

The Past, the Present and the Person:

An Exploration of the Use of
Reminiscence-Based Activities as a
Catalyst for Learning in Later Life

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the ways in which learning might take place in a reminiscence group for older people who are moving towards the end of life. The overall aim was to seek a greater understanding of the processes underpinning reminiscence groups as well as the benefits - to individuals and the wider community - of such learning opportunities.

This is a piece of practitioner research with the author combining the roles of facilitator of the themed reminiscence groups and observer. The study used a qualitative methodological approach from a social constructivist perspective, relying on observation and follow-up individual interviews to build 'cases' of the learning journeys of seven participants.

The findings suggest that reminiscence is a potentially useful route to and catalyst for learning about the self and others, with the thesis being structured around the four main research questions which focus on whether learning is taking place, its nature, and the potential outcomes and benefits of such learning to both individual participants and wider society.

The study, situated within what is recognized as 'an ageing society', hopes to demonstrate the value of learning through group reminiscing in later life and provide encouragement to local councils and their Adult Education teams (the predominant providers of such programmes in the UK) to continue to fund and support such activities. Furthermore, the insights gained make a potential contribution to wider understandings of the individual and social benefits of informal education for older adults in ways which may be useful to policy-makers seeking to promote the well-being of an ageing population.

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1– INTRODUCTION

We live in an ageing society, with 12.2 million people, or one-fifth of the population of the United Kingdom, expected to be over the age of sixty-five by 2021 (Tuckett and McAulay, 2005: 8). Alongside increasing life expectancy, the trend towards a falling birthrate means that there will be fewer working-age adults in employment and paying the taxes which fund the care of older people (Brown Wilson, 2013: 2). At the time I began my doctoral studies, these demographic changes were particularly relevant to me in my dual roles as an occupational therapist working with older people, and as an adult education tutor seeking to promote well-being through the provision of learning opportunities in later life. In the light of demographic change it became important for me as a health practitioner and as an educator specialising in reminiscence¹, to consider how best to enhance the skills and knowledge of older people, as a possible route to improving their quality of life. Part of my motivation in my work was a desire to challenge what I perceived to be the devaluing of older people within society which conceptualised an ageing population as almost exclusively problematic, and ignored the potential resource represented by the extensive knowledge and experience of those who have lived the longest (Housden, 2007).

Members of the local County Council Adult Education’s ‘Learning in Later Life Team’, for which I worked as a tutor from 2001 to 2012, have used reminiscence groups as a means of facilitating learning in later life for over twenty years. I have, in the past, documented this approach through both published material (Housden, 2007) and in-service reports (not published) on qualitative and quantitative outcomes to reminiscence-based learning activities which support the benefits of reminiscence in terms of physical, mental and emotional well-being. Whether the processes taking place in reminiscence groups can be identified as ‘learning’ is to be explored,

¹ Reminiscence is a social and creative activity which involves participants sharing personal memories for pleasure and with the aim of enhancing well-being. It can be undertaken in small group settings or on a one-to-one basis, and with people of all ages and abilities (Housden, 2012).

although the criteria for funding accessed by the Learning in Later Life Team specified that it was for the provision of learning opportunities leading to educational outcomes. Nonetheless, until now there was no research-based empirical exploration of the learning processes taking place in reminiscence groups. This research therefore seeks to address this deficit through analysing the interactions taking place in reminiscence groups using personal memories as the principal subject material. It was also hoped that an exploration could be undertaken of participants' perceptions of what and how they learn in this context.

Having already documented examples of the ways in which older people can contribute their knowledge and skills to the well-being of the community as a whole (Housden, 2007), and being aware of the benefits of learning in later life "in terms of physical, mental and emotional health" (Tuckett and McAulay, 2005: 42), the original objectives of this research were to explore whether, and in what ways, learning might take place through reminiscence-based activities.

Initial Exploration of the Literature

There is a limited educational gerontology literature base (for example Glendenning, 1985, Sherron and Lumsden, 1990 and Withnall, 2010) which considers a variety of aspects of learning in later life, largely focused on the cognitive capacity of older people. There are some notable and insightful exceptions to this focus on cognition, which explore the realms of spiritual knowledge and emotional intelligence and their relevance to learning at the end of life (for example Jarvis, 2001). Jarvis (2001) places biography and life experience firmly at the centre of learning in the Fourth Age²:

things are changing rapidly so that there will always be disjuncture
between our biography and our experience of the world, i.e. we will

² The Fourth Age is commonly defined as the period at the end of life during which an older person's overall health and well-being is affected by an increasing number of impairments and age-related disabilities, leading to greater dependence on others in activities of daily living such as mobility, personal care and domestic tasks. This is contrasted with the Third Age which is the time following retirement from work during which the older person still experiences relatively good health and independence, and can access and contribute to civic, leisure and community activities without significant difficulty.

always keep discovering new things and having new experiences, so that we can never take things for granted and disjuncture is the point from which we begin to learn.

(Jarvis, 2001: 41)

This highlights the importance of learning, which Jarvis outlines as a “process of creating and transforming experiences into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, beliefs, emotions and the senses. It is a process of constructing our own biography, and our own theories about the world” (Jarvis, 2001: 53).

Cranton (2006) outlines the types of learning task which may be of relevance to people whose motivation to learn extends beyond the remit of compulsory educational experiences:

Adult learners are mature, socially responsible individuals who participate in sustained informal or formal activities that lead them to acquire new knowledge, skills, or values; elaborate on existing knowledge, skills, or values; revise their basic beliefs and assumptions; or change the way they see some aspect of themselves or the world around them.

(Cranton, 2006: 2)

While Cranton’s characterisation of adult learners as being ‘mature’ and ‘socially responsible’ might be questionable, the emphasis given to the acquisition, elaboration and revision of knowledge, skills and perspectives, provides a useful starting point for understanding the ways in which learning may be beneficial in later life.

This study aimed to explore the nature and processes of learning through reminiscence groups in care-dependent older people, including consideration of whether it can be seen as having ‘legitimacy’ in a similar way to the acquisition of knowledge and skills undertaken in earlier life stages. This in turn, raises the issue of whether it needs to be comparable, or whether the needs of older learners are qualitatively different from those of younger adult learners. The question of what

constitutes 'legitimate' learning also raises practical concerns about how the value of learning can be measured and by whose criteria this measurement is to take place. For instance, those who support reminiscence groups, may feel a pressure to demonstrate that some beneficial change is taking place in the behaviour, skills or knowledge of participants, whereas learners themselves may be more interested in changes in their self-perception, attitudes, or feelings relating to self-esteem and confidence. These latter qualities are traditionally seen as the incidental soft outcomes of learning rather than the central focus of educational experience.

Rationale for the Study

With a growing ageing population, learning in later life and questions about the meaning of lifelong learning have increasing pertinence to educational policy and practice. While much research into learning in later life focuses on able-bodied, independent and cognitively able older people, such as those attending U3A³ classes (for example, Formosa, 2012), this study explores whether learning can legitimately be said to take place in more care-dependent older people, moving towards the end of life, accessing few resources other than their own memories and experiences.

An awareness of the importance of demographic and social changes, and their impact on well-being in later life, provided a key motivation for focusing this study on exploring how learning takes place through reminiscence-based adult education groups for care-dependent older people. Such findings could potentially be of substantial value in contributing to the work of Adult Community Learning providers nationwide. Phillipson points towards the role of educational gerontology in "contributing to the debate on how we close what seems to be an alarming and somewhat alienating gap: the disjunction between ourselves as we age from within, and ourselves as we age within society" (2000: 34).

³ The U3A (University of the Third Age) is a national and international network of local learning cooperatives which draw upon the knowledge, skills and experience of their own membership to provide learning opportunities across diverse subjects and leisure activities (The Third Age Trust, n.d. – on-line)

Educational providers may experience difficulties in providing relevant and accessible learning opportunities for people who spend much of their time in care settings, and for whom it is sometimes an impossibility to attend the type of venues at which educational opportunities are traditionally provided. Thus, Findsen and Formosa argue that “For lifelong learning to be really democratic and lifelong, older adult learning must also take account of older persons who for health reasons cannot attend learning initiatives” (2011: 112). However, overcoming barriers to learning in later life may be expensive and considered to be a drain on resources due to the investments needed in staff time and training, which might seem too costly when compared with the benefits to learners. The purposes of learning in later life therefore need to be clearly outlined.

Standard 8.8 of the National Service Framework for Older People recommends that people living in residential homes should have opportunities to engage in educational activities as a way of enhancing well-being (Department of Health, 2001). However, a great deal of research into lifelong learning focuses on people in employment who are developing skills for work, or older learners who are developing interests with the aim of enjoying a fulfilling retirement. There is some literature into ways in which learning can take place in care environments, much of it focusing on the use of activities to fill time, encourage cognitive stimulation or enhance skills in everyday living activities (for example Midwinter, 1993, Saul, 1993 and Perrin, 2005). However, Findsen and Formosa suggest that the concept of lifelong learning has been redefined as a way of reducing the economic costs of meeting the learning needs of individuals at all stages of life. Thus, it is a difficult concept to “pin down because those who define the concept hold the power in terms of resource allocation” (Findsen and Formosa, 2011: 48).

Lowy and O’Connor (1986: 6) consider the limited investment made by governments into the provision of late life learning opportunities, explaining the impact of the reduced social value accorded to older people and prevalent attitudes towards ageing within western society, highlighted by McDonald (1995):

The prevalent attitude seems to be that elderly people are not worth investing in and making learning accessible to because they have completed their working 'useful' and economically productive life ... However, this is to ignore the fact that lifelong learning can bring personal development and fulfilment and that a happy active person ... is a resource and of benefit to society as a whole.

(McDonald, 1995: 113)

A seeming lack of government interest in the potential of learning as a means of reducing the cost of providing support for older people by enhancing well-being, suggests in part, that the existing evidence on the benefits of learning in later life remains unconvincing in terms of economic analysis, perhaps because much of it has its origins in research and reports perceived as anecdotal because they don't take an empiricist stance. Whatever its cause, a number of authors in the late twentieth century lamented the lack of sustained government interest in the provision of structured learning opportunities for older people (see for example Carlton and Soulsby, 1999) while Glendenning (2000: 15) emphasised the need for scientific research to substantiate claims for the beneficial outcomes of learning in later life.

Schuller's (2004: 13-20) identification of three types of 'capital' which represent intersecting dimensions of the benefits of learning, offers a useful means of broadening understanding of cost-effectiveness, demonstrating how the returns on investment in lifelong learning can be understood more widely than in purely financial terms. These three capitals are 'identity capital' (which can be seen in the defining characteristics of individuals), 'human capital' (knowledge and skills which enable the effective functioning of individuals in economic and social terms) and 'social capital' (which can be observed through behaviours and attitudes, as well as in levels of participation in activities benefitting wider society). Through this study an exploration of 'effectiveness' which incorporates both individual and social benefits of any learning observed to take place through reminiscence activities, is possible.

Approaching Learning through Reminiscence

While the focus of this study is on reminiscence-based learning opportunities in later life, this does not, however, suggest that other approaches to late-life learning are not equally as relevant and meaningful to the older person. Nonetheless, there are a number of features of the experience of ageing which, it is proposed, could potentially be addressed through learning activities which focus on the participants' personal memories.

The approach taken in this research project was largely person-centred, drawing upon Rogers' guidelines for student-centred learning amongst adults, which include being real and accepting, valuing the contributions of all participants and showing empathic understanding (Rogers, 1967/1989: 306-11). Qualities of person-centred learning, according to Rogers, include a shared responsibility for learning which involves the tutor trusting participants to think for themselves when provided with appropriate learning resources. For person-centred learning to take place, participants need to decide *that* they want to learn and *what* they want to learn. They also decide whether any learning that has taken place was worthwhile. Rogers suggested that such learning is likely to have significance beyond the classroom and should not be regarded as learning for learning's sake (Rogers, 1977a/1989: 326-8). While seeing a person-centred approach as being a desirable means of enabling participants to reach their full potential, a number of tensions are explored between this ideal and the realities of maintaining an environment which promotes both well-being and learning.

To deliver person-centred learning experiences confidently and competently, it is essential that reminiscence tutors adopt a reflective approach to their own practice:

Being an authentic educator involves having a good understanding of oneself and bringing that understanding into teaching, understanding and relating in a meaningful way with learners, being aware of the context of teaching, and engaging in critical reflection on practice. Not only does authenticity bring us to better connections with students, but it also models the transformative process itself.

(Cranton, 2006: 116)

Transformative learning focuses on “more than traditional subject matter proficiency but also the development of a refined awareness of self and others within a broad, flexible way of thinking” (Spurlin, 2012: 116), suggesting a key role for socio-emotional factors, alongside traditionally recognised knowledge and skills, as recognised by Cranton:

By definition, transformative learning leads to a changed self-perception. When people revise their habits of mind, they are reinterpreting their sense of self in relation to the world.

(Cranton, 2006: 8).

Mezirow regards this change as coming about largely by engagement in dialogue, through which participants “give meaning to experience” (1991: 58). Given the likelihood that discussion of personal memories will have an emotional impact on the participants, a person-centred approach has particular relevance in ensuring that educational practice is ethical and promotes well-being.

Research Questions

The local authority adult education project for which I had worked for several years at the time I began my doctoral studies, regularly used reminiscence in learning activities aimed at Fourth Ageds, and I was interested to discover more about the mechanism of learning which might be taking place in reminiscence groups. Furthermore, with increasing demands from the Learning and Skills Council to evidence that learning outcomes were being reached using written records of achievements (Learning and Skills Council, 2005), it was pertinent, at the time, to explore ways in which learning could be observed to take place through reminiscence.

The research questions I sought to answer when beginning this study were:

1. Does learning take place through reminiscence groups for older people?

2. If learning does take place, what is its nature?
3. What are the potential outcomes of such learning for the individual and for society?
4. What are the potential benefits to both individuals and society, of learning in later life through reminiscence?

Studies relating to learning opportunities in later life have focused largely on people who have retired from working life but retain sufficient physical and cognitive functioning to participate in educational activities strongly resembling the traditional leisure-enhancing adult education classes aimed at adults of all ages. Demographic changes point towards the need to explore relevant and meaningful ways of bringing the benefits of learning to the growing section of the ageing population who, while remaining cognitively able, are increasingly in need of care services due to their physical frailty.

This study explores whether and how learning takes place through reminiscence-based activities aimed at older people who are in care settings and moving towards the end of life. It analyses interactions that take place in reminiscence groups and takes into consideration participants' perceptions of what and how they learn, addressing questions of the 'legitimacy' and 'effectiveness' of what has been learnt in terms of both 'soft outcomes', and individual and social benefits. I would argue that at the end of life, in a setting where participants are largely dependent on the support of carers for the meeting of their physical needs, so-called 'soft outcomes' may be of greater value than more easily measurable outcomes such as passing an exam or gaining a qualification.

Two years before the end of my doctoral studies my career changed path and I moved from working closely with frail older learners, to teaching working age adults in a higher education setting. The focus of this study remained relevant, however, largely because I was beginning to understand that some elements which appeared to contribute to reminiscence being a route to and catalyst for learning, might potentially apply to teaching people of any age or ability. Furthermore, my findings

appeared to be relevant to my growing understanding of communication with older people, which had become the theme of much of my teaching in my new role. This broader application of my findings to practice is alluded to in my conclusions.

Changing Understandings of the Literature

The process of searching the literature to gain a comprehensive overview of existing knowledge and understanding of the place of reminiscence in late-life learning threaded throughout the duration of my doctoral studies. Beginning with an understanding that there are likely to be benefits to older people of participating in learning experiences which use reminiscence as a tool for expanding knowledge and skills, the interweaving of data collection, literature searching and data analysis took me on an unexpected journey. Thus, while at the beginning of my doctoral studies I had seen, and understood there to be, learning taking place in adult education reminiscence groups for older people, my understanding at that stage was limited to a fairly superficial awareness of processes such as the exchange of information and practicing of new or neglected skills. Through an emerging knowledge of the literature which took place alongside data collection and analysis over a three year period, I came to realise that central to an understanding of the learning which can potentially take place in reminiscence-based learning groups is Moody's comment that: "Education in later life is less concerned with information processing than with drawing on prior experience in order to 'make sense' of information past and present" (1986: 142). Retrospective interpretation of experience therefore becomes the focus of in-depth learning, suggesting that reminiscence could indeed be a tool which might effectively be used to enhance the impact and effectiveness of late-life learning.

This literature review revealed facets of late-life learning not previously considered, to the extent that it became evident after the completion of data collection, that I might justifiably seek evidence of learning taking place at different and deeper levels. In particular, as well as observing the acquisition of factual information amongst participants and softer outcomes such as changes in self-confidence and expressions of increased self-esteem, it appeared that there may be reason to explore whether

the data revealed any evidence of changes in participants' self-perception and self-concept, or of generating new levels of meaning in, or coherence to, their life experiences.

It seems extraordinary that the rapid growth in understanding occurring after data collection could lead to a completely new approach to analysing the data, and highlights the social construction of our understandings of other people's life stories and experiences. While my initial analysis had focused on surface-level changes in knowledge and understanding, in the last year of my doctoral studies I undertook to revisit the data, armed with a new understanding of how individuals could be transformed through exploring their own life experiences. Specifically, my understanding had grown regarding the different ways in which autobiographical memories could be experienced and recounted within a reminiscence group.

While my retrospective increase in understanding was helpful in accelerating my motivation to reconsider my interpretation of the data, in other ways the fact that this new understanding was gained over such a long period of time, threw up some problematic issues. I had been able to gain an objectively verifiable account of activities undertaken, information shared and knowledge acquired during my original attempt at data analysis (a fairly positivistic account shared with and verified by participants during the follow-up session which took place in the spring after the initial fieldwork sessions). By contrast, by the time this second approach to analysing the same data had taken place (three years after the fieldwork), only one of the participants was still attending the day service where the fieldwork had taken place, and I was concerned about her ability, at this stage, to give informed consent to renewed participation in the fieldwork. Furthermore, consideration of the merit of having only one participant with whom to carry out this triangulation exercise, cast doubt upon how worthwhile gaining ethical approval to meet with her might be, especially as, after so much time had elapsed, there was no guarantee that she would clearly recollect her experience of participating in the fieldwork.

As a result, a double-layered piece of research with two sets of findings is presented here: one being the surface level exchange of information verified by participants as

having taken place, while the other represents a more insightful analysis of in-depth learning, which can only be verified through an examination of the accounts of participant's experiences provided in this thesis through the presentation of their words and my reflections upon and interpretations of, the changes which appeared to have taken place. This second, and main account, whilst potentially of greater interest in terms of the level of transformation taking place in participants, remains, to some degree, a personal construction of what took place in these adult education reminiscence groups. In retrospect, the understanding gained of the transformative potential of reminiscence-based learning groups has great potential for contributing new knowledge and understanding about the place of reminiscence groups in facilitating learning in later life.

Summary

This introductory chapter has outlined my motivation for, and interest in, exploring whether and how learning might take place in a reminiscence group for older people, providing the rationale for undertaking the research and establishing the four main questions which the research sought to answer. The potentially transformative nature of such learning, and the adoption of a social constructivist approach to data analysis, have also been alluded to, alongside a brief outline of some of the existing literature in this area.

2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Understanding the basis for the research undertaken involves bringing together a wide range of literature, from a number of different sources and disciplines, some of which don't appear at first sight to directly address the topic of using reminiscence as a route to and catalyst for learning in later life. It is certainly not the case that no research has previously been undertaken into learning in later life, including the final stage of life (the Fourth Age), and into the benefits of reminiscence for older people at this stage of life. Rather, while research in both these areas does exist, there is little empirical evidence which brings together the two areas of learning and reminiscence. That makes this literature review similar to a jigsaw, which brings together a number of different parts, which may seem ill-fitting in the first instance, but which, when put together logically, lead to a comprehensive picture of an as yet unexplored area of empirical study. Part of the purpose of the review, therefore, is to show that, in the absence of a body of specific research demonstrating the role of reminiscence as a vehicle for learning amongst Fourth Agers, such an approach can be seen as flowing naturally from linking other areas of study with that of education, such as those contributing to an understanding of the ego-related, existential and psychological needs of the older person. Nonetheless, it would also be true to say that while no empirical studies which address this area of research appear to be available, a number of sources exist which provide evidence from experience and which explore theoretical ideas suggesting that reminiscence is potentially both an appropriate and a beneficial tool for learning in the Fourth Age (see for example Housden, 2007).

Much of the existing literature on later-life learning focuses on whether learning of any kind is either possible, or relevant, after retirement from work. Therefore, as well as reviewing literature which addressed the four research questions, another area in which a literature search was undertaken was on the capacity to learn and the intelligence of older people. Prior to the 1980s there was an assumption that older people were much slower to learn new information and therefore had experienced

a decline in intelligence. However, research in the second half of the twentieth century suggested that it was simply a case of having a different approach to learning to that of younger people. Malcolm Knowles and his colleagues (2011) went some way to challenging assumptions about older people's capacity to learn when he framed the concept of androgogy, while other authors and researchers began to clarify the different types of and purposes of learning at different stages of the life course (for example Field and Leicester, 2003, and Biesta *et al.*, 2013).

A range of literature in the late twentieth century also addresses the question of intelligence in later life. Peterson (1983: 66-70), for example, suggests that a wide range of non-cognitive factors could be more important determinants of learning in later life than innate intelligence. Amongst the factors identified as affecting performance in learning situations, Peterson identifies fatigue, hearing and visual impairments, cohort influences, social background, and expectations about learning as well as the pace of a session, concluding that:

The final determination of intellectual change over the life span probably depends more on how one chooses to define and operationalize the construct than on what is the 'real' relationship of intelligence to age.

(Peterson, 1983: 53)

Other authors challenge the loss-orientated model of intelligence in later life:

Too often the learning process of the older adult is examined exclusively from the standpoint of losses: memory, perceptual functions, cognitive deficiencies, and so on. What we need to do is, first, to recognise the special strengths that older people can bring to the classroom, and, second, to use these strengths to enrich the learning experience.

(Moody, 1985: 32)

Moody identified research which suggests that learning in later life is influenced by the speed with which information is presented and "by whether the material is *meaningful* or not" (Moody, 1986: 124, italics in original). Withnall (2010:26) also

highlights the importance of engaging older learners in educational activities which have meaning for them, suggesting that a learner-centred approach is central to successful participation in late life learning.

Others began to pose questions about life-wide issues as both facilitating and debilitating factors, influencing the ability of older adults to learn, including a suggestion that the extent to which an individual could benefit from education in later life was determined partly by previous exposure to educational experiences with an inverse relationship existing between level of education reached and the rate of cognitive decline in later life (Agruso, 1978: 119).

Helmuth (2003) cites evidence from studies undertaken by Thomas Hess which show that older people use their memories of previous experiences more effectively than young people when making social judgements, but it has also been found that they may have difficulty identifying the source of information, unless this is seen as important at the time of encoding (Hasher *et al.*, 2002 cited in Helmuth, 2003). Helmuth also suggests that memory in later life is determined by the relevance of the information, and that selective attention plays a greater role in memory as we grow older. This may explain age-related decline in short term memory, as taking on new information can depend on speed of processing in fast-moving environments, which requires focused attention. Older people often perform better on measures of crystallised, rather than fluid intelligence. Hence, they perform comparatively well on measures of verbal memory which depend on crystallised intelligence and less well on tasks involving rote learning of nonsense syllables, suggesting the importance of “meaningful associations” in enabling recall (Hundal and Horn, 1977: 19)⁴.

⁴ Hundal and Horn (1977) demonstrated the importance of meaningful associations in learning and found that while primary memory was involved in both crystallised and fluid intelligence, the meaningfulness of the material learnt determined subsequent recall. As crystallised intelligence is a feature of intelligence which is thought to increase over the life course, this means that older people are more likely to learn material which they perceive as significant. It is therefore unsurprising that older participants perform less well in more positivist psychological research studies where memory is tested using strings of letters which do not constitute actual words.

Widespread views of older people as uneducable therefore came to be seen as erroneous and perhaps, narrow-minded, being born of a view that older people form a homogeneous group – a view which lacked sufficient allowance for individual differences or consideration of the impact of socio-economic factors. Age alone, therefore, provides insufficient information to judge an individual's cognitive and intellectual abilities, nor their potential for present or future learning (Shea, 1985: 62).

It therefore appears that concerns over the ability of older adults to engage in learning experiences may be misplaced, and that the requirement may be for alternative approaches to education in later life, rather than a withdrawal of opportunities.

The remainder of this review focuses on an analysis and synthesis of literature which can be applied to each of the four research questions of this study.

Research Question 1: Does learning take place through reminiscence groups for older people?

Over a number of decades, the importance of memories in adult learning has been widely acknowledged. A key principle of adult education, informed by the work of Malcolm Knowles and colleagues (2011), is that a primary resource in the education of adults is personal experience, which is stored in memory, expressed through the recall of life events and utilised through reflection on, and application of those experiences, in the present. While agreeing instinctively that every learner, whatever their age, will draw upon their previous experiences in the process of acquiring new knowledge and skills, it is less clear to what extent these experiences are integral to learning, or could become so.

In this research the particular area for exploration was the role of past experience as a route to and catalyst for learning in later life. A search of the literature suggests, largely through opinion pieces and theoretical proposals, that personal experience plays a central part in learning in later life, with the view that “the great psychological task of late life is to establish a sense of self based on knowledge gained from life experience” (Moody, 1986: 135) expressed in various ways over a number of

decades. Thus, it can be argued that assimilation of past experience is not just an incidental or peripheral aspect of late life learning, but may instead constitute both the content and process of learning for participants in reminiscence groups. This is backed up by Wong, who considers that a reminiscence-based approach to learning might play a part in the process of achieving ego-integrity towards the end of life (1995: 29). Drawing upon the work of Eric Erikson Wong identifies this as being a lifelong process which depends on “acceptance of one’s life cycle without regrets” (Erikson 1959, 1963, 1982, cited in Wong, 1995: 29). These, and other authors, highlight past experience as being fundamental to the key learning tasks of later life.

Reminiscence-based activities have been proposed by a number of educationalists as a potential vehicle for learning in later life. Meacham (1995: 45) describes the past as a tool which can be used to understand the present, while Sheridan (1991: 15) emphasises the importance of making links between the past and the present when exploring memories of personal experiences. However, there is less clarity about the extent to which older adults recognise their use of past experience in their learning. Withnall, for instance, found that less than seven per cent of examples in a scoping exercise researching participation in informal learning amongst older people, were identified as reminiscence-type activities (Withnall, 2010: 17). This may be a reflection of a genuine absence of such learning activities by participants in Withnall’s research, or due to their understanding of the definitions used, perceptions of what constitutes reminiscence or possibly, a lack of awareness on the part of either the respondents, or Withnall, as to the learning which may occur through sharing memories.

By contrast, Moody asserts that “education of older people should be grounded in life experience: in the history and the lifecycle of the learner” (1985: 31). As one of the foremost proponents of the use of personal experience in learning in later life, Moody is, nonetheless, realistic in expressing an understanding of the potential limitations of this approach. Experience, while seen as a potential resource contributing to increased wisdom, could also represent a barrier to learning for some people (Moody, 1985: 31), particularly where a dogmatic approach is used for the purposes of maintaining a sense of self in the context of the challenges of past or

present life circumstances. For instance, being in need of care services may leave an older person feeling that they lack importance in the modern world (Moody, 1985: 33). Such a view of life may lead to a need to stick firmly to maintaining an existing view of the past, as well as habitual responses in the present, and thus represent a potential barrier to learning and personal growth (Jarvis 1990: 120). This poses a risk to the ability to learn from experience; a risk which may increase where circumstances don't allow for personally meaningful activities or opportunities for mental stimulation (Jarvis, 1996: 106). For Fourth Agers, such circumstances may exist in day care services and care homes if activity programmes provide insufficient meaning, purpose or cognitive stimulation.

Moody develops this argument as his analysis progresses to differentiate between two perspectives on past experience. Thus, while for some people: "The past represents what is used up, what is bypassed and rejected" (1985: 33) for other older people, described by Moody as 'healthy', memories of past experience are used to inform the present and give hope for the future (Gibson, 1998:20). Moody suggests:

Perhaps the deepest definition of successful aging is simply this: to repair the past and prepare for the future by living in the present.

(Moody, 1985: 33-34)

While it can be argued that this ought not to be taken as a universally applicable definition of successful ageing, it provokes reflection on the potential of reminiscence to provide a catalyst for learning in the Fourth Age, suggesting some kind of relationship between acceptance of past experience and well-being in the present.

Moody (1985) suggests that adult education learning contexts not only provide a legitimate forum for achieving the developmental tasks of later life, but that the provision of educational opportunities for older people are also an effective means of enhancing this process. His arguments are backed up by respected educational theorists such as John Dewey, who defined education as the "constant reorganising or reconstructing of experience" (Dewey, 2007: 61) which "may be treated as

process of accommodating the future to the past, or as an utilization of the past for a resource in a developing future” (Dewey, 2007: 63). This is far from being a passive process of participants simply recounting memories and adult educators listening to their accounts without intervening. Midwinter, for instance, reminds the adult educator of the task of channelling the memories of older people, ensuring that best use is made of their enjoyment of reminiscence, in order to turn potentially “aimless anecdote” into “a useful and systematic exercise, even a valuable resource” (Midwinter, 1982: 64). Midwinter’s framing of personal reminiscences as potentially “aimless anecdote” may sound harsh, but it is worth noting that while guidance provided by reminiscence tutors is likely to facilitate reminiscence based discussions for the purposes of learning, some individuals may be able to achieve purposeful reminiscence without such direction.

Reminiscence may at one time have been seen primarily as a psycho-therapeutic activity, used in psychiatry and psychology in the form of the structured life review. It is arguable, however, that where reminiscence is used as a tool for resolving psychological problems, therapists are simply recognising the potential of this approach to promote learning, in order to assist patients in overcoming problems which are pathological in nature. Both adult educators and health practitioners have made use of the naturally occurring ability of many people to reflect upon and learn from the past. The difference between the use of reminiscence in therapeutic and educational settings is that, in the latter, participants are generating understanding and knowledge about themselves and others, and about aspects of the past, present and future, which could occur in any person, and would not be framed as addressing issues of psychological pathology.

An essential element in the potential of reminiscence to promote learning in later life is the forum it creates for dialogue. Moody proposes that late life learning through reminiscence activities can play a key role in the process of finding meaning in the past and present, because of the way in which it facilitates the discovery of “elements of universal significance” through the sharing of life experiences within a group setting (Moody, 1985: 36). The interaction with others as memories are discussed is, in Moody’s view, an indispensable element of this learning experience,

because: “It is through the process of dialogue that life experience is converted into knowledge” (Moody, 1985: 39). Moody does not explain exactly how this transformation takes place and one of the purposes of this research is to explore some possible mechanisms for such learning.

It could be argued, for instance, that while the social context of a reminiscence group encourages this process, this does not exclude the possibility of individuals learning from thinking through their experiences without sharing them with others. Indeed, the affirmation of personal identity which can take place through reminiscence is a key mechanism. The link between memories of past experience and an individual’s sense of identity is consistently made in the literature on learning in later life. Merriam highlights the need to acknowledge a close link between memory and identity when working in educational contexts, recognising a review of life experiences as being central to “continued growth and learning” (1990: 41).

Smith also recognises the importance of the social setting of reminiscence, describing the processes involved in sharing memories in a group context as involving “transactive memory”, a term which “describes the process of people remembering together in relationships” (Smith, 2010: 45). Thus, it is through interaction with others that co-operation and communication is fostered in a way which enables group members to “share many more memories as a group than any one individual could ever remember” (*ibid*). Whilst recognising this facilitative role of the group reminiscence experience, Smith also sounds a note of caution about the individual stories which are “potentially silenced” if they don’t fit into the general pattern of experiences shared by the group (Smith, 2010: 55).

In other literature, the socially embedded nature of reminiscence is suggested to have greater significance than factual accurateness in terms of the potential to enhance learning about the self, identity and roles. Thus, Gibson considers that: “The process of recalling memories is more like painting a picture than taking a photograph” (Gibson, 2011: 31), in that absolute factual accuracy does not have the same priority as providing opportunities for self-expression and exploration. Similarly, Boud *et al.* argue that while experience is both the foundation of, and the

stimulus for, learning, “Each experience is influenced by the unique past of the learner” (Boud *et al.*, 1993: 10) and therefore reminiscence groups which promote sharing of personal memories around specific topics also recognise that this does not equate to a belief that similar experiences have the same meaning for each individual with “The way in which we interpret experience [being] intimately connected with how we view ourselves” (Boud *et al.*, 1993: 15). Similarly, while Mezirow suggests that “What we see depends in part upon what we have seen in the past” (Mezirow, 1991: 28), it might equally be the case that memories shared in a reminiscence group depend on those which have already been discussed by members in that group, or in similar groups in which these people have previously participated.

Theory on transformative learning has traditionally recognised the importance of learning from the past as a way of preparing for the future: “How we perceive and interpret our experiences determine the meaning we accept, if any, as knowledge for living through future experiences” (Spurlin, 2012: 117). Similarly, Mezirow suggests that “Learning may be understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow, 1991: 12). Cranton also highlights interpretation of experience as central to learning, which is closely linked to: “values, beliefs, and assumptions that determine their behavior” (Cranton, 2006: 19).

There is a strong suggestion in the literature, therefore, that far from having solely individualistic purposes, reminiscence can be seen “as a social process having social functions” (Meacham, 1995: 43) making the interactions between members of a reminiscence group of particular significance in enabling each group member to gain more from their participation in terms of understanding the meaning of life experiences beyond their original context (Meacham, 1995: 43). The role of reminiscence as a route to learning appears therefore to be linked to the expansion of existing understandings individuals have of their lives.

Meacham also argues that the value of reminiscence evolves from the interaction between group members, as, through dialogue, participants are able to identify with others in a way which validates the factual and emotional content of memories and

thus can become a springboard for change (Meacham, 1995: 44). Meacham takes this as far as arguing that: "All our reminiscences belong not to individuals, but to the community and to society" (1995: 48). In a similar type of discussion regarding the interaction between memories of public and private events, Moody suggests that the latter present a risk of descending into: "an evocation of nostalgia or a flight from the present" (Moody, 1984: 161-162). This type of individual reminiscence appears to be seen as secondary, and perhaps inferior, to the understandings reached and connections made through group activities which seek to explore the common ground shared by participants. However, some caution might be needed before discounting personal reminiscing, as every individual has their own style and purpose in reminiscing and it would be unwise to suggest that any one approach is superior to others in all circumstances. Furthermore, there is nothing wrong with nostalgia *per se* which may be experienced as enjoyable and stimulating; nor with finding some escape from the present, should an individual find themselves in intolerable circumstances. Rather, nostalgia and escapism might be seen as constructive approaches to maintaining emotional health in some situations.

The preceding discussion has suggested that group reminiscence activities can be seen to have purposes beyond the enhancement of individual well-being. Abrams (2010) highlights the effect of group interaction on influencing the memories shared, and on the way in which they are shared, so that memory can be seen "as the product of an active engagement with social processes, in particular the process of talking, reconstructing experiences with others, sharing a language to recollect past experiences" (Abrams, 2010: 102) whereby memory is "shaped by the intersubjective relations in the room" (Abrams, 2010: 77). Meacham (1995), Moody (1984) and Abrams (2010), each suggest that memory is not an objective phenomenon through which precise accounts of experience can be produced independently of the social and cultural contexts in which events are recalled. Rather, the stories told are to some extent dependent on each participant finding "a place within cultural discourses where one is comfortable enough to tell one's story" (Abrams, 2010: 77). The construction of life stories takes place in the context of social and cultural relationships, a point reiterated by Randall and Kenyon:

We do not read ourselves in a vacuum, however, but always within a variety of environments, where the stories by which we live are continually co-authored and coread through our relationships with others.

(Randall and Kenyon, 2002: 253)

To return to the previous comments regarding the positive nature of group reminiscence compared to individual nostalgia, it is possible to reach a new understanding of the group approach as assisting individuals to expand their understanding of their own experience, beyond that possible in situations where escape from present circumstances is the main motivation for recalling the past. It is not that it is wrong to be nostalgic. Rather, it is possible to achieve more when working with one's own life experiences in a mutually supportive way with other people with whom some experiences are held in common.

Participation in reminiscence groups therefore requires the use and development of social, emotional and spiritual intelligence (Goleman, 2007 and 1996; Draper, 2009). Such intelligences can be seen as central to the learning which takes place in reminiscence groups, requiring participants to develop a keen sensitivity to other's perspectives, rather than focussing exclusively on their own needs and interests. This sensitivity is promoted through dialogue and discussion, and is recognised by Spurlin as evidence of learning taking place:

The very act, itself, of engaging in objective dialogue is seen as evidence of 'development', by some, due to the focus it requires on mutual understanding among participants rather than becoming distracted by arguing points of view.

(Spurlin, 2012: 126)

A full understanding of learning involves recognition of the ways in which individuals learn: "in and from relationships with others" (Cranton 2006: 41), suggesting that the discussions around personal memories within reminiscence-based activities constitute a central aspect of the learning processes taking place:

Subjective discussion (rather than rational discourse) encourages participants to share their experiences in a non-judgmental way, and connected knowing involves working hard to understand others rather than looking for flaws in others' reasoning.

(Cranton, 2006: 54-55)

According to Cranton, it is the "relational, connected knowing, over individual, autonomous learning" (Cranton, 2006: 54) which is central to transformative learning. Through such understandings it becomes apparent that the learning taking place in reminiscence groups may be due to factors beyond the shared memories themselves – that the memories, whilst important, are bricks with which to build new understandings of the self and others, but that the dialogue through which memories are conveyed are the cement which holds together the bricks to construct something new with them. Thus, Merriam summarises the learning activity associated with reminiscence groups as: "encouraging older persons to recall their past, to use it for creating new knowledge, and perhaps a new sense of the self" (1985: 63).

Schapiro *et al.* bring together an understanding of the interrelatedness of social and emotional learning in the connections which develop through discussion:

Connection occurs not merely in the sharing of the story, but also in what happens once we share our story. When we feel heard and met by group members, deep emotions and a felt sense of cohesiveness often emerge.

(Schapiro *et al.*, 2012: 358)

These authors recognise the centrality of dialogue to learning, acknowledging that the relationships within the group form a context in which learning can take place, with the group being: "a unique container for transformative learning" (Schapiro *et al.*, 2012: 357).

Thus, while opportunities to share memories and talk about the past may be motivating factors in joining such groups, the memories could arguably be seen as

being, in part, incidental to the learning taking place – being more important as the route to learning, rather than as the subject content.

Recognising the centrality of dialogue as a process in reminiscence, over and above what is being discussed, casts light on the depth of the learning that may occur and its relevance to altering participants' perspectives on their own lives. According to this view, the importance of an individual's life experience is not measured in terms of achievements or social status, but in terms of the way in which the memories are utilised within reminiscence-based learning. Thus, someone of relatively high socio-economic status can learn effectively alongside others of lower socio-economic status, as an equal, because the actual events are less important than the process of sharing and reflecting upon memories through dialogue.

Research Question 2

If learning does take place, what is its nature?

Exploration of the question of whether learning takes place in reminiscence groups has revealed a range of literature which emphasises discussion of the personal past as an approach which potentially promotes new understandings of life experiences, and arguably constitutes a form of learning which is relevant in later life. In this section of the literature review, consideration is given to how this might be achieved, exploring issues around the relationship between personal experience, autobiographical memories and learning, as well as the role of reminiscence facilitators and their interaction with group participants.

The lack of a universally acknowledged definition of reminiscence adds to the difficulty of identifying precisely how this approach can be used as a tool for learning (Merriam, 1985: 50). This is especially so in the light of negative connotations of reminiscence-type activities being an 'escape' from an unpleasant present – a common misconception prevalent in the Disengagement Theory of Ageing (Cumming and Henry, 1961) which ignores the influence of the past on the present and future. By contrast, Wolf recognises reminiscence as a "normal and functional" (Wolf, 1998: 18) activity in later life, which can lead to learning through reflecting on past

experiences. It is also suggested that it is, in some situations, a necessity to enabling learning to take place in the present, with the retrospective interpretation of past events constituting the individual's life-narrative (Jarvis 2001: 43). Thus, argues Jarvis, reminiscence-type approaches are more than a stimulus for learning, as "learning is the process whereby the biography is constructed through every experience of life" (*ibid*: 44) such that we engage in a "learning process of recalling memories and reinterpreting them in the light of our current biography and the new social situation in which we find ourselves" (*ibid*: 129-30). Thus, Jarvis suggests that memories are not only a route to and catalyst for learning, but provide materials for generating new knowledge and understanding which enable people to make sense of the present.

Reminiscence and oral history have been described as "valuable educational tools with which to unlock the learning potential of older people" (Tyler, 1991, cited in Withnall and Percy, 1994: 63-64). This is a process whereby, within the design of any curriculum aimed at older learners, "The task is to integrate older people's experience into the conceptual structure of subject matter instead of sacrificing one to the other" (Withnall and Percy: 1994: 19). Similarly, Walker (1983) identifies the need to recognise, draw on and build upon past achievements, abilities and interests as they become known. Good practice in the education of older adults involves finding ways "to identify, value, use, share and build on this [life] experience for the benefit of both individuals and groups of older learners" (Withnall and Percy, 1994: 166). There is therefore a clear interaction between knowledge gained through life experience and learning in later life; a relationship summarised by Thornton:

Learning is essential to understanding experience, while education is a social activity designed to enhance learning and provide experience.

(Thornton, 1986: 62)

This statement encapsulates the significance of personal experience in the context of older adults' learning. There is a sense in which this entwined relationship between experience and learning primarily serves the purpose of assisting individuals and groups in the process of finding meaning in past and present life

events (Moody, 1986: 142). This links closely with the perceived “psychological task of later life [which] is to establish a sense of self based on the knowledge gained from life experience” (Moody, 1986: 135). Thus the purposes of late life learning could be understood to overlap with and run alongside the processes through which learning is achieved, in a complex interweaved relationship whereby recounting experience is the route to gaining understanding of the meaning of that experience, as well as new experiences as they arise.

Jarvis has proposed a model of learning through life which demonstrates a similar interdependency between learning and experience, whereby:

Disjuncture between biography and experience lies at the beginning of all learning and learning lies at the heart of the processes through which we develop our own humanity.

(Jarvis, 2001: 33)

He also highlights the importance of learning to a sense of self, (2001: 45) describing it as “the process through which we become ourselves” (*ibid*: 46) largely because it is “the process whereby the biography is constructed through every experience of life” (*ibid*: 44). This interlinking between the individual’s sense of self and the way in which they recall, recount and process memories, is central to the nature of the learning which can potentially take place in reminiscence groups.

There is a danger that reminiscence will be seen as being only about the past, whereas, to fully comprehend the potential of this approach as a route to and catalyst for learning, it is essential to recognise the part played by all three dimensions of time. Learning through reminiscence crosses the time zones of past, present and future, in that, while memories which are recalled are clearly from the past, the recollection and development of understandings take place in the present, in a way which anticipates the future (Sherman, 1991: 29). Similarly, Bianchi (2005: 322) emphasises the importance of reflecting on memories in a way which transcends a focus on the past, while Moody considers that reminiscence groups can draw generations together across and through time, because: “our sense of time is

collective. Past, present and future, youth and age, are intertwined, linked in a cycle of generations” (Moody, 1984: 161). The involvement of the past, present and future as mutually important elements in the recall of personal memories, is explained further by Bianchi who describes the process by which, with the insight acquired over time, individuals instil new meaning into past experiences, by the “reinventing of our stories” which involves the “seeing of old patterns in new ways”, and “building on the past for the sake of the present” (Bianchi: 2005: 320). It is in the context of such ideas that this thesis emphasises the past and the present coming together in the person.

Reminiscence as a process which involves recalling past experiences, is located within the area of memory known as autobiographical memory (Gibson, 2004: 22). Bluck and Alea identify a number of types of autobiographical memory ranging from specific events being recalled in detail, to “life themes” and “one’s entire life story” (Bluck and Alea, 2002: 61). Reminiscence can be categorised as a particular form of remembering which accesses “personally significant autobiographical memories” which are “mullied over, repeated, or interpreted, and then often shared with other people” (*ibid*: 62). Reminiscence-based recall which makes use of autobiographical memory, reviving past experience through stimulating memory, draws upon more than declarative knowledge and factual content. What is recalled comes alive again in the person’s mind, with: “a momentary merging of the person’s consciousness with what is remembered” (Sherman, 1991: 31). Sherman is suggesting that the emotional and sensory content of such relived experiences has significance beyond the expression of factual knowledge such as the dates on which events took place. This is a “dynamic and reconstructive” process (Gibson, 2004: 3) which inherently involves the affective domain in learning: “When we reminisce, we recall memories, review them, and recapture the emotions that went with them” (Sheridan, 1991: 9). However, even the existence of an actual objectively verifiable memory of any particular experience might be called into question. Abrams, for instance, explores ideas around the encoding of memory at the time of an event, stating that: “people remember what is important to them” (Abrams, 2010: 86) suggesting that both the laying down and recall of memories involve subjective processes.

Furthermore, Abrams explains that our pre-existing world view influences and determines both what is remembered at the time and how we subsequently relay this to others. Through a discussion of the culturally embedded nature of personal narrative, Abrams relates how autobiographical memory consists of “personally reconstructed” life events:

It follows that this reconstruction is dependent on the development of the self, that is, certain things, events, experiences will be remembered and reconstructed in different ways depending on the stage of one’s life.

(Abrams, 2010: 86)

Thus, an understanding emerges of reminiscence not so much as the recall of events exactly as they happened, but of a socially embedded experience whereby: “Memory is refracted through the subjectivity constructed by the respondent and shaped by the intersubjective relations in the room” (Abrams, 2010: 77). This understanding of the subjective nature of memory highlights how essential it is, in exploring the learning potential of reminiscence, to look beyond a purely intellectual exchange of factual information which may take place at a surface level.

The literature on autobiographical memory portrays it as a dynamic phenomenon through which private memories and public events become entwined with socially and culturally acceptable accounts of experience which are determined in part by the settings and contexts in which they are recalled (Abrams, 2010: 89). Our interpretation of events plays a role in uniting individuals with disparate viewpoints in social groups where commonly agreed upon recollections provide a shared reference point (Halbwachs, 1950 cited in Abrams, 2010: 96). This in turn means that “agreed upon memories will tend to predominate and alternative ones will receive little recognition and therefore fade” (Abrams, 2010: 96). Such statements highlight the social value of reminiscence-based learning opportunities, alongside the risk of some memories being censored where they don’t appear to fit with the general flavour of group recollection. In the light of this, Moody’s claim that “Each of us wishes to be known and to know ourselves ... to know ourselves as a whole, as we really are, in the light of finitude and at the horizon of death” (Moody, 1985: 46)

takes on considerable significance. While his suggestion highlights the potential role of reminiscence in strengthening self-identity, it also suggests that unless the pressures of social norms which are likely to exist in reminiscence groups are carefully managed, participants who find themselves holding back their experiences because of concerns that they do not fit with the group's norm, may find themselves excluded in a way which threatens their sense of self. Wong expresses the view that: "In the struggle for survival, we need a self-concept that has stood the test of time and enables us to cope with the demands of the present and the uncertainties of the future" (1995: 29). Such a view clarifies the centrality of identity to the process of recalling memories, and hence, to an understanding of the potential of reminiscence as a route to learning which needs to be carefully managed. It would be unethical to allow a group to exclude an individual on the grounds of difference. Part of the reminiscence tutor's role therefore involves exercising considerable insight into what is not being said, as well as what is. This will at times be difficult, and sometimes close to impossible, depending on participants' levels of self-revelation.

Further evidence for the dynamic nature of autobiographical memories and life narrative comes from the work of Singer and Salovey (1993), who, through a series of psychological experiments, came to the conclusion that the events we remember, the strength of those memories and the feelings we associate with them, are largely determined by our personal goals in the present and the extent to which we see ourselves as successfully meeting those goals. Thus, autobiographical memories, rather than being fixed points in our histories, change according to our present needs and aspirations: "They are action paintings, articulated and defined by the active mind, which shapes and re-shapes their meaning and detail in the interest of desire" (Singer and Salovey, 1993: 67). This is relevant to my research for two reasons. Firstly, it raised my awareness that in observing and interviewing participants it was essential to take note of more than just their memories, but also to consider why these are important to them at present and how they relate to their life as a whole. Secondly, it confirms the idea that autobiographical accounts are not necessarily constructed from experiences which can be objectively proven to have taken place

as recounted, and thereby represents a partial justification for taking a constructionist approach to data analysis and reporting.

Providing a historical overview of the place of autobiographical memory in psychology and philosophy, Brewer (1986) makes reference to a number of theoretical and empirical studies, stating that while autobiographical memory can be defined as “memory for information related to the self ... one has to be able to give a coherent account of the self” in order to use such a definition (*ibid*: 26). Personal memories which can be easily and strongly recalled are classified by features such as “uniqueness”, “consequentiality”, “unexpectedness” and being “emotion-provoking” while less distinctly remembered experiences are likely to be those which were trivial and which occurred on a number of occasions (*ibid*: 44). Brewer explores whether autobiographical memories are actually copies of experiences as they occur, or reconstructed memories. Interestingly, citing evidence from Nigro and Neisser (1983) he suggests that “many personal memories are not experienced from the ego’s original viewpoint”, but instead, on recalling an incident, the person sees themselves from the point of view of another person present (Brewer, 1986: 44) in a way which could be seen as taking a second or third person perspective on their own experiences.

The arguments Brewer presents are, by his own admission, based largely on his own experience and anecdotal evidence, due to the shortage of empirical studies focusing on autobiographical memory at that time. However, his account is a useful summary of some of the evidence relating to the nature of autobiographical memory as compared to other types of memory, and is particularly significant when viewed in the light of philosophical arguments about the nature of identity, and the relationship between memory and identity. In terms of my research, there is particular relevance in his arguments about autobiographical memories being a combination of copy memories (of which individuals tend to experience a clear sensory image in their minds and are sure of the truth of) and reconstructed memories which can come about as a result of telling, and re-telling the story of an experience. Where reminiscence is concerned, the researcher depends on, yet cannot be sure of, the truth of the stories which are told. Brewer’s (1986) argument

brings to light the fact that the person themselves may not be able to tell the difference between a copy-memory and a reconstructed one. This raises the question of the extent to which a study which depends on the veracity of participants' stories, while being unable to prove their objective truth, can itself be seen as valid and reliable. However, this also raises the question of whether a study focusing on reminiscence-based activities is actually seeking truth in terms of 'provable facts' or is instead seeking to create an account with verisimilitude which enables greater understanding of the experiences of older learners.

Presenting a sociological perspective on memory, identity and the stories people tell about their lives, Lawler (2008) uses a case study from an extended life story interview to illustrate the view that "We endlessly tell stories about our lives, both to ourselves and to others; and it is through such stories that we make sense of the world, and of our relationship to that world and of the relationship between ourselves and other selves" (Lawler, 2008: 12). Narratives, according to Lawler, are a way of creating an account of ourselves which makes sense to others who share a cultural understanding of how that narrative is constructed:

... identities are *produced* through the autobiographical work in which all of us engage every day ... The narratives we produce in this context are stories of how we come to be the way we are. But it is *through* the narratives themselves that we produce our identities in this way.

(Lawler, 2008: 13. Italics in the original)

Lawler sees these narratives as being constructed from memories of experiences which we have interpreted in order to fit the story which we choose to tell about ourselves on a particular occasion (such as of a happy childhood), and of being of great significance in establishing social relationships and status amongst our listeners who will in turn interpret what they hear, with the narrative only becoming complete through "the interaction between teller and audience" (*ibid*: 16). More complex still, Lawler sees the memories themselves as interpretations of events, which, having been organised into a plot-like structure, have become "social products" (Lawler, 2008: 17). It is therefore necessary for a researcher carrying out reminiscence work to be aware of the social and cultural context, not only in which stories are told, but

also, in which the memories were originally laid down. The context at the time of encoding memories includes elements of identity, in that the memories most likely to be laid down are those which attract the narrator's attention because they interest them as a person. Therefore, there will always be a sense in which reminiscence group participants will be unreliable, not because they are lying or concealing the truth, but because only the aspects of an experience which attracted their attention at the time are likely to be laid down as autobiographical memory, and are therefore available for recall.

In a review of the research on self and memory, Libby and Eibach (2007) suggest a number of explanations of why memories are laid down as they are, and why some aspects of experience are forgotten or distorted. Firstly, schema theory is used to explain why some experiences are given insufficient attention for encoding, and therefore are only ever vaguely recalled, if accessible at all:

self-schemas can influence the way people think about events as they occur: people are more likely to take note of a particular experience and may encode it in a richer fashion when it is relevant to a self-schema (Barclay and Subramaniam, 1987). Second, schemas may produce biases in the judgements people make during the process of reconstructing the past.

(Libby and Eibach, 2007: 78)

Libby and Eibach also describe research they have carried out which shows that where an individual considers a significant change has taken place in their identity (such as a religious conversion or recovery from addiction) they usually have distorted images of their past selves (Libby and Eibach, 2007: 81). This phenomenon appears to be linked to the need for the individual to see their self in the present as significantly different from their self in the past. Other research cited by Libby and Eibach (2007) shows that some participants will recall autobiographical memories which portray them in a negative light, in order to enhance their self-image in the present. They also explore the concept of 'false memory' citing Loftus (2003) as having documented many cases of "confidently held memory for a complex episode

that was entirely fictitious ... Moreover, once people accept a false event as true, they appear to realign their notions of themselves to become consistent with the event” (Libby and Eibach, 2007: 83). Such examples of false memory, the influence of self-schema and the changing use of negative autobiographical memories are used by Libby and Eibach to demonstrate the extent to which memory is subjective, rather than based on indisputable facts. It is important to note, however, that they are not suggesting that participants deliberately lie, rather that they unconsciously change or adopt views, due to the way their minds are functioning at the time of encoding or recall. This demonstrates that while a reminiscence tutor may question the objectivity of accounts gathered during research, it is rarely, if ever, advisable to challenge these accounts, as the interviewee may not be aware that they are being anything less than honest.

This construction of memory is not dissimilar from the process through which learning takes place through the construction of new knowledge. Ideally, the adult learner is actively involved in constructing knowledge, rather than being a passive recipient of what they are told by someone holding professional status and power, such as a teacher (Dewey, 2007: 245). Dewey argues that no teacher can make another person learn – they can only provide resources and an environment conducive to learning, within which participants can engage in constructing knowledge, which is described as: “the method by which one experience is made available in giving direction and meaning to another” (*ibid*: 252). We see some similarities here with Rogers’ understanding of the processes involved in facilitating person-centred learning. Specifically, in the context of a reminiscence group, the tutor’s role is to provide stimulation in the form of multi-sensory memorabilia, a range of activities and discussion prompts, which each participant then takes and transforms into individualised learning tools, by combining them with their personal memories.

Within the fieldwork for this research, key characteristics of the teaching-style included adoption of a clear structure to activities during the early sessions, which gradually became more flexible and learner-directed as participants grew in confidence in talking about their life experiences. There is potentially a self-

perpetuating tendency in using this approach as learners will respond to the increasing range of opportunities for self-direction in discussions and activities with a matching growth in confidence. The tutor's role then changes from one of creating a clear structure to ease learners' navigation of the different topics, to one in which they are available as a much less directive guide to ensure that the group remains a relatively safe and effective environment for learning.

Illich (1970/2002: 12) provides an illuminating and critical stance on learning, claiming that "Most learning happens casually, and even most intentional learning is not the result of programmed instruction". Illich's critique of educational approaches which have "the goal of transforming the entire culture into a school" (1970/2002: 69), raises questions about whether there is a genuine need or role for learning in later life. Similarly, Glendenning (2001: 66) questions how it is possible to justify the expenditure needed to make relevant and effective learning programmes available to older adults.

Another relevant approach to working with learners is taken by Freire, who insisted that the pedagogy of the oppressed "must be forged *with*, not *for* the oppressed" (1970/2002: 30, italics in the original), raising questions about the altruistic role of professionals whom Illich *et al.* (1977/2010) may have regarded as 'disabling'. Freire argues that "Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building" (1970/2002: 47). It is possible that reminiscence therefore represents an important means of learning through reflection and awareness-raising: without deciding for participants that they have an inaccurate view of themselves, of each other, or of old age, the reminiscence group provides a forum for reflection on the past, present and future, through which an altered perception of the life course can emerge. The learning takes place as a result of thinking, which is fostered through communication, which leads in turn to dialogue and involvement (Freire, 1970/1993: 58). This dialogue is "an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another" (*ibid*: 70). As the researcher and group organiser, I adopt a facilitative role in enabling participants to reframe their own lives through reflecting on experience. This is a process which

Mezirow regards as central to the capacity to challenge assumptions about self and society within adult education, the goal of which could be: “one of either conformation or transformation of ways of interpreting experience” (1991: 6). My reflections on my own learning within the group give credence to Freire’s arguments for a resolution to the teacher-student dichotomy so that both are identified as “simultaneously teachers *and* students” (ibid: 53, italics in the original). Such an approach avoids the danger of adult education tutors exacerbating perceptions of disability and dependence for those to whom learning opportunities are provided (Illich, 1977/2010).

The emphasis, throughout the adult education literature, on fully engaging with older learners in the co-creation of knowledge and understanding, is therefore particularly pertinent to this study (Withnall and Percy, 1994: 166). Relationships within educational groups are central to their success as “our ability to think and feel, our awareness of self and others, and our understanding of the world around us” are key human qualities (Lowy and O’Connor, 1986: 8). A focus on enabling participants to find and establish connections between each other is therefore important in creating an environment in which learning is more likely to take place. Knowles *et al.* (2011) emphasise the involvement of adult learners in identifying their own learning needs and goals, and their subsequent involvement in planning course design and content as essential elements to facilitating learning for adults, while Lowy and O’Connor (1986: 157) highlight creating an environment for the achievement of mutual learning in the relationship between tutors and learners. Older learners having such a wealth of experience to be expressed and drawn upon simply by virtue of the length of time they have lived, suggests that using reminiscence as a vehicle for learning in later life will potentially make good use of one of the most obvious strengths of older people (Moody, 1985: 32). Moody also highlights discussion groups as a natural route to promoting late life learning, expressing the view that: “It is through the process of dialogue that life experience is converted into knowledge” (Moody, 1985: 39), and that “For older people, thinking means a dialogue between the past and present, between the memory of life experience and the structure of the subject matter” (Moody, 1985: 40). This involves “being in touch with feelings

and opinions, not to subordinate them to the subject matter or to reject them as useless or irrelevant” (*ibid*). Moody relates these concepts to transformative learning in his discussion of transcending the past: “Experience is the indispensable resource; dialogue releases the truth of experience and points towards a transcendence of our previous understanding” (Moody, 1985: 47). Dialogue was facilitated through non-verbal as well as verbal means in this research, with particular use being made of mime and drawing as a way of enhancing speech-focused reminiscence.

Randall and Kenyon (2002: 239) discuss ideas around each of us having four points of view on our own lives: “author, character, narrator, and reader”, describing wisdom as a way of “being in the world with” our life stories and of “reading” those stories – or making sense of them (*ibid*: 244). An individual therefore, rather than living “in” their past, can be seen as “living off” the past, in that “our memory is a resource, by which we can potentially be nourished and sustained” (*ibid*: 243). Therefore, Randall and Kenyon suggest that: “a life is a type of literary text, and that reminiscence can be understood as *reading* that text for the meaning that it mediates” (*ibid*: 253 – italics in the original). Furthermore, the task of the adult educator can be seen as being to create a space in which lives can be ‘read’ in “relationship with others” (*ibid*: 253). This ‘reading’ of our lives involves a ‘sensing’ of the meaning of our stories, which can change over time.

The dialogic group as a context for learning is also recognised by Yow who outlines how, as well as reminiscing individually “we also remember as a group; that is, we listen to people who have shared the same experience with us, and we gain a feeling of identity with them when we remember as people in our group remember” (Yow, 2005: 36). Although not referring specifically to group work reminiscence, Yow (2005) highlights how we define and form our identity through focusing on personal memories (*ibid*: 35) and that this is a social, as well as an individual process. Subsequently, we may “describe the memory differently with different cues or, in other words, reconstruct it differently when responding to different needs” (*ibid*: 37).

An understanding of the different dimensions of learning is recognised by Cranton and Taylor who discuss the tension between individual and social factors in learning,

stating that these are not separate but complementary processes (Cranton and Taylor, 2012: 12). Dewey also highlights the interaction between the individual and the group in learning which focuses on experience (1938: 89) while Abrams recognises that “Personal memories are not and cannot always be subsumed within a collective narrative” such that individual memory can be seen “as the product of an active engagement with social processes, in particular the process of talking, reconstructing experiences with others, sharing a language to recollect past experiences” (2010: 102). These are ideas shared by Battersby who describes gerogogy as “a collective and negotiated enterprise amongst older adults” rather than “an imposed set of prescriptive guidelines and strategies” (1990: 135). This is central to the idea that education for older adults can potentially empower older people to challenge devaluing ideas about themselves through such learning activities which break down barriers between educational practitioners and their older learners, as well as drawing people out of themselves in ways which can contribute to and enhance well-being (Merriam, 1985: 60-61).

Research Question 3: What are the potential outcomes of such learning for the individual and for society?

The multiplicity of possible answers which could be given when considering the outcomes of learning in later life, is partially captured by Johnston, who considers that: “Education has two almost paradoxical functions – to help us to adapt and cope with our environment and also to expand our horizons” (Johnston, 1983: 86). In exploring the literature on reminiscence and late life learning, one of the features which stands out in terms of potential outcomes for individuals and society is “education as a mechanism for change” (Agruso 1978: 142). Shea adds to this general understanding by stating that learning is: “recognizable through the changes it brings to the potential for thinking and behaving of the learner” (1985: 59). Thus, our starting point in considering possible outcomes of learning through reminiscence is that such educational activities might bring changes within the individual learner, as well as enabling them to act differently in the world around them.

Trust is an essential precedent to this process of change. Part of the role of the reminiscence tutor involves creating a safe space where participants feel comfortable to share personal memories. This involves facilitating discussion in which participants are able to connect with each other in order to encourage conversation and facilitate learning. Beatty and Wolf (1996) suggest that to change and grow, to develop our ideas and our view of ourselves, as well as our understanding of our place in the world, we need to trust ourselves and others. Although trust is presented as the opposite of denial, Beatty and Wolf point out that there exists a “general cultural denial of aging” which evolves from “a wish that we stay the same, that those around us remain in place” (1996: 111. Italics in the original). This poses a contradiction between the need for change which is necessary to development and growth, enabling us to reach our potential in a range of situations as we move through the life course, and our simultaneous desire for unchanging security – aspects of our lives which we can be sure will always remain the same, acting as reference points should unwanted changes take place.

Peterson (1983: 107-109) outlines three types of change which are common in later life: physical, socio-cultural and those relating to the consciousness of the individual, such as personal interests and expectations. Where an older person has many friends and family members who fall within a similar age range, changes taking place in others might be perceived as equally unsettling to those discerned within the self. Reflecting on the role of change as a catalyst to learning Cranton and Taylor discuss ways of approaching change through which the learning potential of naturally occurring events can either be ignored or harnessed:

We expect things to be as they were before. Or, put another way, we uncritically assimilate perspectives from our social world, community, and culture. Those perspectives include distortions, stereotypes and prejudices. They guide our decision-making and our actions until we encounter a situation that is not congruent with our expectation. At that point, we may reject the discrepant perspective or enter into a process that could lead to a transformed perspective.

(Cranton and Taylor, 2012: 6)

The key difference determining whether change is a catalyst for learning or an irritant to be controlled, therefore appears to be the perspective taken towards life experiences which don't fit with our expectations.

The memories and experiences of older people could be framed as being of no interest to anyone beyond the individual reminiscer, or alternatively, as contributing in an essential way to the lives of others, thus conferring an important social role to older people (Buchanan and Middleton, 1994). These contrasting perspectives on the relevance of personal memories, represent opposing social positions attributed to older people: if our memories have only personal value, then an older person reminiscing epitomises images of the older person as someone who has already lived the most meaningful part of their life, and is waiting to die. Whereas, when personal memories are seen as having interest both within the immediate social circle of the older person and to society as a whole, the value of the memories is reframed. Thus, Buchanan and Middleton highlight how reminiscence can be seen as a "socially located phenomenon" (1994: 73) which reflects wider social attitudes towards older people. In a context where individuals are often valued according to their contributions to the economy (through the payment of taxes) older people have been increasingly repositioned socially as a 'burden' and 'drain' (Phillipson, 1982).

The view that learning affects the internal and personal, as well as the more distant and external, is evident in much of the literature relating to late life learning, and becomes a theme which runs throughout this section of the review, highlighting the importance of the social, cultural, historical and political contexts in which learning takes place. Glendenning speaks out against educational experiences which simply lead "to the domestication of older people" by encouraging them "to accept and conform to society as they have perceived it" (2000: 18). This reflects the paradoxical nature of an activity which both enables people to adapt to things as they are, and to develop strategies for bringing about change in the world around them.

Potential purposes and outcomes of learning in later life include helping the older person to understand and adjust to changes within society as well as within their circumstances: changes which may lead to new roles which require a range of skills previously unutilised or in need of refreshing (Peterson, 1983: 134-145). Peterson

frames these purposes in a way which suggests that they could potentially contribute to the well-being of not only the individual, but also, in a wider sense, to that of society. From his viewpoint, it would seem that there needs to be a justification of the time, effort and expense which goes into organising educational programmes for older adults: a justification which demonstrates purpose beyond the personal well-being of the older person. Similarly, other authors have emphasised the place of late life education in promoting the citizenship roles of older people and the contribution they can make to the well-being of younger generations, as well as providing meaningful activities which add purpose to the everyday lives of older individuals (Schacter-Shalomi and Miller, 1995). The reminiscence group as a space for learning can be seen as being important not only from the point of view of generating new personal understandings, but also as a forum to begin passing on such knowledge to others. Moody suggests that the ability of older people “to recover knowledge from their own life experiences” is a facet of their learning which makes them potential teachers of others (Moody, 1985: 40).

These references to the inward and outward facing outcomes of learning relate to differences identified within the literature between ‘instrumental’ and ‘expressive’ learning. Lowy and O’Connor (1986: 145) define instrumental learning as “directed outside of oneself and oriented towards future utility” and likely to relate to social roles including citizenship and survival skills. Expressive education, on the other hand, is defined as “education for its own sake, where the goal of learning is learning itself” (*ibid*). This may relate to issues such as personal growth, enhancing relationships, and understanding the meaning of life. Lowy and O’Connor go on to say that “Learning in the later years is neither primarily instrumental nor primarily expressive; it encompasses both orientations and goals and allows for meeting survival, utilitarian, contemplative, expressive, influencing, contributory and transcendental needs” (*ibid*: 157).

An essential factor in understanding the transformative nature of learning through reminiscence involves a consideration of the social context and the status of older people within society. Mezirow recognises that most knowledge is socially embedded: “much of what we know and believe, our values and our feelings,

depends on the context – biographical, historical, cultural – in which they are embedded” (2000: 3), yet Glendenning criticises most learning opportunities aimed at older people “for asking no questions about the location of older people in the social structure [encouraging] them to accept and conform to society as they have perceived it” (2000: 18). This ‘location’ is outlined by Phillipson who highlights the social status of older adults as being problematic “in societies where issues relating to production and reproduction have traditionally been central both to the social order and to the individual’s identity within it” (2000: 29). The implication is that once an individual has entered into retirement from paid work or is no longer able to reproduce, they lack the social roles seen as most significant in the western world. There is also a sense in which many older people accept their reduced social status unquestioningly, regarding their fruitful years as being in the past (Hazan, 1994: 33-38).

During the 1980s and 1990s a critical awareness developed regarding the benefits of learning in later life, with key authors such as David Battersby in New Zealand and Frank Glendenning in the UK working towards the development of new theoretical understandings of the purpose and role of Educational Gerontology (Glendenning and Battersby, 1990). Battersby (1982) poses questions regarding the link between adult development and learning, arguing the need for a theory of learning specific to older adults which reflects the psychological and social tasks associated with adjustment to change in later life. Through debates about the value of learning in later life, these authors set out to challenge previously unquestioned assumptions about the value of post-retirement education (Battersby, 1984; Glendenning, 2001). Their aim appears to have been to channel research and debate about late life learning into producing an evidence-base which would justify continued government funding of educational opportunities for older people (Glendenning and Battersby, 1990: 42). During these decades new academic disciplines developed as a way of understanding the processes involved in teaching older adults effectively including Critical Gerogogy (Battersby, 1987) and Critical Educational Gerontology (Glendenning, 1993). Battersby and Glendenning argued that “education for older adults should relate to their gaining power over their lives” (Glendenning and

Battersby, 1990: 40), an idea which was later expressed as referring to both “individual and group empowerment” (Battersby and Glendenning, 1992: 116). Glendenning (2000: 21) states that the adult educator’s “primary concern” ought to be: “how to enhance individual autonomy and creativity”. Glendenning identifies reflection on life experience as a potential way of turning learning in later life into a “liberating and empowering” process (Glendenning, 2000: 21) through which the “individual autonomy and creativity” of older adults may be enhanced (ibid: 21). Of particular note is an understanding of the potential of reminiscence to provide a route through which learning in later life could become a means of empowerment:

Of all the various educational activities for older people, reminiscence work is perhaps the most exciting exemplar of how education can be an enabling process which emancipates older people and assists them to gain power over their lives.

(Battersby and Glendenning, 1992: 120)

Political and social factors in the context “of the relative deprivation of older people in retirement” (Withnall, 2010: 27) introduce notions of personal rights, both in terms of access to educational provision, and as a justification for learning opportunities which include potentially empowering or liberating approaches. Findsen and Formosa, highlighting the essentially political and social role played by learning in later life, state that:

Older adult learning should include a concern for transforming the conditions that promote disempowerment of older people, and for unsettling learners’ assumptions that they cannot affect social change.

(Findsen and Formosa, 2011: 106)

This echoes Glendenning’s suggestion that what is needed:

... is a shift away from the functionalist paradigm, where older people are viewed as a social problem and a disadvantaged group, to a socio-political framework which examines society’s treatment of older people.

(Glendenning, 2000: 21-22)

The concept of education as a tool for empowerment has been evident in the educational gerontology literature since the 1980s. Lowy and O'Connor, for example, make the claim that by "enabling individuals to better understand themselves and the world around them, education can increase their ability to control those aspects of their loads which can be controlled" thus tipping "the scales in favor of individual autonomy, growth, and fulfillment" (1986: 67). Such empowerment, it is argued, can be achieved by paying attention to the need of individuals to have control over their own lives (Lowy and O'Connor, 1986: 163).

It might also be suggested that to feel and be truly empowered, older people need to have a sense of playing a part in something beyond themselves. This is likely to relate to the prevailing socio-political context and will be strongly influenced by cultural understandings of the value of older people within society and the potential contributions they can make to the well-being of local communities. However, in order to move to a position of seeing empowerment of older people as a legitimate goal of learning, it is essential that current views of older people as passive (and often expensive) recipients of care are challenged. This includes questioning "approaches to policy development which treat individuals as recipients of services rather than as constituents or active participants in the conditions and interventions that affect their own lives" (Lowy and O'Connor, 1986: 164)

Education is one possible means through which such seemingly oppressive social conventions can be overcome. However, "In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they must transform" (Freire, 1970: 31). Older people may have low expectations of their capacity to contribute to the needs of others or to make a difference in their communities and the wider world, regarding themselves as a burden in both social and economic terms (Grenier, 2012: 180). Freire sees such self-denigrating views as a key area for change through education: "Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them" (Freire, 1970/1993: 45). This would suggest a potential role

for late-life learning opportunities in encouraging older people to challenge, rather than adapt to, negative stereotypes and concepts of ageing (Phillipson, 1982: 11).

Tennant, in discussing Freire's work observes that oppressed and subjugated peoples may see the world in which they live as unchangeable:

This view is supported by an oppressive social structure which has a vested interest in objectifying the world, making all aspects of a person's situation appear 'natural' and therefore unalterable.

(Tennant, 2006: 123)

It might be argued that challenging views of old age as a time of inevitable dependence, would be equivalent to challenging an oppressive political regime which oppresses the poor. The role of reminiscence in challenging views of older people as passive recipients of care is explored by Johnston who describes the approach as "enabling people who are primarily considered to be on the receiving end to take control and to give something back, something which only they can provide [turning] old age from a disadvantage into a premium" (1983: 85). There is a strong sense in which this is a joint learning opportunity, which emphasises the importance of the relationship between the learning facilitator and group participants. The suggestion is that, as part of the process of creating learning opportunities for the older adult, reminiscence may be effective in breaking down social barriers.

It might also be suggested that reminiscence has the ability to transform the social standing of older people. This is an idea explored by Buchanan and Middleton who, adopting a discourse analysis approach to reminiscence, identify such activities as being socially located (Buchanan and Middleton, 1994: 73), recognising its potential in socially repositioning older people through transforming prevalent attitudes about the value of old age. This "tension between the power of culture and the power of individual agency" is explored by Abrams (2010: 48) in her consideration of the position of the self in oral history narratives, raising the idea that, when narrating their memories of life experiences, individuals are in some ways "the slave of discourses in culture" (Abrams, 2010: 48) as life story narratives draw upon

meaningful concepts of the self at the same time as “public discourses” (Abrams, 2010: 48). This generates:

‘narrative coherence’ between discrepant versions of his or her life story not just with reference to previous versions of the life story but also in relation to cultural assumptions about self.

(Abrams, 2010: 49)

Nonetheless, it could be argued that were an increasing number of older people to become more proactive in making decisions about their own lives, beginning with how they spend their time and in which learning activities they engage, it is likely that existing stereotypes of old age as a time of inevitable decline would at least begin to be questioned. Moody, for instance, expresses a keen understanding of the need for something constructive to come out of learning activities undertaken in later life (Moody, 1985: 41). This leads to “reflexive engagement in worldly activities” which in earlier life might have taken the form of “political struggle and revolutionary consciousness aimed at transforming the world” (*ibid*: 42). Moody goes on to reflect on the work of Simone de Beauvoir who suggested that “older people must avoid turning inward, must transcend their own past by engagement in the present” (*ibid*: 42) arguing that this view ignores later life as a time during which specific developmental tasks still remain to be worked through and that “a developmental process that leads us to transcend the past must be rooted in an acceptance of that past” (*ibid*: 43). This poses the question of whether examining past events and experiences with the aim of gaining a sense of coherence which embraces the entire lifespan, might in fact represent a learning task of utmost importance. It might also be argued that ultimate sense-making would be represented by gaining a fresh perspective on the coherence between the internal and external worlds. Jarvis, for example, describes learning as “the process of transforming experiences of disjuncture with the external world and internalising the outcomes into a part of our meaningful biography” (1996: 104-5). While Jarvis is referring largely to adjustment to difficulties faced by older people as a result of individual and societal change, this rightly draws attention to the older person as functioning in a social context within which all learning takes place (Jarvis, 1987).

Abrams (2010: 38), in reflecting on the expression of self through narrative and story-telling in oral history, recognises that one of the purposes of this process is “reflection of the self to others”, although she sounds a note of caution regarding our tendency to see the production of individualistic accounts as an innate human trait, rather than, in part, a product of modern Western cultural concepts of the self-determining individual. Thus, while it might be considered that “the perception of the existence of the individualised self is a necessary precondition for producing a life narrative” (*ibid*: 35), such a narrative has a clear place in human history and culture (Abrams, 2010: 37).

The stories told in reminiscence groups are not just about what happened, but are also an interpretation, a way of explaining to oneself and others the meaning of what happened. Life stories can therefore be seen as social constructions presented from the point of view of the teller. Mead (1934, cited in Best *et al.*, 2000: 232) viewed self as a social construction arising out of social experience. While we are unique individuals this uniqueness can nevertheless only be defined and affirmed in relationships with others and wider society. Participating in reminiscence-based learning groups provides opportunities for others to affirm or validate our experiences and contributes to an ability to define ourselves in terms of social relationships. Estes *et al.* make links between ‘cohort’ identity and a desire for continuity in identity:

... cohorts can be seen as a means of carrying one’s fixity along as ageing takes place, maintained by continuities of peer reinforcement. Cohort and continuity are both models of stability in identity maintenance

(Estes *et al.*, 2003: 32)

Reminiscence groups can therefore be seen as an important part of a process of defining ourselves, as we see ourselves as belonging to a particular time and series of events in history.

Therefore, in considering the outcomes of reminiscence in later life learning, it is necessary to maintain an awareness of both social and cultural processes at work, such that we “construct our life stories in ways in which we think others will

understand and recognise” (Estes *et al.*, 2003: 40). This, together with Smith’s (2010) awareness of the role of the group in influencing which aspects of our stories are told, points towards life story as a potentially malleable concept, in which the social, historical and cultural contexts strongly influence how personal memories and experiences are interpreted and expressed (Abrams, 2010: 41). This contributes to a growing understanding of the need to be flexible in using concepts such as memory and learning, allowing them to evolve in our thinking about the nature of research involving reminiscence groups and in considering a range of possibilities in relation to obtaining a fully objective view of the experiences of either ourselves or others. This is one of the principal driving forces in taking an openly constructionist approach to the data analysis and reporting undertaken within this study.

Research Question 4: What are the potential benefits to both individuals and society, of learning in later life through reminiscence?

The range of benefits suggested for learning in later life are many and varied, reflecting a similar range that might equally be attributed to learning taking place across the life course. Lowy and O’Connor in recognizing the holistic nature and value of learning in later life, describe the need to direct it “towards meeting a series of bio-psycho-social-emotional developmental tasks ... [demanding] an engagement of all dimensions of the human person he/she is potentially capable of – physiological, biological, somatic, psychic, cognitive, social, cultural, ideological, and spiritual” (1986: 157). Such a view is far from a concept of education as consisting of, and contributing to well-being mainly through, the acquisition and accumulation of new ideas, knowledge or skills, suggesting that in-depth learning can potentially change not only the thoughts of participants, but also their feelings, their relationships and the way they act in and on the world around them.

The diverse benefits of education in the later years, regarded as contributing “substantially to the psychological, sociological, economic, and physical well-being of older adults” (Fisher and Wolf, 1998: 87) gives them a role beyond mere time-filling pleasurable activities. The positive potential of learning in later life, contributing to the fulfilment of individual needs such as “self-esteem and

satisfaction”, has been identified by Midwinter who suggests that this is “The chief, perhaps the sole, purpose” of learning, providing satisfaction to individuals in a way which enables them “to realise their ‘best self’” (Midwinter, 1982: 66). This raises questions about what constitutes the ‘best self’ in later life, and may be linked to the theory of successful ageing (Baltes and Baltes, 1993) which is examined and questioned in the wider gerontological literature, where different conceptions of what constitutes ‘success’ are proposed and critiqued by researchers and authors from a range of disciplines (see for example: Hazan, 1994; Slater, 1995; Pecchioni *et al.*, 2004). Hazan in particular, criticises “the patronizing instruction of aged persons for better and fuller lives” (1994: 15) recognising the influence of political and economic interests in constructions of ageing which are less than transparent in purpose. On a similar note, Glendenning claims that:

Education is not a neutral exercise and self-evidently good for all people. It has become both a prisoner and guardian of the dominant ideology and as such is likely to alienate those with little cultural capital.

(Glendenning, 2000: 22)

By contrast, Elmore argues “that gerontological education is a public good with a comparable moral status to that of health care and it is equally necessary both for promoting individual opportunity and a sense of public well-being” (Elmore, 2000: 53). While it is difficult to envision that the topic of providing learning opportunities for older adults would ever win the same measure of political attention as change to health service provision often does, it is interesting to note the strength of feeling and belief regarding the positive personal and community effects of late-life learning espoused here.

More recent research confirms a dual role for learning in later life as promoting the well-being of individuals and communities. Withnall (2010: 14), for example, identifies personal growth, empowerment, choice, social inclusion and health as individual benefits which in turn contribute to wider benefits to society as the older person maintains their independence for longer through participating in activities which promote health (thus reducing the tax payer’s contribution to the cost of care),

participates in civic life and community affairs and generally functions more effectively for longer, with less support. Withnall reflects on the association made between maintaining well-being in later life and engaging in learning:

... the purpose of educational activity in later life is to provide solutions to the problem of how to achieve 'successful' ageing through the preservation of a positive, healthy and active lifestyle or through adaptation to a socially acceptable role. There is an implicit assumption that education can contribute to this process by assuring good health, well-being and personal satisfaction in later life.

(Withnall, 2010: 24-25)

It has also been argued that reminiscing can lead to resilience in the face of stressful life experiences (Johnston, 1983: 83) with learning opportunities which focus specifically on memories of the past empowering the older person to strengthen their identity in the present through the adoption of meaningful roles (Johnston, 1983: 85).

The value of reminiscence in learning in later life can helpfully be put into context by considering the role of learning across the life course. Shea, for instance, considers learning in the later years to be part of a lifelong process, rather than an isolated type of learning which bears no relation to what has gone before (Shea, 1985: 64) while Thornton sees learning as "an inherent process in the development of the individual over the total life span" (1986: 62). Shea's description of learning as "synonymous with living" (1985: 58) encapsulates the idea that learning is central to the development of self and society, and by implication, to well-being. Learning for older adults can be seen as providing an opportunity to draw together experiences from across the lifespan in a way which enhances quality of life through instilling meaning into the whole of life (Moody, 1985: 41). Moody acknowledges the depth of such learning, as going beyond "information processing" to involve making sense of life as it has been lived (Moody, 1986: 142). This is a process which contributes to well-being throughout the life course in the context of life's challenges which:

“continue to change in mazy and sometimes bewildering patterns from cradle to grave” (Midwinter, 1982: 7).

Shifts in participants’ understanding of the meaning of their experiences both within and outside the group is one way of understanding the qualitative changes which can take place in learning (Illeris, 2014: 6). Altering the perspective taken towards one’s own life as it has been lived is recognised within Peter Alheit’s (1990, 1992) concept of biographical learning which “understands learning as a continuous experiential development created by and adapted to the individual life course” which involves “changes in the individual biography, life story or identity” (cited in Illeris, 2014: 21). Illeris, continuing his discussion of Alheit’s ideas, recognises that “Biographical learning is more or less the same as the concept of changes in the organization of the self” with a strong emphasis on “the interaction between societal and individual conditions” (Illeris, 2014: 21). Biographical learning recognises that individuals interpret their experiences and that learning takes place through transforming the approach to understanding experience (*ibid*: 66) and self-identity (*ibid*: 40). The latter integrates the cognitive, social and emotional dimensions of learning as the identity of learners form the “totality of the human mind” (*ibid*: 38). Furthermore, Illeris regards identity as incorporating both internal and external elements of the person; that is, their self-perception and their interactions with others (*ibid*: 39). Therefore, argues Illeris, “the cognitive and the emotional are always integrated matters, that cognitive understandings and evaluations always include emotional elements, and emotions always involve cognitive ways of thinking” (*ibid*:36). Illeris explains the relationship between identity and learning as being “concerned with and centred around the connection between the individual and the surroundings, and it therefore always involves the three same dimensions, which are involved in all learning, i.e. the content, the incentive, and the interaction – or, formulated in more psychological terms, the cognitive, the emotional and the social” (2014: 69-70).

It is evident from the above that these three dimensions of self are central to an understanding of the concept and process of learning. Other authors also make this link between identity and learning, with Jarvis referring to learning as “the force through which our biographies develop and expand” (2001: 45) and reminiscence an

approach which enables older people “to reclaim their lives” (*ibid*: 132). Soltys and Kunz also recognise ways in which: “Reminiscence is an effective strategy for processing information, feelings, and thoughts and for putting experiences into perspective over time” (2007b: 89). This is a process which Wong regards as leading to wisdom, which: “is the crowning achievement of the search for ego integrity. Wisdom is demonstrated in learning to accept the self with all its defects and failures. Wisdom is also manifested in having a sense of meaning, purpose, and coherence in the midst of adversities and relentless change” (1995: 30). Thus, “Meaning is constructed through experience and our perceptions of those experiences, and future experiences are seen through the lens of the perspectives developed from past experiences. Learning occurs when an alternative perspective calls into question a previously held, perhaps uncritically assimilated perspective” (Cranton and Taylor, 2012: 9). Learning through reminiscence can therefore be promoted by engaging in discussion and reflection, the facilitation of both of which are central to the role of the reminiscence tutor. Outlining this interaction between ‘memory’ and ‘identity’ in order to conceptualise their relationship to each other and their significance across the life course, is helpful to an understanding of the links between the past, the present and the person.

One benefit of education in later life could be seen as social bonding which meets the need of the older person to connect with others. Beatty and Wolf (1996: 70 – 74) put forward a number of ‘principles of ageing’ which are relevant to connecting with older adults and combine these with six ‘principles of learning’ to generate six “integrated principles to support successful ageing”: growth, individuality, competence, autonomy, wholeness and engagement. Within this structure, Beatty and Wolf, have identified factors within individuals (such as locus of control, physiological and psychological capacities, needs, emotions and sense of self), which involve an interaction between the person and their environment (such as life experience and challenges) as well as external factors over which they will have less control (such as the social context). While their foundational and integrated principles could each be seen as over-simplistic and non-specific, this provides the necessary flexibility for understanding the experience of unique individuals. Thus,

Beatty and Wolf provide a useful structure around which to begin building an understanding of a range of factors influencing the nature and benefits of learning which might take place in a reminiscence-based learning group.

A theme which recurs in a number of studies on the beneficial impact of reminiscence-based activities is its role in increasing social interaction. While much of the emphasis in care environments is on physical care, McKee *et al.* (2005) suggest a strong need for social interaction amongst older care-recipients. Plastow (2006) sees reminiscence as a means of tackling aspects of the social isolation and withdrawal commonly seen in later life, while Stinson and Kirk (2006) suggest that self-transcendence (an important feature of the ability to overcome adverse circumstances) is linked to social interaction and meaningful activities.

Socialisation with the opportunity to talk and make friends was the primary aim of the reminiscence groups in Zauszniewski *et al.*'s (2004) research, while Chao *et al.* (2006) found that social interactions between participants engaged in reminiscence-based activities increased during the study, both within the reminiscence group and through greater engagement in other activities in the care setting. They also attributed improvements in self-esteem to the strong sense of belonging and social significance achieved through recounting life experiences. Similarly, Jones (2003) reported increased rapport between group members coinciding with an increase in self-confidence.

McKee *et al.* (2005) see reminiscence as an appropriate social activity for later life because it is not limited by physical frailty or the cognitive changes commonly associated with ageing. Through reminiscence-based activities older people can be purposefully occupied in ways which provide social contact and break social isolation. Chao *et al.* (2006) describe participants using reminiscence to integrate past experience, improve self-understanding, reduce feelings of loss and increase socialisation, while Plastow (2006) found that participants used opportunities to recount memories as a means to reviewing the past, accepting the present, and considering possibilities for the future. The effectiveness of reminiscence might therefore depend on the functions attributed to it by the facilitator and participants, which will in turn effect how sessions are structured.

The development of autonomy, opportunities for social interaction and the acquisition of knowledge, have been identified as the principal aims of learning in later life (James, 1990: 128-9). Amongst these, autonomy, related to a number of facets of personal growth such as self-awareness and self-acceptance, could be seen as being concerned with purely individual and expressive learning, until, that is, it is considered in the context of learning situations which also enhance skills in, and promote opportunities for, social interaction, including developing an awareness of and acceptance of others. Similarly, the acquisition of knowledge, whilst incorporating new understandings of and familiarity with facts, theories and ideas, includes, the ability to make judgments about our expanding awareness of self, others and the surrounding world (James, 1990: 128-9). It could therefore be argued that learning about and becoming more aware of ourselves requires and necessitates a simultaneous interaction with others, and that knowledge-related learning emerges in the interaction which takes place between these two.

Within long term care settings, Walker (1983: 43) identifies the interplay between the personal benefits of learning and potential contributions to the wider community, outlining a role for adult education as being: “capable of providing assistance to residents and patients over such matters as rehabilitation, continued personal development, preservation of independence and links with the community”. Walker later expands upon this list as a means of bringing about personal benefits such as: “Improvements in memory recall, concentration and control” which contribute to: “better mobility, reduction in incontinence and a general ability to cope with conditions such as partial paralysis, reduced confusion and depression” (Walker, 1983: 49). While Walker does not substantiate these claims with research, it is clear that were such changes to result from participation in learning activities aimed at older people, the potential contribution to the level of respect, personal value and dignity they were afforded would be considerable.

The losses and changes experienced in later life all have consequences for maintaining social networks. Our ability to make ourselves more interesting to other people at this point in our lives may ensure continuing relationships in the present and the future. The past was, for many older people, a time when a stronger sense

of purpose, achievement and belonging was experienced, and in the face of the loss associated with later life, these memories potentially represent a resource to draw upon in affirming self-identity. Though it may be argued that we should encourage older people to live in the present, the realities of that may be too painful or confusing by comparison with the achievements, sense of identity and stronger self-image of the past. There is therefore a recognition in the literature that recounting past experiences in a learning context can lead to greater psychosocial well-being for some older people.

However, it is also recognised that participation in reminiscence activities should not, without qualification, necessarily be seen as a good thing. Coleman, for instance, has suggested that “it could indicate a person caught in negative ruminations and needing therapeutic assistance” (2005: 304), while others may have kept traumatic memories hidden for years and still want to do so. Of these people, some decline opportunities to join reminiscence-based learning groups, while others join in only to find themselves vividly recounting painful memories unexpectedly in an inappropriate setting. Coleman warns that some people may get caught in “a vicious cycle of repetition, continually revisiting painful memories but without achieving resolution” (2005: 303). However, he also describes how recounting memories can lead to greater levels of self-acceptance and self-understanding contributing to a new ability to bring about change in one’s own life. McKee *et al.* (2005) relate this to Erikson’s theory of lifespan development, which describes the main task of later life as resolving the conflict between ego-integrity and despair. It might also be considered that reminiscence can provide a mechanism by which individuals adapt to changes that occur throughout the lifespan, and that maintaining a positive self-image can help adaption to any potential impacts of ageing which are perceived as negative (Wang, 2004).

One aspect of the social value of reminiscence is the opportunity it provides for mutual enjoyment of recollections of times past, and while some reminiscence tutors may be fearful of stimulating unhappy memories, Carstensen *et al.* (cited by Helmuth, 2003) have shown that older people have a “positivity bias” (*ibid*: 1302) making it more likely that they will remember positive events and information. This

may impact on autobiographical memory, giving older people the impression that they felt happier in the past than they would have rated themselves at the time. Nonetheless, this can contribute to the way in which reminiscence assists learning in later life:

By reminiscing about a time of strength and accomplishment, we reassure ourselves and others that we are the same competent person. This sense of sameness and consistency reinforce the construction of self as a functioning, effective problem solver. Such a self-identity fosters self-esteem.

(Wong, 1995: 34)

Jarvis, also expresses the view that as “people reminisce about the positive things in their lives the more likely they are to be able to be satisfied with it” (Jarvis, 2001: 132). Connecting this to the idea that the primary learning task associated with the final years of life is to achieve a sense of satisfaction with the totality of one’s life experience, this natural tendency of many older people to take a positive stance when reminiscing, contributes to a concept of reminiscence as a potentially effective tool for facilitating late-life learning.

Bluck and Alea (2002: 64-66) identify three purposes of autobiographical memory relating firstly, to enhanced functioning of the individual by contributing to a sense of personal continuity and coherence, secondly, enhanced functioning of society through promoting communication and social bonding, and lastly, as having directive functions which relate to planning in the present and for the future. The structured expression of autobiographical memory through reminiscence could therefore be seen as having individual, social and temporal dimensions. Bluck and Alea’s acknowledgement that these three functions don’t “necessarily represent discrete categories in everyday behaviour or mental life” (2002: 64) emphasises the usefulness of seeing individual and social experiences as being embedded within each other in the context of the entirety of human experience which spans the whole of history (past, present and future). It is important to note that this differs from the concept of collective memory but relates more closely to Smith’s conceptualization

of transactive memory which “describes the process of people remembering together in relationships” allowing for “the idea that individual members of a group do not remember everything that the group as a whole remembers” (Smith, 2010: 45).

McClusky (1971, cited in Hiemstra, 1998: 10) in his inclusion of ‘contributive’ and ‘influence’ needs in a taxonomy of older people’s needs, demonstrates an insight into the intrinsic human need to contribute to the well-being of others. Approaches to working with older people which neglect to draw upon their strengths, could potentially be experienced as diminishing the humanity of the older person. Reminiscence is therefore a particularly relevant approach to later-life learning because of the way it can transform the usual care-recipient role of older people, and therefore offer ways of developing more balanced relationships between the older person and those working with them (Gibson, 2011:43). Reminiscence, by drawing upon crystallised, rather than fluid, intelligence, makes use of the intellectual strengths of the older generation (Glendenning, 2004: 524-525). Such opportunities for older people to contribute to the needs of others by becoming facilitators of learning themselves can be rare in the lives of older people.

This is an idea expressed well by Holland, who, recognising the relevance and pertinence of the past within the thinking and lives of older people, argues that individuals may experience the loss of important roles and relationships in retirement, such that autobiographical memory takes on a greater significance in that person’s life (Holland, 1995: 74-75). Similarly, Lowy and O’Connor recognise the importance of reminiscing to older people: “Given their perspective of time, older adults are likely to be capable of special reflection on the meaning of their lives” (1986: 158) while findings from psychological studies suggest that people of all levels of cognitive ability need to share memories “to maintain a sense of our own identity. Telling our stories helps us make sense of our present and our past, and to understand who we are” (Kotai-Ewers, 2011: 161). There is also a need to know that these stories are “heard and accepted as valid” (*ibid*: 161). Far from being a means of escapism leading to living in the past, reminiscence can be reframed as a means of drawing upon memories as a way of sustaining and nourishing life in the present

(Randall and Kenyon, 2002: 243). Thus, Rubinstein reflects that “While the connections to the past expressed through reminiscence clearly reflect the past, they are significantly part of the present” (Rubinstein, 2002: 153).

Reminiscence as a means of looking back over the life course to attain a stronger sense of identity is explored in a range of literature which recognises the sharing of personal memories as a valuable tool for finding meaning in the whole of one’s life. This is particularly pertinent in the context of increasing frailty towards the end of life (Soltys and Kunz, 2007b: 92):

To the extent that a person’s self-image or concept is identified with the social roles and functions the person has filled in life, the greater these threats and assaults on self-esteem and morale become with advancing age.

(Sherman, 1991: 33)

Sherman goes on to suggest that a sense of self can be enhanced through reminiscence, giving the older person a role in providing information and knowledge about the past by involving them in pleasurable activities which also affirm their accomplishments throughout the life course (1991: 33-34). Thus the narrative of reminiscence takes on the function of enabling participants to make sense of life and experience (*ibid*: 39), enhancing and strengthening “the sense of continuity, the sense of a common self in the span of a single life” (*ibid*: 101).

The potential benefits of reminiscence include providing a sense of coherence and continuity within the life span of individuals, whilst affirming personal identity and encouraging feelings of self-worth (Gibson, 2004: 26). The wider social value of reminiscence, exists in the opportunities presented for older people to contribute to the well-being of society through transmitting knowledge and values, which in turn contribute to both community development and the social inclusion of older people.

Every change that occurs in the life course requires adjustment. Old age brings particular challenges in this regard in that it is more likely that the changes are unwanted, unprepared for and occur in rapid succession. Such changes might include

loss of work role, loss of spouse, decreased income and increased physical frailty together with decreasing independence in activities of daily living. Associated with this rapid rate of change can be loss of meaningful roles which can lead to many of the pathological features associated with old age in western society, such as depression, anxiety and cognitive deterioration (Gutmann, cited by Coleman, 1994: 19). Coleman claims that a greater identification with past lives and past achievements is helpful to older people in situations of deprivation and loss:

The discrepancy between how one would like to live one's life and how one is actually leading it is minimised by stressing the value of the life that has already been lived.

(Coleman, 1993: 106)

Telling one's life story can be seen as a central feature of exploring and developing one's sense of identity throughout life. Phillipson considers that "asking questions about the status of selfhood in late life is fundamental to any understanding of the problems facing older people" (2000: 31), suggesting that issues of identity may be central to promoting well-being in later life, particularly in a social and cultural context which may threaten identity amongst older learners: "modern living undercuts the construction of a viable identity for living in old age" (Phillipson, 2000: 33). Recognising the importance of reminiscence for the affirmation of personal identity and self-esteem, Coleman (1999: 59) describes it as "the means by which the life story is further elaborated, kept in good order and made more coherent, clear and memorable". This can be enhanced by selective memory, whereby reminiscers select the most prestigious aspects of their life stories to share with others (Argyle, 1983: 200). Roles perceived as being of particular importance or excitement in the past may therefore be most salient to enhancing self-image.

Tennant (2006: 53) notes the long history of adult educators' interest in "the development and transformation of the self" which has brought about courses aimed specifically at self-development as well as "programmes in which changes to the self are seen as being a necessary component of broader social change" (*ibid*). It may be that for Fourth Agers to enjoy all that life brings them, transformation is

needed in both personal and cultural concepts of ageing. Although not specifically addressing learning in later life, Mezirow offers useful insight into how traditional concepts of dependency in old age might be challenged through learning:

Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminatory, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action.

(Mezirow, 2000: 7-8)

Similarly, Schuller *et al.* (2004: 182) outline how being involved in learning enables adults “to redefine what is acceptable or desirable behaviour” for themselves, their families and wider society, putting forward a range of arguments about how the significance and benefits of learning extend beyond individuals to include: “cultural practices and collective behaviours which need to change” (2004: 183). This suggests that changes taking place in participants can be seen as having a broader significance than the transformation of their individual understandings of their personal life stories. Thus, Moody reflects upon individual experience as being “part of the common tale” (1984: 165) and Kasl and Elias express an understanding of the collective nature and qualities of learning, suggesting that this leads to an:

expanded consciousness ... characterized by new frames of reference, points of view, or habits of mind as well as by a new structure for engaging the system’s identity.

(Kasl and Elias, 2000: 233)

These are ideas backed up by MacKeracher, who, acknowledging the bilateral nature of individual experience consisting of: “what was imposed on me by my social and cultural heritage and what happened to me personally and that I have made sense of” (2012: 343) highlights a need for adult educators to recognise the interrelatedness of all aspects of life and humanity (Taylor and Elias, 2012: 160). Individual transformation could therefore be seen as a necessary precedent to wider social change (Weiler, 1996: 140). Therefore, the transcendence of elements of the

past which may prevent us from enjoying later life, as well as being an essential aspect of learning about the self (Moody, 1985: 45), also extend beyond individual boundaries, and represent a potential means of social change. Keightly for example, presents memory as a resource “in the exploration of relations between public and private life, agency and power, and the past, present and future” (2010: 55).

The difference between natural biological processes associated with ageing (Woodrow, 2002), and the social construction of old age (Grenier, 2012), needs to be understood by people of all ages. Learning opportunities in later life can be channels through which participants begin to see themselves in ways which offer new frameworks for understanding ageing processes in us all. Thus, while ageing does have natural effects which can bring about a range of losses, impairments and disabilities (Woodrow, 2002), it is the way in which these are framed as inevitably problematic by a prevailing culture of ageism (Peace et al, 2007:12) which sees such changes in an overwhelmingly negative light (Kelley-Moore, 2010). Illich’s work (1977) highlights how a person’s needs are often framed as deficiencies within the individual, rather than as a problem existing within society. For example, while ageing is frequently seen as problematic, it could legitimately be framed as a success story which demonstrates the effectiveness of the public health movement (Jones, 1994: 356).

Summary:

This wide-ranging review has gathered together literature which has highlighted a number of potential outcomes and benefits of both learning in later life and reminiscence. Emphasis has been placed on experience and memories, as well as how these relate to identity to establish the potential building blocks of learning through reminiscence: the past, the present and the person. It has also been noted that the social context is relevant to understanding the person and how they encode and recall their experiences through autobiographical memories.

This exploration of the existing literature on the mechanisms, outcomes and benefits of reminiscence-learning opportunities occurring in later life, has drawn attention to a number of key issues including the importance of the interplay between the

personal and external impacts of learning and the potential changes these might bring to society, the holistic nature of late life learning and the importance of the wider historical, socio-cultural, economic and political contexts. While one of the most obvious criticisms of the existing literature might be its theoretical and ideological nature, it does, nonetheless, provide a useful and thought-provoking background, assisting an understanding of a potential role for reminiscence-based activities as a tool for enhancing learning in later life.

3 - METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter begins with an overview of the approach taken and methods used in exploring whether empirically discernible learning is experienced by participants in a series of reminiscence groups. This includes a description of the reminiscence techniques employed for the purposes of the study and is followed by an in-depth critical analysis of the use of observation and interviews within a case study approach. Integrated into the explanations, discussions and critique is a strong focus on ethical considerations and the unfolding of a growing understanding of the complex nature of each element of this research, much of which reflects the constructionist approach taken throughout the study.

Overview

The aim of this study was to explore learning in later life as it occurs in a reminiscence group for people in the fourth stage of life. The study took place over six weekly sessions focused on the sharing of personal memories, followed a fortnight later by a seventh session for reflection on all that had been shared, and an eighth session held the following spring where participants were invited to review their experiences in the group, and their thoughts about whether learning had taken place and the value of this. All eight sessions were recorded on a digital voice recorder, with the first six being the main focus of data collection and analysis. The intention was to explore the content of interactions between group members to understand the nature of any observable change which could be interpreted as evidence of learning during the lifetime of the group. The aim of session seven was to consolidate learning, while that of session eight was to enable me to check the assumptions I held at the time about what had taken place, as a way of validating my analysis and interpretation of findings.

This was a case study approach, which explored the learning experiences of seven individuals. Participant observation was used with the researcher also being the group facilitator. Following the first seven sessions, 6 of the participants took part in

individual interviews as a way of gathering more detailed information about their experiences within the reminiscence group. The seventh participant was too unwell to participate further at the time of the individual interviews.

Data obtained through the transcriptions of recordings of audible interactions during the eight group sessions and the interviews, was analysed alongside field notes and a reflective log written concurrently.

The whole study was underpinned by an ethical stance of seeking to enhance knowledge and understanding of learning in later life for the benefit of participants, without causing any harm, as detailed throughout this chapter.

Study Timeline

August – September 2010	Day centre attendees approached and study discussed with potential participants. Consent forms signed.
October – November 2010	7 group sessions held with participants. Transcription and initial reading of data, followed by deeper reading using NVivo8 software and thematic coding.
December 2010 – February 2011	Individual interviews held with 6 of the participants. Transcription and initial reading of data, followed by deeper reading using NVivo8 software and thematic coding.
March 2011	8 th group session held and initial findings shared with 6 participants.
April 2011 – April 2012	Data analysis using NVivo8 software and ‘Cases’ – critical reading.
June 2013 – August 2013	Revisiting data (following intercalation) with a new approach to analysis and interpretation

leading to a more in-depth understanding of the 7 'Cases'.

Entering the Field

The purpose of this study was to explore whether and in what ways learning takes place in a reminiscence group for older people nearing the end of life. To gain a clearer picture of any learning taking place and in order to avoid potential difficulties in gaining and maintaining informed consent from people with a diagnosis of dementia, it was decided to work with people in whom there was no obvious or diagnosed cognitive impairment. At the same time, I was keen to ensure that the potential for the use of reminiscence towards the end of the lifespan could be explored, and therefore, the manager of a local day centre for older people was approached, where those attending were known to be in the later stages of age-related frailty, leading to some degree of dependence in activities of daily living, such as personal and domestic tasks.

The study took place at a time when day services for older people in the county were undergoing a period of radical change, both in terms of their funding, and in terms of the providers' approaches to service delivery. This related largely to a change from County Council block funding of service provision, to a system of personal budgets aimed at promoting service users' choice regarding how and where they would prefer to receive the care services they had been assessed as needing. There was strong feeling locally that this was a cost-saving exercise hiding behind the respectable front of fulfilling the government agenda for personalisation (see Norwich Evening News 24 – January 6th 2010 - online; and HM Government, 2007). Some local day services had closed down as a result of these changes in funding, while those which continued were now competing for older people's personal budgets in order to fund their continuation. This was intended to lead to improvements in cost-effectiveness and the quality of service provision.

It may have been for this reason that, when the service manager was approached to ask whether it would be possible to carry out the research study at the day centre in question, the proposal was met with enthusiasm as contributing an activity session

which would temporarily enhance their profile of service provision, without introducing additional costs. The issue of negotiating access with a gatekeeper was therefore navigated with relative ease, leading to an early opportunity to discuss potential inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants with the service manager. As this day centre did not accept new members with a diagnosis of dementia, and referred on to specialist services any existing members who developed cognitive impairments, difficulties with having to exclude people with dementia who may have enjoyed and benefitted from the reminiscence sessions, could be avoided.

Having identified a site at which the study could take place, ethical approval was sought from the Ethics Committee of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia. This included outlining proposed inclusion and exclusion criteria, designing an information sheet for potential participants (Appendix A) alongside a consent form (Appendix B), and a detailed exploration of issues around coercion, anonymity, the limits of confidentiality and the right of participants to withdraw at any stage. The Ethics Committee provided their approval of the research proposal following clarification of how I would ensure that day centre members who wanted to take part would not be turned down because of a diagnosis of dementia.

On a date arranged in advance with the service manager, and having informed other staff members of the nature of my research, I visited the day centre to invite potential participants to take part, offer them information about the research and provide consent forms and information sheets to take away to read and discuss with relatives and friends. I talked through the information and consent sheets privately with individuals in a manner which avoided any kind of persuasion or encouragement, and maintained clarity about the purposes of the group and the aims of my research. I was particularly mindful of ethical issues around carrying out research in settings where services are provided for people who may feel, or be, emotionally or physically vulnerable, and who might therefore feel obliged to take part in new activities as a way of fitting in with organisational routines, or of gaining approval from those caring for them. Therefore, while telling people that the group would involve stimulating discussion around personal memories and potentially be

enjoyable and interesting, I avoided any suggestion that I especially wanted them to join in. A one week gap was left between providing the information and my second visit, during which I answered any further questions and asked whether potential participants had completed or would like to complete the consent forms. A total of eight forms were returned to me at that time.

The process of providing information and seeking informed consent from potential participants was, on the whole, straightforward. However, in the case of one potential participant, there was some uncertainty about whether or not she wanted to participate. While stating verbally that she wanted to take part, she declined to sign the consent form, saying that her family had told her not to sign anything. Being experienced in working with older people in day centre settings, I was aware that it is often the case that in order to protect an older person from signing official papers without fully understanding the implications of doing so, some families repeatedly remind their relatives never to sign anything. There was a lack of clarity in the case of this one potential participant as to whether she didn't want to take part and therefore wouldn't sign the form, but was laying the responsibility for this with her family rather than expressing her preferences, or whether she actually wished to participate but was concerned about signing the form. Over this issue, I sought the advice of my research supervisors as it seemed unfair to exclude someone who wanted to take part if the latter scenario was the case. After this consultation and further reflection, it was decided that this lady could only participate if she signed the form, due to the need to abide by the original research proposal for which ethical approval had been given. While arguments around the virtues of this decision could be posed *ad infinitum*, ultimately, I made the decision that I had a responsibility to stick to the ethical principles originally laid down, which stated that all participants would be required to sign the consent form indicating that they understood the purposes of the research and their rights regarding withdrawal and privacy. This situation raised a number of issues around the meaning of consent and the purposes of consent forms, highlighting that ethical issues in research with older people are not always straightforward. My decision to work within the original principles

outlined in my research proposal was a way of defining for myself the boundaries within which I would work throughout this research.

At the beginning of every session, I checked with each participant that they were happy for the discussion to be recorded as a way of ensuring that their consent was still ongoing and to avoid any issues around seemingly covert recording of personal information. Furthermore, recordings were transferred from the digital voice recorder at the earliest opportunity, to a password protected computer kept in a locked property to which the researcher alone had access. This ensured that nobody other than me could listen to the recordings, and that the anonymity of participants wasn't threatened. Maintaining the anonymity of participants in any material entering the public domain was central to the research process, partly as a way of ensuring that participants were comfortable sharing personal memories whilst being recorded. Thus, during transcription key personal details relating to the events, names, ages and occupations of participants and their families, as well as all place names, were replaced with alternatives or pseudonyms which did not change the nature of what was being said, or of the interactions taking place.

Further ethical principles included treating participants with respect throughout the study, an issue which became paramount and complex when writing up each of the case studies following data analysis. I repeatedly questioned myself as to how the participants would feel were they to read their own case summaries. This raised questions of how contrasts can arise between how individuals subjectively know and experience themselves, at the same time as being objectively known and experienced by others, which highlighted incongruencies in perception often present in interactions between individuals and within groups in everyday life. Ultimately, it was decided that in order for the final report to be true to my experience of participants within this study, at the same time as being respectful towards them, the report needed to be presented in such a way, that were the participants to read their own case studies, they would recognise why and how conclusions had been reached, based on the data collected, and that the reporting was an accurate reflection of what had taken place. However, this also allowed for the case that some participants may, on reflection, have regretted some of what they said. My overall

aim was therefore for each person to come away with a sense of having been treated with respect, and with their dignity intact.

Facilitating Reminiscence through a Multi-Sensory Approach

Another ethical principle employed throughout the study was that of beneficence, which involved seeking to enhance the well-being of participants through promoting choice and decision-making. Many older people in receipt of care services find their choices in everyday matters are limited, or sometimes non-existent due to financial limitations or lack of awareness on the part of care staff about the need to spend additional time in communicating with older people. To avoid dominating participants with my ideas about suitable topics for discussion in a reminiscence group, I allowed plenty of time for individuals to think through and express their ideas and preferences for topics of discussion. This was facilitated through a general discussion during the first session, which enabled everyone to indicate aspects of their lives which were important to and of interest to them, as well as a discussion at the end of the next three sessions about what they would like to talk about in future groups. This advance planning was important due to the specific approach taken to reminiscence. Based on the work of Age Exchange (Osborn, 1993) and Faith Gibson (1998 and 2011), an approach to reminiscence was used which included introducing multi-sensory triggers to stimulate the recall and sharing of memories. In order to make this possible, it was necessary to know forthcoming themes at least a week in advance so that relevant triggers to stimulate all five senses could be identified and sourced, and a range of activities designed which would encourage involvement. I have found movement, through re-enactment of activities from the past, to be a useful means of accessing and expressing past memories through utilising procedural memories which can be expressed with few or no words. One group member had difficulty speaking following a stroke. Therefore, finding non-verbal approaches to sharing memories was particularly important for everyone to be on an equal footing and to benefit equally from participation.

Table 1 shows the themes chosen by group members for Sessions Two through to Six, with examples of activities and multisensory triggers used to stimulate recall,

alongside the number of people attending each session. In order to appeal to people with a range of auditory, visual and kinaesthetic learning styles each group session involved touching, handling, miming with and demonstrating the use of items of memorabilia, as well as listening to recordings of speeches, everyday activities and music from the past, alongside pictures in the form of newspaper clippings, books, post cards, scrapbooks and posters. All of these resources were obtained by searching my employer's reminiscence archive which contained several hundred items, built up over a period of ten years for the purposes of stimulating learning for, and communication with, older people, through the sharing of memories.

Throughout the research I had a clear concept of myself in a facilitative role. This was a multifaceted role involving practical, social, interactional and ethical elements, ensuring that a room was available at the day centre where the group sessions could take place undisturbed, that all learning resources were available, and that I was in a frame of mind which would enable me to listen to people's stories in a non-judgemental way, enabling them to feel heard and understood. However, part of the educational facilitator's role includes being able to ensure that all participants are emotionally safe, which necessitated maintaining a level of awareness of how participants' contribution might impact on others.

Learning activities with any type of subject matter can potentially stir up strong feelings as an emotional dimension of learning will always be present where learners are actively engaged in processes involving change and personal development (Illeris, 2005). As an experienced reminiscence tutor I was aware of the potential of reminiscence-based learning opportunities to stir both pleasant and unpleasant memories, and had therefore developed a range of ways to ensure that discussions around life events and experiences maintained a positive and constructive focus. These include steering discussions away from areas known to upset particular participants without becoming didactic in my approach. My understanding of the reminiscence facilitator's role therefore demands a careful and negotiated walk between the ethical, emotional and practical aspects of promoting learning and well-being.

At the same time, I was aware during the fieldwork sessions, as during all reminiscence groups facilitated in my role as an adult education tutor, that it was desirable to achieve learning outcomes in accordance with the Learning and Skills Council's guidance on progression and achievement in non-accredited learning, in place at the time (Learning and Skills Council, 2005). A typical form used for assessment of progress and achievement through a series of sessions similar to those undertaken for the fieldwork, but in the context of my everyday work at the time, can be seen in Appendix D. It contains learning objectives such as demonstrating active listening skills and asking questions of other group members, as well as sharing personal memories. The form in Appendix D would be adapted for individuals and groups, depending on the pre-existing abilities demonstrated during the initial assessment undertaken during the first session. Within the context of my workplace at the time, it was accepted that maintaining such skills at the end of life was an equivalent achievement to acquiring them at an earlier point in the life course.

Session No.	Theme	Creative Activities	Examples of Memory Triggers	No. of participants
1	<i>Place of birth and childhood home</i>	Marking place of birth on national and local maps	A wide range of triggers relating to key themes popular with all age groups in recalling memories	7
2	<i>Childhood games and toys/ schooldays</i>	Mimes of childhood games, group recital of times tables and sums in pre-decimal money Table top marbles.	A selection of old fashioned toys such as: yo-yo, 5 stones, cat's cradle and marbles; traditional sweets.	4
3	<i>Working life</i>	Activity around first wage packet using pre-decimal money	Items relevant to job roles of participants e.g. those relating to clothing and munitions factories, cooking, carpentry and the Royal Navy.	7
4	<i>Hobbies, crafts and pastimes</i>	Drawing/writing activity – 'This is the hand that...'	Art, craft, needlework materials and early editions of related books.	7
5	<i>TV, cinema and radio in times past</i>	Radio theme tunes and film star quizzes	'Famous Faces' picture cards and books on the cinema. Theme music from 1940s and 50s films, and 1960s and 70s television	6
6	<i>Homes, DIY and housework in the past</i>	Re-enactment of household tasks using items of memorabilia	DIY tools, reminiscence books on households of the past, items relating to cooking and doing the laundry.	7

Table 1 – Topics, activities and memory triggers for the six group reminiscence sessions

My extensive experience as a facilitator of reminiscence activities within adult education had led through the years to an understanding of how the facilitator's role changes during the course of a series of sessions. Initially, the aim is to establish rapport with and between participants, although as group sessions progress, the facilitative role becomes closer to that of a guide who enables participants to gain the maximum possible from their participation. However, while the facilitator's primary task at the start of a series of sessions is to establish rapport, how this is achieved will depend largely on the abilities and potential of individual group members, where communication could range from establishing eye contact with the tutor, to holding a discussion with a number of other participants. The group taking part in this research were amongst the more able of those for whom I facilitated reminiscence during my time working in an adult education context, and expectations of participation therefore increased as the participants' potential became evident during the earlier group sessions.

The success, or otherwise, of a reminiscence group delivered with adult education funding would ordinarily be determined in two ways. Firstly, by whether participants achieved the individual goals established following initial assessment, and secondly, by whether they considered that they had achieved anything by, or benefitted from, participation. The form in Appendix D therefore provides an opportunity for the learner to express a sense of personal achievement in addition to the learning outcomes agreed with the tutor. For a reminiscence group to be deemed unsuccessful would therefore require that neither the participants nor the tutor were able to ascertain that any benefit or achievements had taken place. However, my experience as a reminiscence tutor had led me to believe that this is rarely a black and white situation of either success or failure, but more a case of the degree to which group members would develop their skills through participation, which would usually be determined by the extent to which they were involved in sharing personal memories at depth, rather than talking about the past in an impersonal way. This is not to say that there is no value in discussing local and social history, rather that in-depth reminiscing involves, to a greater or lesser degree, a re-living of past

experiences in a way which includes a re-experiencing of both sensory and emotional content of memories.

The processes involved in sharing personal memories through reminiscence alluded to here, can be illuminated by giving an overview of a type of episodic memory known as autobiographical memory, which Brewer (1986) describes as being integral to concepts of self and identity and consisting of visual-spatial, visual-temporal and semantic features, which might be represented in either imagined or non-imagined forms (that is, they can be relived whilst being recounted, or it can simply be that the person remembering knows *that* something happened to them in the past, without necessarily re-experiencing the sensory or emotional aspects of the event during reminiscence):

A personal memory is a recollection of a particular episode from an individual's past. It frequently appears to be a 'reliving' of the individual's phenomenal experience during that earlier moment.

(Brewer, 1986: 34)

Brewer (1986) and Conway (1995) explore the processes involved in the reconstruction of memories through reminiscence-type activities and suggest a difference between personal memories for specific events which tend towards greater detail and perceived significance in terms of self-identity (referred to here as autobiographical memories), and more generic memories which relate to events and experiences which recurred in the individual's life history (and might therefore be more closely related to autobiographical knowledge). The form of autobiographical memory most pertinent to learning in later life could be argued to be that which moves beyond generic information (referred to as 'standard' or well-rehearsed stories about the participants' lives in the presentation of findings), to the recall of specific personally meaningful events (Conway, 1995: 72). Nonetheless, the reminiscence techniques employed in this study recognise that generic information which is publicly available makes a good starting point and can be effectively combined with more specific autobiographical memories as part of

the process of generating a comprehensive and potentially transformative learning experience.

During the course of this research I came to recognise that those who gained most from participation in reminiscence activities, tended to be those who recalled memories in a way which involved re-living the sensory or emotional aspects of an experience. While this involved me in a personal journey of better understanding the value of reminiscence activities, it is not necessarily the case that the research participants understood their participation in the same way, and their personal reminiscence style does not detract from the value of their participation and the memories they shared. On the contrary, it emphasises the potential benefits which may accrue from reminiscence activities in which individuals can participate flexibly, from session to session, in ways which are most comfortable to them.

Data Collection and Transcription

All group sessions and individual interviews were recorded and transcribed for the purposes of analysis. In order to simplify transcription, only words spoken or sounds such as laughter were included in the transcripts, with analysis of what had taken place during the sessions being supported through repeatedly listening to the recordings and ensuring that the impressions gained from the written record of vocalisations were supported by these. Similarly, field notes were checked and transcripts annotated by hand to indicate my recollections of what participants were doing at specific times. For instance, during a miming activity undertaken in Session 2, the recording gives little indication of what is taking place, whereas my recollection of the session is stimulated by the learning plan and field notes when referred to alongside the recording. Similarly, a 20 minute period of unclear speech and unstructured discussion makes little sense when analysed in isolation from the original plan which indicates that a creative activity was taking place.

The use of a digital voice recorder in all group and individual sessions left me free to focus on and respond to what participants said, rather than having to pay attention to creating detailed field notes of each session (Bryman, 2004: 329). Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 147) express the view that this leads to “better quality data”

despite the fact that it should not be assumed that this provides “a perfect and comprehensive record” as there may be lack of clarity about who is being addressed and which items of memorabilia are being looked at, passed round or handled (*ibid*: 148). Furthermore, “note-taking can give participants unintended cues – that they should slow down or pause if the researcher is writing; that they have said enough if the researcher is not” (Arthur *et al.*, 2014: 172). It is therefore apparent that whatever method of simultaneous data recording is used, there is a risk of influencing the quality and content of interactions.

While Bryman (2004: 330) regards audio recording as a useful tool which helps “to correct the natural limitations of our memories and of the intuitive glosses we might place on what people say”, Sanger alerts researchers to the recording being “only a partial record of the interaction and communication – the sound component” whereas “communication depends upon the synthesis of sound, gesture, expression, and posture” (1996: 68).

The decision to use audio-recordings was ultimately taken in the light of my extensive experience in digital voice recording which meant that I could comfortably use one without drawing attention to the device during the session. However, following Simpson and Tuson’s guidance, additional information was recorded in writing immediately after the sessions in the form of field notes “describing the context and other non-recorded factors associated with the oral exchanges” (2008: 52). This use of audio-recordings and written notes enabled me to check my “recall and recording skills, not to mention hearing and memory” (Simons, 2009: 52) and reduced the risk of missing some of the more subtle aspects of interaction such as quick-fire comments and vocalisations suggesting assent to or dissent from the dominant conversation (Arthur *et al.*, 2014: 172).

There are nonetheless practical issues associated with creating audio recordings, such as the need to ensure adequate battery charge, free space on the memory card, and the risk of equipment failure through either human error or mechanical fault. To minimise such risks, a second recorder was always available as back-up and a sound test completed before the start of each session. The use of high quality digital

voice recorders already in my possession, meant that external microphones were unnecessary, which reduced the risk of disconcerting participants who could potentially “become self-conscious or alarmed at the prospect of their words being preserved” (Bryman, 2004: 330).

Mason (2002:97) suggests that it is necessary to maintain a “healthy skepticism” about the objectivity of audio-recorded data, while Simons warns that it may “lull you into a false sense of security and to not paying enough attention to the issues at the time” (2009: 52) which can lead to missing significant contributions from individuals and failing to follow up participants’ responses with deeper questioning. Although Simpson and Tuson raise the question of whether the use of audio recording “merely postpones the first stage of selecting and organising the data relevant to the investigation” (2008: 50) I would argue that in an exploratory study where there was uncertainty at the time regarding what data was relevant, it was necessary to gain an overview of all data before being able to determine what could or could not be excluded from the analysis stage.

The generation of approximately 12 hours of audio recordings also resulted in practical issues around transcription, both in terms of the time needed to produce accurate written records of all interactions, and decisions around the type and level of transcription to be adopted. In the light of the purposes of the study and the approach to data analysis and interpretation, the choice was made to produce transcripts which recorded all spoken words, but avoided detailed annotation regarding the length of pauses, and repeated or stuttered words and phrases, whilst still making a note of non-verbal vocalisations such as outbursts of laughter or expressions of disapproval.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data took place in four stages, over an extended period of time:

Stage 1: Initial reading – this involved reading during transcription and led to familiarity with the body of data and the acquisition of a number of ideas which were then used in the deeper, secondary analysis.

Stage 2: Deeper reading – this involved reading through and coding the data using NVivo8 software. This deeper analysis enabled me to determine that learning had taken place through the acquisition and exchange of knowledge and information between participants.

Stage 3: Critical reading – this stage of data analysis involved a process of exploring the data differently, questioning my initial and secondary understandings, and seeking a range of new interpretations. It was at this stage that the analysis took on a more constructionist stance as I realised that it was not possible to fully determine the motivations and intentions of participants, and that there could be many possible interpretations of the data.

Stage 4: In-depth reading – at this stage, I became more aware of a different quality of learning journey taking place for many of the participants, which led to a new understanding of how reminiscence activities could potentially lead to transformational learning at emotional, cognitive and social levels.

The Data Analysis Journey

It was inevitable that some initial, and in some ways superficial, understandings of the data would emerge during the transcription stage and these provided a starting point for coding when the data was uploaded into the NVivo8 software package. The original intention had been to analyse the data entirely through the use of this software. In the secondary, deeper stages of data analysis, coding was undertaken as planned, by identifying specific interactions during which information was shared which could be identified as contributing to an experience of learning by attaining new knowledge or understanding. However, having explored the entire dataset several times over, it became obvious that I was not getting to the essence of individual experience through this approach.

NVivo8 was then used in an alternative way, in order to generate case studies of each participant, consisting of every interaction each person was involved in during the entire project. These seven ‘cases’ were then printed off and annotated by hand, with multiple possible interpretations of meaning and motivation being made. This

change of approach to data analysis generated a fresh feeling of closeness to the data and to the experiences of individuals. A new understanding of individual experiences, and the 'learning life' of the group emerged which demonstrated with greater depth how interacting with the group facilitator and with each other had promoted a much richer learning experience than could be conveyed by the simple exchange of knowledge and ideas. Thus, the reminiscence group emerged as a vehicle for learning about self and identity, with potential to enhance confidence and self-esteem in a way not captured in the initial and secondary explorations of data, nor even clearly understood at the time the sessions took place. This fresh approach to data analysis involved listening to the recordings, whilst reading the transcripts alongside field notes and my contemporaneous reflective log, enabling an understanding of individual experience within the group, and how this had led to changes within group members. This indicates the importance of maintaining flexibility when approaching data, to avoid potential limitations on understanding which might come about through insisting that the original intention is always carried out. There is a need to allow for an unexpected response to what the data itself appears to suggest about more appropriate ways of managing and understanding it. My change of approach could be likened to holding up a gemstone to the light and seeing little of interest. It is only as the stone is turned and the light catches it at different angles that the full beauty of each aspect is revealed. I have therefore intentionally offered multiple interpretations of the observed interactions and responses in an attempt to demonstrate the speculative nature of the analysis.

A Note on Data Selection:

While all recorded data was analysed in each of the above stages, the presentation of research findings makes much greater use of that collected during the first seven group sessions and the individual interviews, with minimal use being made of the data from the eighth session. This was due to the eighth group session taking a totally different course, which is explained further in the Discussion (Chapter 5).

Critical Consideration of the Research Methods

The Case Study Approach

Numerous texts on research methods have outlined the characteristics of case studies within qualitative research over the past few decades (for example Geertz, 1973; Nisbet and Watt, 1984; Yin, 1984; Merriam, 1988 and Stake, 1994) with case studies being variously categorized as interpretive, evaluative and descriptive (Merriam, 1988), intrinsic, instrumental and collective (Stake, 1994) or ethnographic, action research, evaluative and educational (Sturman, 1999), for example. While attempts at nosological delineation of case studies by a variety of authors demonstrate features of the genre which suggest both diversity and common ground between studies, they also play a useful role in promoting understanding about the general hallmarks of case studies and the purposes for which they may be used.

Making use of a dictionary definition, Flyvbjerg (2013: 169-170) identifies case study as a research genre which, through the study of groups and/or individuals, explores factors leading to growth and change within specific situational, temporal and geographic boundaries, producing “context-dependent knowledge” and experience (*ibid*: 172) which he describes as being essential to the development of expertise in understanding human behaviour:

Predictive themes and universals cannot be found in the study of human affairs. Concrete case knowledge is therefore more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals.

(Flyvbjerg, 2013: 175)

I was first alerted to the relevance of case study as a means of exploring the use of reminiscence as a tool for learning in later life by the work of Coleman who considered that “it is only possible to address the complex issues involved [in reminiscence] at the level of the individual case” (1986: 38), largely because sharing personal memories is likely to “mean different things to individuals in different situations” (*ibid*: 12). The detailed analysis made possible through the use of case study allows for the generation of new understandings in a little understood area:

a successful case study contributes to our knowledge of real-life events or phenomena, through enhancing our understandings of contexts, communities and/or individuals.

(Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013: 39)

Integral to the case study approach is the process of gathering and/or generating data to assist understanding within a new area of research, opening “the way to discoveries” (Berg and Lune, 2012: 339) and “the door to the process created and used by individuals” within specific situations (*ibid*: 328). As such it is:

a method involving systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how the subject operates or functions.

(Berg and Lune, 2012: 325)

Cohen *et al.* regard case study as a fitting approach to use in studying “the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships and other factors in a unique instance” (2007: 253), while Flyvbjerg highlights the advantage of being able to create detailed pictures of “real life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice (2013: 187). This understanding of the potential of case studies as a means by which to gain understanding of the dynamic processes taking place within human relationships and interactions, contributed to the case study genre presenting itself as an ideal approach through which to explore the learning processes taking place in a reminiscence group. Furthermore, the temporal and situational limitations which existed for both this research project and the group of participants, lent themselves to the use of case study, which Creswell identifies as “a good approach when the inquirer has clearly identifiable cases with boundaries and seeks to provide an in depth understanding of the cases” (2007: 74). The potential outputs of such research could therefore include material which, whilst giving “attention to the subtlety and complexity of the case in its own right” can also “represent something of the discrepancies or conflicts between the viewpoints held by participants” at the same time as capturing the

“unique features which may otherwise be lost in large scale data” (Cohen *et al.*, 2007: 256). The approach therefore involves maintaining a balance between typical, unique and unusual instances of the phenomena under study (Cohen *et al.*, 2007: 257) which while potentially identifying areas of interest within each case, can lead to an exploration of “common themes which transcend the cases” (Creswell, 2007: 75). This also highlights the importance of case study in:

... the development of a nuanced view of reality, including the view that human behaviour cannot be meaningfully understood as simply the rule-governed acts found at the lowest levels of the learning-process, and in much theory.

(Flyvbjerg, 2013: 174)

This understanding of the capacity of case study research to generate complex and potentially contradictory data, raises questions around some of the potential hazards of this approach to data collection and interpretation. Amongst other criticisms, an awareness of case study as potentially “selective, biased, personal and subjective” (Cohen *et al.*, 2007: 256) needs to be borne in mind by the researcher, in order to counteract the impact of such hazards on the generation of robust and fully rounded findings, which could accurately be described as having verisimilitude (Geertz, 1973). Yin’s appraisal of the skills required in conducting effective and robust case study research is suggestive of these and other potential pitfalls (1998, cited in Berg and Lune, 2012: 332). In order to ensure that data collection, analysis and reporting generates unbiased understandings of phenomena which lead to conclusions which are believable and robust, case study researchers are encouraged to continually question what they are doing and why, to avoid taking for granted their own preconceived ideas and assumptions about what they are finding, and to maintain flexibility and adaptability in handling large amounts of data with an openness to contradictory and irreconcilable findings, at every stage of the research process.

Keeping Individual Realities, Meaning-Making and Truth in Perspective

Carrying out research in social settings is ridden with difficulties in terms of generating data which would be considered reliable and dependable evidence, in a traditional positivist sense, of typical or generalisable patterns of interaction between people. Certainly, it is unlikely when interviewing participants or observing interactions, that the same data could be captured on more than one occasion:

Would a group of individuals react even twice in the same way to the same set of circumstances? Is it possible to *have* the same set of circumstances? It's absurd. There are no real action replays in life.

(Sanger, 1996: 40, italics in the original)

The unrepeatable nature of most social interactions relates to factors such as experiences taking place before and between those interactions, fluctuating moods and the impact of reflection or temporary changes in overall health and well-being. Grbich also highlights the capacity of people “to protect themselves or to reconstruct their identities in a more favourable or acceptable manner” (1999: 129), which when combined with the “partial knowledge or understanding” which most people have of the underlying dynamics of social situations in which they have participated (Mason, 2002: 86) and the idea that “the knowledge discovered [in research settings] results from how it was found” (Webster *et al.*, 2014: 84) leaves the researcher with the challenge of constructing an authentically derived version of reality from the available data, by which both they, and an audience of critical consumers of research are convinced, to the point of considering the researcher’s conclusions a worthwhile contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the social world.

Observation

This study involved the use of participant observation as the primary method of data generation and collection, enabling my immersion in the reminiscence experience of participants at every stage of the field work. Robson identifies observation as a direct approach: “You do not ask people about their views, feelings or attitudes; you watch what they do and listen to what they say” (2002: 310), which Simpson and Tuson

applaud as giving direct access to social situations and aspects of social life which “participants may never have become aware of ... in a conscious fashion and [would therefore be] unable to talk about them in an open and articulate way” (2003: 16). It is this capacity of observation to fill in the incomplete picture of experience which results from participants’ lack of awareness of the subconscious or instinctive elements of their interactions within a group setting (McNaughton Nicholls *et al.*, 2014: 245) which makes it a particularly useful tool in understanding the internal learning processes taking place through the sharing of personal memories in a reminiscence group.

Although observation is generally conceived of as a non-interventionist approach (Cohen *et al.*, 2007: 397) my role as group facilitator conjointly with that of researcher, enabled me to pose questions, offer relevant and timely stimulants to discussion, and follow up on the contributions of participants in a way which is likely to have strongly influenced the nature of the data collected. These joint roles could be viewed as a weakness of the research in terms of interference with the natural processes of reminiscence group work. However, given that “demand characteristics” tend to be a feature of most studies involving open observation (Robson, 2002: 311), and could be argued to be a feature of any group situation which is subject to the guidance of a group leader who seeks to facilitate learning (for example, the response of students to the presence of a teacher), it is unlikely that the dual purpose of my presence would have influenced what happened any more than had the services of an independent reminiscence facilitator been employed. Furthermore, by taking the role of facilitator, I was able to ensure that a consistent approach to stimulating memories was used, as well as having insight into the intended purposes of each activity and the rationale for responses which enabled participants to go to greater depth in sharing their memories.

A further criticism of my close involvement in group processes could be the potential bias introduced by my preconceived expectations regarding the type of learning which would take place. While it is true that previous experience gave me a range of expectations as to potential forms of learning through reminiscence, the decision was made prior to the first group to run the sessions as I would any other

reminiscence activities in my ordinary employment as an adult education tutor. Interestingly, my expectations regarding learning revolved mainly around the participants' relearning and development of communication and social skills through the exchange of historical information, as well as the potential sharing of traditional skills (such as those involved in professional, domestic or creative activities in which participants may previously have engaged). It also emerged that participants' pre-existing expectations of learning primarily concerned the acquisition of historical facts about people, places and events. In the event, although all these types of learning took place to some extent during the life of the group, most evidence of learning arising from the data was indicative of personal development in terms of growing in self-confidence, self-awareness and acceptance of life as it has been lived. This unexpected learning about the self and the associated development of internal integrity which stands out as the main cognitive and affective change which took place in these participants, therefore took their learning experience beyond either my or their expectations, which strongly suggests that the influence of prior expectations was successfully overcome in this study .

However, Maxwell identifies the researcher's involvement in observational studies as a potentially unavoidable feature which ought to be taken into consideration in determining a critical understanding of all research which focuses on real world experience:

As observers and interpreters of the world, we are inextricably part of it: we cannot step outside our own experience to obtain some observer independent account of what we experience. Thus it is always possible for there to be different, equally valid accounts from different perspectives.

(Maxwell, 1992, quoted in Simpson and Tuson, 2003: 66)

Hatch outlines the role of the observer as attempting to "see the world through the eyes of those they are studying" (2002: 72), a point of view with which Mason agrees in principle, whilst cautioning against over-estimating the "capacity to empathise with or 'know' the other, simply because you have participated in a shared setting"

(2002: 86). An appropriate critical approach to using observation as a method, appears therefore to be to acknowledge features such as observer effects and bias and the impact these may have on findings, without necessarily framing them as weaknesses of the method. Gillham (2008), points to another potential weakness which could be considered intrinsic to observation and again, which researchers and those who consume research findings do well to be aware of, without necessarily seeing it as reducing the power of the approach in the generation of knowledge and understanding of socially situated human experiences. This relates to the fact that “large areas of human activity cannot be witnessed” through observation (Gillham, 2008: 99), which subsequently leads to difficulty understanding:

... the evolution or history of the behaviour and context observed ... How we behave is part of our current social system – our relationships with other people, the roles we inhabit, the norms and expectations of the ‘local’ culture. So how we are is as much maintained in the present as caused by events in the past ... Any complete understanding of the present has to take account of the past; more than that we are part of an *evolving* system. This dimension ... may only emerge over a period of time. So there is a need to consider the origins of what we observe and the process of change over time, particularly how these changes came about.

(Gillham, 2008: 99-100)

Similarly, Sanger (1996: 40) describes as “absurd” the idea that validity, in the conventional sense, could be achieved in observational research with human participants who:

... are not very reliable as subjects of attempts to achieve validity. They change their stories. They lie. They refuse to talk. They forget. They move on and become impossible to trace. They can have a lot to lose.

(Sanger, 1996: 40)

Instead, Sanger (*ibid*: 40) stresses the goal as being a pragmatic approach which leads to the production of accurate, fair and trustworthy research findings which can be defended within the bounds of specific studies.

As with any study which uses observation as a method of data collection, there are likely to be instances within both the group and individual sessions where I demonstrate selective attention, which then determines my responses to individual participants, and subsequently influences the extent to which aspects of the discussion and associated activities are pursued or ignored. This would ultimately mean that the data generated was in some ways a product of my expectations of appropriate topics for discussion in a reminiscence group setting, as well as of my ability to maintain concentration and pay attention to all contributions.

McNaughton Nicholls *et al.* (2014: 246) also note the impact of the researcher's emotional response to events being observed, regarding this as contributing to the value of observation as a method for generating understanding of social situations. The immediate effects of the researcher's experience within the setting can, to some extent, be modified by using audio recordings to capture the spoken word. These can later be revisited and compared with field notes and any contemporaneous reflections, in order to lead to a better understanding of the researcher's role in contributing to, as well as collecting and analysing, data.

Interviews

In choosing to use interviews to support my findings in the group reminiscence sessions my intention was to explore whether the participants' perceptions of group sessions differed from my understanding of what they had experienced. In considering interviews as a research method it is useful to look at what is happening during this type of interaction between two people (the interviewer and the interviewee): particularly the dynamics of that relationship and the effects each person may have on the other.

Firstly, it is important to consider what type of knowledge might be gathered through interviews. This leads to questions of how far researchers can 'trust' the information

gathered in interviews; to what extent they can be seen as statements of fact, as opposed to fictional accounts or subjective viewpoints, and what effect this has on how data is analysed. Deeply intertwined with these issues, are issues of power within the interview dyad, as well as ethical concerns about the effect they have on the interviewee. These issues bring us full circle to those of ontology and epistemology as ultimately, how the interview is carried out and what its purpose is considered to be, reflect the researcher's reasons for using interviews, which stem from the original purpose of the study.

Interviews can be defined as a research method by which one individual (the researcher) seeks to find out what is going on inside another person's mind (Hatch, 2002), largely through asking questions and listening carefully to the answers in a way which "goes beyond the spontaneous exchange of views as in everyday conversation" (Kvale, 1996:6). Schostak sees the research interview as a situation where two individuals direct their attention towards one another in order to gain "an insight into the experiences, concerns, interests, beliefs, values, knowledge and ways of seeing, thinking and acting of the other" (Schostak, 2006:10).

A constructionist approach is based on an understanding of "the interpretation of meaning [as] the central theme" (Kvale, 1996: 38) with interviewers and interviewees being seen as co-creators of the research text (*ibid*: 50). There is a recognition within this approach that both parties in an interview will make cultural assumptions which in the case of the interviewer will influence "what they ask and how they construe what they hear" making it necessary to "suspend one's own cultural assumptions for long enough to see and understand another's" (Gergen, 1999: 50 cited in Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 29). This presents us with a useful approach through which to explore the experiences of older learners with both an openness to the sense they make of their own lives and a willingness to interpret the data gathered in terms of a wider theoretical framework, in the belief that the "qualitative interview is a construction site for knowledge" (Kvale, 1996: 14).

There are a number of different factors which shape the interview process, determining how comfortable the interviewee feels and therefore how likely they

are to respond in a trusting manner and at some depth. One of these factors is the type of questions which are asked, the extent to which these are prepared in advance and the interviewer's flexibility with regards to asking them in the same manner in each interview. Wengraf advocates planning a "deliberate half-scripted or quarter-scripted interview" (Wengraf, 2001: 3) with questions prepared "so that they [are] likely to produce the most relevant material for the research problem" (*ibid*: 32), but other authors warn against asking the same questions in the same way on each occasion: "The interview, like an ordinary conversation, is invented new each time it occurs" (Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 12). They add that "An interview is a window on a time and a social world that is experienced one person at a time, one incident at a time" and that imposing questions which reflect the researcher's knowledge of a situation may divert the interviewee from revealing information most pertinent to the research questions (*ibid*: 14-15).

Ensuring that interviews are carried out in the same way, is far from easy. Oppenheim (1992: 147 cited in Cohen *et al.*, 2011: 204) highlighted the significance of this issue when suggesting that "changes in wording, context and emphasis undermine reliability" because questions are inevitably changed in meaning. However, Silverman's view is that the reliability of interviews might actually be enhanced by subtle changes in the wording or order as "it is important for each interviewee to understand the question in the same way" and "what is a suitable sequence of questions for one respondent might be less suitable for another" (Silverman, 1993 cited in Cohen *et al.*, 2007: 151). It thus appears that what is important is that questions have a similar impact on interviewees, rather than being asked in exactly the same way. However, knowing when to ask which question in order to achieve the same impact is somewhat problematic; knowing that one has achieved one's aim in doing so, is equally difficult to measure. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) advocate a free association method of interviewing in which researchers are transformed from "askers of questions" into "facilitating catalysts of respondents' stories" by asking very few questions (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 36). Within this model the interviewer and interviewee can work together in co-constructing an understanding of lived experience. How comfortable an individual researcher feels

with such flexibility, both in terms of the validity and reliability of their data, and on the level of control they hold within the situation, depends largely on personality. Indeed, some authors have attributed interview style almost entirely to personality traits (for example Rubin and Rubin, 2005) acknowledging that researcher characteristics play a central role in how the dynamics of power are played out within interviews.

Inequalities in power within interview relationships can be seen in who has control of the pace and content of the interview. Clandinin and Connelly suggest that:

Where the interviewer asks pre-set questions their intentions are uppermost, whereas when the interviewee is free to tell their story in their way their intentions are uppermost. Therefore, the questions asked determine the extent to which the interviewee can set the agenda.

(Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: 111)

Oakley (1981: 35) criticizes interviews as being “instrumental, non-reciprocal and hierarchical” (cited in Cohen *et al.*, 2007: 38). She considers the notion of establishing rapport as being a way of manipulating and gaining control over people, rather than in any way being the expression of a genuine interest in a person. Rubin and Rubin (2005) point out how important it is to treat people who are used to being voiceless or marginalised with additional respect in order to avoid any discrepancy between the theory and practice of ethics.

Post-modern approaches to interviewing paint a picture of a situation in which nobody can lay claim to having the truth, and in which all are therefore equally powerful or without power. Hatch, on the other hand, describes the co-constructing role of constructionist interviewers and their informers as giving more equal “participation, more control of research processes, and more active sharing” between parties (Hatch, 2002: 110). Rubin and Rubin, for example, explain their use of the term ‘conversational partners’ (for interviewer and interviewee) as a way of expressing the “active role of the interviewee in shaping the discussion” (Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 14) and thus in co-creating the research data through a “shared

understanding” (*ibid*). Wengraf sees power as a personal issue, which is worked out during the course of each interview (2001: 42)

Similarly, Limerick *et al.* argue that power is “discursively constructed through the interview rather than being the province of either party” (n.d. cited by Cohen *et al.*, 2007: 152) Thus, the suggestion is that power does not necessarily fall to the interviewer who is asking questions, but could equally fall to a powerful interviewee, who, mindful of protecting their own interests, can steer the conversation in the direction they choose. So, issues of power in interview relationships are not clear-cut, but researchers need to be aware of the possible effects of power issues on the integrity of their research, particularly through manipulating people unethically using insincere empathy.

This research used an interview format which lies somewhere between semi-structured and unstructured, being ‘loosely structured’ with a list of areas of interest about which questions may be asked (Appendix C), but with no pre-determined questions. In this way it was hoped that issues relevant to the topic being explored would be covered, without the researcher taking full control over what was discussed and how this was interpreted.

Another problematic factor to explore in considering whether the research interviewer can truly gather data which contributes to a greater understanding of the world, is that of language. Naturally, researchers find it easier to listen to respondents who use a vocabulary, tone and pitch of voice which they find pleasant, while “our facility with language, our general fluency and articulacy and our ability to dramatize and tell a story, determine how ‘good’ an informant we are” (Goodson and Sykes, 2001: 47). This suggests that the interviewer’s ability to listen to the interviewee may play a greater role in determining the nature of collected data than the actual words spoken. An interviewee who is easy to listen to (from the researcher’s point of view) may find him or herself taking part in a longer interview, and being given opportunities to talk at greater length than in situations where the researcher finds a respondent’s voice difficult to understand or listen to. This would clearly affect the nature, extent and depth of data collected. Language might also be

problematic in its role as a conveyor of meaning (Wengraf, 2001: 38). This is a problem which can occur where either the interviewer or interviewee are the speaker. In addition, it is not always obvious that misinterpretations are taking place, to the point where the two parties may have different understandings of the actual topic under discussion and the purpose of the interview (Wengraf, 2001: 46) without recognising that this is the case. Wengraf points out that even where the researcher and respondent share a common first language, their social or geographical backgrounds may mean that they do not understand the “encoding of subtle meanings, even if the same words are used” (Wengraf, 2001: 48).

Complexities Arising from the Approach to Data Collection

A range of complex ethical and professional issues arise when using interviews and observation as research methods. While stating that “Good qualitative interviews are characterized by respect, interest, attention, good manners and encouragement on the part of researchers” (2002: 107) Hatch also acknowledges the attraction for some researchers of telling their own stories as a way of improving rapport and establishing “connections with informants”, expressing concern that some “individuals can be manipulated by researchers and seduced into revealing sensitive information by [researchers] they have come to trust” (*ibid*: 110). The difficulty here is that when a potential research participant signs a consent form, they cannot be certain about the details of what they are giving their consent to (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). It is therefore vital that informed consent is not seen as a once-for-all thing, but is re-negotiated throughout the research (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Maintaining an awareness that the informant could withdraw at any time (and may be more likely to do so if they have talked about sensitive personal matters), should prevent researchers from taking chances with participants’ emotions. However, Hollway and Jefferson note that the expression of distress could be either harmful or therapeutic, stating that “distress does not equate with harm” (2000: 99). Nonetheless, if distress is expressed during participation in research activity, it is essential that the researcher provides an opportunity for debriefing of and feedback from the participant, being ever-mindful of the ethical principles of beneficence and non-maleficence, intended to ensure that the research participants would ideally be

in a better position after their involvement in a study, perhaps by making “problems visible to the public or policy makers” (Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 34). Atkinson expresses the view that: “Defining our story, giving it spoken meaning, can be knowing it for the first time” (Atkinson, 1998: 65).

Protection of research participants involves practical and emotional responsibilities. Amongst the practical responsibilities is that of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, as far as possible, and at least to the extent promised to the informant. The responsibility to “report the interviews accurately and fairly” may lead to tensions with “not harming interviewees, especially if you have found out something unflattering” (Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 34-35).

Coming to the end of the research may lead to both researcher and participants feeling an emotional loss. A research relationship may have been established over a number of sessions, and the termination of this partnership leave participants feeling “abandoned or even deceived ... In turn, interviewers may feel depressed ... as if something that was part of them is now gone” (Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 83-4). Due to this potential feeling of loss at the end of the research partnership, it is essential that professional boundaries are maintained at all times during the research relationship, bearing in mind the effect that any move towards a ‘friendship-type’ relationship may have at the conclusion of the study, and taking steps to prevent any misunderstandings before they arise. A research situation which focuses on memories of personal experiences can lead to a close situation within which personal information is likely to be shared which may not have been shared before.

Nonetheless, these possible threats to the ethical integrity of the research, or to the outcomes of observations and interviews, do not detract from the fact that for a given time, and a specific purpose, researcher and respondent are in a relationship with each other, and as well as the researcher having an impact on the participant, their own personalities and backgrounds will influence the way in which they hear the stories they are told. Accordingly, it is important to take into account how the researchers’ “interpretations, explanations and analyses” are “coloured and shaped by a range of influences, not least of which is the background, interests, in short the

biography, of the researcher” (Goodson and Sykes, 2001: 35). Clandinin and Connelly comment that researchers “need to construct their own narrative of inquiry histories and to be alert to the possible tensions between those narrative histories and the narrative research they undertake” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: 29). In other words, the research process is likely to have an effect on how the researcher sees the world, and the research itself, and it is important to maintain an awareness of the fact that: “They too are having an experience, the experience of the inquiry which entails the experience they set out to explore” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: 81). Griffin describes this as a process of telling *her* story about other people’s lives, as opposed to telling the story of their lives directly: “I can use the voices of others from (my understanding of) their positions, but I can never speak/write from their positions” (Griffin, quoted in Sparkes, 1997: 34, quoted in Roberts, 2002: 127). Schostak too, highlights the importance of relationships founded within research situations:

I cannot treat the other who is conscious, like I would the thing that is not conscious. The other makes judgements, has intentions, desires, feelings and can act upon them towards me. [...] Fundamental to an emancipatory strategy therefore is the act of engaging with the otherness of the other, enabling that otherness to be expressed through acts of witnessing.

(Schostak, 2006: 18 & 24)

Schostak identifies the interview as a meeting between two conscious beings, where each seeks to make sense of the social context, of the other person, and of the words which are spoken between them – ‘the acts of witnessing’. This is an intersubjective meeting where both parties have some power and control, but where the situation is in some ways bigger than them both. Each therefore challenges the other to a new way of seeing. These thoughts reflect the image of the research context as presented in Hollway and Jefferson’s psychodynamic account in which researcher and researched are depicted as:

Anxious, defended subjects, whose mental boundaries are porous where unconscious material is concerned. This means that both will be subject

to projections and introjections of ideas and feelings coming from the other person.

(Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 45)

At several levels then, boundaries are potentially broken down in interviews and other research encounters. Wengraf, comments on the effect these situations have on him as an interviewer, challenging long-established assumptions and bringing new understanding:

As I struggle to make sense of (make sensible inferences from) the data, I hope to find that my previous body of knowledge and misinformation gets disturbed and enriched: i.e. I 'learn' from the process.

(Wengraf, 2001: 11)

Further, in some circumstances studies have the potential to "reach across age, occupation, class, race, sex and geographical boundaries" (Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 3) so that interviews and other research encounters potentially become a "shared, negotiated and dynamic social moment" (Cohen *et al.*, 2007: 151) in which participants are enabled to:

... discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view. In these senses the interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is part of life itself.

(Cohen *et al.*, 2007: 349)

With this understanding of the context, it is possible to look at the stories told within research situations in a new light.

At a superficial level, it may seem that the stories people tell about their lives are direct representations of those lives as lived. However, a number of arguments have been put forward which cast doubt on this idea, revealing it as possibly too simplistic and lacking awareness of how people represent and experience their own lives in narrative. Goodson and Sykes see 'self' as "a contested and controversial term"

describing people as “multi-self beings” (Goodson and Sykes, 2001: 41) while others have argued that we come to know ourselves by the stories we tell about our lives, rather than by constructing a sense of identity which is then expressed through narrative (Roberts, 2002: 128). This suggests that data collected in reminiscence-type research does not necessarily represent an account of actual events or experiences, but rather an attempt to make sense of those experiences:

Narratives are not records of facts, of how things actually were, but of a meaning-making system which makes sense out of the chaotic mass of perceptions and experiences of life.

(Josselson, 1995: 33 quoted in Roberts, 2002: 138-9)

Pals (2006) has argued that this meaning-making process is dynamic, and so will continue to function after a person has told their story, such that the same narrative is never given twice, with new understandings of the self always being reached. In addition, this is a process which, as long as we are alive, does not end: “our lives continue while the ending is unknown” and so the account of an experience is never complete (Roberts, 2002: 124). This presents difficulties for those researchers who lean towards a more positivistic approach and whose understanding of the nature of the world leads them to believe that there must be a definable version of the ‘truth’ concerning events or experiences. However, there is an extent to which for a constructionist “multiple and even conflicting versions of the same event or object can be true” because people are *expected* to see things from different viewpoints (Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 27). The researcher’s task is therefore to capture the image as they see it at the time of data collection, but not to lay claim to having pinpointed the nature of an individual’s experience or identity once and for all. Rubin and Rubin for instance, see the researcher as being “more like a skilled painter than a photographer, selecting details and creating an image from them” (Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 11): an image which leaves plenty of room for interpretation of data to take place, without the threat of totally misrepresenting the reality of the participant.

One of the strengths of interviews and observation as research methods is their ability to capture “a manifold and controversial human world” (Kvale, 1996: 7) by

drawing upon “the multiplicities of views of individuals, their struggles for meaning, identity and recognition” (Schostak, 2006:44). It could, however, seem problematic for the researcher to collect a set of data, and be unsure of what this represents, other than perhaps, the participant’s own attempts to understand the life data available to him or her (Goodson and Sykes, 2001: 40).

Plummer (1995: 34) suggests that those who participate in the process of telling their life stories turn themselves into “socially organised biographical objects” (cited in Goodson and Sykes, 2001: 41). This may be partly due to the social conventions associated both with taking part in research (Wengraf, 2001) and with constructing a good story (Goodson and Sykes, 2001). There is also a sense in which participants could be seen as interpreting their own lives in terms of social myths which form aspects of our self-conception:

Myths provide images of the individual and the society, for example the common myths of ‘unhappy childhood’ and ‘self-made man’ through which people revise and relate their lives in a social context.

(Peneff, 1990: 45 cited in Roberts, 2002: 127)

This “personal mythmaking” moves research data from “the unique story to the universal story” (Atkinson, 1998: 65) and so represents complex individual lives as related to the wider experience of humankind, and therefore, presumably, as relevant to expanding the existing body of knowledge about the human condition. Many of these myths demonstrate a “relationship between social and political circumstances and cultural storylines” such as that of ‘the scholarship boy’ (Goodson and Sykes, 2001: 77), while Clough sees autobiographical research as seeking to “relate the ‘micro’ world of the individual to the ‘macro’ world of institutional meanings which they both inhabit and re-create” (2002: 12). The ambiguity of ‘truth’ in individual life events which is channeled into a cohesive story using narrative structures and conventions, might therefore be seen as mirroring the human condition itself, with people creating institutional structures as a way of making sense of life. Furthermore, concerning the collection and analysis of research data, the universal myths and knowledge of story-telling conventions lie within both

researcher and researched, meaning that even where the research participant does not impose a meaning-making structure on their own story, such as a plot - with beginning, middle and end (Denzin, 1989), it is likely that the researcher will do so in order to make sense of the data for him or herself and readers of the published research.

The whole basis of data collection and analysis is the researcher's desire to make some new sense of the world by establishing additional knowledge based on listening to other people's stories. This is not as straightforward as a novice researcher may suppose it to be, with "a continual postponement of certitude and comprehensibility" at the heart of every study (Schostak, 2006: 15). Within this lies a difficulty seeing into other people's lives if we separate our own "way of seeing" from the "threads which make up the cultural patterns of personal and institutional life" (Clough, 2002: 17).

A further difficulty with being sure that research data represents any kind of lasting 'truth' is closely connected to the idea that the story told is only true at the time it is told, and only in that particular telling. This highlights the role that *time* plays in changing attitudes and broadening (or narrowing) perspectives on the past and future:

Lives have to be understood ... as lived within time and time is experienced according to narrative. Narratives – of past, present or future – are the means by which biographical experience is given an understandable shape.

(Roberts, 1999: 21 quoted in Roberts, 2002: 123)

Clandinin and Connelly (2000: 50) connect time, place, and the social and personal with the 'plot and scene' of the life story, with 'plot' being seen as the means through which events are timed. This suggests that time, as well as being a dimension of the world in which data collection takes place, is also a dimension of how participants tell their stories. So, while the process of narrating one's story is "a process of creating and recreating one's life" with each new telling bringing additional meaning (Atkinson, 1998: 63), the effect of time in the contemporary world of the research

study is influencing the 'plot' (which can also be seen as the device by which events are timed in the narrative) of the participant's story – perhaps affecting which events and experiences are given more attention, and therefore more time, during the observed sessions and interviews. Wengraf questions whether accounts of past events are really “an adequate description” of feelings and thoughts which took place at the time events occurred, and therefore whether firsthand accounts of past events can be considered reliable (Wengraf, 2001: 19). Equally, the time a participant spends in the interview itself can be a life changing experience which changes the 'plot' of their own future life:

... the questioning in research interviews may instigate processes of reflection where the meanings of themes described by the subjects are no longer the same after the interview.

(Kvale, 1996: 34)

This whole issue of time is especially relevant in reminiscence-related research, where more emphasis might naturally fall on talking about the participant's personal past, than occurs in studies seeking, for example, attitudes about aspects of the present, such as politics or social problems. An awareness of time as an active catalyst in the research situation is therefore important to gaining an accurate understanding of the nature of the data collected.

The key issues raised here centre around matters of interpretation and representation, of both the researcher and the researched. Whilst it is tempting to conclude with the post-modernists that truth is undecidable, there is potentially an equally clear case for accepting the tensions which arise in research which uses intersubjective interactions (such as group work and interviews) as a research method, in the full knowledge that every viewpoint adds something to the body of knowledge. Ultimately, group work and interviews offer ways of gaining multiple viewpoints on the world, and on individual lives, and their value lies largely in this characteristic. As a means of exploring questions surrounding reminiscence and learning in later life, they provide a particularly useful means of taking a detailed look into individual lives and 'selves'. However, it is vital that in undertaking this type of

research, awareness was maintained of the more problematic issues raised by the use of manipulation, power and control in relationships with participants, and the interviewees' own understanding of the experience.

Broader Ethical Issues of the Research Approach

My research proposal, field work, data analysis and report of the findings were continually informed by a determination to carry out ethical research which was not only worthwhile and beneficial to participants, but also made no unreasonable demands on those taking part. However, while keeping individuals appropriately informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw, as the research progressed it became clear that ethical issues were by no means straightforward, requiring a staged approach to informed consent (Simons, 2009: 103; Webster *et al.*, 2014: 88-89), and careful negotiation of the data in order to secure anonymity and confidentiality, whilst ensuring each participant was treated with respect. Cohen *et al.* (2007: 51) comment upon the way in which ethical problems “can multiply surprisingly when they move from the general to the particular, and from the abstract to the concrete” leaving an impression of the “general exhortations of [ethical codes] ... far removed from the interactional complexities of the field” (Christians, 2013: 135). Key areas of ethical ambiguity emerged around my retrospective understanding of the limitations of the concept of fully informed consent, together with a greater understanding of the potential impact of this on the quality of research findings, and my growing awareness of the importance of the relationship between researcher and researched, with particular reference to issues of power and inequality when working with potentially vulnerable older people.

As the research process got underway, my understanding of the role of ethical principles was transformed from one in which guidelines and ethical codes were regarded as rules to be followed, to a deeper understanding of ethical practice, closer to that envisioned by Webster *et al.*, who highlight the need for flexibility and balance in the translation of principles into practice:

every research study involves translating sound principles into a set of detailed decisions that fit the circumstances of the particular study in a way that iterates and tries to find the right accommodation between ethical principles, quality considerations and practical constraints.

(Webster *et al.*, 2014: 78)

Similarly, Simons in discussing the need for a “relational and situational” approach to ethics, because of the “multifaceted and conflictual nature of much experience” (2009: 110) highlights the real-life complexities of conducting ethically robust qualitative research, with the ultimate responsibility being a matter for individual researchers who make “the best judgements they can to insure [*sic*] that the individuals they study are treated with fairness and dignity” (Hatch, 2002: 69).

Regarding the issue of gaining fully informed consent prior to the start of the reminiscence groups, two issues were visible with hindsight which had not previously been given full consideration. One of these related to the requirement for all participants to sign a consent form. As well as not foreseeing the potential difficulties posed by asking older people to sign a form in the context of familial prohibitions to do so, I also had only limited understanding of the potential impact of providing a signature on participants’ understanding of their right to withdraw. This is an issue raised by Webster *et al.* (2014) who express the view that not only may some individuals who are keen to participate be deterred from doing so due to anxieties arising from the requirement for a signature, but this formalised approach to consent also runs the risk of participants who do sign potentially finding it more difficult to withdraw due to their own desire to stand by what they may consider to be a contractual agreement with the researcher (Webster *et al.*, 2014: 91). This gives the appearance of signed consent being mostly about the researcher protecting themselves from accusations of deception or of carrying out covert observation with underhand motives.

The second question relating to consent is that of the extent to which this can be fully informed in an exploratory study where although the purposes of the research

are clear, there was less clarity about the exact nature of interactions during group sessions:

The flexible and responsive nature of quality data collection means research encounters are unpredictable regarding the nature of data that is collected, and that the participant is also playing a part in shaping the encounter in terms of topic selection, coverage and depth.

(Webster *et al.*, 2014: 85)

A key principle for ethical practice in these reminiscence groups therefore included ongoing attempts to reduce the risk of adverse consequences by assisting participants to manage the extent to which they revealed information of a personal nature, which might later be regretted due to feelings of undue exposure, leading to “embarrassment, emotional turmoil or other forms of distress” (Grbich, 1999: 71). With the nature of what might be discussed being not only unknown in advance, but also unpredictable in the moment (Webster *et al.*, 2014: 94) it was essential that participants were made aware at the start of each session that there was no requirement to share any memories about which they could potentially feel uncomfortable being public, and for me to purposefully avoid undue intrusion into participants’ lives in my decisions about how to follow up each contribution made to discussions by individuals (*ibid*: 86). This was a matter of finding the right balance between the individual’s right to privacy, my right to carry out in-depth research with a view to gaining understanding, and the public’s right of access to any resulting knowledge. Each of these represent aspects of ethical practice which Simons (2014: 102) describes as according “equal treatment to individuals and ideas”. Creswell (2007: 142), reflecting on the uncertainty of what might take place during interactions and the possibility of some discussion topics being of a sensitive nature, suggests that researchers should present “*general* information” [italics in the original] when seeking informed consent in the early stages. Grbich, however, notes that ethical dilemmas remain unavoidable in qualitative research, due to the shifting nature of socially determined boundaries between private and public domains, alongside the subjective nature of decision-making regarding what is considered to

be worthwhile research in the pursuit of “beneficial knowledge” (1999: 74). The lack of consensus regarding the “distinction between public and private domains” (Christians, 2013: 136) also alerts us to difficulties regarding the purposes and means of maintaining confidentiality and protecting identity. Flick (2009: 42) suggests that it is highly problematic to attempt to disguise the identity of individuals where research is carried out involving “a limited number of cases in well-defined fields”, making it especially important to avoid inadvertent breaches of confidentiality through descriptions of habitual behaviours or typical modes of communication and manner of speech, which further emphasises the tension between ethics and the quality of research requiring the reporting of richly detailed data (Webster *et al.*, 2014: 98). Sanger, by contrast, expresses the view that “Effacing individuals’ experience and viewpoints has a totalitarian ring to it” which could lead to the reporting of data in a way which is tantamount to “rewriting history” (Sanger, 1996: 32). He goes on to quote an example of someone described as a “distinguished sociologist” as having said: “I don’t care if he actually said what I say he said. The point is he might have said it” (*ibid*: 64). Such dubious practices increase the risk of the pursuit of an ideal level of anonymity turning into the presentation of distorted data, which in turn reduces the actual and perceived validity of findings from qualitative research. Simons, likewise, suggests that the pursuit of confidentiality and anonymity runs the risk of denying or distorting individual identity, and of causing disappointment amongst some participants who would have liked the research report to offer an opportunity to celebrate their lifetime’s achievements (2009: 106) as well as “to have their views and experiences heard” (Webster *et al.*, 2014: 103). Ultimately, the decision was made to disguise all data, whilst ensuring that distortion was avoided – an approach which at times required a tightrope walk in finding the right balance between truth and participant protection (*ibid*: 98).

The need for the research report to reflect the diversity of experience and personality amongst participants (*ibid*: 103) further limited the extent to which consent could be fully informed at the start of the study, due to uncertainty regarding the potential outcomes of data analysis and interpretation. Whilst working to an ethical principle of trustworthiness, achieved through maintaining a

determined integrity in avoiding the distortion of data (*ibid*: 104), this necessarily took me through stages during data analysis, interpretation and reporting where decisions had to be made regarding the inclusion and exclusion of material which reflected behaviours or contributions during the group sessions which might subsequently cause participants embarrassment or anger, as well as personal judgements about participants' life choices or characteristics (Flick, 2009: 41). The final report of research findings therefore represents an incomplete picture of my perspective on the entire study, as a result of my prolonged reflections, and at times wrestles with, ethical tensions arising from:

two sets of related values held by society: a belief in the value of free scientific inquiry in pursuit of truth and knowledge, and a belief in the dignity of individuals and their right to those considerations that follow from it ... [such that] greater consideration must be given to the risks to physical, psychological, humane, proprietary and cultural values than to the potential contribution of research to knowledge.

(Cohen *et al.*, 2007: 58)

This had particular relevance where it was clear that there were aspects of the recorded data about which I and some of the participants may think differently, when, for example, statements were perceived by me to be provocative or aimed at causing shock. This raised my awareness of the limitations on my pre-research reflection on the potential costs of my participation in the research. Although an experienced reminiscence facilitator, I had not fully considered the possibility that viewpoints and experiences might be shared to which I did not feel comfortable being exposed (Simons, 2009: 105; Robson, 2002: 68) or of the emotional burden experienced as a result of gaining knowledge of the more tragic events of some participants' lives at a time when I had experienced an unexpected bereavement myself. Webster *et al.*'s caution to think through, in advance, any topics which might be experienced as sensitive by any of those involved in research, as well as maintaining a position of "expecting the unexpected and being adept at managing

this in the fieldwork situation” (2014: 96) proved to be particularly pertinent in this research.

While Flick (2009: 36) considers that weighing the risks and benefits of research is more “relative than absolute and clear”, the ultimate principle determining the conduct of this study was supplied by Bulmer and Ocloo’s (2010: 377) edict that: “... while truth is good, respect for human dignity is better, even if ... the respect of human dignity leaves one ignorant of human nature”.

Summary

This chapter has placed a strong emphasis on critiquing the methods used to explore whether and how learning takes place in a series of reminiscence groups for older people experiencing dependence for care needs as they move towards the end of life. Through this critical analysis, an awareness of both the strengths and weaknesses of the methods has been demonstrated. The subsequent impact on the quality and generalisability of the research findings will be considered in more depth following their presentation, alongside reflections on the constructionist stance taken in the analysis and interpretation of data.

4. LEARNING JOURNEYS: ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents evidence from seven 'case' summaries exploring experiences of learning and change observed in seven participants in a reminiscence group. The seven descriptions of learning journeys given here are based on the critical and in-depth readings of the data whilst including the understandings I had after the initial and secondary readings.

In order to maintain the anonymity of participants, their names have been replaced with pseudonyms, as have potentially identifying proper nouns such as place names (including streets, parks, workplaces, villages and towns) and the occupations of participants and their family members.

The six reminiscence sessions took place in the autumn of 2010, beginning in the first week of October, and ending in mid-November, with one follow-up session held as a celebration of learning two weeks after the sixth reminiscence group and a further one aimed at facilitating discussion with participants around the key findings, being held in the spring of 2011. All individual interviews took place between the seventh and eighth group sessions.

Although all group participants attended the same day centre on the same day of the week, they hardly knew each other prior to participating in these reminiscence sessions. Part of the learning experience of each participant included a growing interest in the lives and experiences of other group members, made possible through the increasing cohesiveness of the group as the sessions progressed, reflected in a growing motivation to listen to, learn from and communicate with each other. These elements in each participant's learning journey are reflected in their individual case summaries, although it should be noted that a complementary way of understanding the experiences of each person, are individual experiences which are, to a

considerable extent, dependent on the dynamics generated by interactions between all members.

7 Case Studies of Learning in Later Life through Reminiscence

Box 2 provides a summary of biographical information for each participant.

Participant's pseudonym	Approximate year of birth	Key biographical information
Douglas	1940-1945	An unmarried man with a wide variety of health problems affecting mobility, Douglas worked in a number of unskilled jobs and has a keen interest in the cinema. Born in the city.
Bill	1935-1940	A former naval operator who trained as an electronic designs engineer. Married with two children, he was born in a nearby market town. A stroke has left him with left-sided paralysis.
Clifford	1915-1920	Oldest member of the group, married with two children. Worked as a labourer, sometimes with two or three concurrent jobs. Born in a small market town in a neighbouring county.
Diana	1920-1925	From a large family, brought up in a rural area, Diana worked for St John's Ambulance Service during the war. Now widowed, she had no children of her own, but fostered several. Diana worked as a cook until she married.
Robert	1935-1940	Originating from London, Robert worked in a managerial role with local councils throughout the country. A stroke has left him with right-sided paralysis and speech difficulties.
Teresa	1930-1935	Teresa married in mid-life, and is now widowed, having had no children. Worked in a factory, until marrying. She was brought up in the city.
Philip	1945-1950	Philip has a lifelong disability and so has worked in supported employment and for charities. The youngest member of the group, he was also the most physically frail. Born in the city.
Box 2: Profile of the seven participants		

Case 1: Douglas

Douglas is a man who, from the beginning of the group sessions, has a number of detailed memories which he is keen to share with the group. At the same time, his uncertainty about himself and his position in the group causes him to hold back on the enthusiasm he feels about his experiences. As tutor of the group, I feel that Douglas lacks understanding of the viewpoints of others, and consequently has some difficulty concentrating on what they say. As one of the younger, more recently retired participants, he has slightly different memories of childhood in the local city to those of other participants. This is potentially an advantage as it makes his different view a point of interest. However, at the start of the group sessions, Douglas' voice lacks the extent of animation which many of his memories deserve, suggesting a low sense of confidence in other group members' interest in what he has to say. The learning journey for Douglas was one in which increasing levels of confidence were seen to develop alongside a growing awareness of the needs and sensitivities of other group members. Through the learning experiences which take place as he shares his memories and listens to those of others, Douglas seems transformed from a man who appears to be afraid to pay attention to the reactions and responses of other people, to someone who becomes integrated as a group member, with a corresponding increase in his social confidence and self-esteem.

In the first session Douglas attends (Session 3) he contributes three lengthy monologues on matters of importance to him, paying little attention to the responses of other group members, whose body language suggested little interest in what he was saying. While Douglas could be characterised as demonstrating an unusual level of self-interest as he begins his group participation, it is also possible his manner of speaking could be due to a low sense of self-worth which causes him to direct his gaze at the floor much of the time, avoiding eye contact with others when he speaks. However, over the sessions, he gradually adapts his contributions so that they are more suited to the purposes of a reminiscence group, becoming, by Session 7, a 'team player' who shows interest in and responds to remarks made by other participants and as a result is treated differently by the group.

Douglas' first contribution, made in response to a request from me to introduce himself and tell the group about his early working life, has the feel of a much-rehearsed story, possibly repeated many times throughout his life, which although it may have become abbreviated over time in a way which makes it difficult to follow, still contains many details:

I started at the Fit-Well shoe shop up St Martin's Road and I stayed six months and I didn't like it. I went to work at the tobacconists, that one on the corner of Market Street and I also used to go and do a lot of relief work in the shops: one down near the main supermarket in town, one in Ellingham Road and one near Stony Road. In the holiday period I used to go round and do it, two years. In those days if anything went wrong the last two in and they were to be the first two out and that's what happened. Then I went to Webster's which they had a big warehouse in St Thomas' Street and they supplied all the stuff for the hospitals like cotton wool or anything they want and downstairs they had a big cork place, they had all the old fashioned bundles of corks for medicine bottles in big bags. This is about 1957. That went wrong after a year or two. The day I found out we had someone from the haulage company delivering there. He said "What's up?" I said: "I've just been made redundant" and he said "This is April time, they take a lot on at the haulage firm, have you ever worked in haulage?" I said: "No". He said "Go and tell him you've worked in haulage" I said: "No". I knew George. I used to live up Bartholomew Street. I knew George what worked there, he lived in the first block of flats to us and he say: "Oh you know George do you?" he say "If you want to come they taking them on temporary. If you're a good worker they'll keep you on". I stayed on there for twenty one and a half year.

One feature of this account is the list-like quality of Douglas' working life before moving to the haulage company. Although the details of the names and whereabouts of each workplace are retained, he gives no information about the nature of the work or his feelings about his early working life. It is possible that one of the reasons the

account remains somewhat superficial and unengaging is because it is impersonal. While other group members may be familiar with and interested in local history conveyed through the names of shops and the streets on which they are located, they learn nothing about Douglas as a person from what he says.

As the account moves on to how Douglas came to work for a haulage company, its nature changes to what appears to be a word for word recitation of a conversation. While it is possible that Douglas is reliving the conversation in his memories as he repeats it to the group, at the time it had the feel of a conversation he had recited many times. If this is the case, it is unlikely that he would be simultaneously accessing the memory of the actual event, as much as the memory of his established account of the event. The tone of voice in which he speaks and the lack of pauses in his delivery which would give other participants opportunities to interrupt or ask for further information, together with the fact that Douglas did not make eye contact with anyone other than me as he spoke, suggests that at this stage, he could be lacking confidence, and has not yet got a feel for in-depth reminiscence as the simultaneous recounting of life events whilst revisiting them in memory.

As this is Douglas' first group, none of this is surprising. However, it presented a challenge to me as group facilitator, as it emerged through comments from other participants after this session that Douglas habitually spoke about the past in this way, with a tendency to use a single tone voice and avoiding giving other people the space to interact with him. Despite this, Douglas makes two comments during Group Session 3, which suggest he is able and willing to interact at a deeper level. The first of these is a moment of reflection about his working life given towards the end of the session: *"I didn't think I would do that sort of work, but I took to it in time"* which suggests a capacity to reflect on his experience as well as opening up his thoughts and feelings to exposure to other group members. The second occasion in the same session is where Douglas, having sat in silence for most of the session, except when giving extended responses to direct questions, unexpectedly joins in with a conversation taking place between other participants about the crashing of airships:

Diana: It was the R34 that crashed in France.

- Douglas: That was the R101 that caught fire.*
- Diana: Oh, the R101. I remember them too. We lived near the airfield.*
- Bill: It was as big as four football pitches; that's how big it was.*
- Tutor: When did it crash?*
- Diana: Something like 1935. Something like that. We used to stand on top of the gate and see all the [inaudible] they had to pull the mooring masts.*
- Douglas: There is another picture showing that, something like the Eiffel Tower and that used to come in and unload and that hit that. It just exploded. That was the gas they used just exploded. I think it was only about six people found alive. Some just jumped out and landed on the ground.*

Although Douglas is not sharing a personal memory here (he was not born at the time, but has read about the event in books) he becomes suddenly interested and speaks with greater animation than at any time earlier in the session. In addition, it was noticeable that he had a different approach to contributing during this extract, in that the things he says are part of a dialogue with other participants, are more reflective and demonstrate an ability to listen to others.

Reflecting on Douglas' participation during his first session, it is important to consider how he may have felt as a newcomer to an existing group. As discussed, he reveals two sides to his nature. The first is his habitual way of responding to direct questions by giving long impersonal answers which reveal little about his underlying feelings about experiences, and which other participants find difficult to listen to. That this is Douglas's habitual way of participating in group discussions was revealed mainly through the informal and unrecorded comments of other group members after his first attendance, when the suggestion was made that Douglas's presence made the

group less enjoyable. As tutor, it put me in a difficult position to hear this, raising questions about how best to facilitate relationship-building in a group where what appeared to be mild hostility was being expressed towards one of the group members, by others. However, being aware that Douglas had also revealed himself to be a man with potential to contribute constructively to group discussions through sharing knowledge which he finds interesting, my aim as facilitator became to encourage him to make more of the latter type of contributions. This seemed to offer a potential route to giving him a role in the life of the group which could alter the way in which others interacted with him, enhancing his belief in himself as someone who had something to say which was both interesting and stimulating to others. Douglas' participation in subsequent group sessions points towards the success of this approach, as he becomes more of a group player, making fewer contributions of the kind others originally had difficulty focusing on.

Douglas' contributions during his second session (Group Session 4) range from reading out a list of his interests including fork-lift truck driving, fishing, badminton, billiards and darts, which is delivered in the previously noted single-tone voice with little engagement with, or regard for, the preferences of his audience, to a solo recital of the song 'Red Sails in the Sunset', which reveals a remarkable ability to hold the attention of others and win their admiration, which had not emerged through his previous mode of communicating. A few minutes after this, as Douglas again settles into what appears to be a position of disengagement from the group, Clifford re-engages him with a question:

Clifford: Anyway Douglas, do you remember anything about playing cigarette cards?

Douglas: Oh, cigarette cards, I put that on my picture too.

Clifford: We used to collect them and go about playing with each other.

Douglas: I put that down. I put that down.

Tutor: Tell me about them. Where did you get them?

Douglas: Out of cigarettes. Sometimes you'd swap them too if you had got one someone wanted, they'd give you one of theirs, exchange them.

Tutor: You did that when you were teenagers?

Douglas: Yes.

Bill: I gave my cigarette card collection away about a year ago. I gave it to my brother.

(Group Session 4)

Shortly after this exchange, Clifford asks a question, this time addressed to the whole group and Douglas is quick to share his memories in response to this:

Clifford: Did anyone have sports at school? Running and that sort of thing?

Douglas: Oh yes, cross country run, snow and ice, T-shirt and shorts, running across Aspley golf course. Oh, I hated that.

Bill: Thirteen and a half miles for the seniors' cross country.

Tutor: Did the girls have to do cross country?

Douglas: I don't remember, no.

Bill: They didn't have girls in our school.

Diana: I never remember running at school.

Clifford: If we did cross country we usually lost our way!

Diana: Deliberately!

Douglas: Something else, PT. Used to do that at school. They used to sit me on top of this horse because I was big and they jump up and hit the thing and jump over the top of me. I used to be told to keep my head down and they jump over the top of me as well.

Tutor: Did that make you nervous?

Douglas: No.

Teresa: I never went over that thing. I used to stay to the back and they say "Go on, go on!" I used to say "I ain't going to open my legs that blasted wide!" You'd get over it didn't you, in the middle like that, you had to open your legs wide and went over it like that. I thought to myself, "I'll be deformed!"

Douglas: I broke the springboard once, because you had to hit that and bounce so you could get over the horse. I jumped on that and it went as flat as a pancake.

(Group Session 4)

In these two sets of interactions, there is a marked difference in the manner of Douglas' communication compared with his earlier contributions. Firstly, what he says here is highly relevant to and shows engagement with, other group members. He also speaks in an excited voice which suggests interest and gives a sense of simultaneous recollection of the experiences, which suggests that he is in touch with the emotions he experienced at the time. Lastly, the most obvious feature of Douglas' contributions to these discussions is that he says what he wants to say briefly, allowing time and space for others to contribute.

As this is only Douglas' second time of attending the reminiscence group, it is difficult to believe that this change in his manner of participating is a new learned behaviour, acquired within his first two hours of reminiscence interactions. However, some evidence which suggests that this may indeed be the case, lies in the informal, unrecorded comments of other group members after the previous session (Group Session 3) which had implied that his lengthy dominating speeches with no space for interruptions, were what group members had come to expect from Douglas through their interactions with him during other activities. It is also possible that Douglas is demonstrating existing communication skills which he has not previously had the

opportunity to use at the day centre. If this is the case, it can still be argued that my and other participants' interactions with Douglas during these two group sessions, have conveyed the message to him that this is a setting in which it is acceptable to explore new ways of communicating with a group of people, most of whom are older than him, with whom he has previously had difficulty connecting. Clifford's first question, addressed directly to Douglas, appears to have communicated to him indirectly that he has a role to play as a group member, that he is part of the group and that he may have memories in common with other participants which they would welcome him sharing. That it is only two minutes after this that Douglas responds to Clifford's second question in a relevant way, may be coincidence but may equally be because he has received and understood the message of Clifford's first question.

Douglas has quickly become established as a group member. However, to ensure a lasting change in his communications with other participants which can be carried through to conversations outside of the reminiscence group, his position needs to be consolidated in his ongoing interactions within the group. At times he returns to over-lengthy contributions which stray from the main focus of the general reminiscence-based discussion. An example of this takes place in Group Session 5, when Douglas provides a list of all the cinemas which have ever existed in a nearby city. Although he is able to list each of fifteen cinemas with their key features, this is done without paying attention to the level of interest shown by other participants, who, despite their attempts to add their own memories, are over-ruled by Douglas' insistence on providing a historically factual account of the cinemas. As some of these cinemas closed before Douglas was born, it appears that his aim is to deliver a strictly historical account, rather than focusing on personal experience. While there is great value in sharing historical knowledge as part of the reminiscence process, especially where demonstrating an interest in historical knowledge represents a sharing of self, Douglas strays into a problematic area when his confidence in his knowledge of historical facts conflicts with other group members' personal memories:

Douglas: The Ritz was the one right on that corner. That's the one that had the organ that come up from below. All the other ones used to come on at the side.

Philip: The Carlton had it too didn't it? So did the Odeon didn't it?

Douglas: No, they used to come on at the side.

Philip: The Odeon had one that came up from the floor.

Douglas: No, it came on from the side.

Philip: I can't remember that, I always thought they come up from the side.

(Group Session 5)

The difficulty that arises in the above conversation extract is that to Douglas, historical facts as he perceives them, are more important than Philip's feelings or the potential of this interaction to develop his confidence to participate. This interaction can be interpreted as a demonstration of Douglas' lack of sensitivity towards other participants, and an indication of a potential area for development in his own learning.

Despite Douglas' emphasis on information and focus on historical accuracy when it comes to local cinemas, he goes on to reveal why cinemas hold such interest for him, moving again to the realms of personal reminiscence:

The Regent was on Princess Road. There was another one next door, the Electric. There was a room at the side. I don't know if it's still there but there are some houses beside there and if you look up there is a big white sign on the back of that building and it says 'Regent Theatre'. Whether it's still there now I don't know. That's where the projection room was. My mother worked there twice. She originally started at the Electric. [... inaudible...]. The old Electric closed in 1949 and re-opened in 1955, you know, wide screen. We went down first of all, nearly up front of the queue and the manager was there and he said: "Hello Mrs S. How are you?" She

said: "I'm having a break at the moment. I was at the Odeon". He say: "Well if you'd like to come back we'd appreciate it just to get us going. You're a good worker. Think it over for a fortnight". She went back there for quite a while.

(Group Session 5)

On several occasions Douglas refers to having frequented cinemas from a very early age, due to accompanying his mother when she went to work. An analysis of Douglas' interest in the cinema, offers an opportunity to understand more about how some of his stories from the past tend to have the feel of being well-rehearsed or frequently retold. For instance, on several occasions, Douglas refers to having talked through particular family events with his mother, suggesting that his close relationship with her was based partly on their shared memories. In Group Session 6, Douglas describes how he quickly learned to cope with domestic chores after his mother's sudden death, because he had always observed her carrying them out herself during her lifetime. While Douglas never states explicitly that he was close to his mother or that he spent most of his time outside school and work with her, this is revealed through several descriptions of conversations held between them and their shared activities, in the absence of any similar such descriptions of relationships with friends or other family members. A picture therefore emerges of Douglas as someone whose audience for reminiscence has, until now, been his mother. It is possible that participating in these reminiscence sessions is his first opportunity to explore new ways in which to share personal memories. It could therefore be argued that he is learning to share himself more widely after a relationship with his mother which may not have included a wider circle of friends. This adds weight to the idea previously expressed that Douglas does have communication skills beyond those initially revealed in the first session, and that through the reminiscence groups he is presented with opportunities to experiment with using those skills in the context of an environment which fosters the sharing and valuing of memories.

Within the final three group sessions, Douglas demonstrates a broadening range of emotions as he increasingly shares and relives past experiences:

Just one more thing. I used to love 'Journey into Space'. That used to be good that one. I've still got three paperback books which they made the stories from. Serial every week. You'd have to wait each week to see what happened. It was the end of the fifties, going into the sixties. It was very good. Well put forward.

(Group Session 5)

At one time I got to know a girl who was in the church that lived next door. We were only about twelve or fourteen but we became friends. We started going out together and it got to the point where I thought 'Oh, she is the one' and we got engaged. But all of a sudden she just went off with someone else. I wish I had continued to find someone but I just didn't bother.

(Group Session 6)

I've made rabbit hutches. We had Dutch ones, the white ones with pink eyes. The only other one we had was a Flemish Giant. He was a big bugger he was. Like he was, he came out of the hutch one day and he was jumping about, he was pulling me round the garden! Right I say "You're for the kitchen table". We killed him in the end and my mother skinned all the rabbits.

(Group Session 7)

Each of these contributions demonstrates Douglas' increasing propensity to share memories briefly, to express feelings and to tell a new range of stories which hold the attention of his audience both because of their interesting content and because of the animation in his voice as he tells them. During many of his later contributions, Douglas chuckles to himself as he recounts his memories, and this, in addition to observing him staring into the middle distance whilst reminiscing, suggests an actual reliving of the events, complete with accompanying feelings. This represented a dramatic change from the way in which he told seemingly well-rehearsed stories during the early stages of his involvement in the group's activities.

When interviewed alone after the completion of the group sessions Douglas said that his participation had brought many old memories back which had led to feelings of happiness, especially in the context of years of feeling socially isolated due to living alone. He also confirmed that some things he had recounted in the groups were stories his mother had shared with him, rather than his own memories, emphasising that he had enjoyed being able to make links between the stories of group members and the items of memorabilia which were present, and the knowledge of the past acquired by listening to his mother's memories.

An analysis of Douglas' experiences in the reminiscence group helps to create an understanding of one of the ways in which sharing memories can lead to learning. For example, he expresses the satisfaction gained from learning about the past from other group members, especially where this led to greater clarity on topics he knew something about through past conversations with his mother and grandparents. Although this is an illustration of how the conscious value of reminiscence to Douglas lies in the way he can use the sharing of memories to accumulate and demonstrate knowledge of historical facts and information, he appears to have much less awareness of the more marked change which has taken place in him – the ability to relate to others and function as a group member much more effectively than at the start of his participation. Nonetheless, while a sense of personal value might reasonably be considered to lie behind an increased ability to enjoy relationships with others, Douglas clearly states that he doesn't see his life as having much value in the present:

"I ain't got much hope. I liked my past better than I do my future".

(Douglas, Individual Interview)

In Douglas we see a man who appeared somewhat socially and emotionally disengaged when he began to attend the reminiscence groups, which resulted in a disinterest with and detachment from the past and other people, leading to an unemotional style of reminiscing that focused largely on facts. During his participation, an emotionally protective, socially isolated person with a desire to interact and become part of something bigger than himself quickly emerged.

However, his individual interview did not elicit any direct statements to this effect, suggesting that Douglas either does not see himself in these terms, does not have the vocabulary to express such ideas about intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships, or alternatively that he would disagree outright with any suggestions to this effect.

While Douglas focused on learning being, for him, to do with the accumulation and dissemination of historical facts, he stated unreservedly that he appreciated taking part in the group largely because it provided him with opportunities to interact with others and *“get to know more about them”* (Individual Interview). Despite these findings from the individual interview, in his changed interactions, Douglas demonstrates an ability to adjust the way in which he relates to others in positive ways. These are changes which appear to have come about because of his ability to read cues which suggested that the group was a fairly safe place in which to try out new ways of communicating – cues which were modelled by other group members’ interactions and through the tutor’s guidance as to the kinds of interaction which were most appreciated.

Case 2: Bill

Bill reveals himself in the first group session as a man whose life includes significant achievements of which he is proud, but who simultaneously feels emotionally vulnerable due to his physical dependence on others and what he perceives to be his reduced social status as a person with disabilities. There is also some indication that he feels unsure of himself in the group, which is seen in the way he tries out a range of ways of contributing, partly to discover what is expected of him, but also to explore where the boundaries lie in terms of appropriate and acceptable topics for discussion.

Bill’s first input, given in response to my request to introduce himself, has the feeling of attempting to provide a summary of who he sees himself to be, drawing upon his experience in the Navy to identify himself as a person of some significance in the past, but contrasting this with the man he may appear to be now - someone who has had a stroke and for whom opportunities for achievement are over:

William James Warner, Royal Navy Retired. That sums me up. I have had a stroke and can't do much. They dunk me in the bath here. I've been all over the world; about fifty countries. You could say I was in the first Gulf War, but I never shot anyone. My father was an engineer and my mother was a Scot.

(Group Session 1)

Within this statement, there are suggestions of what Bill may be feeling about attending the day centre and being part of the reminiscence group. He juxtaposes old and new identities in a way which could suggest an understandable dissonance between his sense of himself as a naval operator with an important role, and a disabled person recovering from a stroke. While the conciseness of this statement may suggest a certain quality of a frequently used and therefore rehearsed introduction, the juxtaposition of information about his situation as someone who has had a stroke and as a result needs assistance with bathing, immediately introduces a note of vulnerability. It might be surmised from this, that while Bill wants to assert his identity as a man who has achieved significant things in his life, he is fearful of being given the potentially humiliating status of a 'stroke victim' in need of help with routine tasks, rather than being seen as a person with meaningful contributions to make to the group.

Bill's introductory statement might also be interpreted as a reflection of a commonly held stereotype of reminiscence groups as places where dependent people with disabilities talk about the Second World War and other events from the past as a way of passing time until death. There is further evidence that Bill may hold this stereotype of reminiscence as focusing on wartime memories in his next statement, which is a response to being asked where he was born and brought up:

I was born in Metcliff and lived on Park Road. There used to be a park there but it was taken over by the army during the war and they dug a lot of trenches, which I subsequently fell in and nearly cut my leg off! Herts regiment took it over.

(Group Session 1)

This information, which could be seen as an attempt by Bill to fit the requirements of a contribution to a reminiscence group, is immediately followed by more personal information:

We had a two up and two down and a loo at the bottom of the garden, fuelled by earth. I had an incredibly happy childhood and two wonderful parents. I went to the local grammar school and never regretted it. I should have done better but there we are.

(Group Session 1)

A number of attributes of this contribution can be noted. Firstly, Bill moves rapidly from one topic to another, making short statements on each: his place of birth which includes a wartime focus, features of his family home, a reflection on his happy childhood and positive relationship with his parents, a reflection that he had the potential to achieve more in his youth, swiftly followed by what appears to be a philosophically resigned attitude towards that part of his life: “*but there we are*”. The rapidity with which Bill moves between one topic and the next within one uninterrupted contribution, suggests a possible perception of a need to say as much as he can in a short space of time. It could also be argued that Bill is again delivering the information which he assumes I want to hear as part of a reminiscence session, as there is no clear link between the different parts of this contribution, apart from one which may exist in Bill’s mind that these are likely to be the kinds of things of interest to a reminiscence tutor. Similarly, as with Bill’s original introductory statement, there is a contrast between personal and public information: his time in the Navy and information about his local park contrasting with the statements about his stroke and the idea that he could have done better in his youth. The way in which he aligns these two different types of information, may suggest an attempt to explore my reactions to both types of contribution in order to establish the extent to which I would welcome the inclusion of personal as well as public reminiscences.

A third statement by Bill during the first group session provides further evidence of his testing the ground:

*I was blessed by Pope Pius XII. That was in the Navy. I was twenty.
We weren't allowed too near convents though.*

(Group Session 1)

Bill's statement about being blessed by the Pope is not out of context in terms of the discussion taking place about his achievements, as he is suggesting that the reason for his success and intelligence is this blessing. However, while the information about convents which follows could be interpreted, at this stage in the group's life and our relationship, as a humorous comment, similar conversations in subsequent sessions revealed a tendency on Bill's part to unexpectedly interject ideas which were challenging for me to handle, both as a tutor, and as a woman. They included the beginnings of a detailed description of watching prostitutes at work which I curtailed (Group Session 4) and statements made on two occasions about hitting women (Group Sessions 2 and 4). In making these comments, Bill could be seen as seeking to establish his place in the group by making statements which draw attention to him. Alternative interpretations are that it is possible he wanted to test the boundaries of what was acceptable conversation in the group, or perhaps, being preoccupied with these matters, he wanted to bring them to the group as this was somewhere he was given a voice. While there is no certainty about his intentions, I considered it necessary to be aware of the sensitivities of all group members and not pursue these lines of discussion. This is an example of how tensions can arise between the ideal of using a person-centred approach which gives learners control, and the need to maintain a relatively safe space for everyone to explore their memories comfortably.

Towards the end of the first group session, Bill contributes to a discussion on the prevalence and acceptability of smoking in the past, in a slightly different way. Taking hold of an item of memorabilia, a wooden pipe lying on the table, he gesticulates with it, saying:

Oh yes, a bowl of thunder and lightning. I was a roller and I also smoked a pipe. I think I smoked sixty or seventy fags a day. Shall we say there are a lot of things which I used to do that are now

curtailed? Basically, you put this in your mouth and you leave it hanging there. Used to point the things [referring to pipes as objects used to point towards things or as a way of emphasising a point, and simultaneously demonstrating this]. Very therapeutic. I had a beard; everyone laughs but I did have a, what you call a full set; in the Navy I had to have a certain presence. I started having the whiskers when I was at the Arctic when that was a necessity not to shave and I kept one for years and years. You see, people with beards put their hands round and they tug it. Habit, you know what I mean.

(Group Session 1)

This statement is qualitatively different to his previous contributions to the group within the first session, in that he addresses these comments to the whole group, rather than just me, and uses arm movements to back up what he says. He appeared and sounded more relaxed during this particular contribution, suggesting not only that he had found a way of contributing memories with which he felt more comfortable, but also that he was enjoying remembering these aspects of his past and actively reliving them in his mind as he spoke. Being able to take hold of a tangible and perhaps, much-loved and now missed object, may have contributed to his relaxed stance and more confident air, possibly because it enabled him to communicate through more than spoken language in a moment of reminiscence re-enactment.

Bill's first contribution during the second Group Session is in some ways similar to his final one in Group Session 1, in that he chooses an item of memorabilia, a child's cork pop-gun, and describes his favourite childhood play-thing:

I had virtually no choice [referring to his toys as a child] but I had a very fine collection of handmade guns from the Second World War – almost real. Because basically my father was away during Home Guard working and I was left at home so he would make me guns so I could play with them. These [holding up the cork popgun] we

used to make out of elderberry. We would fire corks or acorns through them.

(Group Session 2)

One notable aspect of this statement is that it is one to which two other participants offer assent and therefore represents a move towards participating as a member of the group, rather than acting as an individual interacting only with me, the tutor, in the presence of others. The memory is one which is likely to be held in common with other group members, and therefore indicates the possibility that in his final contribution in Session 1, Bill was able to identify that the way he had moved towards sharing memories and talking at that time, successfully created a positive experience for him that he wanted to repeat. This however, is an interpretation of his change in approach, which at this stage cannot be confirmed as conscious learning as Bill at no time makes a statement to this effect. It can only be ascertained from the available evidence that he used a number of different styles of participation during Group 1, most of which were individualistic and unlikely to stimulate shared reminiscences, but the last of which involved the use of an item of memorabilia and represented a move towards finding common ground with other participants. It may be a conscious change in participatory style, coincidence, or possibly a subconscious desire to repeat a feeling of connection obtained at the end of the first session.

Further evidence of a development in Bill's style of interaction emerges during the rest of Group Session 2, and in Sessions 3 and 4. Initially, there is a marked change in his approach to communicating whilst sharing memories directly with the tutor. Examples of this include a sustained interaction during Session 2 through which he recollects his schooldays, describing the school buildings, a favourite schoolmaster and the academic subjects in which he was most interested. The content of his sharing on this occasion is personal, delivered in an animated tone and of potential interest to all participants who are likely to have similar school-day memories. However, there is a change in tone towards the end of the conversation, as Bill turns his thoughts from his favourite subject (history) towards the topic of corporal punishment:

Bill: The things is, I went to a school that was full of history and was founded in 1636. You had the headmaster who'd beat the crap out of you

[Robert laughs]

Robert: At that time you did, course, whack, whack. You'd go to the headmaster. Oh, yeah.

Bill: I had blood drawn from my buttocks.

Tutor: Goodness, they must be really horrible memories for you?

Bill: No, I quite liked the master!

Tutor: Are you joking?

[Robert laughs]

Bill: That's not because I was bent or anything. Only thing was, he was a good master. As my father said when he saw my bum, he said "You must have did something wrong for him to hit you". Well actually, I assaulted a master.

Tutor: In those days you would have got it.

Bill: He hit me with a large piece of wood with steel on it, he dropped it and I picked it up and I hit him hard.

Tutor: How do you feel about that now Bill?

Bill: Makes me feel sad that I couldn't control my temper. I never did control my temper, so there you are.

(Group Session 2)

The most interesting features of this interaction include the use of images and terminology which are likely to have an emotional impact on his audience thereby

putting Bill at the centre of attention. On one level, Bill is successfully regenerating some of the horror which may have been felt by his fellow students at the time, and therefore could be considered to be entering fully into a reminiscence experience at some depth. However, it seems more likely that he has sensed that the sustained interaction in which he has been participating with me, is drawing to a close, that I am disengaging and moving on to give attention to other group members. There is no sense of the story not being true, or even of it being exaggerated. It is simply the case that as I slowed the pace of our interaction and began to make eye contact with other participants, the tone of the conversation changed in a marked way, suggesting that Bill was attempting to hold my attention. If this was his intention, it would suggest a continuing level of insecurity and self-doubt in the reminiscence group setting, which would not be surprising at this early stage. Bill has experimented with new types of interaction based on sharing his memories, but lasting change in his sense of identity would take longer to establish.

My reaction to the change in tone and content of this discussion with Bill in Session 2 could, in the light of subsequent developments in Bill's contributions, be interpreted as a positive turning point as there was an increase in a number of positive and constructive qualities in Bill's interactions with me and other group members in the sessions which followed.

Firstly, Bill began to ask other group members questions:

What was that gadget thing that you put on a tower thing and it revolved round?

(Group Session 2)

He also explained items of memorabilia to others:

The ball goes through and pulls there, that snaps there and kills the mole. I've got one at home.

(Group Session 3)

In addition, he supplied various pieces of information which contributed in a positive way to ongoing discussions and reflected on his own memories as a direct response to the memories of others:

Diana: We used to have meat dumplings years ago, they cut the top off, put this mushroom ketchup in on top of the meat

Clifford: Mushroom ketchup, it was lovely; first mushrooms. Made it at school. We used to collect the mushrooms and they'd squash it all up.

Bill: I spent half my life roaming around the hedgerows. If you look at the hedgerows, there's five species every yard, you get blackberries don't you, different fruits, all that kind of thing.

Diana: When I was a kitchen maid I used to collect all the strawberries. I tell you what [mimes selecting and eating a strawberry as she acts out the memory] there's a nice one there.

(Group Session 3)

Each of the above demonstrates a reduction in the length of Bill's contributions, but a greater relevance to other group members. This suggests an increased ability to listen, and a reduced need to dominate, both of which are highly conducive to operating as a group member and contributing to the life and well-being of the group. A contrast can also be seen between these statements, which all stick to one topic, and the tendency towards the disjointed stringing together of different topics in Group Session 1. The implication is that Bill has moved from just talking, to communicating and engaging meaningfully with other individuals, and with the group as a whole.

Although Bill appeared to achieve greater coherence in his thinking about the different aspects of his life, past and present, he remained aware of the limitations imposed on him by the long term effects of having had a stroke:

My living crashed the day I had the stroke. I was an electronic designs engineer, one of the top engineers and then I had the stroke.

(Group Session 4)

Such a revelation seems a courageous one to make, adding weight to the idea that his identity, having been interrupted by having a stroke, has to be made anew. That Bill makes use of the reminiscence group as part of this building of a new identity is suggested by how he gradually reveals more of himself in less stereotyped ways, becoming more expansive in his expression of who he is. This also enables others to get a broader picture of the whole man. A striking example takes place in Group Session 4, where Bill produced and explained a drawing which expressed the hobbies he had enjoyed earlier in life. The most outstanding features of this exchange are Bill's openness to expressing a less stereotypically masculine side as he identifies his leisure pursuits, and Diana's resulting expression of interest in him:

Bill: I have put copper sculpture. I would make posies out of copper as gifts. I have all the equipment in my garage still but I can't use a hammer now, so there we are, I am stuck. I did all cards, dominoes, watercolours, drawing, walking, athletics, throwing discus and all that. Sailing as well.

Diana: Well, I never even thought about you doing all that. I know you are a nice gentleman, I used to look at you and say "well I wonder what he did?"

Diana's response to Bill's self-revelation can be seen as particularly important as this is the first time Bill has received such open and outright affirmation for a contribution he has made in the group. In addition, Diana and Teresa both commented during

their subsequent individual interviews that their view of Bill changed as a result of taking part in these sessions. It is possible that one reason for this is a change in Bill's habitual approach to interacting with others. An example of this is seen in Group Session 5, where a potential confrontation between Bill and Douglas is prevented by Bill adopting a compromise position over their disagreement about the timing of 'Dick Barton', a radio programme of the 1940s:

Douglas: Quarter past six it used to come on.

Bill: I remember slightly different; it might have been on at different times.

Douglas: As far as I was concerned it was quarter past six.

Bill: There were different stories every time; sort of private detective sort of thing, proper detective thing.

Bill's growing sense of security in his own identity is seen most strongly at this point, as he is prepared to move on and prevent a conflict. He no longer displays the need to be at the centre of attention, or of expressing stereotypical masculinity. It could be deduced that he steps back from confrontation at this point for the sake of the well-being of the group. This action contrasts greatly with his contributions in the first two sessions, in which he appeared to be more egocentric.

During his individual interview, Bill reports enjoying the groups, finding them stimulating and activating for the mind in a way which in his opinion overcomes some of the effects of his stroke:

I thought it was quite, in a way, stimulating, because the trouble with a stroke is you tend to get muddled up and you forget things and if you reminisce things keep pricking into the old memory and then you start to think about them.

(Bill, Individual Interview)

While an immediate reaction to this statement might be that it is unlikely that such improvements would be objectively measurable, it is worth taking into consideration that emotional changes are a common after-effect of a stroke (Hankey, 2007: 326). It is therefore possible that Bill had initially been experiencing a long term post-stroke lowering of his mood which began to shift as a result of having his identity affirmed, feeling part of something which was bigger than him and being able to make a positive contribution to the well-being of others.

Bill identified that through his participation in the group he was able to more easily connect and communicate with others, getting to know them better and developing friendships. As a result, he and Diana had decided to carry out some joint research into the differences between Norfolk and Suffolk barns, sharing their findings when they met at the day centre each week. Bill described how, through such stimulating activity, he had been able to come to terms with the past to some extent, including his experience of having a stroke. He finished his interview by saying that he had found the sessions enjoyable and entertaining.

Bill's learning journey takes him to a point of being able to contribute positively to the needs of others, whilst enjoying and appreciating the remaining skills and abilities which are available to him following a stroke. It also gives him the confidence to re-establish positive relationships with family and friends outside of the group.

The evidence from observations during the group sessions strongly suggests a change in the way Bill interacts with others, and in his identity as someone who can contribute positively to a group. Bill talks about improved relationships and communications with others, but does not talk about the specific nature of these changes in any detail. Although in some ways, he does not appear to be as aware of the changes which have taken place as I, as an observer am, this should come as no surprise given that Bill lived through each of these groups once, whereas as the researcher, I was able to listen to the recordings of interactions repeatedly, as well as considering the transcripts over a long period of time. The individual interview material can therefore be said to confirm what was observed, without adding any detailed additional insight into how Bill experienced those changes.

Case 3: Clifford

Listening to and observing Clifford's participation in the group reminiscence sessions reveals a man who enjoys sharing his memories, is comfortable in his interactions with others and who has a wealth of engaging stories to tell which are interesting to all concerned. He never attempts to dominate the discussions, but neither does he hold back when he has something relevant to contribute which might add to the general quality and depth of the conversation, or to ask questions of other participants when he is interested in a particular aspect of their past. As such, he could be seen as adopting the role of a co-facilitator within the group, enabling others to keep focused and providing encouragement through active listening.

At least, that is the impression Clifford gave at first, and had I not carried out two individual interviews with him, each of which lasted almost an hour, it might never have dawned on me, that I was seeing what Clifford wanted me to see: I would have missed the man underneath. Analysing Clifford's learning experience within the reminiscence group was intensely challenging; it took longer to understand who Clifford is largely because he kept his views and feelings hidden beneath a facade which I didn't discern until a late stage in data analysis, partly because his participation had indicated that he had fully engaged with and enjoyed the group. It was only after considering his participation over some months, focusing to a greater extent on some of the unexpected things he said in the individual interviews, that I was able to see the extent to which I had missed the reality of Clifford's feelings about his life experiences.

Clifford didn't join the group until the third session, due to having had time away from the centre with health problems during the first two weeks. In Group Session 3 he appears to have no difficulty in joining in immediately with discussions about working life, interacting well with other participants. The following extract led on from a discussion around Diana's job as a kitchen maid:

Bill: Oh yes, you used to skin pigeons, didn't you?

Clifford: You take the skin off with the feathers, the whole lot.

- Tutor: What do you do with them?*
- Clifford: You fry them. I've never had a tastier bird than a pigeon.*
- Douglas: My mother was obsessed with rabbit pie.*
- Diana: They used to put strips of belly pork on top of it. Then you do all the pastry up and there's all that lovely thin jelly. Gorgeous.*
- Tutor: Clifford, can you tell me more about your first job, what you did when you left school?*
- Clifford: Errand boy. I used to work for a meat and fish merchant. I used to pluck turkeys, chickens, guinea fowl; I used to deliver them. I used to skin rabbits.*
- Tutor: What did you get for doing that?*
- Clifford: Ten shillings a week, from about eight o'clock in the morning until about ten o'clock at night. Ten shillings is equivalent to fifty pence. That was worth more in them days. It's only about a penny or something like that you know.*

The qualities in Clifford's interactions illustrated in this extract, and extending to the majority of his contributions to group discussions, include a confident tone, certainty about his memories and clarity in their expression. In subsequent contributions he supplies detailed, relevant and direct information about his own past, including references to his family and working life, and always incorporating a consideration of his feelings at the time, as well as demonstrating an apparent enjoyment of talking about the past, evidenced by his jocular tone and occasional laughter as he reflects on some of the joys of childhood during the 1920s:

When I was five and at school and just come out to play in the playground, I looked up and there was this bloody great thing going

across the sky. I wondered what it was. It seemed as though you could just reach up and touch it. In later years I realised it was the R101 on the main voyage.

(Group Session 3)

Clifford makes the above statement shortly after initiating the discussion around airships by asking whether anyone remembered the R101. That he generates a lengthy discussion on a topic which I know little about, and thereby places himself in a position of being able to act as a facilitator in that discussion, suggesting that he feels comfortable and confident in a group setting. Although he has raised a subject of historical significance and is able to explain that he was a witness to this voyage of the R101, Clifford shows no sense of self-importance, but acknowledges the awe he felt at the time.

Throughout the group sessions, Clifford appears to be open about his feelings about the past, as he discusses a range of aspects of his life, including some injustices:

You talk about bikes. I can remember when I was at the grammar school in Newton, I was about twelve and I managed to save four and sixpence. A friend of mine wanted to sell his bike, second-hand you know, so obviously he wanted five shillings for it. So I said to him: "I've only got four and six, will you take that?" So he said: "Go on then". I got the four and six out of the savings, bought this bike and I had it a week and father sold it. When I went home I said "Where's my bike?" Father said: "I've sold it, you don't want it; you'll kill yourself on it". That was my story.

(Group Session 4)

As Clifford tells this story of buying and losing his bike, he does not betray any sense of bitterness about it, going on to explain that at that time, fathers had ultimate authority in a family and couldn't be argued with.

Clifford's contributions to group discussions are often informative, and never over-worked in terms of detail, although they are often quite specific, meaning that he is able to bring clarity to discussions where some uncertainty exists:

Teresa: I remember having candles and that, yes. We used to have candles everywhere, yes. In everything - jars, saucers, everything we could find – we weren't posh and had candle sticks: just had ordinary saucers.

Douglas: Used to have little oil lamps.

Robert: A lamp; a paraffin lamp.

Teresa: You stand them in the middle of the table.

Douglas: They have wicks in.

Tutor: These wicks? [Picking up an item of memorabilia]

Douglas: No, that isn't a wick.

Bill: It's a wick from an oil heater.

Douglas: They are very small, about as big as your finger. You just light the wick and put the glass back on the top and you get a decent light from it. You have like a little wind up clockwork thing – you turn that and that makes the wick a little longer.

Clifford: The wick for an oil lamp was flat. Approximately an inch wide and approximately an eighth of an inch thick and they used to put it in the burner, and as Douglas was just explaining, they used to wind it down with a winder. Then as it was going up you used to wind it up and light it.

Douglas: The more you wound it up the brighter it got.

Clifford: The more you wound it up, the more smoke you caused!

Douglas: That was the only trouble, you got smoke a lot.

Clifford's contributions to this dialogue, whilst providing very specific details about the features of an oil lamp wick, enable the discussion to continue on a surer note, where there had been a risk of confusion over exactly what was being discussed. Thus Clifford demonstrates another way in which he has potential to take the role of a facilitator.

At various times during the group sessions, Clifford asks questions of other group members, apparently seeking to draw them into the discussion, as well as to raise issues which are of interest to him by seeking out others' memories. Hence, in extracts quoted under other case analyses, Clifford asks Douglas about cigarette card collecting, and the group as a whole about their experiences of school sports. In both these instances, Clifford's questions lead to discussions in which several other group members take part, demonstrating that he has a natural ability to identify issues which will be of interest to the group. Equally, where he considers that he has nothing useful to contribute, Clifford refrains from taking part in a discussion. For example in Group Session 4, when asked about his experience of going to dances, his answer is short and unambiguous: *"I never danced – two left feet"*. Equally, where he considers that he has relevant memories, he does not hesitate to answer questions with clarity, and a sufficient amount of detail to ensure his audience gets a clear picture. Thus, when asked about his memories of going to the theatre, he answers *"I saw a play when I was about a twelve year old; twelve, thirteen, and that was a version of Gone with the Wind"* (Group Session 5). He goes on to express his interest in the theatre in more detail:

I went and saw the Phantom of the Opera a few years ago when it first came out. Very, very good – enjoyed it very much. You talk about going to see the theatre when you are younger - I always remember close to where I was born, close to where I lived, there was a cinema and it was a theatre as well. It was called the Electric and then changed to the Regent, but that doesn't make any difference. Does anybody remember Sandy Powell?

(Group Session 5)

The question about Sandy Powell is not picked up by anybody, and Clifford mentions this in his individual interviews, where he expresses finding the group sessions difficult at times because he was older than other group members, and therefore had memories from a slightly different era. He also mentioned that as he was brought up in a different county, many of his memories differed from those of other group members in terms of local attractions, shops, pubs and places of interest.

Despite Clifford having memories which differ from those of other group members, he very effectively takes part in sustained discussions in which his memories complement those of others. The following discussion on nutritional supplements provides an example:

Douglas: Cod liver oil. That was a big bottle, grey.

Clifford: My father used to make me take that every week.

Douglas: Big bottle, about this size [indicating height of bottle], square bottle about that tall. Cardboard box on the outside – there was fisherman carrying a big cod on his shoulder.

Clifford: That's right, yes.

Douglas: It wasn't very nice; it was sort of grey colour – one swallow and it was gone.

Clifford: But you couldn't half taste it afterwards.

Philip: You got a sweet afterwards an all.

(Group Session 6)

In the above conversation, Clifford's input involves adding in personal memories, affirming the memories of Douglas, and providing further detail regarding these memories. Thus he is seen to add quality and depth to the discussion, whilst remaining unobtrusive. At this point in the series of seven group sessions, most participants are functioning quite differently in their contributions and interactions with each other than at earlier points. This extract demonstrates the way in which a

tendency by some participants to dominate the discussion in earlier sessions has been replaced by an ability to participate in dialogue with mutual turn-taking. This appears to be a context in which Clifford functions happily, although from the positive nature of his contributions throughout the group sessions, it could also be argued that other group members have now attained the level of communication and collaborative working skills which he had from the start.

At this stage, Clifford's learning experience within the group could be classified as relating largely to his adoption of a facilitator's role, which, for a man of his socioeconomic status and work history, is unlikely to have been a role he has had many previous opportunities to play. If the analysis stopped there, we would be missing some highly significant features of Clifford's group experience.

While other participants said all they needed to within one individual interview, two interviews were held with Clifford following completion of the group sessions. The reason for this was that during the first interview it became clear that I had missed some important aspects of his life experience and factors behind his approach to participating in the group. During the groups, my interpretation had been that Clifford's experience of reminiscing was largely positive, partly because of his adoption of a constructive and facilitative role in enabling other group members to share memories. He confirmed this to some extent by saying that the groups had given him an opportunity to talk about memories which he doesn't usually discuss unless specifically asked about them. However, as Clifford talked one-to-one, it became clear that in some ways he felt that the group had not responded to his attempts to steer the conversation towards topics of particular interest to him:

If you will excuse me, they weren't talking about the era when I was born, the twenties and thirties. I was older than what they are.

(Clifford, First Individual Interview)

I noticed that the first time we were here [referring to Group session 3], I did mention the fact that did anybody believe in ghosts, not ghosts but spirits. Anyway nobody answered and they went straight into another subject.

(Clifford, Second Individual Interview)

During the individual interviews, a note of bitterness creeps into some of Clifford's comments, including expressing distaste towards the types of memories shared by Teresa and Douglas in the early sessions. This feeling of bitterness was not apparent to me at the time, and even after listening to the recordings several times was only marginally evident. This in itself could indicate a natural tendency to hear what we expect to hear, filtering out information which does not fit with our pre-existing schemas.

This new interpretation of Clifford's experience opened the way for a fresh look at what I had seen as his facilitative role within the group. For instance, posing questions could be seen as a way of steering the discussion in a direction he would like it to go. A more positive interpretation however, would be that Clifford was seeking to establish some common ground with other group members, such as swapping cigarette cards or their experiences of school sports, both of which are subjects most people above the age of sixty are likely to relate to.

While any feelings of bitterness about the hardships of his 1920s childhood were well controlled throughout the group sessions, Clifford shared many more details relating to his family and working life during the individual interviews, which, when taken *en masse*, can be seen to have a common theme. This theme became more obvious when considering Clifford's views about the meaning of life:

*When you are born, from the day you are born until the day you die,
I think your life is mapped out for you, I do.*

(Clifford, First Individual Interview)

The memories which Clifford shared in detail on an individual basis include the death of his two brothers in the Second World War, the amputation of the thumb on his dominant hand after an accident whilst working as a labourer, getting the sack from his job as an errand boy and spending most of his adult working life doing two full time jobs in order to make a home for his wife and children. The overarching theme is one of hardship in the context of not being able to alter his life-course due to

experiencing a position of powerlessness as a working class person, born before 1920. Reflecting back to his tale of his father selling his bicycle, one can see that Clifford has a strong sense of there being a fixed social order which meant not only respecting his father as head of the household, but also being unable to appeal when dismissed from his job unfairly. Such stories reveal the social powerlessness experienced by people of Clifford's age, which would not have applied in the same way to others in the reminiscence group, all of whom were born later. Clifford's expressed concern about having different memories to the other group members, could therefore be seen as a frustration about the limitations posed on a man of his age by his social status at birth – a frustration not shared by other men in the group such as Bill and Robert, who although from similar working class backgrounds were able to aspire to and achieve careers as professional men in the post-war world.

Clifford expresses the idea that participating in the reminiscence sessions has helped him to think about the meaning of his life:

It helps you see things in a different light and think of things in different ways. Could I have done it better? Could I have made a better job of my life? I don't know.

(Clifford, First Individual Interview)

He later says that he has no regrets about the way he has handled the challenges life has brought:

Well I can't say that I have ever regretted anything that I have ever done in my life, whatever's happened to me in my life, because I have always had it in my mind that your life is mapped out for you. I think that you can't stop it. I mean, look at it this way: can you stop yourself from dying? [I shake my head]. No, neither can anybody else. When your time comes you will go. This is what you have to look forward to. No, not look forward to! This is what I have got in my mind.

(Clifford, Second Individual Interview)

It is difficult to see how a person could regret events and their responses to those events, when they consider them to be predestined. On the other hand, a natural response may be to feel angry about having been limited in what you could achieve simply due to the circumstances of your birth. During his second interview, Clifford describes an experience which illustrates his feelings about the injustices which were so often meted out in the past to people of low social standing. He describes an experience in which, as an adult, he saw two children playing in his living room by the fire, and understanding these to be the ghosts of two local children he had read about who had been hanged in a previous century for stealing bread because they were starving. Clifford reflects:

The two children, I was so full up about what had happened to them. They came to let me know they were alright. They weren't here a minute, sixty seconds, just long enough for me to open my eyes. I never said a word. Never jumped or frightened. I never said "Who are you?" or anything like that, and my eyes just closed again and I went off to sleep.

(Clifford, Second Individual Interview)

Both individual interviews with Clifford revisited this theme of social injustice through a range of stories relating to his own past, backed up with the life stories of other people to whom he had been close throughout his life, including that of his wife, who had become a household maid at a young age because her family had been too poor to keep her at home.

Given this new interpretation of Clifford's approach to life and his feelings of bitterness, it becomes clearer that these deeply rooted, lifelong feelings of resentment at the rigidity of the social order into which he was born, present a potential barrier to learning and change. This potentially generates resistance to changes in self-concept. However, although it could be argued that Clifford maintains a fixed image of himself as a victim of circumstances, in his facilitative role in the reminiscence group he demonstrates a capacity to rise above these feelings. There is also a sense in which Clifford uses the group experience as a spur to personal

reflection on his life, and that his need may have been for the group to understand and acknowledge how difficult things had been for him. His participation has led him to acknowledge the hardships of his life and this world to himself. I would argue that through participation in this project, he achieved a deeper level of self-revelation - a successful outcome which demonstrates the level of trust established with a relative stranger, which enabled him to reveal his deepest thoughts and feelings, albeit through coded messages. Had further sessions taken place and more affirmation from other group members and me been provided, it seems possible that his sense of fatalism may have shifted.

Case 4: Diana

Diana's learning journey differs again from those of Douglas, Bill and Clifford, largely because her participation gradually reveals particular needs which are not immediately obvious and which emerge through a subtle demonstration of her self-perception and understanding of what her life represents. However, she emerges as a person showing far less rigidity in the way she talks about her past and present.

Similar to Douglas' initial contributions, Diana participates in group discussions with recollections of past experiences delivered in a manner suggestive of well-rehearsed stories recalled in the absence of simultaneous reliving of the events. The evidence for this lies in the repetition over a number of group sessions of a limited range of stories, each of which is repeated in similar words and with the same variations in tone of voice and emphasis on each occasion.

Diana initially gives the impression of being a person with a strong sense of identity, expressed through a philosophy of life which centres on making the most of difficult circumstances and doing good to others. Thus, she introduces herself to the group with the following statement:

My name is Diana. I am over ninety and I live alone. I come to the day centre here. I don't enjoy very good health, but I make the best of what I have got. If I could help anybody, I would. I used to do voluntary nursing and all sorts of things, but I can't do it now. Made cakes and everything like that, but I can't do it now, so I just give it

up. I've had some good times and I just say 'thank the Lord' for what I have had, because I try not to worry about anything.

(Group Session 1)

An onlooker's initial impression of Diana may be of a person with an established sense of self and a strong sense of identity, which a number of themes arising through her contributions to group discussions, tend to confirm. One of these themes is that of 'poverty and hardship', expressed in the first instance in her description of her childhood home:

We had one up and one down. I remember sleeping five in a bed – the two at either end fell out and the middle one got suffocated. That's how it used to be years ago; you never had a single bed, you always shared. A tiny garden. My mother brought up eight children in that house. Two of the boys slept in the little back room downstairs but that was it. I remember it well. Everyone seemed to live like that. We had a toilet built in wood at the side of a ditch and if the wind blew you were frightened that you were going to fall in the ditch. We used to pinch apples and all sorts.

(Group Session 1)

Delivered as part of a discussion in the first group session, it would be conceivable that Diana is contributing in a similar way to Bill at this stage, in that she is presenting material which she thinks likely to be interesting and relevant in the context of a reminiscence group. While for Bill, this was part of experimenting with a range of ways of operating in the group, for Diana, it at first appeared that this could be her habitual way of presenting herself. That this might be the case was suggested by the style of many of her contributions to group discussions over the coming weeks. Regardless of the chosen topic Diana puts forward one of three stories about her past. These are her school-day memories of the 'parson with a drip on the end of his nose', her first job as a kitchen maid, and an occasion when she won a cookery competition. As the weeks pass and Diana continues to draw on the same three stories, questions arise about whether she was experiencing the full potential of

reminiscence, as it could be argued that as long as Diana talks 'about' memories, rather than actually reliving them, she is not experiencing the full benefits of reminiscing, but simply fulfilling a social role within a group in a way which relies heavily on her assumptions of what group expectations are. However, there is no clear evidence of why Diana chooses to draw upon these three particular memories on several occasions, and it might equally be the case that these are, for her, memories which define her identity and make a strong contribution to her understanding of the meaning of her life as a whole – which may have stayed with her across several decades. Similarly, these might be stories which have interested people with whom she has reminisced in the past, in which case, Diana's telling of these tales could be considered a gift to the group as she seeks to contribute in ways which, experience tells her, will bring others pleasure. Alternative feasible interpretations include the possibility that she is sticking to recounting memories she feels confident she remembers clearly, perhaps suggesting an element of insecurity in the group setting, or a desire to keep other, less pleasurable memories at bay.

In Group Session 2, Diana initially resists participating in a discussion on childhood games, protesting that her family had been too poor to allow time or money for toys and games:

I mean, fourteen children, we didn't have any toys. No teddy, no doll, I didn't have. We couldn't afford to buy them.

(Group Session 2)

This statement in itself is not surprising. However, the group has already established that toys were more likely to be homemade than purchased in this era, which raises the possibility that Diana's statement might in some ways be a stereotyped presentation of the past, suggesting that poverty and hardship are the only things she can recall from childhood. Further discussion within the group led, moments later, to Diana agreeing that she did indeed have memories of childhood games:

We didn't have any toys, but we had to make our own sort of thing. My favourite was running to school with an old bicycle wheel and a

stick. You kept warm and you got there faster. I ran miles with a stick.

(Group Session 2)

Shortly afterwards, Diana concedes that she also had some toys which were not homemade:

We played marbles on the main road years ago but someone shouts 'Look out there's a car coming', but we'd always finish our game of marbles before the car came on to us.

(Group Session 2)

Later still, having emphasised that she was too poor as a child to have time to play, Diana responds to a 'Cat's Cradle' activity taking place in the room, by describing a homemade tool for French knitting:

But that was similar to what we did with empty thread reels – put four little nails in the top, and sit twisting the wool round for hours. We done that with the cotton reels. We used to play that on the main road.

(Group Session 2)

Towards the end of the second group session she responds to a game of table-top marbles explaining: *"We used to have a marble board with holes so you could see"* then adopting a dramatic posture, says: *"We used to stand like this you know. Oh I say!"* (Group Session 2).

From these statements, one can speculate that Diana's fixed ideas about her childhood, which she expresses in stories focussed on her family's poverty, have perhaps prevented her, until now, from taking a broader perspective about some of her life experiences. It is also possible that her understanding of what is meant by games and toys initially presented a barrier to her accessing and sharing a range of pleasurable memories and entering into an in-depth reminiscence experience. However, it also seems likely that her original purpose may have been to draw a

contrast between the toys and games available to her, with those provided for young people in the modern world.

It's possible that Diana's confidence and security in her own identity are threatened. It may be the case that she emits an air of self-confidence and certainty in her expression of her philosophy of life, and in her perceptions of self and others, as a way of avoiding looking at feelings and fears that might lie beneath the surface. Such speculations are not justifiable on the basis of casual interactions with and observations of Diana, but require an interpretation of her contributions over time, relying in turn, on reading into what remains unsaid, as well as what she openly shares.

As the reminiscence sessions progressed, Diana repeated her three well-rehearsed reminiscence stories a number of times. However, a new note finds its way into some of her interactions, causing potential confusion as a conflict emerges between her usual stories and a more expansive view of her past. The contradictory note between what she had initially expressed, and the memories she begins to explore is seen in the following conversation:

Tutor: How was school for you Diana?

Diana: I hated it. I had a favourite subject at school years ago. We had a church school; there was a reading room further down the road; what they called a reading room. Girls had to go to cookery once a year for a fortnight. We had caps and aprons and we never went to school for that whole fortnight and we had to learn cookery which I loved and I finished up, a chef I was called. I hated school.

Tutor: So those cookery lessons were really important to you?

Diana: Yes, I wrote to the teacher when I left and said what a nice school it was - don't know whether I was truthful or not. I had a lovely letter back saying: "If you always behave as

nicely as you always did at school you will get on very well”.

I thought, ‘Oh well’.

(Group Session 2)

Here, there is a dichotomy between the elements of her expressed memories which suggest she enjoyed some aspects of school, and her broad sweeping statement that she ‘hated it’ which suggests that for her, school had few, if any, redeeming features. It is entirely feasible that she held contradictory feelings, both liking and disliking different aspects of the same thing.

As the reminiscence group is a social context in which people’s contributions are generally accepted rather than challenged, I did not point out such contradictions to Diana. However, the fact that over the second and third sessions Diana began to offer more and more contradictory opinions could be interpreted as evidence of her feeling sufficiently emotionally safe to begin exploring and expressing feelings which she would ordinarily censor as unacceptable – such as thinking negatively about others, or positively about aspects of her own childhood. There was perceivable tension in Diana’s voice and facial expression at times, which may indicate the difficulty she experienced in going beyond her well-rehearsed approach to talking about the past. Diana’s standard story has an underlying message that ‘life is hard - but I try to be good’. Such a position may well be adopted in order to maintain emotional control through adversity. One possible interpretation of the driving force behind the increasingly frequent contradictory statements is to consider Diana as a person who has adopted a set way of talking about her life as a way of not revealing deep feelings of disappointment or resentment – to herself, or to others. While echoing my interpretation of Clifford’s learning journey, in Diana’s case, there is a stronger sense of insecurity which contrasts radically with the seemingly self-assured person who originally introduced herself to the group.

In the remaining Group Sessions, Diana begins to sound less fixed in the way she talks about her past, and joins in with general discussions with greater ease. Statements about her deprived childhood are replaced by a more relaxed and open enjoyment of sharing her memories:

And I've now found something in this cookery book which I'm quite excited about; we made gallons and gallons of this. We had to go on the airfield to gather the mushrooms – that was early morning. My mother used to make gallons and gallons of mushroom ketchup. I can remember her putting it in a big china pot. She used to squash it all down and put all these herbs in you know.

(Group Session 3)

Planting potatoes! We had a big garden and a big family, so father used to make the holes and we always had a job to do – make the holes. And we used to have to go in and put them in eyes upwards in the holes. I didn't have many toys when I was young but we lived right in the country and would make our own amusements. – put a rope on a tree and all that sort of thing.

(Group Session 4)

Her enjoyment of reminiscence includes an increasing level of interaction in general discussions.

Douglas: I just want to mention one thing: did any of you have a clockwork train set?

Diana: I saw them but I never had any. I saw richer people than we were have one, but we never had one.

Bill: I had one until I wound it up too tight.

Diana: You were lucky. We didn't have any electricity in our house. We had candles and lamps.

Bill: In that case my father would have got you a generator run by an engine, as he did for some friends of ours, for the whole electrical system.

Douglas: There were gas lamps in that dilapidated house, the first dilapidated house that we had when I was a baby.

Diana: A few years ago I went into a very old couple lived near me, and they had an oil lamp on the table, and this old chap was reading the paper and he said: 'Turn that there light down Mrs, that's enough to flare you!' and I looked and wondered what 'flare' meant. I never did find out. Does anyone here know what that meant?

Douglas: What that meant is if it flare up it could set fire to you or I should think it was up too bright.

(Group Session 6)

In each of these extracts, Diana's comments demonstrate that she has not discredited, denied or discounted the reality of the experiences she initially put forward regarding coming from a poor family. This was the reality of her early life, and a determining factor in much of what she has lived through. What changes in these later sessions is that her comments about poverty become an integrated feature of her total experience rather than an aspect of life determining a fixed view of her identity.

Diana's ability to relax her strict 'script' about her life and experience ultimately enables her to get full enjoyment from her participation in the group sessions. It is important to recognise the part she played in adapting her own reminiscence style, and to acknowledge that this was by no means an easy change for her. Her internal struggles with this change in her interactions reveal themselves in the contradictory phase through which she progressed during the second and third sessions. A significant factor in enabling her to participate more fully and with much greater enjoyment may well have been the non-judgemental acceptance expressed by the group – an approach I tried to model myself. The unquestioning acceptance of Diana's contradictory statements left the field open for her to continue her own journey of development without experiencing any external conflict or challenge from the rest of the group. While an approach to group facilitation and an understanding of the purposes of learning which focus on objectively verifiable facts may have led to more explicit guidance and perhaps even a direct challenge to contradictory

statements, the effect of such 'corrections' would most likely have been to force Diana to adopt a more defensive position whereby she might have held more firmly to her existing view of her experiences and identity. Thus, Diana's case illustrates how important a person-centred approach to learning can be to enabling change.

In her individual interview Diana speaks in a similar style to that of the early group sessions, but now incorporates an understanding that most aspects of life consist of subtle blends of good and bad, leading to a need to adapt to change as it occurs throughout life:

I have had it hard but it's a lot better now. We were a big family and I've got a lot of brothers and sisters and I think I am very lucky for my age. I am getting about, the Lord is looking after me; this is what I feel. I feel people are so kind. My neighbours are so kind: "If you need anything just call us".

Diana's reflective thinking about her life experiences, past and present, are evident here, as well as a need to continue developing the capacity to maintain a balanced view of the strengths and weaknesses of others. Nonetheless, on the whole she appears to have abandoned her earlier rhetoric of who she is and how she functions.

During the interview, Diana expressed a preference for reminiscing on a one-to-one basis rather than in a group. However, on analysing the memories shared whilst alone with me, compared to those discussed openly in the group sessions, she appears to have gone to more depth in group sessions, with a tendency to return to standard stories of the past when alone with me. The evidence for this lies in the repetition during the individual interview of the three stories previously identified as making up a substantial part of her reminiscence repertoire. At the same time, she avoided questions which probed for further details of these well-rehearsed stories, and had difficulty in answering questions about her experiences within the reminiscence groups. It is possible that Diana felt more supported to explore her self-concept and ways of expressing herself within a group context where everyone present is sharing memories and involved in equivalent personal development and learning processes. Therefore, as with Bill and Douglas, Diana's interview shed

minimal additional light on any conscious change or learning she had experienced within the group setting.

Case 5: Robert

Age-wise, Robert falls mid-range within the group, but a stroke had left him with speech difficulties which sometimes meant that he used words unintentionally, and was not always able to express himself clearly.

Observations of Robert during the group sessions and individual interview, suggested someone who was alert, capable and active in thinking about all that was being said, but who was unable to produce fluent speech. Therefore, as the majority of data gathered in this research to provide evidence of learning is based on the spoken word, insufficient evidence exists to argue the case for a marked change in Robert's perception of himself or others. What is worthy of comment, is that for other participants, the verbal contributions Robert made were a revelation, as in some cases this was the first time they had heard him speak. Even Bill, who had an existing friendship with Robert, made the following comment during his individual interview:

I don't know if you noticed but at one point Robert spoke an entire sentence and there wasn't a mistake. So I award him a certificate!

(Bill, Individual Interview)

Compared to his everyday interactions both within and outside the day centre, taking part in the reminiscence sessions may well have been a radically different experience for Robert. In a fast-moving world where few people have time or patience to wait for questions to be answered, the reminiscence group context allowed him sufficient time to formulate answers, because of a willingness on the part of those present to persevere in seeking to understand Robert's communications. For this to be possible, it was sometimes necessary to adopt a position of what might be termed 'sideways thinking' as Robert had a tendency to use words which had something to do with what he wanted to say, but would have been misleading if taken literally:

Tutor: Robert, where were you born?

Robert: *I was born in Africa, Lion, T – they pick you up and drop you off.*

Tutor: *I see – a place whose name is something to do with Africa, lions?*

Robert: *The bells [cupping his ear].*

Tutor: *Within the sound of the bells? The East End. Cockney? Would it be the Elephant and Castle area?*

Robert: *Yes, Elephant and Castle.*

Tutor: *That's great, well explained. Thank you, Robert. When did you move away from London?*

Robert: *When I obtained [indicates woman's shape].*

Tutor: *Something to do with getting married?*

Robert: *Yes, that's right. And I acquired to a Finnish lady.*

Tutor: *She'd been to 'finishing school'?*

Robert: *Who?*

Tutor: *Or was she from Finland?*

Robert: *Yes, that's right.*

(Group Session 1)

The key features of this interaction are the time and effort given by Robert to answering the questions as clearly as he can, combined with my application of the necessary patience with myself to understand what Robert is communicating. Thus, adopting what might be termed 'poetic awareness' enabled me to think through the relevance of imagery relating to Africa and apply this to Robert's additional statement about bells to reach an understanding that he had been born in the East End of London. Had his original statement been taken literally, an erroneous assumption could have been made that Robert was from Africa. Such an error would

have potentially devalued his contribution, frustrated him and obstructed future communication with him within the reminiscence group.

Another feature of the above interaction is a sense of my struggle to comprehend, which sometimes overshoots the mark, leading to a misinterpretation of his statement that he had 'acquired to a Finnish lady'. However, the outcome of the interaction between us is favourable, in that we reach a point of understanding. Observations of other group members during this interaction suggested that they started off feeling quite puzzled by the conversation, but soon reached a point of interest as Robert's statements were deciphered, and ultimately, their eyes were opened to the fact that Robert could communicate, which lay the foundation for all future interactions with him during the group, with other participants learning to take time to understand what he was saying. The adoption of this approach by all group members, turned out to be one of the most significant contributory factors to Robert's learning journey due to the fact that he became, for the first time since his stroke, a contributor to a group, rather than just an observer.

The rationale for introducing a drawing activity in Group Session 4 was to enable participants to explore alternative ways of expressing themselves. This was motivated partly through awareness that Robert might be able to communicate more through drawing than through speech. During the drawing activity, particular attention was paid to assisting him to identify activities which he had been involved in in the past. Through a combination of spoken and written words, alongside pictures and mime, Robert communicated that his interests included typing, shorthand, cleaning, cooking, playing the piano, writing stories, church social functions, playing cards, marbles, hoops, having a motorbike, and having a car – with the added detail that he had been the first person in his street to own a car. As this information was delivered to the group at the end of the activity, Robert was observed to adopt a more upright posture, suggesting a feeling of pride at his interests being communicated to the group at such length. It is difficult to imagine that someone with such a marked dysphasia had many opportunities to express so much of the core of his identity in this way. Diana echoed the responses of several

group members after this communication of Robert's lifelong interests, by exclaiming: "*Marvellous!*"

The individual interview with Robert led to little further insight into his experience within the reminiscence group, although he did attempt to communicate more personal memories which had not been touched on during the group sessions, such as the death of his only child. Unfortunately, communicating about something which had a profound emotional impact upon him exacerbated his difficulty in finding the words he wanted to express this experience. As a result, I was left feeling uncertain of the circumstances surrounding his child's death, and unable to do more than express empathy for what this must have been like for him. During the individual interview, Robert also expressed his dislike of coming to the day centre, saying that he came for his wife's sake, to give her a rest.

In Robert's case, there is considerable evidence that he enjoyed and benefitted from participating in the reminiscence sessions, and that other participants also benefitted from learning more about him than had previously been possible, which led to them altering their perceptions of him. Robert's presence and verbal interactions during this series of reminiscence group sessions, suggest that being able to take part in an activity was a breakthrough, potentially contributing to an altered self-image and view of his own potential. The patience, time and effort applied to understanding his communications, led to other participants learning that Robert had something to say and that behind the limitations imposed by the disabilities incurred through his stroke, lay an individual with a rich and meaningful past as well as something to offer to those who could take the time to slow their pace and alter their habitual modes of understanding. Robert learnt from the outset of the project that he had a place in the group and that the tutor and other participants wanted to give him the space to express himself and play as full a part as possible within the limits imposed by his disabilities.

Case 6: Teresa

Teresa has a tendency to dominate discussions with what could be termed well-rehearsed, standard stories from her past, which, like Douglas, she relates without significant eye contact, meaning that she is not always aware of the level of interest, or disinterest, shown by the rest of the group.

At times, Teresa appears determined to express her thoughts, regardless of the responses of others, leading to three participants who attended Group Session 1 withdrawing from the research because they did not want to listen to her. As a tutor, I was aware that I had a responsibility to make the group a safe space for all participants, where, while there may be challenges to face, enjoyment and growth were possible. My approach to Teresa involved asking her direct questions to emphasise that her memories were valued. Past experience in reminiscence work had told me that giving people time and attention can reduce their tendency to dominate. At the same time, I used body language, facial expressions and deliberate redirecting of the discussion to indicate when it was time for Teresa to round off the story she was telling and give others an opportunity to speak. While this approach was not always successful, especially in the first two group sessions, Teresa appeared to attain a greater degree of awareness about the way in which she communicated as the weeks passed.

While Douglas and Diana each have a small handful of well-rehearsed reminiscence stories which they repeat, especially during the early group sessions, and sometimes in their individual interviews, it gradually becomes clear that Teresa has a large number of such stories which are important to her, and which she tends to relate in great detail when the opportunity arises. The topics of these stories vary, with the most often repeated ones focusing on memories which involved discussions or activities with her father, who died when she was twelve years old. This raised questions, firstly about how the standard stories came to be developed, and secondly, what they represented for Teresa. Examples of two of these stories will serve to illustrate possible answers to these questions. The context of the first is a discussion about childhood games, during which participants were asked to mime a game they played as a child while others guessed what it was. After the group is

unable to decipher her mime, Teresa explains that she was miming playing a game of Ludo with her father:

I'll tell you what happened with me with that. My father used to play this. I must have been about ten, as my father died when I was about twelve. He died with bowel cancer, so I was ten. My brother was a year and a half younger than me. Father sat there. So what happened? Course, in them days you had a fire grate and a mantelpiece and a big mirror over the top. My father when he got away from his chair he'd walk along and his fags used to be on the corner of the mantelpiece. So, every time he walked, got his fags, I was looking back with my head like this, there was I with my thing [illustrates picking up a playing piece] pulling it up on there [the Ludo board]. 'Cause I was looking at the back of his head. Looking at the back of his head so's he couldn't see what I was doing, but I wasn't old enough to realize that he could see me in the big mirror.

(Group Session 2)

Teresa repeats this story in Group Session 7, and in her individual interview, adding further indications as she retells it, that one of the reasons this has become one of her well-rehearsed stories is that it was one of the events she discussed with her mother after her father's death:

He left it and I never got into trouble, but I said to my mother later, "Why didn't he tell me off?" My mother said "I don't know" but as the years went on she told me he always said "Whatever game you go with her she cheat on every bloody game. She cheat all the while!"

(Group Session 7)

There are other occasions when it becomes clear that Teresa often talked with her mother about things which had happened with her father during his lifetime, and

this is well illustrated in another account she gives three times, about an occasion when she got into trouble for drinking milk at school which had not been paid for:

So when the night time come and father come home from work, it was summer time, we used to play outside, but she had to see us: "You mustn't bugger off, you got to keep there". So he knocked on the window and of course I knew what it was all about. He said "Sit down on that chair. What's this about what I hear you've been having milk every day? The teacher said you know that it wasn't paid for". "I didn't know you had to pay, I didn't see no money", which I didn't. So he turned round and come up to me – he'd always touch your nose if you'd done something wrong. He said: "Don't you ever, and I mean ever, take anything which isn't yours. You'll have what you want but you must ask, you'll get it but you must ask". Then it was finished and bed time. I had my cup of cocoa and something to eat and off to bed. So when I lost my father, when I was a little older and the kids were out to work, my mother said to me: "Do you remember the milk at school Teresa?" and I said "Yes". "Well when you went to bed your father said – 'that was the bloody teacher's fault she should have look after the kids'". Which was right, wasn't it? Oh, talk about laugh, I laughed at it as I got older.

(Teresa, Individual Interview)

Some of the features of these two stories contain the same elements as several of Teresa's well-rehearsed stories. Firstly, her father features in most of the situations she recounts. Secondly, Teresa generally adds information from after the actual event, in the form of her mother's reflections on what happened, including things her father said at the time which Teresa didn't hear about until after his death. Lastly, Teresa tends to recount conversations with her parents word for word, and these verbatim accounts of conversations rarely alter between one telling of a story and the next. It is possible that she has learned a version of the events by repeating them, suggesting that in terms of memory, the account may no longer reflect an actual event which is re-lived with the telling of the story. Instead, the story itself has

become something separate from the original episodic memory - a version of a past event which has been generated through repeated telling and an acceptable version settled upon. Ultimately, it is very difficult to judge, even within our own memories, the extent to which an established version of an event and the actual event have merged with each other, so that individuals can no longer be certain how much they remember of the original occurrence, and how much they have generated either a watered-down or embellished version of what really happened. These issues are relevant and significant in a reminiscence group setting, where participants who repeat well-rehearsed stories, described here as 'standard stories', tend to use these accounts in an inflexible way, often in situations where they are uncertain of their role in the group. Thus, Douglas and Diana notably used standard accounts of past events more during the early group sessions, and it is only as they move into more spontaneous participation that they find new ways of expressing themselves and relating to others. Douglas and Teresa seem to have in common the fact that many of these standard stories have been repeatedly discussed with someone close to them.

Standard stories tend to be quite inflexible, often standing in the way of an individual being seen for who they really are, with all their qualities. They represent a public image, a tried and tested way of thinking and talking about the past which tends to put up rather than bring down barriers between people by keeping communication at a superficial level. Continuing to recount these long and detailed stories prevents Teresa from being fully 'seen' by other group members.

On the whole, Teresa maintains her position of relating to others in the reminiscence group through these well-rehearsed memories. However, in later group sessions, there are some occasions when she reveals more of the person underneath, and through instances of finding it difficult to relate unplanned-for recollections spontaneously and on a few occasions when she does access and share memories which she has not previously visited. Of the former, there are two ways in which she indicates the difficulty she has expressing herself in new ways. Firstly, she twice says that a physical impairment caused by arthritis presents her with difficulty in participating. The first of these takes place when invited to take part in a game of

'Cat's Cradle' to which Teresa initially responds: "*You turn it off don't you* [meaning turn it under]. *I don't know how to do it now. My hands aren't good 'cause I am full of arthritis*" (Group Session 2). As it turns out, Teresa's protestations can be interpreted as expressing self-doubt about joining in with an activity where she is not certain of her role, rather than the physical limitation preventing her from participating. This becomes evident when, having watched someone else have a go, she then went on to enjoy several minutes of Cat's Cradle, whilst the rest of the group talked about their memories of the game. Later in the same session, Teresa is invited to have a go at table-top marbles, and again expresses self-doubt about her ability to participate: "*Well, the thing is too light isn't it? My fingers are so, I can't feel the board*" (Group Session 2). Her reactions on both these occasions could easily have been accepted as a straightforward explanation of the difficulties caused by arthritis which prevented her participation. However, while not disputing the existence of the condition, the way was left open for Teresa to try the activities offered, which she successfully did, demonstrating that the principal barrier to full participation may have been lack of confidence, rather than physical impairment.

Another approach Teresa uses to deal with feelings of uncertainty about her role as she moves into areas of reminiscence which are both spontaneous and unexpected, is to express cynicism towards me or other group members. Thus, in Group Session 5, the end of the session approaches without any opportunities arising for Teresa to recount one of her usual stories. At a moment when Douglas has been sharing his memories of his courtship with his childhood sweetheart, Teresa interrupts, saying: "*Never run yourself down Douglas. Leave it to us!*" Given the depth of self-revelation that Douglas had reached at that moment, Teresa's comment suggests possible feelings of unease at another group member gaining attention, or perhaps unease at someone else sharing deep emotions about a life experience. Teresa's comment could even be interpreted as an attempt on her part to shut down any personal feelings which may have arisen to threaten her sense of stability and safety. Similarly, she may simply have made the comment in jest, in an attempt to lighten the mood.

During Group Session 6, Teresa is again taken into the realms of memories she is not used to recounting, and therefore has few opportunities to draw upon her standard

repertoire. At several points during the session, Teresa demonstrates some spontaneous reminiscence which she appears to enjoy, interspersed with moments of expressing cynicism or impatience towards my approach:

Tutor: So, what's this for? [Passing round a chamber pot]

Frank: Under the bed isn't it.

Bill: A guzzunder.

Clifford: So you didn't have to go downstairs to go to the toilet.

Teresa: In the middle of the night. She knows what that is!

Bill: A chamber pot.

Teresa: Mother wouldn't let you go downstairs.

Teresa's protestation that I knew what the chamber pot was, may suggest a temporary unease with joining in with the conversation in a spontaneous way. Alternatively, it is quite possible that she is annoyed about me staging a question to encourage conversation, when I already know the answer. It would be understandable if she found my tone patronizing in the context of perceiving herself as an intelligent woman having a conversation with another intelligent woman. As with the Cat's Cradle and table-top marbles, Teresa then continues to join in without dominating the discussion. It is in these glimpses of Teresa's potential unease with sharing spontaneous and unexpected memories on terms which are not her own, that her unfulfilled potential for participating in group work and interacting with her contemporaries can be presumed. It is possible, that had the research project involved more group sessions, Teresa would have become more comfortable with reminiscing in this way, overcoming her tendency to recount long and detailed recollections which came to hold little interest for other group members in the retelling.

The overall impression Teresa gave during the group sessions was of someone whose determination and inflexibility in recounting well-rehearsed stories, created difficulties in terms of group facilitation, as it often meant that the needs of other

participants were not easily met. Interestingly, during her individual interview, Teresa said that one of the reasons she had enjoyed and looked forward to the groups was because of being able to listen to and find out about other people. In addition, she revealed that after the sessions, she would often continue reminiscing by herself at home while looking at old photographs and that she had found the experience inspiring because of gaining understanding about others, leading to a sense of admiration for the way they overcame difficulties associated with the ageing process. During the interview, Teresa repeated four of her 'standard stories' in more depth than usual, adding details that she had been hesitant to share in the group, including the fact that she had needed treatment for addiction to prescription drugs in the past. She reflects: *"sometimes when you are in a group you have to be careful what you say. I am liable these days to talk a little bit over the mark"* (Teresa, Individual Interview).

Such comments made during her individual interview suggest that Teresa had greater awareness of herself and others than had been evident during the group sessions. She comments that one of the things taking place during reminiscence is: *"your thoughts in yourself"*, suggesting that when Teresa looked vacant and disengaged when she was not taking part in discussions, she was actually reflecting on her own memories and those of others. Again, these insights into Teresa's experience gained through the individual interview, added weight to the idea that given a longer research project and more reminiscence sessions, Teresa would have been likely to gain enough self-confidence to move away from repeating her standard stories, revealing more of the depth of feeling and reflection currently restricted to the realm of inner thought. An analysis of Teresa's contributions to group discussions, suggests a woman with enormous potential to learn in ways similar to those identified as occurring for Bill, Douglas and Diana, but who takes smaller steps in the direction of change than some other participants.

Case 7: Philip

The final individual case analysis concerns Philip, for whom the evidence of learning in relation to his participation in the reminiscence sessions is unclear. It subsequently emerged that Philip was approaching the end of his life, meaning that no individual interview took place as he was too unwell to attend the day centre in the weeks following the group sessions. Nonetheless, during the group sessions he attended Philip played an active part, contributing to the overall quality and depth of memories shared, and proving to be something of a catalyst in encouraging other participants to contribute to discussions. Philip had different life experiences from the other group participants, having had lifelong health problems, which had meant that he had never undertaken employment outside of a supported work environment. Nonetheless, he had been active in the community in a number of ways, having a great interest in local history and providing entertainment in local pubs and clubs, to raise money for charity.

On the whole, Philip contributes positively to a number of discussions, but occasionally has differences of opinion with other group members, which are not easily resolved:

Tutor: Does anyone have any favourite films from the past?

Robert: Only clips of films.

Philip: I can remember the old ones – Jesus of Nazareth.

Douglas: That's television.

Philip: No, that was film first of all.

Douglas: No, it's television. King of Kings was the one, Jesus of Nazareth filmed twice and I have seen them both... [Douglas proceeds to explain the different versions of these films].

Philip: That's where they forced him to carry the cross and they crucified him in the end, three of them in the

end. Carrying the cross, and a stranger came up and gave him a drink of water.

Tutor: A drink of sour wine vinegar, wasn't it?

Philip: A pain killer.

Tutor: I think that story was in a book before it was ever made into a film or seen on television.

Douglas: They all came from books, didn't they?

(Group Session 5)

In the above interaction, there are elements of miscommunication and lack of connection, as Douglas and Philip disagree without either of them appearing to try to understand the other's perspective. There is little compromise or clarification-seeking from either of them, just disagreement. Ironically, I probably complicate matters by attempting to diffuse the tension with humour, without being explicit in my meaning. My attempted humour appears to be missed by everyone, and the conversation moves swiftly on to other matters, during which Philip re-establishes himself as a participant with significant memories to contribute:

Philip: First time I went to Theatre De Lux was 'Rock around the clock' and they were dancing everywhere, even on the seats. Dancing up in the aisles, everywhere they were. The audience went mad.

Douglas: It started with the 'Black Board Jungle'. The original song was in that film. They brought the film out 'Rock around the clock' after that [...inaudible...] lots of kids were ripping up the blinking seats.

[Whole group spontaneously joins in singing 1 2 3 o'clock, 4 o'clock rock]

(Group Session 5)

Here, Philip has shown an ability to return from a controversial interchange, without being affected by feelings of resentment or embarrassment which could potentially arise where there is disagreement. It is encouraging, in terms of Philip holding his position in the group despite his physical frailty, that regardless of the outright disagreement between the two men, Philip is able to maintain full participation in the ensuing conversation about cinema and film.

During the group sessions, Philip interacted with all other participants, and demonstrated an interest in exploring past experience as a way of communicating in the present. As a relative newcomer at the day centre, he had no pre-existing friendships within the group, so these sessions offered him an opportunity to introduce himself and get to know other day centre members. However, on analysing his contributions to discussions, there is no clear evidence of learning. It can be argued that although there is uncertainty about his learning journey through reminiscence, this is a case of lack of sufficient evidence, rather than positive evidence of non-learning. Had Philip had the opportunity to participate in more group sessions, and had an individual interview taken place, the analysis of his participation may have reached different conclusions.

Summary

The seven case summaries provided give an indication of the potential of reminiscence as a route to and catalyst for learning, and these concepts will be further explored in the following chapter. It is clear that all participants engaged in group activities to the best of their ability, that on the whole they found the group interesting, and that for some, profound changes which could be framed as learning relevant to their stage of life, took place as a result of this engagement. Questions remain about how to understand the experience of these seven individuals taking part in collaborative reminiscence activities, as well as about the nature of the group dialectic experience. Furthermore, there is uncertainty about how long-lasting the effects of participation are likely to have been, although reflections on Group Session 8 in the following chapter give an indication that for some participants at least, the sense of empowerment and confidence to speak up, lasted some months.

5 – DISCUSSION OF LEARNING

Introduction

The purpose of this discussion is to explore insights gained through this research in more depth, in order to elicit greater understanding of the role of reminiscence as a potential route to and catalyst for learning in later life. The chapter is divided into four sections. Section I is a reflective exploration of the observed learning in the light of the four research questions of this study. This is followed by a discussion on social constructionism as a research approach and the value of the study in Sections II and III, ending with reflections on my own learning journey in Section IV.

Although learning took place in a group setting, and it is essential to consider the impact of this social context (Jarvis, 1987: 64), there is limited evidence that the collected individuals functioned as a group with a common purpose. For instance, to consider the group to have been a cohort (Wiesenberg, 2005: 113) would be inaccurate, as the goals of learning were individually determined, rather than shared, and although participants attended the sessions together, they took different journeys through learning and therefore each had a unique experience of the group. Neither is there much evidence of collaborative learning whereby a group of learners take responsibility for each other's learning: "mutually searching for understanding, solutions or meanings" (Lee, 2005: 118). Instead, while such understanding, solutions and meanings are achieved to various degrees by individual participants, mutuality occurs largely at the level of agreeing to attend a reminiscence session at a particular time each week, as part of a research study into learning in later life. Thus, while selected sub-sets of participants form mutually beneficial learning partnerships as part of this experience, partnerships which extend beyond the group sessions in some instances, the group as a whole does not appear to have formed an identity or a cohesive way of working in order to achieve shared learning goals. Thus, while throughout this thesis I refer to the 'group', this is largely in the sense of a number of individuals sharing the experience of my facilitation concurrently, with the group therefore being more of a 'learning set' rather than being intended to

suggest a cohort or collaborative learning experience. The term ‘learning set’ was chosen after reflecting on literature on action learning sets which suggests that membership of a ‘set’ consists of a collection of people or organisations “interested in sharing experiences and in exchanging inspirations” (Revans, 1982: 68) where “even sets with an apparent common purpose may choose different methods within the action learning spectrum for achieving that purpose” (Mumford, 1996: 3). Thus, reminiscence is utilised as the primary route to and catalyst for learning in this study, in a way which enables seven individuals to undertake learning journeys without any of them having the same starting point, means of navigation, or destination, yet travelling alongside each other in terms of the route taken and the fuel used to enable and facilitate that learning.

Section I – Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Four Research Questions

1.i Research Question 1:

Does learning take place through reminiscence groups for older people?

As outlined in the previous chapter, a range of examples of learning were observed within this group. During the actual fieldwork and for a considerable time following the observations and interviews, I held a view of learning as something which needed to be measurable in terms of conscious knowledge acquisition. Nonetheless, a growing desire for a more in-depth understanding of the changes I sensed had taken place in both the participants and in me, led to further exploration of the data. This enabled a new, more reflective awareness of the learning which had taken place. Increasingly, I moved away from a positivist stance whereby I was attempting to quantify change, to more a social constructionist understanding which made it possible for me to see and reflect upon changes which may have taken place internally, bringing about sometimes subtle changes in social interactions and more positive attitudes towards themselves and each other. In some cases, it is possible that these changes were so subtle or of a nature to make them difficult for those experiencing them to express.

In the presentation of the case summaries, the metaphor of the ‘learning journey’ is used, to indicate that individuals within the group start off in one place, and end up

in another, whilst travelling alongside each other. Changes attributable to individual and collective learning are evident in the overviews of each participant’s learning journey provided in Box 3 below.

Box 3: Overview of the Learning Journeys of Each Participant	
Douglas	Detailed recollection of local information, which gradually turns into more personal memory sharing and more reciprocal interactions with other participants. Expresses enjoyment and satisfaction regarding his participation. Attended sessions 3-6.
Bill	A marked qualitative change in interactions throughout the six sessions (all of which were attended), becoming more co-operative and constructive in his input. Evidence of changes in self-perception including increased security in his own identity.
Clifford	Takes a facilitative role within the group and achieves an increased level of self-revelation. Attended sessions 3-6 and took part in two individual interviews.
Diana	Early group participation reveals mostly autobiographical knowledge, which moves over time to an expression of autobiographical memories (Conway, 1995) and appears to involve some questioning of previously established assumptions about her own life story. Attended all group sessions and an individual interview.
Robert	Increased confidence communicating in a group setting, with evidence of an altered view of his own abilities as well as enjoyment of being able to reveal more of himself to other participants. Attended all group sessions and an individual interview.
Teresa	Enjoyed listening to and finding out more about other participants. Inspired by the ability of others to adapt to and cope with ageing bodies. Attended all group sessions and an individual interview.
Philip	Played an active part in the sessions attended and acted as a catalyst in stimulating discussions which involved all group members. Attended sessions 3, 4 and 6. No individual interview was possible due to Philip’s deteriorating health following the final group session.

The previous chapter identified a range of ways in which participants altered their interactions with each other as well as their approach to sharing memories during the course of the research field work. Such changes can be seen as evidence of learning because of the qualitative changes observed. However, the primary aim of this research was to explore whether and how learning takes place in reminiscence-based adult education groups, rather than to quantify the changes in terms of either the amount of learning or the impact of this on quality of life. The review of the existing literature on learning in later life which took place throughout my doctoral studies, focusing largely on learning through experience, transformed my own understanding of the potential depth and transformative nature of late-life learning experiences through the process of interpreting and re-interpreting the literature and the research data. In itself, this was an occurrence which demonstrates the transformative potential of learning through sustained reflection on experience, and highlights the central position of change, and openness to change, in the learning process.

The revisiting of existing ideas is a concept inherent to Freire's view of the potential of educational experiences to bring about change: "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Freire, 1970/1993: 53). In the case of a reminiscence-based learning group this potentially leads to transformed ideas about the meaning and significance of participants' life experiences, from the point of view of themselves and of those who hear an account of their stories.

One aspect of learning in later life explored in the literature review was the social context, with particular reference to ageism and the devaluing of older people within society. I would argue that by valuing participants' memories and respecting them as people in the present, the basic approach used within reminiscence confers value on participants (see also Housden, 2012), or rather, recognises the value they already have. Within this group of research participants, examples of learning which challenge the prevailing culture of ageism and devaluing of older people, include participants adopting altered perspectives regarding each other's abilities. For

example, the new understandings developed of Robert's ability to communicate and of Bill's personality and interests, as well as Teresa being encouraged to take a different approach to adapting to age-related disability through her observations of Diana. Thus, there are changes not only within individuals, such as the way they come to understand their place in the group, but also in the way they see each other.

These are sometimes small changes which could potentially make a big difference over time, but they are shifts in the perception of self and others, which could be seen as challenging ageist attitudes towards the self. Recognising yourself as something other than the stereotyped 'victim' of the relentless decline commonly associated with ageing, could in time, lead participants to believe that they are what they say they are, rather than what society says they are. Thus, they can try out new social roles within the group as Teresa and Douglas do, have identity restored as appears to happen with Bill, and be transformed from a passive observer into an active participant as becomes possible for Robert.

A feature which stands out in each of the case studies is the way in which some elements of learning take place because of the group experience, rather than purely because of reflecting on the past. Clifford, for instance, would not have had the opportunity to develop his facilitation skills in the absence of the group. Likewise, the central learning experiences of Bill, Diana and Douglas, and in a more subtle way, of Teresa, in skills relating to cooperation, communication and self-confidence would have been unlikely to have developed within the short lifespan of the project, had the group setting not been utilised. Even the beneficial experience of participation experienced by Robert and Philip were marked by their acceptance by and integration into the group.

There is also evidence within the group that learning took place for individuals within the framework of Tuckman's (1965) model of the life of a group. Thus, during the period of group 'forming' little evidence of learning is available, but as 'storming' and 'norming' were worked through in different ways by each participant, so 'performing' took place in a way which could be understood as self-development, and self-awareness – both of 'self' as an individual, and as part of a larger collective.

That is to say, that both the group, and individuals within the group, needed to proceed through each of these stages of group development to gain a sense of cohesiveness with each other, and within themselves, before learning, evidenced by changing self-concepts, improved relationships and enhanced interactions, could take place. Thus, as the group learnt to function as a whole, so individuals were able to undertake the learning tasks of most relevance to them in the context of their personal life experience.

In introducing the case studies, mention was made of the physical, social, emotional, spiritual and psychological differences between group members, which placed demands on me, as tutor and facilitator, in holding together interactions in such a way that the diverse needs of individuals would be met. Reflecting on the processes taking place within the group, it might now be added that part of the richness of the reminiscence learning experience has its roots in the diversity of backgrounds, experiences and cultures that exist within a group of people who, through a combination of exploring differences and similarities between memories, were able to make connections with each other, and within themselves, leading to increased knowledge, understanding and skills. Examples include increased knowledge of local cinemas gained through Douglas's reminiscences, increased understanding of each other (this is particularly seen in new understandings of Robert as someone who has something to contribute) and the development of confidence in the use of communications skills.

With the age differences across group members spanning over 30 years it could also be argued that this was a cross-generational group, with the oldest member born during the First World War, and the youngest born soon after World War Two, a major aspect of each participant's learning journey lay in their ability to find ways of communicating with others with whom, on a surface level, they had little in common.

I would therefore argue that the learning potential of reminiscence lies very much, although not exclusively, in the interactions between people which are made possible in a group setting. It is through these interactions that personhood is affirmed in a context where the group facilitator acts as a catalyst to enhance both interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships.

Reflecting on what seemed to be an emerging group identity, it is worth posing the question of whether it is the nature of the identity which has changed, rather than that there is an identity at all. From the start, all participants share some common ground in being members at a day centre, each of them deemed to be older people with varying degrees of physical frailty and dependence which necessitate their attendance at the centre. Through participation in the reminiscence group, they find more common ground in terms of their shared life experiences. By the end of the group sessions, a new identity is beginning to form which relates to the common bond of having participated in a group experience where their memories have been listened to, affirmed and recognised as having significance. I would therefore argue that a new consciousness emerges, held collectively by the group members, of having participated in something meaningful, as individuals and as a group.

1.ii Research Question 2:

If learning does take place, what is its nature, in terms of what is learnt?

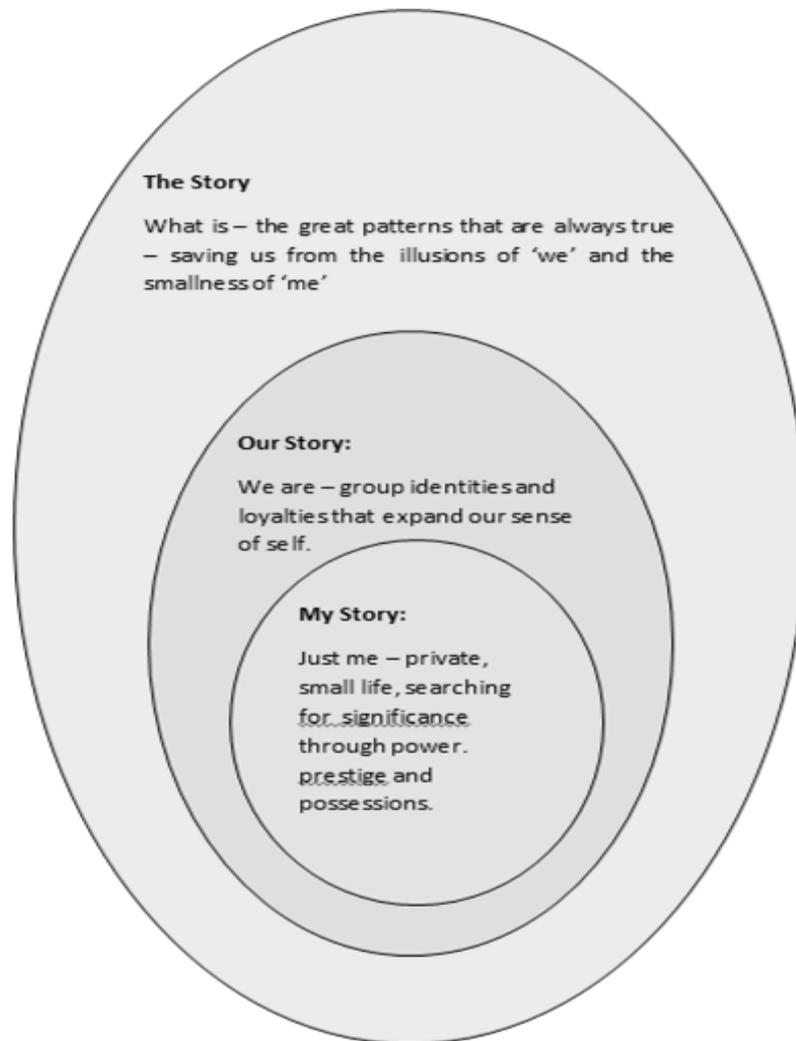
Having discussed the learning observed in individuals in this reminiscence group, a new model for understanding group learning experiences through reminiscence, and their potential impact on individuals and society, is put forward. This model depends on an understanding of the social, cultural and historical context in which learning takes place, and highlights the need for transforming the perspectives of older learners about the relevance and meaning of their life stories. As such, it can be seen as reflecting Jarvis' understanding of learning as "a driving force in human living, it is one of the major means by which we become ourselves, it is a stimulus enriching our lives and making us truly human" (2007: 132).

Salomon and Perkins (1998: 2), in an exploration of a range of understandings of social learning describe a "sociocultural conception of learning as a collective participatory process of active knowledge construction emphasising context, interaction, and situatedness". We can therefore view this research as seven case studies of individual learning, or from a different perspective, we can see one case study of a group (or set) involved in a learning process. However, this could equally be considered from a further perspective, as more than two ways of seeing the same

thing as individual and group learning are each dependent on the other: individual learning is embedded in and part of group learning; group learning would not take place in the same way without these particular seven individuals, and indeed, would not exist without them. Group learning and individual learning are not the same thing – but the particular learning which takes place in a reminiscence group for older people is unlikely to take place in a one-to-one setting, nor would one person reflecting alone, internally, achieve the same benefits. This is not to say that they would achieve no benefits, but that the outcomes would be different to those identified here, which could be argued to accrue in addition to the individual reflection which is stimulated as a result of group participation. An example is Teresa’s statement of her individual reflections on the group experience. Salomon and Perkins (1998), after exploring six different understandings of social learning, argue that “effective learning of any scope involves not one learning system but several functioning together in spirals of reciprocity” (*ibid*: 20) concluding that learning is most effective where the facilitator designs instruction with an awareness of the different facets of reciprocity in individual and social learning (*ibid*: 21).

Similarly, Rohr (2008: 22) describes a holistic understanding of life, depicted as a ‘Cosmic Egg’, which can be seen as embracing all aspects of human experience. The Cosmic Egg is depicted overleaf in Figure 1. Rohr argues that to “live only within the first dome of meaning, in the realm of private experience” risks being “boring and narcissistic after a while” (2008: 23), and poses the questions “How does this fit into a larger context?” and “What do I do with my experience for the sake of others and for the sake of the future?” (2008: 23). Equivalent risks exist in placing too much emphasis on the second dome of meaning, where group loyalty and identity may lead to people putting group values before their own views and often better judgement, potentially leading to individuals following paths they believe to be wrong, because remaining part of the group becomes more important than personal autonomy. The third dome of meaning provides a context within which the first two operate and are embedded, providing what could be regarded as universal rules of human nature which are always true, such as innate tendencies. An example might

be humanistic ideas regarding growth potential and the actualising tendency (Rogers, 1977b: 380).



**Figure 1: a healthy view of human experience includes the whole Cosmic Egg
(Rohr, 2008: 22)**

Rohr is not claiming that any one of these domes of meaning has greater significance than the others – all three are necessary to understanding the entirety of human experience: “the only way you dare move up to The Story and understand it with any depth is that you must walk through and take responsibility for *your personal* story and also for your group story” (Rohr, 2008: 24; italics in the original). Thus, listening to our own experience and recognising that this has taken place within, and been strongly influenced by, a wider group history and culture, is a necessary path to tread on the way to seeing the “full meaning, where nothing is eliminated and all is used” (Rohr, 2008: 24). While Rohr explores this model of cosmic meaning in the context

of spirituality and religion, combining his understanding of human experience with Illeris' model of the three dimensions of learning demonstrates the position of identity within the structure of learning (Figure 2), providing further insight into the experience of social learning taking place through reminiscence.

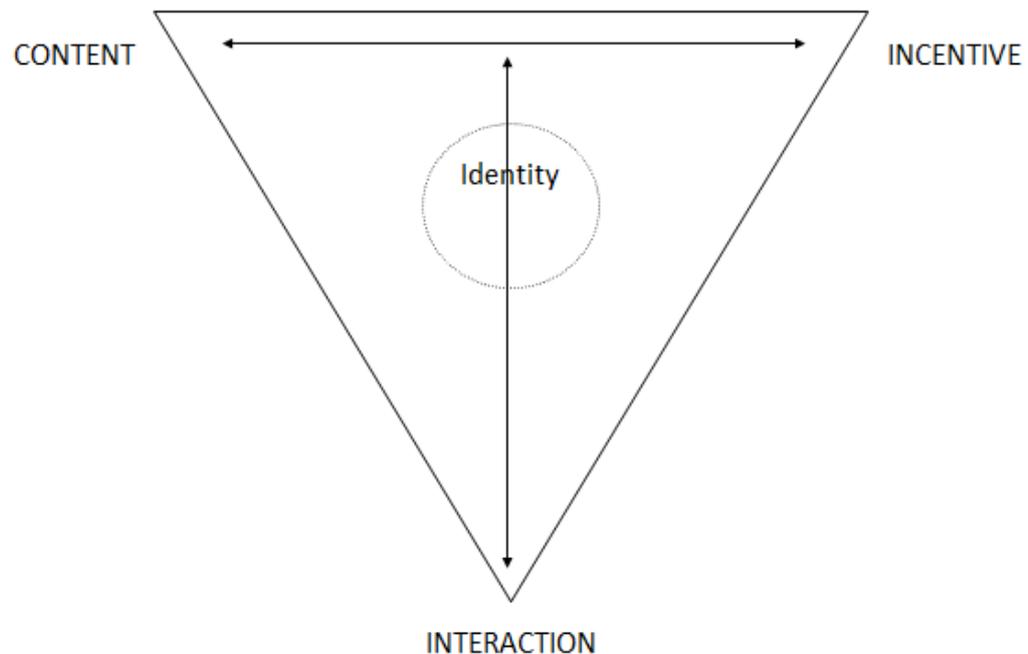


Figure 2: The Position of Identity in the Structure of Learning (Illeris, 2014: 69 – Figure 9.1)

Illeris comments that “all three dimensions are always integrated parts of the learning process and in practice do not exist as separate functions” (Illeris, 2002: 20). Similarly, the three levels of ‘Story’ outlined by Rohr (2008: 22) can be seen as integrated in that ‘My Story’ does not exist independently of ‘Our Story’ or ‘The Story’. Each is integrated as part of the others in generating an understanding of life experience. Adding Bluck and Alea’s (2002) understanding of the individual, social and temporal purposes of autobiographical memory generates a model of reminiscence which acknowledges the significance of time in learning processes using reminiscence as a catalyst, leading to outcomes with potential benefits for individuals and for wider society, as illustrated in Figure 3.

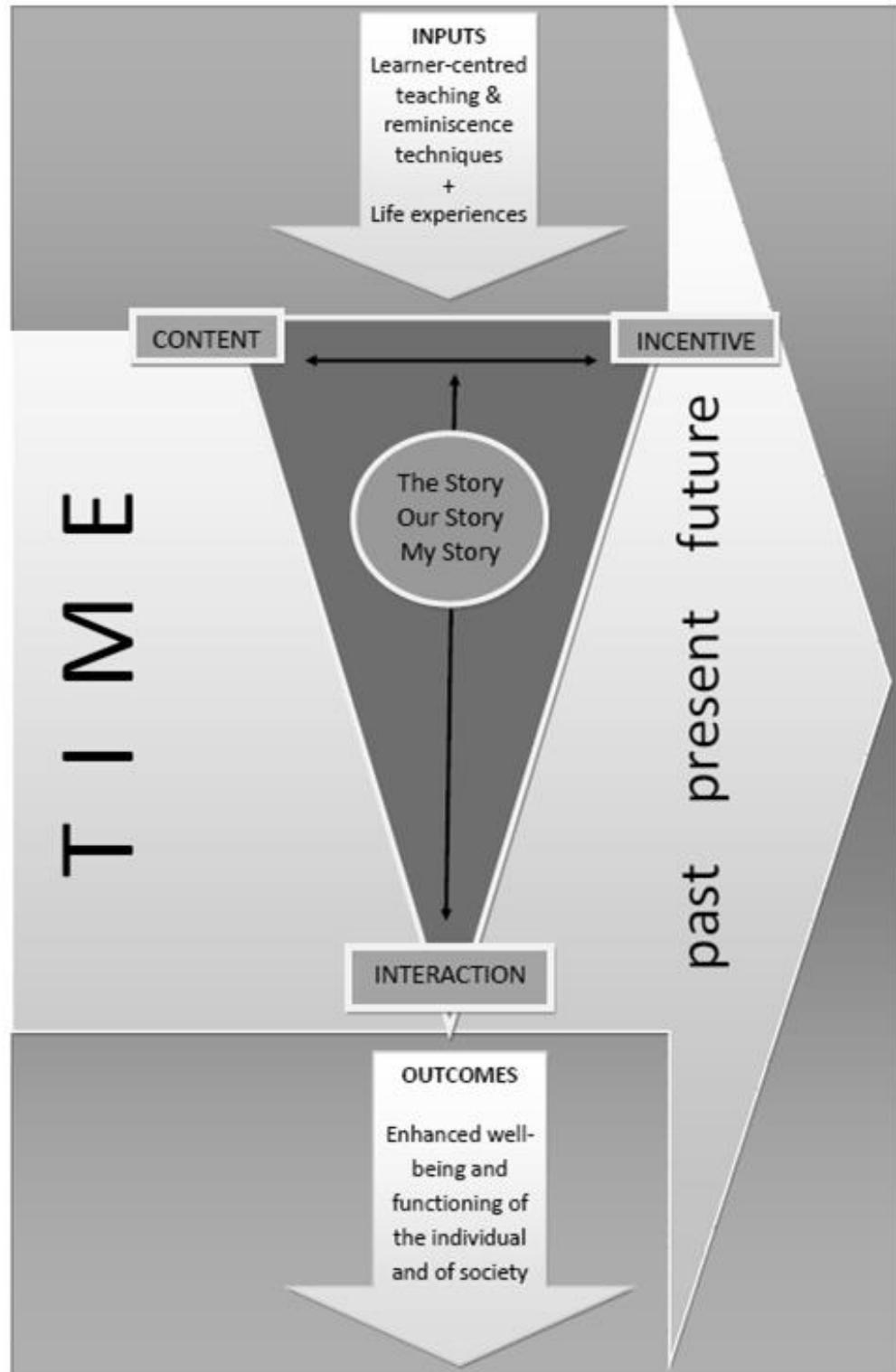


Figure 3: A Model of Transformative Social Group Learning in Reminiscence

This model draws heavily upon an understanding of the interactions between Illeris' three dimensions of learning and Rohr's three realms of 'Story', placed firmly in a temporal context. This creates nine interactive facets which come together in reminiscence to generate potential learning outcomes, namely: past, present and future (time); cognitive, emotional and social (dimensions of learning); and self, group and society (realms of experience). Identity might then be posited as being formed through the interaction between the three dimensions of learning, within the three realms of social being, and lived out across all three temporal elements. Thinking further about the temporal dimension, learning in a reminiscence group could thus be said to be happening in the present (experienced cognitively, socially and emotionally), whilst being about the past (experienced cognitively, socially and emotionally), in a way which may determine future attitudes and decisions (experienced cognitively, socially and emotionally). Similarly, what is happening in the reminiscence group in the present is influenced by and experienced in terms of My Story, Our Story and The Story; through reflecting on what happened in the past in My Story, Our Story and The Story; whilst also influencing what takes place in the future in My Story, Our Story and The Story.

Perceptions of the meaning of the three realms of Story and the three dimensions of learning are therefore central to understanding the learning which takes place through reminiscence. An interpretation of Rohr's Cosmic Egg in the context of the reminiscence sessions held as part of this research could be as follows. 'My Story' consists of the specific autobiographical memories of the individual participants, in all their diversity in socio-economic, cultural, geographical and historical content. This is the aspect of reminiscence through which any individual's conscious identity in relation to their life story is experienced. There may also be an awareness of the wider group to which they belong, whether this is a family, school, workplace, faith-based organisation or other community in the past or present. More specific to this research, would be an awareness of being a member of the reminiscence group facilitated for the purposes of the study. This is 'Our Story'. Correspondingly, 'The Story' could be framed as the wider social context, including prevailing views of older

people as contributing little of value to the well-being of society due to being comparatively unproductive pension recipients.

Each of these realms of Story is experienced cognitively, emotionally and socially – in that participants think, feel and take a perspective on their experiences. Talking about and sharing these experiences and their feelings about them then become the materials and content of the reminiscence session through which learning, development and growth take place.

Looking back at the model in Figure 3, the main inputs needed to enable this melting pot of memory and identity to come into being are my skills as a reminiscence group leader, the memories of participants, and a willingness on all our parts to bring these assets together. Potential outcomes of this process are discussed later and include benefits for individual participants and for wider society. In saying this I am aware that while some benefits appear to have resulted for participants in this study, benefits for wider society both immediately and over time, can only be imagined. Such benefits might include the economic effects of reduced health and social care costs as empowered older people retain a greater degree of independence and autonomy; improved intergenerational relationships, including older people taking on more extensive caring and mentoring roles with younger generations until much later in life; a reduction in social inequalities brought about by changing perceptions on the part of people of all ages of the road that lies ahead. While, with such a small-scale research project of short duration, these potential individual and societal benefits cannot be said to be evident, it is worth imagining the potential effects of wider-scale and longer-term input, if only as an academic exercise to imagine what might be possible were sufficient resources available.

Each of Mulligan's seven internal processes of experiential learning (1993: 56) can be identified as having occurred within the fieldwork reminiscence group. Examples include the many ways in which participants selected memories to share and demonstrated choice and self-direction in their participation (willing); drew upon and shared memories of personal experiences (remembering); actively participated in mime activities as a way of expressing memories (imagining); expressed

individually selected memories which had personal significance (feeling); described and listed cinemas and shops which had existed nearby in the past (reasoning); and learnt about themselves and each other by reflecting upon their own and each other's experiences (intuiting). Reminiscence-based learning activities are also conceptualised in this research as presenting an opportunity for participants to 'sense' alternative meanings in the interpretation of their life experiences.

Learning through reminiscence can be seen as taking place partly through re-interpreting experience. Specific examples include Diana's exploration of some of the ambiguities of her childhood, and Teresa's development of greater flexibility in the way she talks about her past. Bill can be seen reframing the difficulties he has faced following a stroke, while all participants, can be seen as reframing age-related illness and disability in their changed attitudes to Robert. This can be understood as a process of reinterpreting the meaning of present disabilities and difficulties, as much as reframing the past, for example, the changed approach to life at the day centre exhibited by Diana and Bill as they undertake a learning project together outside of the group. Similarly, the altered way in which Douglas talks about his life experiences, and shares memories with greater animation as he becomes more involved and confident in the group, suggests a new willingness to explore and express his own memories.

1.iii Research Question 3:

What are the potential outcomes of such learning for the individual and for society?

The extent to which these changes can be framed as learning, is perhaps, not as open to debate as the wider meaning and purpose of that learning. It might easily be conceded that the developments in interactional style, which suggest that participants have grown in confidence by recognising the value attributed to their life experiences, means a great deal to these individuals. Whether it means anything to those around them, or would be recognised as worthwhile learning by policy makers and funders, is more difficult to discern. In relation to theoretical debates about the processes and interrelatedness of formal, non-formal and informal learning (for example Rogers, 2014), reminiscence can be seen as usefully bringing

together lifelong informal learning in a non-formal approach to achieve personal development goals through structured activities.

One of the principal ways in which identity across the lifecourse is affirmed through reminiscence is in the celebration of lifetime achievements. While Philip, for instance, was not observed to learn in specific ways during the group sessions, there were occasions when his memories made a marked impression on others, and when admiration was expressed for some of his achievements which involved raising money for charity. Similarly, Bill is appreciated more as a person as he reveals more about his hobbies and in particular, his creative talents. Likewise, Robert's revelation of many of the activities engaged in during his lifetime and Diana's account of her culinary successes, provide opportunities to celebrate both achievements and individuality. For each participant, the link between autobiographical memory and identity is evident in some way. For Clifford, there appears to be a close association between the way he understands his life story and his sense of 'self', while Teresa, in becoming more flexible in the way she shares memories begins to experience her 'self' in new ways.

These stories of learning from their own and other people's memories, highlights the relevance of reminiscence as a route to learning about themselves. The processes of internal reflection and external expression of self-image are deeply entwined with each other. As each participant reflects on their own past in response to memorabilia and the tutor's questions, they are then able to express something of their identity to others in the way memories are selected and shared. The responses of others, and their own feelings about what they have said, interact and can then be further reflected upon, leading to new and exploratory ways of experiencing and expressing themselves. In Bill, for instance, we see someone whose life story narrative has been interrupted and his identity threatened through his stroke. The reminiscence group therefore presents him with an opportunity to regain a sense of who he is and how the present and the future, while in some sense fractured from his expected life-trajectory, are not irreconcilable with the person he has always perceived himself to be. The contributions he makes during the first group session can be conceptualised as his attempts to try out new ways of being Bill – an intelligent and perceptive man

who may be afraid of being seen as a 'stroke victim' rather than for himself. He can therefore be understood as having begun to regain his voice through participation in this reminiscence group. It is also conceivable that the group provided a context in which he could demonstrate that his intelligence and identity are intact, despite his body no longer functioning as it once did.

Key concepts elicited from the literature on learning in later life included the desirability of empowering participants and the debate over differences in the cognitive functioning of older people, epitomised in their preferred use of crystallised intelligence over fluid intelligence. Awareness of this led to the use of learning materials which were meaningful to individuals. Reflecting on learning leading to empowerment, this part of the discussion will explore ways in which such learning opportunities, particularly in later life, needs to be focused on the individual life stories of participants and utilise material of personal relevance.

Choice was promoted at many points during the group sessions, specifically in terms of participants identifying topics they would like to discuss. While I planned learning activities around these chosen themes, participants always had choice about what to say, how far to disclose personal information and whether to actively engage with each topic at all. Different kinds of choices also emerged as participants became more comfortable in the group and became increasingly respectful of the needs of others.

Theme-specific multi-sensory memorabilia were used as a way of eliciting memories. This meant that those with visual impairments could be fully involved, while the use of creative activities such as mime and drawing made use of alternatives to speech as routes to communication. This ensured that all group members had the opportunity to become involved, and highlights the inclusive nature of reminiscence which makes it particularly relevant when working with older people with a range of physical and sensory impairments.

An example of theme-specific memorabilia being used to involve an individual is the use of cinema-related materials to trigger Douglas' memories. These included photos of film stars from the 1950s and recordings of theme tunes from films and radio

programmes of the 1940s which triggered a wealth of memories of both cinema-going and aspects of home life which had been structured around particular radio programmes. This gave Douglas ground on which he could talk with authority, which led to more in-depth participation and greater involvement with the group.

Another aspect of empowerment was the way in which Diana became more comfortable with the ambiguities and balance between positive and negative aspects of her life. The reminiscence group provided a platform for her to explore alternative ways of viewing her life experience and to try out new ways of recounting her memories. This can be framed as a positive and empowering learning experience as it could potentially equip her to face the remainder of her life with a stronger and broader repertoire for self-expression.

Clifford's involvement in the group presents a less clear picture of learning leading to empowerment. While he has an opportunity to use his natural facilitative skills, and to engage in meaningful reflection on his life experiences and worldview, there is a sense in which Clifford may have experienced the group as disempowering, and perhaps frustrating, due to some of his memories and attempts at leading the group not being picked up by other participants.

Issues surrounding the empowerment-enhancing features of learning could be seen as problematic in a number of ways. These include ambiguity around the concept of 'power' as something which one person can give to another, and the multi-faceted nature of power relationships between me and the participants. To what extent choices are real, or imagined, remains uncertain. It is me who makes the choice to give them choices about participation and discussion topics, and I do so partly because I know that this will better achieve my purposes of generating meaningful and in-depth discussion. As group facilitator, my motivation for doing so can be seen as purely altruistic in terms of wanting to enable participants to have an enjoyable experience entirely for their own benefits. However, the reality is that the more in-depth and involved their participation, and the more they get from participating, the more likely it is that I will be able to construct a thesis around my observations. Such questions, although not unusual in research projects, are pertinent to understanding

the potential limits of learning for empowerment. Nonetheless, I would argue that were the participants to develop individual or collective voices which subsequently outweighed my own voice, their learning experiences might truly be said to have been empowering. Interestingly, one of the main sources of evidence that acquiring the ability to be heard, to have a voice, extends beyond the reminiscence group and my facilitation is seen in Group Session 8. One of the reasons why little data relating to the benefits of learning was collected in this session was because much of the time was spent discussing something taking place at the day centre which they wanted to change. During this discussion I was clearly not in control, and participants were sure enough that they had a voice to override my attempts to bring them back to fulfilling the purpose of the session from my perspective. This in itself is indicative of a new level of empowerment which may be attributed to the reminiscence-based learning experiences in which they have taken part together, as now collectively they have sufficient voice to determine the content of discussions, regardless of my agenda.

1.iv Research Question 4:

What are the potential benefits to both individuals and society, of learning in later life through reminiscence?

In explaining ways in which the purposes of learning in later life are understood in this group, consideration will be given to how participants might be seen to have benefitted from taking part. Issues of power will also be revisited, and questions of motivation considered.

On a simple level, participants were motivated to take part because of the enjoyment they gained from being part of the group. Throughout all eight group sessions there was an opportunity for everyone to take centre stage at some point, and in the individual interviews all participants reported enjoying the sessions. There were also clear signs of enjoyment at the time, such as increasingly animated discussions, responsiveness to others, engagement and laughter.

One question which arises in considering the purposes achieved through participation was what the intentions of the participants were when they joined the group and whether motivation to continue attending was different to the original

perceived purpose. Some participants may have wanted a change of scene from the main lounge where similar activities took place each afternoon. Others may have recognised that it was an effective way of reducing boredom, while some may have wanted to take part in a research project which might have been perceived as prestigious. Others may have seen an opportunity for getting more individual attention than was possible in the routine activities at the day centre, while some may have known from past experience that they enjoyed reminiscing and so wanted to make the most of an opportunity to share and listen to memories.

Part of the purpose of participating is likely to have been a desire to learn, as the information provided about the group sessions outlined the research as exploring learning as it takes place in a reminiscence group setting. Examples of learning observed during the fieldwork help to clarify the benefits of participation. These include the following:

- Participants listened to each other more, gained confidence in speaking out in the group and in asking questions of one another, rather than depending on the tutor. Examples include Teresa's reflective listening and Douglas' increased engagement with other group members.
- Participants developed their knowledge about the local area in the past through each person contributing their understanding of local and social history, as well as reviewing and re-evaluating national and international events which they all lived through, leading to a better understanding of the past. This included discussions around the R101 airship, several discussions around the function and use of specific items of memorabilia and clarification about details of local cinemas which had since closed down.
- Existing knowledge and understanding of past events, experiences and skills were affirmed for participants through discussions whereby they described their own expertise in particular areas (for example Bill's knowledge of copper sculpting) or reached agreement after negotiation about shared experiences (such as what oil lamp wicks were like).

- Participants developed relationships with each other as they learned more about each other, discovering life experiences and interests in common. Examples include discussions around collecting cigarette cards and engaging in sports at school which involved each participant in a different way.
- Some participants learned more about themselves, and the value of their lifetime achievements, thus affirming identity and building self-esteem. This was evident in Bill's regaining confidence in himself as a professional and creative person rather than just someone who had experienced a stroke, in Clifford's revelation and exploration of his lifelong worldview, and in Diana's increasing confidence in moving away from a rigid way of thinking about her life experiences.
- Learning took place about how to operate effectively in a group setting. For instance, levels of cooperation and collaborative working increased as the sessions progressed. Examples include the way in which Douglas moves comfortably into taking part in whole group discussions, Clifford uses questions to involve other group members and guide discussions, and in the way Bill chooses not to argue a point over the timing of the Dick Barton show.
- Some individuals were inspired by others as they recognised how effectively they had adapted to and responded to illness and disability, thus giving others hope for a better future. Teresa's open admiration of Diana's ability to cope with health changes which led to decreased mobility, and the whole group's experience of better understanding Robert's communication, helped foster mutual encouragement about what might lie ahead.
- Participants grew in their understanding of people of different socioeconomic backgrounds and from a range of age cohorts. With the age-range of participants being spread over almost thirty years, there was a wide range of experience in terms of the national events through which individuals had lived. Clifford and Diana, the oldest group members, had both experienced poverty at a greater level than, for example, Bill and Robert, who had been able to take advantage of more flexible social mobility in the post war era.

- Renewed confidence and competence was experienced in communication and in talking about practical skills. Old skills were revisited through participants sharing their knowledge of particular occupational roles and interests. This was seen most clearly in Clifford's explanation of some of his tasks as a butcher's assistant and in Diana's explanations of some of her household and culinary skills.
- Confidence was developed as participants tried out new activities such as mime and drawing. This was particularly important for Robert, who discovered a relatively effective means of communication, and for Teresa and Diana who enjoyed using mime as a way of recounting childhood memories.
- Some participants engaged in learning outside the group, which was directly inspired by group discussions. Thus, Diana brought in newspaper cuttings relating to the R101, Bill began to have discussions with his wife which were an extension of those which took place in the group, and Bill and Diana together undertook research into Norfolk and Suffolk barns.
- Participants learnt that they were of value and that their life stories were of interest to me, and to other group members. This led Diana to bring along some watercolour paintings she had completed some years earlier, and Teresa and Philip to bring in a range of holiday photos, each of them wanting to reveal more of themselves to other participants through these items.

The bio-psycho-social-emotional purposes of learning discussed by Lowy and O'Connor (1986) are evident in the above examples, with benefits ranging from becoming more physically active and socially engaged, to participants exploring and developing their emotional and psychological responses to their own life stories. Central to an understanding of the contribution of reminiscence-based adult education groups for older adults in facilitating learning, is the concept of achievement of coherence and satisfaction with the entire life course as the primary learning task of later life (Erikson, 1959, 1963 and 1982 cited by Wong, 1995). The learning journeys described in Chapter 4 might be considered to be not only legitimate, but essential journeys for every older person to take in some form. The

journeys described differ for each participant, and individualised understandings of the meanings and effects of learning are inherent in reminiscence.

While multiple learning-related purposes of participation are therefore suggested from observation of these sessions, questions about the extent of the benefits of participation also arise. Equally, there are some things which people would not want to learn or acknowledge about their own life experiences, and which it may be emotionally challenging to consider. Furthermore, it was my perception that had the reminiscence sessions gone on for a few more weeks, Teresa and Diana, may have gained considerably more confidence. Glendenning stated that “education is not a neutral exercise and self-evidently good for all people” (2002: 22). We might therefore question whether participation in these sessions was experienced as universally and exclusively beneficial. The irritation expressed by other participants at Douglas’ and Teresa’s communication styles in the earlier sessions suggest that there were elements of participating which were not enjoyed by everyone. Similarly, Clifford seems to have experienced some disappointment at other group members not sharing, or being interested in, some of his memories. While the evidence leans heavily towards the benefits outweighing the frustrations of participation, a sensitivity concerning the possibility of me holding a perceived position of power within the group, causes me to question my own understanding. There is a possibility that I perceive participants as benefitting, because that is what I want to see. Similarly, participants are likely to have been aware that I wanted to them to benefit and were certainly aware that I was interested in their learning experiences within the group, and may therefore have told me what I wanted to hear. It is therefore possible that I remained unaware of some of the struggles participants experienced, or even that they continued to attend and participate out of a kindness or sense of obligation to me, either as a researcher or as a person. These are, in some ways, false concerns as all adult education learning groups are attended voluntarily, and so it is probable that there was little more sense of obligation to me than is experienced by all participants in adult learning who develop a relationship with their tutor over time.

Nonetheless, as I am taking the position here that there were benefits to participation, this raises the question of who decides whether participants are benefitting and whether learning has taken place. While each participant was able to identify aspects of participation which they enjoyed, and might therefore be seen as benefitting in some way from participating, they each had varying degrees of difficulty when it came to pinning down how they had learnt. This was likely to have been because of our differing understandings of learning, such that they associated learning with the more formal acquisition of knowledge, while I frame it more in terms of psycho-social-emotional development. However, I was unable to make this clear to participants, largely because of my changing understandings of learning following the fieldwork. Therefore while adopting the position that each person had a purpose in participating, I also acknowledge that there are likely to be both benefits and risks of participation which remain unexplored.

Each participant is seen as a person in a new way and can thus be affirmed by me and the group in this self-revelation. Robert is able to demonstrate his intelligence and reveal some of his life story through a combination of drawing, mime and short phrases. Diana gains sufficient confidence to begin to explore some of the ambiguities of her own life – to explore who she is as a person, and all that that may mean in the past, present and future. Teresa begins to reveal her potential for expanding her repertoire, and therefore her opportunities for self-development and social engagement in the future, as she moves beyond well-rehearsed stories and tries out new roles.

Moody describes one of the purposes of learning in later life as being “To repair the past and prepare for the future by living in the present” (1985: 34). In some ways, this can be related to adjustment to acquired age-related disabilities. This is most pertinent in Bill’s case. With his lifelong professional and personal identity being threatened by a stroke, Bill appears to use his participation in the group as an opportunity to re-acknowledge, and have affirmed, who he is, what he has achieved during his lifetime, and what he is still capable of achieving. He can be seen to explore and rediscover confidence in his own voice, and the legitimacy of his concerns, but also of his role as a team player. Therefore, Bill appears to discover through the group

that his disabilities and subsequent difficulties don't define him as a person, or as a man. Rather, he gains respect as a rounded person who is seen as interesting by other participants.

In a different way, Clifford also discovers that he has a voice through his participation in the group, and this is an important part of him exploring and coming some way to expressing the anger he has felt about social injustices which limited the expression of his potential throughout his life. In his reflections on his life experiences, Clifford could be seen as moving towards a place of some resolution with the past, which in turn reveals who he is in the present. He reveals an identity during the group sessions and individual interviews which might have been completely unexpected by people who had known him in his youth, to whom, knowing his expected place in the social order, he is unlikely to have revealed his true feelings. Participation in reminiscence provides Clifford with the opportunity to reveal who he is as a person in a way which would have been much more difficult in earlier life, or perhaps, in another social context.

Section II – Reflections on Social Constructionism

An understanding and critique of the social constructionist approach to research and its relevance to this study are particularly pertinent in discussing the quality and depth of this research. Constructionist studies are concerned with “how to most valuably or beneficially conceptualize” relationships and events in the world (Weinberg, 2008: 15). Constructionism is of particular relevance to understanding the learning taking place within the setting of a reminiscence group because it discourages fatalistic thinking about the world, challenging the idea that aspects of our existence, such as social withdrawal and decline in the Fourth Age of life, are inevitable. Similarly, the approach can usefully be used to reconsider ideas about the stage of life at which learning and education are of most importance and bring maximum benefit to society:

The ritual historical positioning of humans in relation to cultural objects and stories that we both make and are made over by – this, perhaps, is the elementary form of an effective social construction. This elementary form casts a social circle of believability around artificially constructed accounts of the world.

(Pfohl, 2008: 645-6)

Wortham and Jackson explore the ways in which accepted conceptualisations of the learning process and the subject matter, as well as of the identities and roles of facilitators and participants, are constructs which lead to uncritical thinking about the “social structures produced and reproduced” in educational settings (2008: 107), recognising the role of social, cultural, interactional and psychological mechanisms in maintaining the status quo. Pfohl recognises how “social consensus and common sense” can be distortions of reality (2008: 657) which maintain social inequalities and injustices. Such ideas relate closely to Friere’s work (1970/1993) on the role of education in liberating oppressed peoples.

Despite the social constructionist challenge to the uncritical acceptance of established social norms, Wortham and Jackson (2008: 108) assume that some stable aspects of the social world do exist, namely, the object being constructed, the mechanism of construction and the time during which these occur within the experience of learning. Within this project, these stable elements equate to the narratives within which learning takes place, the social interactions between participants and the recognition of the need for sessions to take place at a particular time, and within a temporal context. Of particular concern to constructionist researchers is a differentiation between what is taking place and how it is taking place (for example Gubrium and Holstein, 2008: 6; Wortham and Jackson, 2008: 108). The mechanisms for learning within a reminiscence-based adult education group include the interactions between participants, the facilitative role of the reminiscence tutor, established reminiscence practices such as the use of creative activities and multi-sensory triggers, and established social positioning within group work which give participants confidence that the leader will provide a structure and

activities which will enable the group to function well. Aspects of what is being constructed through these mechanisms include the learners' concepts of me and mine of them, as well as their self-concepts, and my understanding of my role as tutor as well as my understanding of reminiscence processes. All these factors contributing to concepts of how and what is constructed within reminiscence-based learning activities takes place within previously established objects of construction, such as those relating to society-wide images of old age and disability, ideas about learning and about who reminisces and why, and my understanding of the roles of both reminiscence tutor and researcher. In taking a social constructionist approach to understanding the learning and change taking place within participants during these sessions, it becomes clear that each participant (including me as the researcher) came to the group with preconceived ideas about what was involved in reminiscence-based learning activities. My recollection of the fieldwork sessions combined with participants' statements about their experiences within the group, suggest that there was a shared expectation that the main focus would be on the actual memories shared, rather than on the social processes involved in and around that sharing. As previously described, my understanding of the reminiscence process altered in retrospect through careful analysis of group interactions and consideration of the changes identified in interactional style of individuals, leading to an understanding of reminiscence as a powerful tool for learning in later life which presents an unobtrusive route to encouraging participants to challenge their own assumptions about themselves, as well as their conception of their own lives in the past, present and future.

Within this research, three principle layers of construction can be seen to exist. Firstly, each participant has constructed a narrative around their own experiences as a way of generating meaning and promoting self-understanding: "storytellers not only tell stories, they do things with them" (Holstein and Gubrium, 2013: 270). We therefore cannot be certain of the extent to which the memories recounted within the research setting consist of objectively verifiable facts or accounts of events to which others would readily concur. Secondly, I, as the researcher, in carrying out an increasingly in-depth analysis of the interactions between participants, including the

changing styles of reminiscence used by each person, construct my own narrative about what is happening within and between participants as they learn through reminiscence-based activities. Lastly, there are a number of society-wide constructions which have influenced the existence and content of this study. These include my acceptance of and understanding of the role of a tutor employed by the local council to facilitate learning experiences for older adults, alongside the existence of a social care system which provides day services for older people within which they can take part in specially designed educational programmes, in addition to dominant social attitudes towards older people and perspectives on old age which led me and my employers to believe that I was able to provide suitable and relevant learning activities for people moving towards the end of life in a way which promotes their well-being.

Section III – Reflections on the Value of this Study

The question of the relevance of the findings beyond the specific study applies across a wide range of research into the effectiveness of reminiscence-based activities, not only in education, but also in health and social care practice, due to a lack of consistency in reminiscence techniques used between studies. For instance, in reviewing the literature on the use of reminiscence to promote well-being, some studies describe using tangible artefacts and memorabilia as a way of stimulating conversation, which has similarities with the approach taken in this study. Wang (2004), for instance, used sounds and photos, while Chao et al (2006) encouraged participants to use personal memorabilia to assist the sharing of memories. Jones (2003) describes the use of photos, scrapbooks and personal memorabilia in an approach adapted to the interests of individuals. However, the structured approach used in a study by Zauszniewski *et al.* (2004) limited participants to discussing photographs provided by the group facilitator, which risks being inflexible in allowing individuals to explore the memories which are most important to them.

Issues relating to the trustworthiness of data gathered through the groups and interviews are made more complex by my changing perspective on possible social constructionist understandings of educational and interactional processes taking

place through reminiscence which evolved throughout the duration of the study. Thus, a starting position which included an understanding of how each person's unique perspective on and interpretation of the meaning of their life experiences will influence the way in which they recount events, which creates a potential for learning to take place through establishing consensus through dialogue, moved over time, through more in-depth analysis of the interactions taking place, to a greater awareness of the processes involved in reminiscence-based learning, whereby interactional factors became more important to understanding the 'how' of learning through reminiscence, than the actual material discussed. This led me from an early stance of appreciating how knowledge and skills could be shared and developed through recounting memories, to a conceptual model of reminiscence-based learning which incorporates different realms of the human story, a range of dimensions of learning, and time (past, present and future) as the context within which life experience becomes a catalyst for learning when combined with facilitative features such as person-centred teaching and multi-sensory reminiscence techniques.

In addition to the complexity of my changing perspective on the research data which resulted in reduced opportunities for respondent validation with participants so close to the end of life, there were also problematic issues relating to participants' understandings of learning, research and reminiscence which impacted more upon the data gathered through the individual interviews than on the group sessions. Due to my determination to carry out ethically sound research which would promote the well-being of participants by providing a positive and enjoyable experience, the interview data did not reach the expected and hoped-for depth in capturing participants' own views on their learning experiences. Thus, while each participant was able to recount aspects of the reminiscence groups which they had enjoyed and benefitted from, they were less coherent when it came to explaining what and how they had learnt from the experience. As a result, the eighth group session which took place a few weeks after the last interview in the spring of 2011, focused largely on how participants had valued taking part because of the effects it had on their well-being, rather than a clear focus on the experience of learning. While it can therefore

be said that the benefits of learning accrued through participation, claiming that participants were aware of changes taking place within them, or of what or how they were learning, is more problematic. Such an occurrence is not without precedent as adult learning literature suggests that unless techniques are used to increase awareness of learning, it can remain unconscious. Rogers, for example, describes how adults engaged in acquisition learning may not be conscious of the learning taking place as they focus on the task in hand, resulting in difficulty expressing what has been learnt: "Because they do not know that they have the knowledge, because it is unconscious knowledge, the generalisability of what is learned is not recognised" (Rogers, 2003: 34). In addition, it would be fair to say that the majority of participants' life experiences had not exposed them to a high level of education, which suggests the possibility that expecting them to articulate their own experience of learning was an unusual and excessive demand, for which they may not have been equipped with the necessary vocabulary or concepts of learning. Mason, for instance, (2002: 193) argues that research participants may not understand interpretations of their experiences due to the use of technical language and complex concepts. It might therefore have been opportune that my more in-depth constructionist interpretation of the learning which took place in this reminiscence group came at a later time, as involving learners in validating learning taking place in more than the cognitive dimension may have been experienced, by them, as confusing. This does, however, raise questions regarding how, in a time-limited study with older people moving towards the end of life, it would be possible to validate more complex findings. While discussing a short, plain-language summary with participants would seem to offer a viable approach, it is also possible that simplifying the findings of this study would necessitate reducing them to the point of distortion, therefore invalidating this approach to validation. Furthermore, in a study which centres on the processes involved in the subjective interpretation of experience, maintaining any certainty that participants would consistently hold an opinion on their learning experience would be difficult to justify. Instead, it might be necessary to accept "a decentring of the self away from the notion of a coherent 'authentic' self and towards the notions of 'multiple subjectivities', 'multiple lifeworlds' or 'multiple layers' to everyone's identity" (Tennant, 2006: 20) – which is the stance

taken in this discussion in attempting to recognise the fluctuating nature of interpretations of personal experience.

Despite these difficulties over respondent validation of the more in-depth findings, the research has substantial integrity as a constructionist exploration of the learning processes taking place within this reminiscence group with this particular group of people at this specific time. This, however, raises questions around the generalisability of the findings and whether the model of transformative social learning in reminiscence outlined here would apply with another group of people, in a different care setting, at another time. Bathmaker regards the specificity of the detailed analysis of a time limited group experience as a strength, rather than a limitation: “An essential aspect of data relating to the singular and particular rather than to large samples and statistical generalisability [is that they] reveal ambiguity rather than tidy it away” (2010: 2). This idea is essential to understanding the findings of this research as a great deal of emphasis is placed on the individual approach to and experience of sharing memories, as well as to the differing quality and nature of each learning journey. However, this poses difficulties not only in regard to transferring the findings to other groups of older people in diverse settings. It also suggests the possibility of a question mark hanging over the representation of participants and the truth of what was experienced and observed. Such issues are explored by a number of authors in discussions of the validity and believability of qualitative research findings, with Kincheloe (1997) exploring issues of power in relation to representation, Wolcott (1994) presenting a sustained argument on the transformation of data to suit the researcher’s purposes, and Clough (2002) exploring similar issues around the potential of researchers to distort participants’ narratives to make the point they wish to convey. Atkinson, in discussing the presentation of data obtained through life-story interviews confirms the subjective nature of interpretations of reality where meaning and validity “may be different for the one who has told it than for the one recording it” (Atkinson, 1998: 58).

Given the complexities relating to the verifiability of my interpretations of what participants experienced in recounting personal memories, which had themselves been subject to interpretation, it may seem questionable whether the findings of this

study have a useful role to play in influencing policy and practice in late life learning at a local, national or international level. At the simplest level, it can be argued that as each of the participants demonstrated and expressed enjoyment of the reminiscence-based learning activities, it is highly likely that such opportunities can be reliably used as a way of promoting well-being in later life, as a way of maintaining communication skills vital to ensuring high quality person-centred care, as well as in preventing and reducing social isolation which has been identified as leading to increased morbidity and use of health and social care services amongst older people (Lupien and Wan, 2005: 91-92). Improvement in general well-being is an outcome of participation in informal learning activities which is widely accepted as making participation worthwhile. However, to take this argument to a deeper level, if the interpretation presented here of altered perceptions of the meaning and value of personal experience across the lifespan which appeared to occur in individual participants is in any degree correct, it is certainly worth pursuing reminiscence as an approach to learning in later life, because of its potential to improve life satisfaction. Lastly, a possible role for reminiscence-based learning activities in encouraging participants to transform their perspective on their own lives through the past, in the present, and looking into the future, would be a powerful weapon against ageist assumptions about older people being a burden to society, which in turn would have potential to bring about better standards of provision across a range of health, social, cultural and educational services, as the older person emerges as just that – a person.

Section IV – Reflections on my Learning Journey

At the outset of this research journey I had a sense of myself as a competent reminiscence tutor with sufficient experience of interviewing older people to feel confident about my ability to carry out this research effectively and proficiently. Along the way I have, at times, felt utterly incompetent and ineffective, arriving at a place where I seem to have more questions than answers, alongside doubts about my ability to do justice to the research participants who shared their stories with me,

and being acutely aware of the privileged position I hold in having shared this journey with these participants for several months.

Questions which I now ask myself in a different way to when the study began include doubts about why I was interested in whether learning takes place in reminiscence groups. On one level, I enjoy listening to people recount stories from the past because of taking a simple pleasure in nostalgia. I also enjoy hearing about people's lives because it gives me insight into them as individuals and therefore gives me scope for interacting with them at a more meaningful level. At the same time, all my adult life I have had altruistic aspirations of wanting to contribute to the well-being of older people, and therefore, having the opportunity of undertaking a research project of this nature, appeared at one time to be a way of learning more about how that might be achieved. Furthermore, my dislike of deficit models of later life which portray older people as a homogenous group, uniformly disadvantaged and in need of hand-outs and 'care', goes against my experience of working with hundreds of disparate and unique older people, whose ability to give to others shows itself in diverse ways, regardless of their level of ability or disability. Furthermore, my work as a higher education lecturer in the field of ageing and dementia, has led to an increased interest in portraying even the most disabled older people as able to take some responsibility for their own lives and to contribute to the needs of others. It might therefore be that my increasing desire to demonstrate that older people, even towards the end of life, are able to give to others in meaningful ways, is about finding meaning in my own work. Similarly, any discoveries made about the value of reminiscence would enhance my sense of purpose in training health and social care practitioners to run reminiscence activities and to work with older people in ways which recognise the personhood of every ageing person. What started off as a seemingly altruistic desire to enhance the wellbeing of the ageing, now appears, therefore, to be motivated in no small part by a need to find meaning in my own work.

This tendency in me to find meaning in my work by giving to others is not necessarily a bad thing, and is likely to be common to many professionals in both teaching and health and social care. The dual desire to find meaning for one's own existence whilst

meeting the needs of others is arguably the source of much good practice, as the motivation to serve others well originates from more than one source. Nonetheless, it also relates to power relationships within teaching, research and healthcare practice, whereby individuals wanting to discover more effective ways of enhancing the well-being of others, might be doing so to further their own aims of feeling good about themselves and having a sense of purpose.

Further to concepts of power relationships between me and the participants, is my awareness of my dependence on this small group of older people. Not only do I need them to be participants in my research, I also need them to participate consistently over a number of weeks, which requires a considerable time investment on their part. So while it might be argued that I was bringing increased meaning into their lives, and enhancing their well-being by giving them purposeful activities to undertake for an hour a week over several weeks, there is also a sense in which they were doing the same for me. More so, in that they were enabling me to undertake a substantive piece of research which I have wanted to carry out for over a decade. Far from meeting their needs, therefore, it could be argued that they were meeting mine. No amount of professionalism, no information sheets, consent forms or right to withdraw, would ever fully remove a potential sense of obligation that may have been experienced by these participants once rapport had been established, and memories shared and responded to. I can't help wonder now whether any of the participants might have attended the group because they wanted to please me, because they cared about the research and the group after having formed a relationship with me – despite every effort to avoid coercion and maintain a professional stance.

One reason for considering this as a possibility is the connections made between people in the group, which might also have been made with me as I listened to and responded to people's accounts of their lives. Anybody could have withdrawn at any time with no repercussions, but as the weeks passed, it became increasingly unlikely that they would want to. They had invested time and emotional energy in the group, and as a result of this, they had also invested, to some extent, in the research project. Therefore, although I didn't have this perception of the power relationships between

me and the participants at the time of the fieldwork, I have subsequently become aware that I was dependent on them, and that the group relationship held power over us all. As each participant began to see how they were contributing to the needs of others, there is likely to have been a certain draw of the group – perhaps as an entity which existed outside of us as individuals, but of which we were very much a part.

This mutual power relationship and mutual dependence can be conceived as being common to all educational situations. A tutor can only teach where students are willing to learn, and will therefore allow teaching and learning to take place. This makes sense of the aim within adult education and person-centred teaching to establish rapport and connect with learners at an early stage in the relationship. It suggests that the emphasis on learners' experiences within androgogy and gerogogy potentially enhances learning because it serves to forge connections between adult educators and their students, drawing them into a mutually beneficial relationship. This seems, in some ways, far removed from ideas of simple facilitation of learning, although it could equally be argued that all adult educators facilitate *relationships* as a route to and catalyst for learning. In reminiscence the facilitation of relationships occurs through the medium of personal memories.

Even though I, as the group facilitator, do not share my personal memories with the group, I am nonetheless affected by my responses to the memories they share – responses which generally involve my own memories - of grandparents' houses, childhood trips to museums, conversations with friends and family which echo the ones taking place in the room, and of deceased family members with whom I have enjoyed reminiscing in the past. I am deeply touched by these experiences and recognise that my own learning journey had taken place involving Illeris' three dimensions of learning. I am more conscious of the content, interaction and incentive of my own participation and learning journey on reflection than I was at the time. Similarly, I recognise the place of the past (the story of me specialising in reminiscence), the present (my facilitation of the group) and the future (my desire to gain a doctorate and progress in my career). I also recognise that My Story has become part of Our Story in the shared experience with the group members. The

interrelationship of these two with The Story, is seen in my desire to challenge a prevailing culture of ageism which in part, has contributed to my interest in exploring the learning potential of reminiscence. Thus, the model of Social and Transformative Group Learning in Reminiscence presented in Figure 3 explains how I see myself on this learning journey as a facilitator of a reminiscence group in a doctoral research project. The inputs to my learning experience are my own memories and motivations, and the outcomes of my learning are this thesis and my hopes for what it will achieve – outcomes which are both real and imagined.

Through the process of carrying out the reminiscence group fieldwork and analysing data, I have become increasingly aware of the position of power I hold as a tutor and as a researcher, yet I feel more impotent now than at any time in the last six years. Setting out with a grand scheme to demonstrate the learning that potentially takes place in reminiscence groups, developing a desire to challenge views of older people as a burden on society and ultimately, wanting to express all that I have seen, heard and understood in a way that others will also be able to hear, see and understand. I am powerless to do that because each person who reads this thesis will do so from a position acquired as a result of their own life experiences such that I have no control over their reactions, thoughts, or subsequent actions upon reading it. Thus, having questioned and considered the multilayered nuances of power-relationships between adult educator and learners, researcher and participants, I reflect with Clifford:

It helps you see things in a different light and think of things in different ways. Could I have done it better? Could I have made a better job of my [research]? I don't know.

(Clifford, First Individual Interview)

Summary

The above discussion has explored in greater detail the implications of the research findings in relation to the four research questions. The indications are that learning is taking place in this reminiscence group, amongst this group of participants, on this

occasion, and these indications are strong enough for me to have suggested a model of Transformative Social Group Learning in Reminiscence, which may be applicable in other similar learning situations. It appears that reminiscence can, in some circumstances, be a route to and catalyst for learning in later life – and that this learning may have potential beneficial outcomes for participants and for wider society. However, to some extent, the wider applicability of these findings remain tentative due to the exploratory and social constructionist nature of this study.

6 – CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This chapter summarises some potential contributions of this study to the field of learning in the Fourth Age and to adult learning generally, as well as to the specific area of reminiscence groups, through a review of the findings in the light of the existing literature, and of possible implications for policy and practice. Directions for future research are also considered, with final thoughts on the contributions made by this study.

Contributions to the Field of Learning in the Fourth Age

Research Question 1:

Does learning take place through reminiscence groups for older people?

Existing literature highlights the importance of life experience to adult learning in general and to learning in later life specifically, and although reminiscence is suggested as an appropriate learning activity for older people, there is no empirical research exploring whether and how learning takes place through reminiscence.

Through my findings from data analysis, and my discussion of these, I have indicated my belief and understanding that learning at a number of levels did take place through these reminiscence sessions, suggesting that learning does, or can potentially, take place through reminiscence groups for older people. As previously discussed, this belief is based on my understanding of learning as involving emotional, social and cognitive domains.

I have suggested that some of the learning taking place in this study may have been partially or fully unconscious, observable to me as I read and re-read transcripts of group sessions over time, but rarely explicitly stated by the participants themselves. This has been discussed in the previous chapter where it was suggested that I and the participants may have held different ideas about what 'learning' means. It is, however, also worth noting that where a requirement of funding bodies is that learners write their own goals and statements of achievement as a way of evidencing

that learning is taking place, this may not always be possible in situations where learning outcomes are less easily definable and not always discerned by participants. While none of these participants are likely to have argued with statements relating to the more obvious and perhaps superficial benefits of participation, they may have had some difficulty identifying and listing the more in-depth processes of personal growth and development which appear to have been experienced. This alerts the adult educator, as well as funding bodies and policy makers to the possibility that many of the benefits of participating in learning in the Fourth Age may not be easily identifiable or measurable, especially where courses are of short duration or where learners express a different spectrum of benefits of participation to those valued by educators, governments and funding bodies.

Research Question 2:

If learning does take place, what is its nature, in terms of what is learnt?

The existing theoretical literature recognises an entwined relationship between experience and learning, as well as the importance of the social processes which take place in adult learning contexts, including in reminiscence groups. The literature on autobiographical memory emphasises the potentially in-depth nature of reminiscence which engages feelings and senses, as well as cognitions, although it is recognised that memories tend to be subjective.

The intention of this study was to facilitate learning through a person-centred, non-judgmental approach, encouraging group members to learn through sharing themselves by discussing memories of past events. It has been argued that the group context is essential for such learning to take place, as this enables the communication of attitudes of acceptance and positive regard of each person's value, which are essential for a growing sense of personal worth.

Through the case studies it has been shown that participants demonstrate change in individual ways. In addition, the mechanisms for change, where it does occur, are unique to the individual, in each case being dependent on how they interact with the group and with their own internal processes of reflection on experience. Interpretation of the data suggests that there is also a group experience through

which learning occurs in a different way to that observed for individuals. The wide variety of learning is evidenced, as well as characterised by, changes in the way individuals function in a group setting, and in the case of the group, how these individuals work together over time. In each case, such changes require alterations in the self-concept and sense of identity of each individual. Some elements of a group identity form over a number of sessions, demonstrated by increased co-operation between participants and consideration for the needs of others. However, this group never attains a strong identity in itself, and could more accurately be described as a 'learning set' – a group of people who have come together to reminisce and learn, but for whom what constitutes learning goals or paths, is experienced in individual ways.

Changes in interactional style can most clearly be experienced and expressed in a group setting, where each participant interacts with a number of other participants, each of whom has their own personal style of communicating self. I would therefore argue that it is partly the additional pressures caused by being part of a small group which acts as a catalyst for learning through sharing personal experience, as it requires more of participants than reminiscing on a one-to-one basis or with just two other people. It could also be argued that the more participants move towards contributing to the needs of others and to the group as a whole, the more they learn about themselves and each other. Furthermore, the group experience intensifies the learning potential of interactions because of a wider range of dynamics caused by each person experiencing others differently from each other. Thus, there is an individual experience of other participants whereby Douglas would experience Teresa differently to the way in which Clifford or Philip experience her, and Robert's observations of feelings about interactions between Diana and Bill would differ from every other person in the room. It is possible that it is the individuality of the experience of interactions within the room, which enhances the learning potential of reminiscence. Memories are the learning material, but being an expression of selfhood, these diverse experiences of the interactions taking place in the group turn memories from a simple route to communication into a catalyst for learning.

This study particularly highlights the importance of drawing upon experience and of relationships in promoting learning amongst people of all ages. While other studies exploring the use of personal experience in adult learning have seen autobiographical memories as a resource to harness in teaching a range of academic subjects, this study has explored such memories as the principal learning material, which when focused upon in a structured way, can in some instances, enhance identity and well-being at a time of life when these might be threatened.

The emphasis placed on forming mutually beneficial relationships leading to a commitment to the group learning process, provides useful insight into working with adults of all ages, and possibly, also with younger people. The understanding gained from this study is that there is a mutual dependency between the facilitator of learning and the learners, which leads to increasing levels of co-operation and a desire to contribute to the needs of others, resulting in beneficial, yet unique, outcomes for all participants. A similar understanding, if applied across the board in adult education, may increase retention rates and commitment to both self-directed and group learning, enhancing the life-changing potential of such learning experiences.

The finding in this study that the actual content of memories was not as important as the process of sharing them and using them as a catalyst for self-development and personal growth suggests a generalisability of the approach. It is likely to be possible to bring together groups of people who need to live or work together, who, despite being from different social backgrounds or age cohorts, could learn through the sharing of memories. That is to say that although one aspect of this study was that it was carried out with Fourth Agers, it is possible that it could equally well have been carried out with any age group. The important thing was the process of sharing memories, rather than having similar backgrounds with experiences in common.

Research Question 3:

What are the potential outcomes of such learning for the individual and for society?

Existing literature on adult learning and learning in later life, emphasises potential outcomes in a number of areas of life, including physical, socio-cultural and those relating to individual consciousness. There is also a focus on empowerment, with reminiscence being recognised as a potential tool for enhancing the social status of older people, through giving them a stronger voice within society and by transforming their understanding of their current social position.

Within this study there is no evidence of reminiscence leading to widespread social change, and although there is a suggestion of changes in individuals' understanding of their social standing, these are modest. Nonetheless, as a route to and catalyst for learning, reminiscence can be seen as a powerful tool for teaching health and social care practitioners, as well as family members and friends, that an older person still has abilities and personal qualities which mean that they can contribute to the needs of others, that they can be interesting people with whom to spend time, and that attitudes which suggest that the end of life is a time spent waiting to die, are erroneous. The memories of older people, and interactions between them as they share and discuss their life experiences, may well have potential to transform the attitudes of both individuals and wider society by challenging misconceptions about the homogeneity of Fourth Ageds and demonstrating, through individual life experiences and approaches to telling these stories, that each person is as unique towards the end of life as they were when younger.

It is unlikely that anything can, will or necessarily should be done to alter the current trend in the demographic profile of the United Kingdom. It is however increasingly important that stereotyped attitudes towards ageing are challenged and that as much as possible is done to enhance well-being in later life. By doing both these things it is possible that the perceived and actual burden of an ageing population can be minimised.

The British government, whilst keen to reduce the cost of providing health and social care, does not appear to see the link between providing genuinely lifelong learning opportunities for people of all ages, whether they are in employment or not, and the well-being of older people. Dissemination of this research could play a part in raising awareness of reminiscence as a potential route to a number of learning-related benefits, including elements such as increased social networks, reduced dependency and an ability to contribute to the needs of others. This is not say that participation in learning activities generally, or in reminiscence activities in later life, in particular, could provide the ultimate solution to the widespread societal, political and economic problems posed by an ageing society. Rather, that learning in later life, including that taking place through reminiscence groups, could make a meaningful contribution to the well-being of some older people.

Again, the government speaks much about person-centred provision for older people. Reminiscence could be an effective way of contributing to the development of person-centred practice because of the way the uniqueness of individuals is highlighted and the value of their memories appreciated. Examples of such individuality abound in this research. It is possible that including health and social care practitioners in such groups could be a way of providing opportunities for older people to learn alongside people of all ages, not only enabling learning across age-cohorts, but with older people, in effect, teaching younger generations about life in the past. This is one possible way of providing insight into who these older people are in the present, as well as their ongoing potential for future development. The types of interaction taking place in reminiscence groups, differ from many of the everyday communications between carers and cared-for, in that they provide older people with opportunities to share their lives in ways which engender respect and understanding for themselves as sentient beings, rather than limiting them to a role as passive recipients of care.

The reminiscence techniques used within this study did more than draw upon experience as an aid to learning. There was also a strong practical element in the re-enacting of memories through mime and the imaginative reliving of memories. The important aspect of this is that participants were actively engaged in learning and

were contributing virtually all of the learning content. At no time did I present myself, nor would it have been possible to do so, as having more knowledge than they did about their own memories. They were therefore in a position of controlling the session content. This is a feature of reminiscence activities which make them well placed in enhancing self-worth and giving learners autonomy. The facilitator therefore is in a position of never knowing in advance of a session what will be discussed. Reminiscence might therefore be seen as an especially challenging approach to facilitating learning, as there is so little predictability and an extraordinary need for sensitivity and flexibility. In recognising this, it also needs to be acknowledged that this has implications for practice in terms of providing adequate, and specialist, training for the facilitators of reminiscence-based learning groups, in order to ensure that facilitators have the confidence and competence to work in this necessarily sensitive, responsive and flexible manner.

With an increasingly strong focus in adult education on employment-related learning which focuses on skills-related changes in individuals and the acquisition of qualifications, it is worth thinking further about the group learning experience and how the group and individuals interact. This could be useful for workplace learning, as well as for workplace relationships, whereby a work-based group learning experience could be used to enhance co-operation by fostering a sense of mutual dependency. This also applies to Family Learning and Community Learning, whereby groups of people using their life experiences as a tool for learning together could be a possible route to greater co-operation and support in families and communities, as well as across generations.

Research Question 4:

What are the potential benefits to both individuals and society, of learning in later life through reminiscence?

The existing literature in this area focuses on the role of both learning in later life and reminiscence in facilitating social interactions and connections between people; these then lead to benefits such as increased confidence and self-esteem. Potential outcomes of learning which this research suggests may be possible through reminiscence activities sustained over a period of time include a reduction in social

isolation for some participants as they are better understood by those around them, elements of identity maintenance and strengthening, and aspects of resilience-building in the face of a wide variety of individual and social changes taking place towards the end of life. These are in addition to increasing confidence to speak up and be heard in a group setting, which may relate to an improved sense of self-worth.

The analysis of each of the cases of the seven participants presented, indicates the potential of structured reminiscence activities within a group setting to contribute towards the development of individuals' views of themselves, their life experiences and those of other people, which in turn has potential to bring about change in interaction styles and depth and breadth of self-awareness through reliving pertinent and emotionally meaningful experiences, contributing to enhanced social functioning and subsequently, to a potentially deeper fulfilment of individual needs.

In the instances where learning and change were less marked, this too can be seen as contributing positively to generating an overall picture of the potential of group-based reminiscence to create and sustain an emotionally safe environment in which learning and change can take place comfortably, and at a pace suited to individuals, especially where projects are ongoing, or take place over a longer time-frame. The cases also illustrate how opportunities for learning in the Fourth Age may be missed due to issues such as insufficient time being available for some participants to feel comfortable enough to open themselves up to a deeper level of interaction, and how vital it is for a tutor working with people towards the end of life to be flexible in their approach, sensitive to the meaning personal memories hold, and willing to allow transformations to take place in their own understanding of what group participants are experiencing.

There may also be implications for practice for staff working with older people in non-educational roles, such that the learning potential of reminiscence is given a greater focus by practitioners working in health and social care wishing to maximize the potential of reminiscence to enhance well-being. Thus, reminiscence as demonstrated in this study, is more than a pleasant way to pass time in later life, and where seen as a route to learning and personal development can be used for

enhancing identity, self-worth and independence, as part of a larger care package aimed at assisting with rehabilitation or recovery from age-related illnesses and conditions.

Future Directions for Research

Repeating this study with other groups of participants for comparison of the processes taking place within the group will help in gaining more understanding of what the facilitator in such groups does to facilitate learning. I'd like to carry out further studies where I am the group leader and the data collection is done in the same way, to discern the extent to which learning journeys in this context are individual, as well as of the wider applicability of the 'Model of Transformative Social Group Learning in Reminiscence' put forward in the Discussion. I would also like to record groups led by others – both with them doing the recording, and with me doing the recording, in order to try and discern common factors at work in a reminiscence group setting, or whether they are all very different. I would also like to carry out a closer examination of the relative effectiveness of different approaches to facilitation, as well as how these apply across age-groups and age-cohorts. I'd then like to try distilling something of the essence of what makes learning through reminiscence effective in a way which could be applied to other learning activities for Fourth Agers, such as craft and discussion groups, as well as more academic subjects. Diana's and Bill's interest in Norfolk and Suffolk barns indicates a need for intellectual stimulation, rather than just social interaction, amongst some older people.

Memories are not expensive and sharing them doesn't require textbooks or equipment. It would be interesting to compare the economics of providing alternative forms of learning experience which perhaps make use of more resources external to the individuals taking part. It is possible that as the learning material came from within individuals and was supplied voluntarily by participants, this is what made this group effective because they invested part of themselves in the group experience. While this might also make it more cost-effective than some other approaches to learning, the difficulty for participants and educators of easily

identifying the full range of benefits through the usual methods of identifying learning outcomes, means that it is at risk of being side-lined as a learning activity for older people. Hopefully, this study will go some way to raising awareness amongst policy-makers and practitioners of the potential of reminiscence as a route to and catalyst for learning in the Fourth Age. Nonetheless, one direction for future research includes exploring ways of assisting older people to express for themselves the kind of outcomes I have discerned in this study.

In the experience of carrying out and reflecting upon this research, I have wrestled with the tensions caused by my sometimes conflicting, sometimes complementary and overlapping roles as educator, therapist, researcher and human being. Integral to my enjoyment in facilitating this reminiscence group was the pleasure observed in participants. While they appeared to benefit from learning, I benefitted and learnt alongside them, always with one eye on my research aims, and another on what I might take from this experience to other teaching situations.

This study presents an exploration of a complex web of diverse elements of learning, achieved through the individual and group experience of sharing memories. At the outset the potential outcomes of learning were unclear, and although it was expected that there would be learning-related outcomes, it took careful and absorbed analysis of the data over an extended period to understand the learning taking place. It is also likely that if I continued with data analysis for a further year, I would see still more evidence of different types of learning. It is in the nature of an exploratory study that some outcomes are unpredictable and unexpected, but I continue to be surprised at my own lack of insight into the depth of learning taking place at the actual time of the fieldwork.

Conclusion

The current demographic trend towards an ageing population generates demand for evidence about and insight into ways of promoting well-being in later life. The study's findings could therefore be of interest to policy makers and practitioners in the field of adult and community learning both now and in the future. It explores how learning from personal experience is of particular value to older people, suggesting a

meaningful and relevant approach which can be used with older people with complex physical, social and psychological needs, in community settings.

Part of the focus of this research was an endeavour to explore how and why it might be the case that reminiscence groups lead to learning, and thus to enabling and empowering older people - ideas expressed in the existing literature. This has been achieved in so far as it has been determined that within this group of participants, learning did take place as a direct result of sharing memories with each other under the guidance, and with the facilitation of the researcher, in the role of reminiscence tutor. Furthermore, it has been determined that there are some identifiable outcomes and benefits to this process for individuals, although the extent to which such benefits and outcomes could extend to wider society remains undetermined.

Final Thoughts

It is now over three years since the local authority's Adult Education Learning in Later Life Team was disbanded and I left the organisation to teach in higher education. Motivation to continue this study came because of opportunities to apply my learning in the field of health and social care, and latterly, due to the prospect of carrying out further research in this area. While my interest in reminiscence as a route to and catalyst for learning in later life is a niche area of study, it remains an important one because of the way in which it incorporates people with diverse social backgrounds and educational experiences in co-operative learning ventures, as well as in the light of population trends which suggest it is located within a growing area of care and lifelong education.

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APPENDICES

A – Participant Information Sheet

B – Participant Consent Form

C – Guidelines and Prompts for Individual Interviews

D – Example of a Learner Progress and Achievement Record Form

Appendix A – Information Sheet

Research into Learning in Later Life in Reminiscence Groups with Sarah Housden



Members of this day centre are being invited to take part in a reminiscence research project which is planned to take place over the coming months. You are invited to take part in this by joining a small reminiscence group of six to eight people, which will be held here each Thursday for seven weeks, starting in September. You do not need any previous experience of taking part in a reminiscence group, although you will be welcome to join us even if you have been in a group before.

The group will take a different theme each week – examples of themes might include things like memories of schooldays, hobbies or working life, but you will be given an opportunity to choose themes which you are most interested in discussing. You will be asked to keep information shared in the group confidential, although you can discuss it with me at any time.



Soon after the seven group sessions, you will be asked to spend time with me discussing your thoughts and feelings about your experience of taking part in the group. This discussion will take place between the two of us, and nobody else will be told about what you have said.

I would like to record both the reminiscence group sessions and the individual discussion we have, mostly because I find it difficult to remember everything that is said, and don't want to forget any of your thoughts or ideas. However, when I type up what is said, I will not include your name, so hopefully nobody will know it is you. There is just one circumstance in which I would tell someone what has been said, and that would be if I was concerned for your wellbeing, or that of someone else.

Through this research I hope to find out more about what takes place in reminiscence groups, how group members learn from each other, and how people benefit from taking part in reminiscence. This research is part of a Doctorate in Education I am doing at the University of East Anglia.

If you have any questions about the reminiscence groups, the individual discussions or the reasons for doing this research, please do ask me. I will be around at the day centre during the coming weeks and would be pleased to answer your questions. I can also be contacted by phone through the centre manager, and will be happy to come and talk with you again.

Sarah Housden

Appendix B – Consent Form

Research into Learning in Later Life in Reminiscence Groups with Sarah Housden

You have said that you would like to take part in the reminiscence sessions being run by Sarah Housden, a student at the University of East Anglia, who is carrying out research into what takes place in reminiscence groups.

Please read the information below carefully. You can ask Sarah Housden for further information about reminiscence or the research at any time. She can be contacted through the day centre manager.

Statement by participant in reminiscence research:

I would like to take part in the reminiscence sessions which will be taking place at this day centre as part of Sarah Housden's research into reminiscence. I agree that:

- I am taking part in the reminiscence sessions and subsequent discussion of my own free will, and have chosen to do so freely
- I have discussed this with Sarah Housden and had the opportunity to ask questions about the research

Please turn over page

I am aware that:

- I can withdraw from the research at any time, without giving any reason, and nobody will think badly of me or treat me differently for doing so
- The reminiscence sessions and the discussion after the seven sessions will be recorded
- These recordings and their transcriptions will be kept in a secure place which nobody apart from Sarah Housden has access to.
- Nothing from my personal circumstances will be included in the transcriptions of the recordings, such as names of people, places, workplaces, friends or family.
- All information I give will be kept anonymous unless there is a concern about my safety, or that of someone else
- The information collected through the recordings will be used to explore the ways in which learning takes place within reminiscence groups as part of Sarah Housden's Doctoral Thesis, and may be published in a form which protects my identity.

I consent to be a participant.

Please sign both copies of this form. Keep one yourself to remind you of what you have signed, and give the other one to Sarah Housden.

SignedDate.....

Appendix C - Individual Interviews – Guidelines for questions and discussion

Check for continuing consent for participation and recording

Date

Group member's first name.

Reminder of anonymity and confidentiality.

In discussion with participant, explore areas around:

What they thought about the reminiscence group sessions attended

Whether the sessions were what they expected, and whether they gained anything from attending which hadn't been expected

Benefits from being in the group - ask for examples

Understanding gained of other group members by listening to their memories? Ask for examples.

Did talking about the past, or listening to other people talk about theirs, help them see anything differently about their own life, past or present?

Ask for examples of ways in which being in the group helped them to see their own life (past and present) differently or in a new way.

Ways in which they thought differently about the group at the end compared to at the beginning. For example, thoughts, feelings and perceptions of self, the group and other group members.

Was there any follow-up discussion or reflection about topics discussed during the group after the meetings?

Conversations with other group members/ friends/ family about memories which had come up in the group and examples.

Did the group change perceptions of:

- Learning
- Your past
- Your life now
- Other people
- Life experiences in general

How would they describe the purpose of such a group?

Anything else they want to add?

Appendix D

Adult Education and Guidance Services

Reminiscence Course – Summative Assessment

Course code:

Venue: Care setting

Learner name:

Date of Assessment:

Personal achievements

What have you achieved by attending the course?

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Learning Outcomes

Learning Outcomes	Able to do this	Close to being able to do this	Working towards this	Can't do this
Look at and handle memorabilia				
Share a memory about an item of memorabilia				
Mime or draw pictures of activities taken part in, in the past				
Demonstrate active listening skills				
Ask questions of other group members				
Identify something I have learnt from someone else in the group				