

## 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 relations 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 Perception of self as different Spurn others
Client E.	Trapped in others' will	Negative emotions Relationship patterns based on punishment and reward
Client F.	Detailed narratives lacking emotions	Silent monologues Focus solely on self
Client G.	Body image issues and low self-esteem	Need to help/protect others Focusing on others Holding negative emotions

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### Case Study Example

"A lonely life-observer"

**Quote from early recollections:**

"I am in kindergarten and while all the other children are playing happily, I am sitting on the playground alone. I am feeling ok. I don't remember anything else, but at the same time I remember how alone I am about 4 years old".

Client D  
(30 years old)

**Quote from self-characterization:**

"... She is a girl with a quite cold look in her eyes, she is always with her eyes on whatever is going on around her. Her eyes seem to be always scanning to anything that is going on around her, she is a 'realy person'".

**Case records:**

- 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).

### Acknowledgements

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## **Background**

Postmodern therapists, including family-oriented and systemic therapists with an interest in narrative, often leave early recollections unexplored. “They may consider such work as either exclusively associated with individualistic and modernist approaches to therapy or as unavoidably involving a ‘high risk’ exercise in integration of modern and postmodern practices (Androutsopoulou, 2013, p. 314). However, as Efran & Clarfield (1992) have supported, it is the theoretical framework different techniques are associated with that should matter.

Early recollections have been used extensively both as an assessment and as a clinical tool, mostly in the adlerian tradition (Mosak and Di Pietro, 2006; Clark, 2002). Therapists from various 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 (Sarbin, 1986). 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**

The research team consisted of trainee therapists. The project was supervised as part of a course in qualitative research methods. Seven (7) clients’ written early recollections were analyzed using a thematic narrative analysis framework (Lieblich, Tuval, Maschiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 2008).

These were then triangulated with client records and written self-characterizations (Androutsopoulou, 2001) retrieved with therapists’ permission, who secured clients’ anonymity and consent.

Central common themes were ‘detected’ exploring word repetition and content commonalities regarding the self, others and 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 (see Method).

Case Study	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 pattern based on punishment and reward
Client F	Detailed narratives lacking emotions	Silent monologues Focus solely on self
Client G.	Body image issues and low self-esteem	Need to help/protect others Priority in others Hiding negative emotions

*Table 1. Themes in the seven (7) case studies: Central and secondary*

### Case Study Example: A lonely Life-Observer

(Client D, female, 30) (see Table 1)

*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 history:*

- 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. These differences can be detected in both the form and content of early recollection narratives (Androutsopoulou, 2013). Further research would strengthen the above arguments.

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