Collage Life Story Elicitation Technique: A Representational Technique for Scaffolding Autobiographical Memories

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A basic premise in narrative therapy and inquiry is that life story telling is a mechanism by which experiences are rendered meaningful within some form of structure. However, narrative inquiry has to take cognisance of difficulties ensuing from discursive practices for different populations when eliciting their life stories. In this article I explicate a unique method, the Collage Life story Elicitation Technique (CLET), geared towards scaffolding life story remembering. Based on the theoretical underpinnings of social constructionism (Gergen, 2000), symbolic interactionism (Berg, 2009) and performative strategies in social science research the CLET provides a mode of expression and narrative performance for positioning the dialogical self. As the individual engages in collage-making and narrating, cognitive, motivational and affective aspects of autobiographical memories emerge while telling her or his life story. Different forms of positioning in the dialogical self and significant attachments to people, objects and life events co-exist in the verbal and non-verbal communications elicited with this technique. As suggested by the pilot study, the CLET provides a structure within which non-English speaking participants could explore multiple forms of positioning in the dialogical self without the restrictions of a verbal interview conversation. Key Words: Dialogical Self, Positioning, Life Story Remembering, Autobiographical Memories, Narrative Performance, Representational Strategies, and Scaffolding

Introduction

Telling one's life story has become a key feature of narrative therapy and inquiry. The basic premise is that the life story telling is a mechanism by which experiences are rendered meaningful within some form of structure (McAdams, 2001, 2006; Taylor, 1996), interweaving physical, cognitive and affective changes with psychosocial consequences to present the context and content of identity. The individual engages in conversations with multiple voices inside the self (internal voices) and others in the outside world (external voices, culture, ideology and so on) to narrate a life story in which different *I*-positions find expression in the same person (Hermans, 2001). In therapy and research there is a shift towards exploring identity focusing on the complexities of autobiographical narratives (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2001), the dialogical self (Hermans, 2002), and subjective positioning in discursive practices (Harre & Van Langenhove, 1991). Narratives provide a framework for studying development (Gergen & Gergen, 2006; McAdams, 2001), and the integrative configuration of self-in-the-world. In the process of developing identity the person dialogues with a wide range of different and conflicting self-positions and relationships integrating past events with present experiences and future expectations (Habermas & Bluck; Hermans, 2001; McAdams, 2001). The

social and personal positioning of self in life story remembering affords the individual the opportunity to take different stances in a growing capacity to remould and reconstruct her or his life in accordance with social expectations and personal aspirations.

The purpose of this article is to present an explication of a representational technique for collecting life stories and analysing the content of self-defining memories. The technique focuses on scaffolding life story remembering and overcoming perceived obstacles that some client populations have with autobiographical memories and telling their stories (Raggatt, 2006). Obstacles to narrative inquiry include, *inter alia* difficulties some clients have with life story remembering (e.g., adolescents, substance abusers, clients in therapy negating a past filled with trauma, discontent and emotional cut-off, and so on). For some it is anomalous to the spirit of the dialectic self and the intrinsic relational focus of their culture (Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, Wang, & Hou, 2004; Sun, 2008). For example, asking Chinese adolescents to "tell me about your life" either in conversation or writing is inconsistent with the cognitive processes that preclude such self-descriptions (Ho, Peng, Lai, & Chan, 2001; Nisbett, 2003). Others lack the discursive modes of expression and have difficulty expressing themselves with a sense of biographical uniqueness as they "struggle to negotiate the competing information of an interior and external world" (Singer, 1995, p. 430). Habermas and Bluck (2000) and others (e.g., McAdams, 1993; Murray, 2004) also pose that adolescents are only starting the mytmaking process and are not yet fully 'storied' posing obstacles to their life story narrating. McAdams (1993) describes mythmaking in adolescence as the way in which the young person "formulates personally meaningful answers to ideological questions so that identity can be built on a stable foundation" (p. 36). During adolescence this questioning is accepted as the young person constructs personal fables in their stories about self (Singer), and convey these in their expressions and performances.

Thus, although life story narratives provide a plausible and integrative framework for identity research and the study of different forms of positioning in the dialogical self (Hermans, 2001), there is a need for assisting and encouraging autobiographical remembering. The expressive and representational strategies I explicate in this article aim to overcome some of the obstacles and scaffold the process of life story remembering. It is a work in progress, a working model for narrative inquiry. It provides scope for collecting and analysing self-defining memories and expressions or representations of self, involving autobiographical memories, as well as cognitive, motivational and affective aspects as the individual engages in collaborative process of (co)constructing life narratives.

A Representational Technique for Scaffolding Autobiographical Memories

In order to develop a method that does not rely on conversational practice and language proficiency alone I used a qualitative approach and representational technique. The *Collage-Life-story Elicitation Technique* (CLET) scaffolds the process of narrating life experiences using different modes of expression including both language and non-linguistic action. In the CLET I accept that collage making is a valid social action, a representation or narrative performance involving what we think and say (dialogue) and do below the level of awareness (Threadgold, 2003). Scaffolding, in this regard, implies a system or process of supporting and/or priming life story remembering and narrative performance. It is a process of eliciting

experiences from the past that have or could have significant meanings to the identity construction and provides a mechanism for bringing to light or disclosing, especially by a process of questioning, rich and vivid stories of the identity construction during different periods of life.

Based on the theoretical underpinnings of social constructionism (Gergen, 2000), symbolic interactionism (Berg, 2009; McClelland, 2000), and the authority of visual images in social science research (Beebe, 2002; Harper, 1994) I developed the CLET as a unique method geared towards a deeper understanding of the symbolism informing the narrative meaning-making process. Narrating one's life story is a process of making sense of past selves, past events and past circumstances within the context of social categories and in social interaction, and doing so in discursive modes of expression be they verbal conversations (interviews), written texts or non-verbal representations. The CLET draws specifically on the heuristic value of two theoretical frameworks. First, I accept that life story remembering and autobiographical memories form the basis of identity development (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2001). Storytelling blurs the boundary between 'fact' and 'fiction', and allows for a multiplicity of 'truths' each reflecting a particular way of storying an experience. It is not merely descriptive of experiences but also constitutive. That is, stories do not merely describe an independent objective reality but are an active and collaborative process constituting the realities we inhabit. It is a continuous process occurring through active reflection and mediated action, and entailing a repositioning of the self in relation to internal and external psychosocial demands and expectations. Autobiographical memories provide the reflective framework for (re)considering experiences and rendering them meaningful in the context of one's self-concept. Secondly, I accept that "dialogical relationships should not be restricted to verbal dialogues" (Hermans, 2001, p. 259). Non-verbal communications or visual images are equally valid symbolic expressions of the embodied self (Harper, 1994; Raggatt, 2007; Weber, 2008).

The CLET is an adaptation and extension of the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET; Gavel, 2000; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). According to Zaltman (in Pink, 1998) the ZMET taps into that which occurs in the human brain that we are not always aware of. It thus focuses on what we say and do below the level of awareness such as perception, memory, learning and reasoning. By combining collage making with written (or conversational) modes of expression the participant is engaged in vivid perceptions and memories and in giving rich descriptions in relation to the multiple voices of the social and the private self that continuously dialogues below the level of awareness. The CLET thus provides a channel for making sense of the past and integrating these experiences with the present and an anticipated future, providing a valuable mode for eliciting and exploring autobiographical memories.

In the rest of this article, I first explain the procedures for data collection – the process of scaffolding mythmaking – and the post-structural method for analysis. Secondly, I present an overview and discussion of the application of this technique in a pilot study conducted with a group of first year psychology students in Macao. Finally, drawing on insights from social constructionism, narrative psychology and the theory of dialogical self, I reflect on the method and its applications in different settings and with different populations.

CLET Procedures for Scaffolding Life story Remembering

The process of scaffolding life story remembering unfolds in five sequential steps. The participant completes each step before commencing with the next one. Step 1 entails the making of a collage, followed by 'story-telling' (Step 2), positioning of the dialogical self (Step 3), narrative juxtaposition (Step 4) and self-reflection (Step 5). The tasks for each of these steps are explained to the participant in writing and using simple and easy English and/or translations in their native language. In the next section, I explicate the steps in the process in more detail.

Steps of the CLET

Step1: Collage making

The first step in the CLET entails the making of a collage. During a first interaction with the participant, either in person or via electronic mode, I ask her or him to make a collage that represents dominant experiences and events in her or his personal life in the past and that tells a story about her or him as a person. I give some description of how to make a collage using simple and easy language (English) or a translated version (Box 1).

Box 1. Instructions for collage making in the CLET project

Create your own life story collage. Try to answer the question:

> *"Do these pictures/images represent significant or important experiences in my life (as a young person in Macao) so far?"*

Use at least 12 (minimum) photos, pictures and cuttings (also text) from magazines and other media. Paste all images and pictures on the A4 (or A3) page provided. Because the collage forms part of a research project, I will keep the collage after the interview. I suggest you make colour copies of your personal photos and special images that you paste on the collage so that you do not lose them when you hand over the collage to me.

The collage is a poster or visual representation in which the participant makes use of photos, pictures and cuttings (also text) from magazines and other media, and any other print material that tell something about her or him as a person. Participants are encouraged to include pictures and images that stand out in one way or another, and that represent situations and/or events, feelings, high points and low points in their lives and that tell a story about their development as a person. The main objective of the collage is to tell a story about whom they are and how they came to be the person they are today. Although the collage is composed on paper, it is possible also to do it on the computer similar to 'blogging', which is a popular form of narrating using modern technologies.

In Steps 2-5 the participant reflects upon and comments on the collage compiled in Step 1. These steps unfold in a sequential manner in either of two settings.

1. As a 'conversation' in writing for non-English speaking participants, Steps 2-5 evolve in written assignments over a period of five days or

weeks. The participant collaborates throughout the process as co-researcher generating and constructing her or his life story narrative (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The written text can be either in English or in the participant's native language. In the latter case, of course, the text will have to be translated for the analytic process if the researchers cannot speak/read the local language.

2. Alternatively, in a discursive setting using semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996) suitable for native language speakers, Steps 2-5 unfold in one or more face-to-face conversations between researcher and participant, and audio recordings are made of the storytelling for later transcription and translation.

For the purpose of this paper, I focus on the setting for a written CLET project (see Setting 1 above), although the CLET has been implemented in conversational practice (Setting 2) as well and purview of a future article.

Step 2: Story telling

In the story-telling task, the participant engages actively in life-story remembering (McAdams, 1993) and in generating autobiographical memories. They have to (a) tell a story about each picture/image on the collage, (b) describe as best they can what each picture/image means to them, and (c) how it contributed to their development as a person. They write, either in their native language or in English (if possible), a story about each picture and/or image on the collage, giving reasons for selecting it, the connotations it has for their lives, and the associated thoughts, feelings and meanings each image brings out. Numbering the images on the collage consecutively as they progress through telling the stories, helps to provide a point of reference for later steps and the content and thematic analysis (see discussion of analytic procedures further on in this paper).

Step 3: Positioning the self and eliciting silent voices

Continuing the reflective process and reminiscing autobiographical memories, the third step involves positioning the self and the elicitation of silent voices. The participant has to (a) position her or himself on the collage where she or he sees her or himself now (at the time of doing the task); and (b) describe an image she or he could not find but would have liked to add to the collage. They have to mark their selected position clearly and give reasons, meanings and emotions related to this positioning of the self. Whereas describing an image they could not find offers access to the silent voice(s) in the collage, placing the self in the collage engages the participant in actively dealing with the conflicting voices of the past and present, and with finding harmony amongst the different *I*-positions represented in the narrative.

Step 4: Juxtaposing

In step four, the participant engages in juxtaposing the different narrative voices and inter-subjectivities (Markova, 2003) portrayed in the collage. By juxtaposing different voices, she or he has the opportunity to reflect upon and explore the many *I*-positions adopted in the dialogue between voices that are part of the

outside or the inside world of the dialogical self (Hermans, 2001). McAdams (2001, p. 482) poses that, "when telling their life stories, people will sometimes juxtapose clearly negative events with positive outcomes (redemption sequences) and highly positive events with negative outcomes (contamination sequences)." In similar vein, the participant now has to select three images on the collage that involve (a) two pictures/images with similar meanings (positive or negative events) and (b) one with an opposing meaning (positive or negative outcome). After selecting the three images, they then describe the similarities and differences of these images, and give reasons why they consider them similar or different. This step extends the self-reflective process as the participant engages in dynamic dialogue with relationships and functionalities embedded in the different images on her or his collage.

Step 5: Reflection

As a final step, the participant reflects upon the process of making the collage and writing her or his life story (Box 2). The self-reflection provides a space in which she or he can create a sense of coherence amongst the many *I*-positions occupied in the process of creating autobiographical memory (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2001). They get a chance to reflect upon the "existence of unity in the self, as closely related to continuity, although it does not contradict the existence of multiplicity as closely related to discontinuity" (Hermans, 2001, p. 248). Some question prompts might be added to help with the reflective process and with (re)constructing identity and integrating the multi-voiced self (Box 2). As a reflective process, this step also provides a form of debriefing for the participant who can recollect her or his thoughts about possible unresolved conflicts or emotional distress. It creates a narrative space for re-storying her or his narrative (White, 2007) and thus contains an embedded therapeutic component (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Box 2. Instrucitons self-reflection in the CLET project

Reflect upon the process of making the collage and telling your life story. You had to write some intimate stories. Now is the time to think about the feelings and thoughts you had when telling these stories. How did it affect you making this life story collage and telling your stories? What did you feel when doing the project? Can you think of anything you would like to add that you did not include previously?

Discussion of the CLET procedures

In the CLET, meanings are not fixed but negotiated. With the collage making, the CLET engages symbolic meanings and representations in the process of scaffolding life story remembering. It is a performance of positioning the dialogical self, involving cognitive, motivational and affective aspects of autobiographical memories as the individual engages in collage making. Both social and personal voices, as well as dominant and conflicting positions emerge in the rich 'text' and metaphors represented in the pictures and images posted on the collage as a form of narrative performance (Du Preez & Roos, 2008). There is consensus that language is the mechanism by which we construct our stories. It is in our social interaction and through conversation that meanings are, not given or 'found' but progressively made or fashioned. However, there are also those (including me) that argue for a broader

notion of storytelling extending to non-linguistic ways of meaning making (Harper, 1994, 2000). The collage as representation of self in the CLET is, or is part of, the doing of a certain kind of action or illocutionary act (Threadgold, 2003), the performance of which would not normally be described by just 'saying' or 'describing' something (Weber, 2008). Whereas locutionary acts refer to the use of speech or language or images in the common sense way (denotational value), illocutionary acts produce certain consequential effects in the speaker and the audience/researcher (connotational value). It puts language in the realm of a social action (Burr, 1995) engaging not only the actual content of the images but also the feelings, meanings, thoughts or actions implied by the image to the 'speaker' (participant or story teller) and the other, the listener.

Based on the principles of symbolic interactionism (Berg, 2009; McClelland, 2000), the CLET provides a context for making sense of and integrate the past, the present and the potential future. Symbolic interactionism implies that participants:

1. Act towards the images on the basis of the meanings, feelings and thoughts they assign to the people or things in the images
2. Negotiate meanings through the use of language and naming utilising and interpreting the biographic cues of their social-cultural environment
3. Modify their interpretations of the images on the collage through their own thought processes and inner conversation with others
4. See the self through a looking glass that is socially constructed and always in flux
5. Incorporate the 'outside' conversations, the socialising effect of others' expectations in the multiple forms of positioning in the dialogical self

Collage making prompts autobiographical memory. The collage contains personal pictures and images that have specific and relevant connotations and form the basis for the participant to reflect on dominant stories in her or his life. The pictures/images on the collage act as supportive structures or cues assisting the process of drawing out rich and vivid stories of the self. As representations of the self and their past lives, the pictures/images involve attachments to significant people, settings and actions, specific life events and experiences, moves, losses and acquisitions, successes or failures, future aspirations, or anything else that contributed to the participant's development in one way or another. In their writing (telling) about the pictures and images, the participant is free to express whatever comes to mind as authentic author of her/his own autobiography (McAdams, 1993) – a self-defining myth in the making. The life story collage stimulates reflecting upon these experiences and encourages memory in the process of integrating a wide range of different and probably conflicting self-positions and relationships (Bakhtin, 2002; McAdams, 2001) and supporting the necessary emotional process involved in narrating their stories. Through the social exchange of engaging with pictures and images, the participant positions her or himself and ascribes meanings to events co-creating autobiographical memories for identity narrating. This coincides with the humanistic tradition and the notion that the construction of identity is fundamentally a moral and reflexive project around issues of value and in response to questions about how to live a good or happy life as opposed to a bad or unhappy one (Danzinger, 1997). Significant attachments representing the dynamic and changing context and

content of identity emerge in response to social processes and the cultural, discursive and symbolic resources available at the time.

   The CLET is a collaborative process of inquiry (Berg, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 1999) actively and fully involving participants and researcher/counsellor in the process of co-constructing stories (protocols or data for analysis) and interpretation. Participant and researcher are integral to and collaborate actively in organising and framing the process of inquiry (Riesman, 1993). Research participants have particular insight and much to offer in terms of knowledge construction and as relational beings. They tell stories in a way that add significance to events and comment on beliefs, internal and external views of the self and core constructs regarding the nature of the world and reality (Pasupathi, 2006).

Making Sense of CLET Data – A Post-structural Framework for Analysis

  The analysis of CLET data aims to explore the ways in which the collage reflects or represents something of the maker's identity and augments the textual data (narratives) (Franz, 2005; Weber, 2008). Content analysis of the CLET starts with a process of text reduction before continuing with the identification of important themes and clusters of meaning. The sense-making process (analysis) unfolds in different phases as one organises the data for an in-depth thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and interpretation of the rich and vivid autobiographical memories in the strategic presentation (performative) of the embodied self in verbal and non-verbal texts. Figure 1 is an example of a collage constructed in a pilot project with first-year psychology students (discussed further on in this paper).

*Figure 1*. Example of a collage constructed in a CLET project with first-year psychology students.

  Clusters of meaning provide a coherent way of organising data (both verbal and non-verbal) in relation to specific research questions including, for example, significant attachments to people (the social self), to objects-in-the-world, and to life events and support the sense-making process. The following phases support the sense-making process (elaborated below):

1.   Creating an inventory of denotations and metaphors for the collage
2.   Summarising the narrative texts for each image/picture in terms of the key elements as they reflect the aim of the project
3.   Creating a story grid for each image/picture on the collage

Phase 1: Denotation inventory and metaphor analysis

The first phase involves creating a collage transcript by drawing corresponding spaces on a clean sheet of paper representing the position of each image/picture on the collage, complete with numbers ascribed by the participant to each of the spaces. On this transcript (Figure 2), I compile an inventory of denotations for the collage by listing the constituent elements systematically and cataloguing the literal meanings of the images and pictures posted on the collage. I follow this up by analysing the higher forms of signification and/or metaphors embedded in the images and asking questions about the listed elements in the denotation inventory (Du Preez & Roos, 2008; Penn, 2000; Weber, 2009). Analysing for higher forms of signification implies searching for deeper meanings, connotations, situated meanings (Gee, 1999) or metaphors that reflect something of the storytellers positioning of the dialogical self (Raggatt, 2007) and different *I*-positions adopted at the time of telling her or his story. The central question in this phase of the analysis relates to "What are the contextual meanings manifested in the symbolic aspects of images/pictures?"

Figure 2. Collage Transcript based on collage depicted in Figure 1.
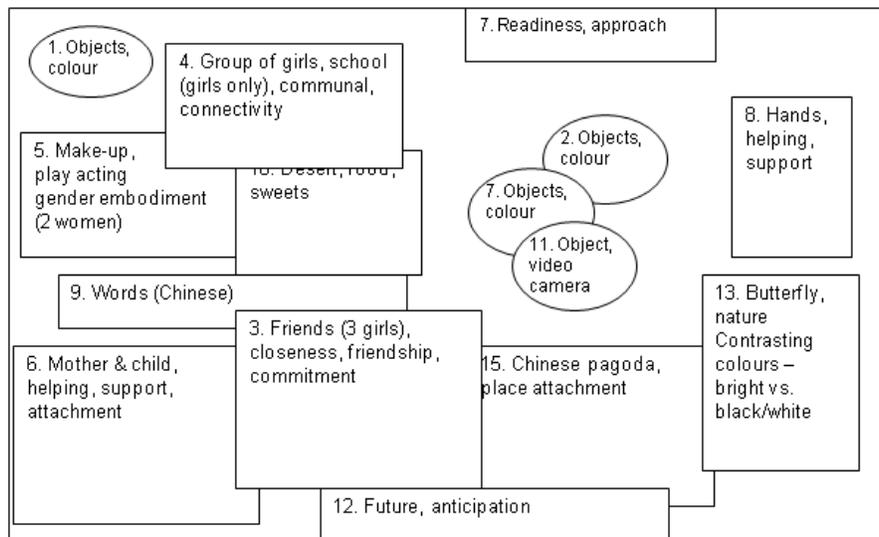
A second question to ask of the representation of the dialogical self in the collage entails "What is the relationship (distance and proximity) between different images/pictures?" The distribution of pictures and images present, to some extent, "the increasing density and heterogeneity of positions and the possibilities of larger position leaps [that] contribute to the experience of uncertainty" (Hermans, 2001, pp. 274-5) as the participant negotiates the personal and social positions in the self. It also reflects a positioning of the multiple voices of past and present, of personal and social self, and of movement in time and space in autobiographical memories.

Phase 2: Narrative analysis

Analysing the stories (narratives) that the participant told about each image/picture on the collage I aim to find the voice of the participant in a particular time, place or setting (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Summarising the texts for each image/picture I develop a story map (Richmond, 2002) recounting the participant's autobiographical memories in terms of the actual and symbolic meanings or metaphors, as well as past and present attachments to people and objects and the significance of events/experiences (Raggatt, 2007).

Phase 3: Creating a story grid for each participant

Finally, I create a story grid for each participant. The story grid is a unique protocol for each participant consisting of the (a) denotation inventory, (b) metaphors or connotations, and (c) autobiographical memories for each image/picture on the collage (Du Preez & Roos, 2008; Table 1). Each protocol, consisting of 12-15 stories (depending on the number of images/pictures on the collage), provides the final texts for conducting thematic analysis pertaining the substance, content and meanings of the participant's identity construction.

Table 1.

Example of a Story grid for the transcript depicted in Figure 2

No.	Denotational inventory	Metaphor	Participant's self-defining memory
3.	Friends	Closeness Friendship Commitment	The three girls have been friends since primary school. Each girl has her own unique characteristics to add to the friendship: "Ceci (alias) was an intelligent girl who taught me a lot of things in the school. Her learning attitude was good and she was ready to help"…"Zaza (alias) got the extreme character of Ceci. She was the kind of optimistic and curious girl. She guided me to be an open minded person and provided me some true happiness of living."
5.	Make up	Play acting Gender embodiment	She participated in choir and drama to enrich her life. She "learnt to appreciate the artistic work" and developed a "passion in drama and joined some performances and competitions." The activities also built her confidence and "leadership was gradually built up."
10.	Desserts	Enjoyment Pleasure	"I like to eat sweet dessert, for example, cheese cakes, chocolate and ice-cream. I will feel happy when I am enjoying the desserts, maybe it can be considered as a kind of escape from the reality."
13.	Butterfly, nature	Contradictions Dreaming Contrasting colours	"I cannot catch the past, and I am living in the present and I have confidence in my future." She hopes to travel and visit different places and to find peace and relaxation in nature.

Using the story grids for all participants, one analyses the themes across the narratives on the CLET and compiles a list of clusters (or codes; Raggatt, 2006, 2007; Weston, Gandell, Beauchamp, McAlpine, Wiseman, & Beauchamp, 2001) noting the actual and symbolic meanings or metaphors, dynamic conflicts, social-cultural constructions, and personal and social positioning of the dialogical self. Cluster labels provide access to the landscape of autobiographical memories that give form and content to identity as well as to the proximate nature and importance of interpersonal relationships including role relationships, status relationships and specific relationships (Ho, Chan, Peng & Ng, 2001). Raggatt (2007) poses that positioning within the dialogue (also the non-verbal 'dialogue' with pictures and images) is embedded in the social and cultural constructions of self and the discursive micro-encounters of daily life. Thus, in the CLET, micro-social roles (e.g., within the family) and macro-social scripts (e.g., local discourses) emerge in the strategic positioning of the self. Stereotypes prevailing in the micro and macro-social dialogues, specific relationships and psychological dimensions, and implicit differences in social dichotomies of society (e.g., trusting-non-trusting, power, gender, class, and so on) find expression in the collage and autobiographical memories elicited while making the collage. Furthermore, in narrative inquiry one can compare these labels across the story grids for different participants to gain an overall picture of the identity construction process of, for example, adolescents in a local context.

Reflexivity, Trustworthiness and Credibility

Ensuring trustworthiness and credibility is a key element in qualitative research. The process of analysing the textual material is a subjective one and unavoidable in qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003). Analysing CLET data has to take into account the complexities of qualitative data collection and analysis, and involves different perspectives to address issues not easily explained. The researcher should therefore adopt a critical reflective position when analysing CLET protocols, and check and re-check interpretations with the original collage, textual material and literature on the topic. Furthermore, global, local and thematic coherence emerge by focusing on the overall goals of the study. Thematic coherence evolves from noting the repeated use of certain themes and accentuating the "grounded nature" of these themes and maintaining awareness of the co-constructed nature of the research.

Ideally, a group of collaborators should conduct the analysis in order to ensure investigator triangulation, reduce biases to the minimum, and gain a fuller contextualised picture of the autobiographical memories represented in the CLET. To enhance credibility, triangulation with various data sources and theories (Miles & Huberman, 1994) facilitate richer and potentially more valid interpretations. The CLET provides different data sources (collage, textual data from transcribed interviews), while literature study adds multiple viewpoints for a deeper understanding of the topic under investigation. Thick descriptions, referring to information regarding the research context, the collage and different perspectives from participants (Weber, 2008), further add to a better understanding of the autobiographical memories and unique life story remembering elicited using the CLET.

Reflexivity forms an integral part of the process and includes regular returning to the collages, written texts and the literature while rigorously questioning one's own positioning in the collaborative meaning making process. For example, one has to accept that in constructing the collage, dominant *I*-positions play a role in the choices

participants make when presenting an appropriate 'face' to the audience. The audience not only involves the counsellor/researcher or others who might have access to the product, but also the multiple voices of the self. Keeping this in mind, one therefore has to scrutinise the collages and written texts for

- The autobiographical memories in the medium of expression (collage and writing/interview text),
- The personal and social positioning in the dialogical self,
- The origins of dynamic conflict in the person,
- The biographical cues, metaphors and symbolism, and
- The social and cultural constructions emerging in participant life story remembering

In the following section, I report on the application value of the CLET in a pilot study with adolescents in Macao. The objective of the pilot study was to determine whether the CLET could function adequately and effectively as mechanism for scaffolding autobiographical memories of identity (co)construction. For the purpose of this article, I selected only some of the core themes that emerged, and focus on the utility and practice of collaborating in the CLET.

Collaborative Inquiry – Implementation of CLET in a Pilot Study

I conducted a pilot study (Neuman, 2006) to explore the application value and implementation of the CLET, and to explicate the principles underlying the conceptualisation of the method for eliciting life story remembering and vivid mythmaking. The project took place with a group of non-English speaking adolescents attending an English language university in Macao. I recruited five male and thirteen female first year psychology students as participants because they were easy to access and willing. At the time, the students attended a course on social and personal competence that I presented, and I introduced the CLET as a project of learning regarding self-exploration and life-story remembering. I briefed the students in class, and they also received a structured outline of the project as homework assignment. Students received course credits for collaborating. However, participation for inclusion in the pilot study was voluntary and only those who gave consent were included in the final analysis for this paper.

In qualitative research of this nature a large sample was not required (Kvale, 1996), as the purpose was not to generalise any findings to a larger population. I therefore used a non-probability purposive sampling strategy (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007) to identify participants who fit the criteria of the project. Purposive sampling specifically aimed at identifying participants who could provide rich and vivid stories and who had adequate and in-depth understanding of the topic under investigation. According to psychosocial theory, participants included in this final analysis were all in the late adolescent phase of their lives (between 18 and 19 years of age), of Chinese-Macao origin and speaking Cantonese as their native language.

To protect the confidentiality of participants, they received an information leaflet during a briefing session (in class) explaining the purpose of the CLET as well as instructions for making the collage and writing their narratives on each picture/image. All participants signed a letter of consent allowing me to proceed and use the materials for research purposes. They were assured that no personal or identifying details would be disclosed in reporting on the project. Although

participating in the CLET project was not an experiment and participation did not expose them to any life-threatening situations, reflecting upon experiences of the past could open up unresolved conflicts and result in emotional distress. Debriefing was provided after completing the different steps in the CLET and students could speak to me as their lecturer or to an independent counsellor at the university who was previously informed of the project content. Both the counsellor and I were easily accessible for the students at the time, and we both are qualified psychologists who could provide the necessary support in case of emotional distress. However, none of the participants in this pilot project requested such consultation at the time. If applied in different contexts, debriefing by a psychological counsellor or mental health service provider should be available to participants upon request. This can be either the therapist/researcher or an independent person familiar with the content of the CLET.

Outcomes of the Pilot Study – Findings and Discussion

Positioning in the dialogical self becomes intelligible in the representation of different *I*-positions on the collage and in narrating one's stories. The self is represented in the distribution of images on the collage, and the metaphors and meanings become elucidated through commenting (narrating) on these images. The CLET is a powerful expressive channel for conveying non-verbal messages about the self and the different *I*-positions in the dialogical self – that which is below the level of conscious awareness – and for modulating emotional impact (Raggatt, 2007). It is not only an individual movement. Rather, it is a process that is context-shaped and context renewing. Expressions in the CLET are not true or false, that is, they are not truth-evaluable. Instead, they are subjective meaning-making actions, or part of the doing of a certain kind of action, the performance of which would not normally be described by just 'saying' or 'describing' something. When something is wrong with them then they are 'happy' or 'unhappy', not right or wrong.

The collage as mode of expression

In the collage as non-linguistic (pre-linguistic) mode of expression, images and picture represent embodied meanings. Different embodiments become accessible as participants enter the self-space of the collage at some moment in time. Biological facts of bodily endowments, positioning with regard to gender identity, and conflicts over body image were some of the aspects that found expression in the images selected for the collage (Figure 1). Furthermore, multiple *I*-positions emerged (Hermans, 2001; Raggatt, 2006, 2007) as attachments to people, objects (external) and life events were positioned in relation to the self (internal) and vice versa. Thus, both "internal and external positions receive their significance as emerging from their mutual transactions over time" (Hermans, 2001, p. 252). Drawing on the principles of social constructionism (Gergen, 2000; Gergen & Gergen, 2006) the CLET emphasised subjective meanings and the creativity of participants as they (co)constructed their social worlds as active collaborators rather than passive, conforming objects of observation. The CLET focuses on interaction and on the underlying meanings of events to the participant, shifting the attention away from stable norms and values towards more changeable, continually co-constructed social processes. In the collage, the participants accounted for experiences, symbolic meanings, and multiple voices as they (re)presented identity in 'conversation' with

multiple voices (people), objects, attachments and social interactions represented in the images they collate.

    Figure 3 shows two examples of collages compiled by first year psychology students in Macao engaged in this CLET pilot study. In these examples, the richness of the collage as mode of embodied expression in a given space and time in the participant's life is evident.

Figures 3. Examples of two collages as embodied expressions of self (reprinted with permission from participants).

    In the distribution of pictures and images on the collage, the participants represented different voices in the dialogical self that were either (a) coherent-integrated or (b) fragmented-diffusive. For example, identity was represented in the performance on the collage with high levels of self-differentiation and self-integration (Berzonsky & Adams, 1999) and a (re)positioning of the self both with regard to personal and social relationships. The images on Figure 3 (left) showed commitment to values and ideological becoming (Tappan, 2005) and integrated voices from the past with future expectations and goals. There was a harmonious co-existence of multiple voices and "reorganisation of the self in such a way that an intensified flow of positions is counteracted by an increasing need for more stable positions that guarantee a basic consistency of the self-system" (Hermans, 2001, p. 255). Contrary to the coherent-integrated presentation of self, positioning of self in the collage on the right (Figure 3) represented an identity that is fragmented and trapped by the diffusion of the past, the insecurities of bounded external scripts, and a seemingly avoidant processing strategy (Berzonsky & Adams). For example, Figure 3 (right), reflected childlike images that did not show any ideological commitment or integrated sense of self.

    As mode of expression, the collage incorporated ideas of "stagecraft, of role-taking and role play, of scripting, of strategic display and 'dramaturgy', all as metaphors of performance in everyday life" (Raggatt, 2007, p. 362). Hermans (2002) referred to Beebe who "analyses the film as a theatre of mind" (p. 157). In a similar fashion to Beebe's film analysis, characters in the collage reflected possible positions in the multi-voiced self of the creator resembling autobiographical memories. These memories were integrated as the participant used imagery to express her or his enduring concerns or unresolved conflicts in the process of constructing and reconstructing identity (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2001; Thorne, 2004). Furthermore, participants experienced the collage making as an intentional activity

with a specific purpose in mind. It provided for an "alternative reality" in which the participant could search for (and find) pertinent ways in which to tell her or his life story. As one participant aptly commented:

> ...the Life story Collage attracts my attention since I like doing the artistic work that can show my own feeling and thinking. It is like a mind map that represents my thought. Sometimes, I can learn more about myself from this work. Besides, it is also a good chance to look at my life once. From the collage, I really think about my life process, my experience and all the events that happened to me. Those who still appear in my memories influence me a lot. I use this chance to rearrange my memory into some neat files so that I can search what I need in the future...During the making process, I feel both happy and sad. Some important memories come to my mind when I am searching for the image, on the other hand, some bad memories also appear in my mind. All of them are unforgettable and all of them made up my life....

Writing as mode of expression

Writing as mode of expression had advantages when conducting the CLET with participants who find discursive modes threatening. Non-English speaking participants in particular found writing easier than having to converse (in an interview) as it allowed them time to consider and reflect upon the memories they wanted to present to the audience. As one participant in the pilot study aptly explained:

> Writing became a way of escaping from the stressful reality for me. Every day after I finished homework in my room and no matter how late it was, I could not help starting my computer and wrote until I was really tired. I got a prize in the national composition sponsored by my favourite magazine in junior three.

The CLET provided a space in time where the participant could collaborate in writing as intentional activity with a specific purpose in mind. It offered a space for cognitive activities such as "observation, speculation, doubt, questioning, self-awareness, problem stating, problem solving, emoting, and ideation" (Kerka, 1996). The participant took responsibility for her or his unique life story and gained insight with regard to embodied realities and the origins of dynamic conflict, as well as the social and cultural positioning in the dialogical self. In their writing, participants in the pilot study also had the opportunity to move between positions in the dialogical self without feeling threatened. The CLET, both collage making and writing, allowed their authentic voices to be heard without interference from an interviewer with question prompts.

Negotiating moral positions in the dialogical self

'Moral career' (Raggatt, 2007) as meta-concept in the CLET related to how the participant negotiated different moral positions and explored, for example, conflicting ideas about the good self and the bad self, an autonomous, separated self, and redemption and contamination scripts. The collage and accompanying narratives

became a representation of the private and public self and constituent of good and bad *me*-stories. For example, in the pilot study a participant struggling with the moral conflict of being jealous when her brother was born (13 years her junior), posted a picture of her brother as young boy and then, in her narrative on the picture, positioned herself as caretaker and protector rather than as sibling.

> When I was thirteen years old, there is a new family member. He is my little brother, Ka Fai. I enjoy the life having a little brother though we always go quarrel. I like the feeling that he depends most of the things on me.

Presenting an appropriate face, the "good me" self included 'back staging' some aspects of identity felt to be inappropriate while 'front staging' the more favourable parts. For example, presenting a picture of self when receiving a school-leaving certificate on graduation day, a participant commented in her narrative:

> I was a good child in the eyes of my parents in the aspects of schooling. I take care of my academic learning in school

while another participant said:

> I promised that I will do everything that is up to the expectations of my parents. I will never try to do things that make them feel disappointed and I will always put the teachings of my parents in my mind.

Juxtaposing relations

Furthermore, identification of the origins of dynamic conflict in the person, and of moral action (redemption and contamination sequences [McAdams, 2001]), agency and communion was possible on the collage and in the narratives as strategic representations of the self. "As part of a narrative juxtaposition, characters [were] portrayed as conversing with others, often in opposition. Such characters may be part of the world that we define as 'outside', but they may also be part of the 'inside' world of imagination" (Hermans, 2001, p. 249). By contrasting images with similar and different meanings (juxtaposing), social and cultural constructions interweave with the medium of expression. Various internal stimuli compete with external demands and as "narrative memory is recalled [and] a coordination of thought, feeling, goal-oriented activity, and bodily responses is achieved" (Singer, 1995, p. 430). Institutional roles and rituals as well as political/hierarchical positioning (Raggatt, 2007) found expression in the multiple forms of positioning represented in the collage and life story writing. The CLET provided a space for expressing the continuous striving to combine the independent voice of individual achievement with the interdependent voice of a communal self (McAdams, 1993). Power relations, dominance, the embodied self and relations and interactions with various groups and dialogues found expression as the participant positioned her or himself on the collage and in the writing. Furthermore, constructing the collage and narratives also allowed the dominant voices of society to emerge in biographical cues (Habermas & Bluck, 2000) for autobiographical remembering.

In the pilot study, attachments to the social and physical world of family, friends and objects became dominant voices in the positioning of the dialogical self. This aligned with the cultural cues of their Chinese origins and the relationship focus and other orientation (Sun, 2008). For example, in Macao as predominantly collective society, Chinese adolescents have very little power in the parent-child dialogical relationship and often had to deal with conflicting experiences of being distanced in relation to the parents (Sun) and protecting the family by not exposing problem relations. Posting only pictures with friends, one participant positioned herself, for example, in opposition to the family whom she did not trust, and who rejected her in critical moments.

> I was always alone…I was being neglected. I rarely got pictures that took with my whole family. I felt lonely when in my house, thus till now, I have a strong sense that I will always be with my friends whenever I am needed.

Friends became proximate and important for the adolescent. Friends were not only as a source of emotional support but also as a way to emancipate from the family home and moving the dialogical self to new temporal-spatial contexts. Most likely because parent-child relationships in the Chinese culture lack warmth and emotional connectivity (Sun, 2008), friends became particularly important as the adolescent re-positioned the dialogical self in relation to others. For example, posting a picture of an attractive Asian boy, one participant narrated:

> I have been dating for three times…it influences me a lot. These three guys play an important role in my life. They taught me a lot. Because of them, there is "mine" now. I love myself at this stage.

Final Remarks

The article offered an explication of the Collage Life story Elicitation Technique I developed for scaffolding autobiographical remembering and self-defining memories. I believe that the CLET has great potential for use in different settings and with varying populations in both clinical and non-clinical settings. The CLET combines different steps to scaffold the narrating process and to elicit autobiographical memories. The different steps structure the process eliciting rich and vivid stories and metaphors about the past in the present and with a prospective future in mind. Participants become co-researchers as they reflect upon their (re)positioning in the dialogical self and co-construct a "new" sense of self through narrative meaning making.

The CLET has numerous advantages. In settings where multiple languages prevail both in verbal and non-verbal communication, doing qualitative (narrative) research poses a constraint that is more noticeable when the method of inquiry depends on how people socially co-construct the self, create meanings and negotiate certain phenomena or forms of (personal) knowledge through language. Collage making and writing are ways of dialoguing that overcome the problem of verbal communication (Hermans, 2001, p. 261) utilising alternative modes of expression. Although conducting the CLET using written narratives is somewhat time-consuming and limits the prospect of probing issues that are unclear or that need further exploration, it overcomes the potential barriers of face-to-face interviews. There is,

however, the loss of the finer nuances of language and discourse when translating non-English transcripts. Furthermore, the method offers a framework for doing narrative inquiry in settings where the philosophy of mind and the epistemologies that underlie local processes and social interactions lean more towards interdependence and relationship rather than towards individuality and mutually exclusive binaries (Van Schalkwyk, 2006).

Finally, I believe the CLET has application value with different populations. Counsellors and therapists could utilise the technique to explore a variety of questions through narrative inquiry and meaning making in clinical settings, particularly with individuals and groups who have difficulties with discursive modes of expression. As the pilot study suggested, adolescents engage with the steps as a "fun" activity, something to which they could easily relate. The CLET offers a narrative space in which to negotiate past, present and a potential future providing a structure for (co)constructing an integrated sense of self-in-the-adult-world and ideological becoming (Tappan, 2005). It also provides a space for overcoming misunderstandings as multiple sources of data coalesce to supply structure for autobiographical remembering. Clinical populations such as clients in a therapeutic setting (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004), inmates of a drug rehabilitation facility (project in progress), and patients who suffered head trauma could benefit from the scaffolding process embedded in the CLET. Other populations in non-clinical settings could also benefit from collaborating on the CLET. For example, men exploring their "new" identity as first time fathers (Marx, 2005), and young people exploring their unique consumer identities (Mulaudzi, 2005). These are but a few examples of populations that could benefit from collaborating on the CLET, and further study is underway to also explore the application value with children in middle childhood.

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