

Making Sense of Current Difficulties: Thematic Analysis of Clients' Early Recollections as Autobiographical Stories

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Background

Early recollections have been used both as an assessment and as a clinical tool. Therapists from a variety of approaches have emphasized the enduring nature of themes in early recollections. Recent studies confirm this enduring nature of themes in the telling of memories and past experiences (see Josselson, 2000; Singer & Bonalume, 2010; Thorne, Cutting, & Skaw, 1998). From a narrative perspective, clients' stories are constructed and constantly re-edited in order to make sense of experiences. Early recollections can be seen as autobiographical stories told to make sense of the current self-narrative (Androutsopoulou, 2013).

Aim

This narrative study explores common themes between clients' specific early recollections and current-concern stories.

Method

Seven (7) clients' written early recollections were analyzed using a thematic narrative analysis framework (Lieblich, Tuval, Maschiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 2008) and were then compared to their case records and written self-characterizations following the triangulation method. Central common themes were "detected" by the exploration of word repetition and content commonalities with regards to the self, to others and to events. All data were collected during the first year of therapy.

Main Findings

Several common themes were "detected" among clients' early recollections and current-concern stories as compared with their case records and written self-characterizations.

Table 1. Themes in the Seven (7) Case Studies: Central and Secondary

	Central Theme	Secondary Themes
Client A.	Neglected self-needs	Negative emotions Challenging relationship with the mother Conflict avoidance
Client B.	Always being nice	Conflict avoidance Trying to keep others satisfied Trust issues
Client C.	Perfectionism and order	Need to help/protect others Challenging relationship with the father
Client D.	A lonely life-observer	Negative emotions Perceptions of self as different From others
Client E.	Trapped in other's will	Negative emotions Relationship partners based on punishment and reward
Client F.	Detailed narratives lacking emotions	Silent messages Focus solely on self
Client G.	Body image issues and low self-esteem	Need to help/protect others Focus on others Holding negative emotions

References

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Case Study Example

"A lonely life-observer"

Client D
(30 years old)

Quote from early recollections:

"I am in kindergarten and while all the other children are playing together, I am walking around the playground alone. I am feeling ok. I am jealous of the other children playing together but at the same time I am too shy to join them. I am about 4 years old".

Quote from self-characterization:

"... She is a girl with a quite sad look in her eyes, who observes with her eyes wide open whatever is going on around her. Her ears are wide open and she listens carefully to anything that is taking place around her, without talking very much. [...] She is a lonely person".



Brief case record:

The client came to therapy feeling "invisible".

Lack of support from family led to issues of self-esteem and loneliness.

(Father's absence and mother's mental illness)

Discussion

These findings are in line with Androutsopoulou (2013) who supported that central themes run across all self-narratives, including early recollections. "Detecting" theme commonalities among early recollections and current-concern stories may be of therapeutic value in allowing clients to make better sense of their experiences and current difficulties, and in enhancing both a sense of continuity and change. Themes that are judged as "restricting" by clients and therapists can be more easily revised once their centrality and endurance is detected. Mosak and Di Pietro (2006) have provided extensive evidence that successful therapy outcome is reflected in differences when re-telling recollections following treatment (see also Clark, 2002). These differences can be detected in both the form and content of early recollection narratives (Androutsopoulou, 2013).

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