

Reading Between the Lines: An Exploratory Pilot Study of a Co-creation Approach to Life Story Work in Aged Care in Australia

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TITLE PAGE

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Declaration of author consent and contribution

All authors consent to the submission of this manuscript to the Journal of Applied Gerontology.

Dr Xanthe Golenko was the project lead and was instrumental in designing, implementing and evaluating the Life Stories Program. She was actively involved in completing individual life stories projects, training and supervising students and data collection. She also drafted and reviewed the manuscript. Dr Asmita Manchha lead the data analysis and drafted and reviewed the manuscript. Ms Anna Fowke played a key role in implementation of the Life Stories Program and the development of the posters. She was the

site supervisor for the University students and also reviewed the manuscript. Ms Georgina Johnstone provided research and operational support for the Life Stories Program and reviewed the manuscript. Prof. Judy Lowthian oversaw the governance of the Life Stories Program and the ethical conduct of the research, as well as reviewing the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Life story work (LSW) uses a narrative, reminiscence approach to capturing memories from one's life and has shown positive outcomes for participants. However, LSW in aged care has been criticised for being resource intensive, often involving care staff using pre-determined process and output formats. This pilot study explored participants' lived experiences of a novel co-creation approach to LSW conducted predominantly with university students and older adults in residential aged care and retirement communities, producing multi-modal outputs. Within a 12-month period, 33 LSW projects were completed (21 books, 5 posters and 7 digital stories). Semi-structured interviews (n = 44) explored participants' lived experience of completing a LSW project. Findings indicate that working with students and adopting a flexible, co-creation approach that empowers participants to make decisions, engage in learning and reflection, and build meaningful relationships can maximise opportunities for transformative impacts, and enable providers to offer a LSW program despite finite resources.

What this paper adds

- This paper provides insights into the lived experience of participating in a co-creation approach to LSW projects from multiple perspectives.
- It proposes a conceptual model that represents the process of LSW that participants engage in.
- It presents an alternative approach to LSW that involves working with students and uses a flexible method to the process and output, which minimises staff burden and enables providers to offer a LSW program despite finite resources.

Applications of study findings

- LSW, when underpinned by building rapport, embracing vulnerability, and creating inclusive spaces, amplifies the voices of older adults, providing them with the opportunity to reflect on their life and regain a sense of identity and belonging.
- LSW provides the opportunity for staff to get to know residents and clients on a deeper level, which can better meet the needs and preferences of individuals and aligns with person-centred care.
- Engaging students in LSW can provide opportunities to experience positive interactions with older adults and breakdown stereotypes and institutionalised ageism, and potentially increase aged care workforce.

KEY WORDS:

Storytelling; aged care; co-creation; lived experience; wellbeing, students, social connection

MAIN TEXT

Introduction

Changes that occur in later life can have a major impact on a person's subjective wellbeing (Stephoe et al., 2015). Bereavement, transitions to retirement and institutional age care can impact on one's identity, sense of purpose, life satisfaction, health and wellbeing as they are challenged to adapt as process and adapt (Sullivan & Williams, 2017). In addition, older adults (generally classified as those aged 65 or older, (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023)) are more vulnerable to feelings of loneliness and social isolation which can have detrimental effects on their overall health and quality of life (National Academy of

Sciences, 2020). The importance of maintaining or improving emotional wellbeing and quality of life in older age has been gaining attention in the literature and in practice (Beard et al., 2016; Steptoe et al., 2015) and recent aged care reforms require service providers to offer programs and lifestyle activities that are aligned with person-centred care (Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission, 2018).

Life story work

Life story work is a type of reminiscence, narrative-based intervention that gives people the opportunity to talk about their life experiences. It involves collecting and documenting personal memories through stories, pictures and other mementos, and usually results in a “product” such as a life story book, collage or digital recording (McKeown, Clarke, & Repper, 2006). While LSW draws on narrative and reminiscence therapies, and have therapeutic benefits, we support the notion that LSW is not considered as therapy (Westerhof et al., 2010). This means that people facilitating LSW do not need to have a recognised qualification in mental health or other related health discipline. However, it should also be noted that LSW may not be suitable for everyone as it can evoke painful memories, therefore residents and clients should be carefully selected and appropriate supports should be provided for people who experience distress (Gridley et al., 2020; McKinney, 2017).

Studies on LSW have been undertaken with older adults across a range of health and social care settings (McKeown et al., 2006) including residential aged care (Doran et al., 2019), community centres (Lai et al., 2018) and with people living with dementia (Gridley, Birks, & Parker, 2020), and have demonstrated positive results for older adults and family members. Studies report that LSW can enhance emotional and mental wellbeing among older adults (Subramaniam & Woods, 2012) and preserve personal identity (Doran et al., 2019) Studies show that LSW is perceived by older adult participants as an enjoyable activity that

can stimulate conversation and reduce boredom (Henkel et al., 2016). Research involving family members found that LSW helped them to build closer bonds with their loved ones, and that families valued the investment in their relatives by staff (Grøndahl et al., 2017).

Research has also demonstrated benefits for aged care staff including enjoyment and attitudinal change (McKeown et al., 2010). LSW also helped staff to better understand what is important to older adults, to know them as people (Cooney & O'Shea, 2019; Thompson, 2011), and the end-product was found to be a useful conversation piece (Doran et al., 2019). Improvements in individualised nursing care plans and activity programmes and changes in the aged care home environment have also been attributed to LSW (Berendonk & Caine, 2019).

Social and relational benefits of LSW are also consistently reported in the literature (McKeown et al., 2006; Nathan et al., 2022). For example, LSW can strengthen feelings of companionship and belonging, and help improve interpersonal relationship through enhanced communication (Doran et al., 2019). Additional benefits of intergenerational approaches to LSW include the potential transfer of knowledge to younger generations, and increased positive attitudes among young people towards ageing and older adults (Lee, Jarrott, & Juckett, 2020).

Potential risks have also been identified including staff burden, resource constraints, and reliance on managerial support (Cooney & O'Shea, 2018). Studies highlight the importance of training for staff to be sensitive, and to enable them to cope with and manage the positive and negative emotions that may arise (Gridley et al., 2020; McKeown et al., 2015). A limitation of LSW was that other staff and relatives were not always aware that their client or loved one had created a life story book and therefore it was not used to gain the additional benefits noted earlier (Gridley et al., 2020).

The literature presents a wide variety of ways that LSW is conducted, however programs generally target specific population groups, and can use prepared templates with pre-determined processes and outputs (e.g. Möllergren & Harnett, 2024). This standardised approach removes the ability to tailor LSW to the needs and preferences of individual clients and residents, and the ability for providers to work within existing resource availability.

The Bolton Clarke Life Stories Program

The Bolton Clarke Life Stories Program is a novel approach that adopts a strengths-based approach which focuses on developing an individual's self-determination (McCashen, 2017). The program involves older adults living in residential aged care (RAC) and retirement living (RL) communities (referred to as *storytellers*), partnering predominantly with individual university students or small groups of high school students (referred to as *storyteller assistants (SAs)*) to work on individual life story projects using a co-creation approach and producing multi-modal outputs. In Australia, residential aged care homes (i.e. nursing homes) provide ongoing care and accommodation for older people unable to continue living independently in their own home (Department of Health and Aged Care 2023), whereas retirement living communities are purpose-built housing designed for older people with independent accommodation but may include shared facilities (Grant Thornton, 2014).

Storyteller assistant training and pairing with storytellers: All SAs participated in an online two-hour training session delivered by the author XG. The training session covered: LSW; interview conversation techniques; risk management; recording, documenting and storing information; information technology (IT) requirements; and compiling information and designing the book. *Storyteller assistants* were paired with *storytellers* based on convenience of geographic location and/or building rapport with older adults during introductory activities. Staff and university students worked one-on-one with an older adult,

while high school students worked in small groups of two to three students with one adult *storyteller*.

Collecting stories and memorabilia: SAs spent up to five sessions with their *storytellers*, which were conducted in an informal, friendly conversation style. SAs invited *storytellers* to share stories about their lives through open-ended questions and photos, life story cards, prompting, and guiding to assist with recall. SAs audio recorded some sessions, with permission from their *storytellers*, for notetaking and accuracy of information. All recordings were deleted once the project was completed and approved. Digital copies of photos and other memorabilia, such as letters, certificates, postcards, newspaper articles, were collected to help bring the stories to life.

Co-creating the output: Multimodal outputs included life story books, posters and digital stories created using a collaborative process between *storytellers* and SA involving: 1) sorting items to be included and excluded; 2) choosing the order in which to present items; 3) format, design and layout of the output; and 4) reviewing, final editing, and obtaining approval from the *storyteller*. Books were created using photobook software, Momento (Momento, 2023). Posters were created using *Canva* (Canva, 2023); they provided a more cost-effective alternative, and were suitable for older adults who experienced cognitive decline, did not have many photos from their past, or preferred not to share detailed stories. Digital stories were created using *Movie Maker Pro – Video Editor* (Microsoft, 2023). Audio and video recordings were made and edited together with still images, voice recordings and music into a short five-minute video.

A printed copy of the book or poster, and a digital copy of the digital story on a USB, was presented to each *storyteller* free of charge. *Storytellers* could order additional copies for family and friends at their own cost. Several sites hosted presentation events to celebrate the achievements.

Study aim

This study explored participants' lived experience in the *Bolton Clarke Life Stories Program* and aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How do participants (*storytellers and SAs*) experience LSW?
- 2) How does LSW impact on:
 - older adults' emotional and social wellbeing?
 - staff morale and older adult-staff relationships?
 - University and high school students' attitudes towards older adults and aged care?

Methods

Study design, location and time frame

This qualitative pilot study was conducted over a 12-month period from March 2021 to February 2022, within four RAC homes and three RL communities in South-east Queensland from one aged care provider. The sites were selected for convenience for *SAs* and the research team, based on geographic location being within one hour driving distance from Brisbane. A total of 33 life story projects were completed during the 12-month period as reported in Table 1. Some *storytellers* had more than one project output (e.g., book and digital story).

< Insert Table 1 here >

Twenty-eight *storytellers* participated in the Life Stories Program and completed at least one life story project (i.e., book, poster and/or digital story). Twenty-four *storytellers* were living in RAC homes across four sites (Site one: n=4; Site two: n=7; Site three: n=8; Site four: n=5). The remaining four *storytellers* lived in RL communities across three sites.

Participant selection, recruitment and consent

Storytellers: Older adults living in participating Bolton Clarke RAC homes and RL communities, who had completed a life story project within the specified 12-month period, were able to provide consent, and were not diagnosed with a severe mental illness were eligible to participate in the study. RAC and RL managers selected *storytellers* based on their knowledge and interactions with the older adults who expressed a desire to share stories from their lives. These selected older adults were invited to participate, and those who agreed were contacted by the researcher to provide additional information and seek written informed consent.

Storyteller assistants (SAs) - RAC lifestyle staff; University and high school students: Lifestyle staff from participating RAC sites were eligible to participate. University students enrolled in health-related programs at undergraduate or postgraduate levels from a local university participated in the *Life Stories Program* as part of a placement. The university was responsible for selecting suitable students based on an expressed interest in either working with older adults or learning more about LSW. On-site supervision was provided by either the site manager, lifestyle staff or the lead researcher. University students who completed life story projects with older adults during the intervention period were invited to participate in the study. Written informed consent was sought by the researcher prior to commencing. Year 11 Students from a local high school (aged 15 to 17 years) were invited to participate as volunteers in the *Life Stories Program* as part of their school curriculum requirements. Following a presentation at the school, interested students contacted the lead researcher directly. Parents of participating students were required to complete a permission form and written informed consent was sought from the students prior to commencing. All high school students were supervised by the lead researcher while they were interacting with the older adult *storytellers*.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with *storytellers* and *SAs* by experienced qualitative researcher and Research Fellow, XG, within one month of completing their life story projects.

Storytellers: Interviews with older adult *storytellers* were conducted in-person, either within their homes or a quiet area of their RAC home. Interviews were conducted with 23 of the older adult *storytellers* (RAC: n=19; RL: n=4) with just under 40% being male (n=9). Of the five *storytellers* who did not participate in interviews, two passed away prior to conducting the interviews and three residents were deemed ineligible to interview as they were no longer able to provide informed consent (could not remember project participation and/or had difficulty understanding and responding to interview questions). Follow up interviews were conducted with all four *storytellers* from RL communities; three of which were male. For privacy reasons, nobody else was present during the interviews.

Storyteller assistants: A total of 21 *SAs* participated in the study. Interviews with university students were conducted in-person in a quiet and private location with the RAC home upon completion of their placement period. Fifteen university students from one university who completed a life stories project with at least one *storyteller* living in a participating RAC home were recruited into the study. Student participants were enrolled in the following degrees: Bachelor of Human Services (n=3); Bachelor of Social Work (n=5); and Master of Social Work (n=7); three were male.

Interviews were conducted with individual high school students online at the completion of the life story project. Four high school students (1 male) from one school completing Year 11, who worked in pairs to complete a life story project with one *storyteller* in participating RL communities, were recruited into the study.

Staff were interviewed in the final stages of the study period. Two staff members from one RAC home who had each completed life story projects with multiple residents were recruited into the study. One staff member was a lifestyle coordinator, and the other was an activities officer.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the duration across participants ranged from 5 to 45 minutes (median 17.4 minutes). Transcripts were created utilising Microsoft Office 365, with one researcher, AM listening to the audio and revising transcripts to resolve any errors. Any queries were resolved with XG.

An interview protocol (see Figure 1) was used to guide questions for each participant group.

< *Insert Figure 1 about here* >

The researcher, XG had met all SA participants through the selection and recruitment process, and delivery of the online training. The researcher also supervised the high school students while they were interacting with *storytellers*. XG also met most of the *storytellers* and was involved in creating two of the digital stories. Prior to conducting this research, XG had no direct experience in conducting life story work, and therefore approached this study with few assumptions and an open mind.

Data analysis

An inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was employed to identify and categorise themes derived from the interview data. Data from participant groups were combined as a) the population groups within the *storytellers* and SAs were not large enough to split into sub-groups, b) the outcomes for *Storytellers* and SAs are interrelated, as they are heavily influenced by the collaborative relationships and interactions, and the co-creation process. Two researchers (XG & AM) engaged in an iterative process of reading through

interview transcripts and developing an initial list of codes using NVIVO 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2018). After independently compiling categories of codes, researchers reviewed the codes together and defined sub-themes through a discussion where consensus was reached (Miles & Huberman, 1994). No conflicting cases were identified. Understanding of themes was checked with interviewer to ensure that it captured the essence of interviewee's experience. These sub-themes were further regrouped into larger categories, which produced overarching themes (see Supplementary Material 1 for coding tree). These themes were revised through discussions with the research team, with any disagreements and decisions were made by consensus.

Ethical approval was obtained from Bolton Clarke Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 210000). This study adheres to the research reporting standards according to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist for qualitative studies (Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007) (Supplementary Material 2).

Results

Participants' lived experiences of engaging in life story work

Five overarching themes were derived from the interview data: 1) Building connection; 2) Engaging in a co-creation process; 3) Experiencing emotions; 4) Rebuilding a sense of identity; and 5) Transforming attitudes towards older adults and aged care. Additional quotes for each theme are presented in Supplementary Material 1.

Theme 1- Building connection: Participants identified that building connection prior to commencing LSW created a positive experience. Enablers to building connection between the *storytellers* and their *SAs* include building rapport, embracing vulnerability, and creating inclusive spaces.

Building rapport was an essential part of the storytelling process as it assisted with facilitating an open dialogue as described in this quote from one of the older adult *storytellers*:

“The important thing is to have somebody that can just let you express yourself in whatever way. I find it difficult to express myself, but making me feel relaxed; I think that was what made this easy...” (S_08)

Embracing vulnerability and enabling people to feel comfortable to share their personal stories was important in building connection, as one *SA* recalled:

“We kind of build a mutual trust; we became really close by disclosing information and personal stories to each other. While sometimes I share mine as well; that's a really good way to enhance our relationship because you won't tell a stranger something personal. But here it's safe. It's OK because we are in the process of doing this life story project, so everything is about your experience, your feeling, you know your story.” (SA_12)

Creating an inclusive space helped participants feel accepted and valued when sharing their stories. One student *SA* stated:

“Just remaining aware that everyone's culture and beliefs makes them who they are today, and it makes all their stories individual and special to themselves. So knowing that every story told isn't the same and that everyone has their own special aspect and that culture comes into play. I respect that at all times.” (SA_11)

Theme 2 - Engaging in a co-creation process: Most participants recognised that LSW involved *storytellers* and *SAs* engaging in a co-creation process, which involved a practice of working together to achieve a shared goal. For instance, one of the *storytellers* shared:

“She [SA] doesn't press you about what you're going to say, she would have a leading point and then I would pick it up from there.” (S_18)

Participants understood LSW as a reciprocal process whereby exchanging ideas and sharing views could enhance the overall story as one student *SA* explained:

“[Storyteller] would go ‘I can't think of the word’ ... I knew exactly what she was trying to say so I would just slightly tweak her words without changing the context of what she was saying. She appreciated that...” (SA_21)

Participants also demonstrated a practice of checking in with each other to clarify their interpretations reflected the *storytellers'* felt experience. One student *SA* said:

“I was double checking with [storyteller] to check the details because in the first interview she roughly told me her whole life story and during the second or third interview I just keep digging deeper and deeper... I can gain much more details of her feelings through that process.” (SA_13)

This collaborative approach resulted in outputs that represented a shared understanding, which were relatable, authentic, and engaging.

Theme 3 - Experiencing emotions: Participants experienced several emotions during the LSW process. Most participants described it as an enjoyable and rewarding activity. *SAs* recalled feeling contentment from hearing the stories and seeing the enjoyment of *storytellers* when recalling their memories:

“I see the happiness on her face at the end of the interview- I can't wait to show her [poster]...” (SA_15)

At the same time, participants also experienced sadness when reflecting on emotional stories, for example one SA stated:

“It’s really emotional...some [memories] heartbreaking and really touching.”

(SA_21)

Storytellers appreciated the quality of the finished products and described feeling proud of their LSW outputs as it would help preserve their memories:

“It makes me feel happy when I fall off the perch, the [book] will still be there- a bit of my story.” (S_22)

Storyteller assistants also recognised that conducting LSW was a rewarding learning experience because it enabled them to understand other peoples’ perspectives:

“It was nice to be able to bond with someone and understand the life they lived, living their lives through words...I’m learning about different cultures and the way that he discussed their cultures gave me a new perspective.” (SA_01)

Theme 4 - Rebuilding a sense of identity and belonging: Many described that LSW provided an opportunity to reminisce and recognise that they “had a good life” as one *storyteller* stated:

“It was an interesting experience- made me think back over of my life and realise I had been very happy. I had troubles but overall, I had been happy, so it was a good thing for me.” (S_18)

Another *storyteller* recalled how they felt when reliving their accomplishments:

“It’s made me feel things we did was worthwhile, and it was really fulfilling to be sharing with others...” (S_01)

LSW may also help with healing past experiences:

“It's good to talk about them [stories]- I never spoke about any of that to anybody.”

(S_22)

Storytellers were able to reframe negative experiences through focusing on their own personal growth and resilience as one SA stated:

“[Storyteller] told me she felt cleansed from the past because she hadn't dealt with them [experiences] but she dealt with it and now she said she can finally after 50 years put it to rest.” (SA_20)

One SA observed this program encouraged *storytellers* to interact with other residents in care home, which may help reduce feelings of social isolation:

“I think it's a precious experience for the residents. [the resident I worked with] is quiet and was not active with other residents but after we started the project, she was talking with other residents. Sometimes she will ask another resident how's your project going? so I think it's really provided a chance for them to have a more active attitude towards their daily lives.” (SA_13)

In addition, participants described how engaging in LSW provided greater opportunities for *storytellers* to bond with others within the RAC environment and broader community:

“The life story books are so meaningful- this project involves the residents, their families, staff, their friends, the whole community because they're sharing their books.” (SA_20)

“She's [staff member] just there for you [resident] and my daughter said exactly the same thing. She said [staff member] is so good and was thrilled to bits with the books. It's lovely mum for you to go through that [LSW] she said I'll treasure it forever.”

(S_06)

Theme 5 - Transforming attitudes towards older adults and aged care: LSW is a novel opportunity for challenging negative pre-conceived notions about working with older adults and aged care. Student SAs described how their attitudes changed from engaging in the program:

“We didn't think that we [younger generation] could engage [with older adults] but when we were sharing experiences everything changed- it really helped us to get to know the elderly.” (SA_04)

“Before this placement I was a little bit afraid of creating waves for elderly people but after I love to communicate with the elderly people because they are so lovely- [LSW] is kind of an enhancing experience.” (SA_13)

Several student SAs perceived that storytelling helped them create authentic connections with people living in aged care that outside this program they may have not encountered before:

“By knowing them [older adults] I start to see them as a person, not as resident number 13.” (SA_12)

These positive experiences further afforded student SAs to gain another perspective about ageing and aged care:

“When I started my placement, I was afraid of getting old because for me it means getting slow, getting vulnerable- that's kind of my personal perception of aging. But since I started this project, I know how they [residents] are feeling about their life. I realise aging and getting old is part of the life process and they are still resilient. They have a lot of activities going on here and enjoying their life, they are still positive which influenced me a lot to be positive.” (SA12)

Student SAs also reflected on how conducting LSW with *storytellers* encouraged them to view working in aged care as a viable career choice:

“I'd never really considered aged care before as an area to go into whereas now I could work with older people. I've realised that age it doesn't really matter...”

(SA_06)

For staff, LSW had a positive impact in terms of boosting morale and building deeper connections with *storytellers*. Staff perceived conducting LSW added a layer of meaning to their job, which reinforced positive aspects about working in aged care:

“I love every aspect of my job but having a project like this was really important to me. It gave me more reason to look forward to coming to work.” (SA_21)

They also described LSW as an authentic way of building a more comprehensive understanding of their *storytellers*, which could then assist with improving care delivery:

“I think getting to work with that person on a one-to-one basis, realising how much trust they've put in you, what they share with you gives you such an understanding of their life and them.” (SA_20)

Discussion

This pilot study explored participants' lived experience of engaging in a *Life Stories Program* that used a co-creation approach to LSW and was conducted with older adults living in RAC and RL communities (*storytellers*) together with university and high school students and Lifestyle staff (*storyteller assistants (SA)*).

In addressing our first research question: *How do participants experience LSW?* Findings from our study suggest that participants engage in a process that encompasses four key components as presented in Figure 2.

<Insert Figure 2 about here>

Our conceptual model identifies four key components that are directly linked with the emergent themes. The first component is *Enablers of LSW*, which links with *Theme 1: Building connection*. Our findings support the well-recognised notion that creating a safe space and sense of trust and mutual respect are imperative for fostering an open dialogue (Winters, 2020), and are also a cornerstone of successful person-centred care (Ebrahimi et al., 2021). By employing strategies to work through initial feelings of unease and vulnerability, such as getting to know the person and focusing on individuals' strengths through general conversation, completing recreational activities together, finding common interests and looking at photos they can collectively build trust and rapport. This finding is supported by other studies that have shown that participating in meaningful activities and prompts such as photographs can help to build relationships (King & Miller, 2021; McKeown et al., 2006).

The second key component is the *Co-creation Process*, which links with *Theme 2: Engaging in a co-creation process*. Findings from our study show that participants used multiple strategies to engage in the co-creation process. For example, *storytellers* and *SAs* exchanged ideas and checked in with each other to assess whether their interpretations of stories were aligned and if any changes were necessary. There was no set structure or template for the output, only a set of flexible guidelines, so participants were required to utilise effective interpersonal communication, and joint decision-making to produce an output. Through these interactions, our participant groups engaged in reciprocal learning, which enabled *storytellers* and *SAs* to learn *from* each other and *about* each other, which develops mutual respect and understanding (Skilton-Sylvester & Erwin, 2000; Tam, 2014). This idea is consistent with social constructivism theory in education, which posits that knowledge is constructed through interactions with others and builds on prior knowledge (Adams, 2006; Amineh & Asl, 2015). Participants recognised that decisions surrounding the

content and expression of stories were directly shaped by interactions they had shared with their storyteller at the time of creation. As such, stories represented a new perspective of their life experiences - one that reflected the *storyteller* – SA shared interpretation of events. This finding is consistent with person-centred care approaches that recognise doing things ‘with’ older adults rather than ‘for’ or ‘to’ (Edvardsson, 2015).

Reactions to LSW is the third component, and links with *Theme 3: Experiencing emotions*. We found LSW elicited both positive and negative emotional reactions for our participant groups, which was an important part of the journey of sharing, reflection, meaning-making and growth. While our findings demonstrated that *storytellers* enjoyed remembering and sharing the good times, participants also understood that experiencing sadness was part of the LSW process. Some previous studies have raised concerns about reopening negative past experiences (e.g Gridley et al., 2020; McKinney, 2017), however, we found that although some stories brought up memories of grief and loss, participants reflected that talking about these difficult life experiences and acknowledging that they had overcome challenges in their life gave the *storytellers* a sense of empowerment, resilience and healing (Fang et al., 2023). In addition, as *storytellers* could choose what they wanted to share and what would be included in the output, they were able to talk freely and openly, knowing that their privacy was respected. This is consistent with the literature around reminiscence which argues that reminiscence may be helpful in maintaining or improving self-esteem and life satisfaction among older adults (Pinquart & Forstmeier, 2012; Subramaniam & Woods, 2012; Westerhof & Bohlmeijer, 2014). Thus, LSW was helpful for integrating an authentic life narrative that encompasses all the ups and downs.

The final key component in our conceptual model is *Impact of LSW*, which links with *Theme 4: Rebuilding a sense of identity and belonging* and *Theme 5: Transforming attitudes*

towards older adults and aged care, and addresses our second research question: *How does LSW impact on [participant outcomes]?*

Storytellers enjoyed spending quality time with their *SAs* and felt proud of the tangible item that they had created which could be treasured by families or future generations. This finding highlights the important role that LSW can play in providing opportunities for older adults to remember and reflect on the contributions they have made throughout their lives, and the positive impact this can have on social and emotional wellbeing in later life (Pinquart & Forstmeier, 2012; Tam et al., 2021).

Staff felt re-energised about their job whilst working on LSW as they engaged in meaningful interactions with *storytellers* and the wider community. Similar to previous research (Cooney & O'Shea, 2019; Doran et al., 2019), staff *SAs* in the present study appreciated working one-on-one with *storytellers* and developed a greater understanding of their needs. In addition, LSW was seen as a valuable activity that enabled them to create deeper connections with the *storytellers*.

University and high school students in our study proclaimed that they felt more comfortable about interacting with older adults and confident with working in aged care after participating in the *Life Stories Program*. Our findings showed that LSW was a transformative experience for students who were apprehensive about working with older adults and in RAC settings due to generalised negative perceptions in society and entrenched ageism, and likely exacerbated by media coverage and findings from the Royal Commission into Aged Care Safety and Quality and the COVID-19 pandemic (Curryer & Cook, 2021; Thomson et al., 2024). Initial presumptions about older people, growing old and aged care were recognised, challenged proven wrong, through developing connections with older adults and engaging in in-depth conversations, recognising each other's personhood and humanity (Cooney & O'Shea, 2019; Dhavernas, 2023). This suggests that engaging university students

enrolled in health-related degrees in LSW can assist with breaking down stereotypes and ageism among our future health workforce (Ben-Harush et al., 2017), and can be an innovative strategy for preparing students to support older people. In addition to the intergenerational component, future research should also examine the opportunity for bi-directional cross-cultural competence and learning afforded by story work, key given the cultural diversity in Australian residential aged care (Xiao et al., 2018).

Qualitative research and convenience sampling are associated with inherent limitations such as lack of generalisability (Creswell, 2009; Tracy, 2019). However, the purpose of this study (and a strength) was to provide insights, rich details and thick descriptions around the lived experiences of a novel co-creation approach to LSW (Polit & Beck, 2010). We also acknowledge that the sample sizes of sub-groups with participant groups were not evenly distributed (e.g., high proportion of *storytellers* living in RAC compared with RL, and high proportion of SAs being university students compared with staff and high school students). For the participant sub-groups with small sample sizes, data saturation may not have been reached. This may result in some differences in the findings between sub-groups with diverse characteristics and therefore, the transferability of the findings between sub-groups may be limited (Tracy, 2010). However, by including a wide range of participants, we were able to explore how LSW can be adapted to suit different contexts based on the participant characteristics (including capacity and capability), and the resources available.

The findings of this study hold significant implications for research, practice, and policy within the context of aged care. In terms of research, our investigation highlights the importance of understanding the process of engaging in life story work (LSW), not solely focusing on its outcomes. Employing qualitative methodologies to explore the lived

experiences of participants offers a deeper understanding encompassing not just the what, but also the how and why, essential for maximizing the efficacy of this intervention.

In the realm of aged care practice, our study reveals that when anchored in rapport-building, vulnerability acceptance, and fostering inclusive environments, LSW serves as a powerful tool for amplifying the voices of older adults. It provides them with a platform to reflect on their life journeys, fostering a renewed sense of identity and belonging. Furthermore, by facilitating deeper connections between staff and residents, LSW facilitates a more personalized approach to care delivery, aligning with the principles of person-centred care. In addition, our research also carries significant implications for the education of future healthcare professionals. By involving students in LSW, we create opportunities for positive intergenerational interactions, challenging stereotypes and dismantling institutionalized ageism. This, in turn, has the potential to bolster the aged care workforce by instilling a deeper understanding and appreciation for the unique needs of older adults.

With regards to policy, findings from this study highlight the therapeutic benefits that a non-medical intervention can have on older adults, which indicates that funding in aged care needs to support a broader, more holistic approach to aged care services including lifestyle activities.

Conclusion

Life story work is a meaningful activity that can be conducted with older adults in residential care or living in the community. Adopting a personalised co-creation approach allows for a more individualised output and recognises that everyone involved in the process contributes to shaping the final output. This approach empowers *storytellers* and *SAs* to make decisions, engage in learning and reflection, and build meaningful relationships which can

maximise potential benefits for all involved. Involving university and high school students provides a transformative learning opportunity that can contribute to breaking down negative perceptions and attitudes towards older adults and aged care among young people and our future healthcare workforce.

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