

Historical context

Reminiscence, as an area of medical, social and psychological investigation has been steadily growing in recognition amongst the caring professions since it first came to be recognised in the 1960's.

Here we look at life story work and its value in reconnecting individuals with a sense of self, helping them to place their past, present and future life experiences into a personal context.

Whilst life story work incorporates the use of reminiscence, the prime purpose is in helping others to put their experience into some kind of visual format that can be shared by others. Reminiscence by itself remains limited to the verbal sharing between others. Where this verbal and aural ability is limited, life story work makes use of visual props to facilitate the visual representation of the memories within.

In many cases though, what is within is not open to sharing. Despite our best efforts to help and encourage sharing, memories are temporarily lost and inaccessible. Trauma, physical or psychological damage may have blocked off our ability to retrieve parts or parcels of our life experiences.

In these cases, images, photographs, documentation, however presented, can be assembled and revisited to give a visual reminder of a life that did exist, events, people and places that did and do matter. Working with individuals, agreeing how this information can be newly presented allows us to create an externally accessible means by which to help others reconnect with who they are. The visual images may mean little by themselves, but the repetition, and the manner in which this repetition takes place helps those 'trapped' in their own personal limbo to regain a sense of self. To develop new self-respect, self-confidence.

As children, this acceptance and realisation of ourselves as separate individuals can be startling and unnerving. Feeling unconnected and displaced can make us feel separate. Life story work then, has many valuable contributions to make to a wide number of situations. More and more organisations are coming to see the benefits of incorporating a life story programme within their culture. Life story work has moved from merely reminiscence to whole new areas of our social society as it attempts to help individuals regain a lost identity.