

## Remembering the Historical Roots of Remembering the Personal Past<sup>†</sup>

SUSAN BLUCK<sup>1\*</sup>, NICOLE ALEA<sup>2</sup> and SIDEEKA ALI<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Florida, USA

<sup>2</sup>University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago

*Summary:* As scholars, remembering the historical past in one's area of study provides a foundation for purposefully pursuing knowledge. As individuals, remembering our personal past provides direction and purpose in everyday life. Taken together, these percepts provide the impetus for the current paper, which traces the contributions of six early pioneers who wrote about how humans remember their personal past. Analysis demonstrates how their historical ideas support current literatures focused on the personal past: reminiscence-based mental health interventions, the adaptive psychosocial functions of autobiographical remembering, and the construction of identity as a life story. Three future research directions are also briefly presented: the human ability for mental 'time travel', a lifespan approach to remembering the personal past, and reflection on one's past as a route to wisdom. Understanding the human phenomenon of remembering the personal past has long-standing historical roots that continue to stimulate basic and applied research. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Remembering our *historical* roots as scholars provides a necessary foundation for purposefully pursuing knowledge. In tandem, one of the things that pioneers in the area of remembering the personal past have argued is that remembering one's *personal* past may provide direction and purpose in individual lives. As such, remembering our past can facilitate both scientific and individual development. The study of human remembering has a long history in Psychology. Alongside well-established core fields dedicated to research on memory (e.g., experimental psychology and cognitive neuroscience) and research on memory impairments due to age-related disease (e.g., dementias in Medicine), lies a different approach to studying memory. It does focus on memory but places primary emphasis on how individuals use, make sense of, and integrate what they recall about their own lives.

Some might not agree with the use of the term, memory, in relation to such work. We agree that *memory* is neither completely accurate nor rich enough to embody work being carried out from this perspective. As such, to unify various areas, we introduce the term, the study of the *personal past*. We use this term to refer to research and writing that cuts across various disciplines (e.g., Gerontology and Sociology) and across sub-disciplines in Psychology (e.g., Cognitive and Personality). Researchers in each of these attend their own scholarly meetings and have their own academic journals and research paradigms. All aim, however, to elucidate the same basic human phenomenon: how individuals remember and think about their own personal past. In contrast to basic memory research, research on the personal past focuses on why individuals remember their experiences

and how they recall and reflect not only on individual episodes but on life periods and on the entirety of the life already lived. Research on the personal past emphasizes memory for experiences one has lived through (not other sorts of memory, such as semantic or procedural) and how those memories are used, potentially to create adaptation, in one's present life. Note that, unlike in the basic study of memory, researchers who focus on the personal past generally embrace a view of adulthood, particularly late life, as a rich phase for remembering and re-evaluating one's personal past (even though other aspects of memory may be showing age-related decline).

What are the conceptual roots of research on the personal past? Today's psychological science is strongly shaped by scholars' need to 'stay on the cutting edge'. Researchers, very reasonably, cite recent works but do not always have time to return to the classics or engage in historical analysis of the ideas that may have shaped current thinking. The problem with this is that it can leave researchers unaware of the place and significance of their own work in historical context. This first problem leads to the next. That is, it drives researchers to operate in disparate areas and without much cross-pollination when they are in fact examining the same basic human phenomenon. The goal of the present paper is to begin to address this in one specific area through (i) succinctly reviewing the history of some seminal ideas about the personal past and (ii) demonstrating links from ideas of early pioneers from various disciplinary backgrounds to current sub-disciplinary psychological literatures unified by their focus on the personal past.

Toward this goal, the first section reviews contributions of six early scholars, including Erik Erikson (Personality and Lifespan Developmental Psychology), Robert Butler (Gerontology and Psychiatry), Carl Jung (Analytical Psychology), Bernice Neugarten (Sociology), Simone de Beauvoir (Philosophy), and James Birren (Experimental Cognitive Psychology and Gerontology). We clearly recognize that this is not a comprehensive list of scholars who have advocated for examining the role that the personal past plays in people's lives. Particularly, major thinkers are often cited in the autobiographical memory literature for their groundbreaking contributions to the study of everyday cognition (e.g., Bartlett, 1932;

\*Correspondence to: Susan Bluck, University of Florida, PO Box 115911, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA.  
E-mail: bluck@ufl.edu

<sup>†</sup>We also recognize the substantial body of research on the development of autobiographical memory, life stories, and social cognition in childhood and adolescence by such researchers as Qi Wang, Robyn Fivush, Kate McClean, Tilmann Habermas, and others. Such work is not included in this review, however, as we believe that a person first needs a more extended personal past before they can engage in the sophisticated type of looking back that is the focus of the current paper. Looking back at one's personal past in childhood is likely to be qualitatively different than doing so as an adult.

Galton, 1879; Neisser, 1978; Proust, 1934). Still, others are cited for foundational contributions to the psychology of memory: recognizing the utility of memory for guiding present and future action (Bergson, 1911), early calls to examine memory in terms of its adaptive psychological function (Ribot, 1882), and Freud's extensive writing including the constructs of repression (Freud, 1920) and screen memories (Freud, 1899). Interested readers should see Danziger (2008), which provides a comprehensive history of the study of memory in Psychology.

Clearly, many great scholars have contributed to our understanding of memory over the last two centuries. Instead of revisiting some of those well-known figures, however, we chose six multidisciplinary pioneers whose writings have particularly influenced the study of the personal past (as earlier defined). Reviews of these six scholars are presented, each ending with a summary of their major contributions in this area. Their work (with many others, as cited earlier) provided the conceptual basis for the emergence of the personal past as a research area not just in cognitive psychology but in several Psychology sub-disciplines. In the second section, three exemplars are provided from among the currently flourishing research areas based on ideas of the early scholars. When one thoughtfully remembers the past, a next step is often to contemplate what the future may hold: the final section of the paper very briefly considers new directions in the study of the personal past.

## REMEMBERING THE PIONEERS OF REMEMBERING THE PERSONAL PAST

The historical progression of ideas is not always continuous and chronological (Hilgard, Leary, & McGuire, 1991), but reviewing seminal historical work can provide insight into current disciplinary trends and future directions within Psychology (Pickren & Dewsbury, 2002). Thus, we do not attempt to provide a timeline here for the development of ideas. Instead, we review the insightful and unique contributions of each of these early thinkers. The focus is to show how their work collectively forged intellectual roots for examining how and why individuals remember their personal past.

### Accepting one's personal past as the 'one and only': Erik H. Erikson

Erik Erikson's work has had an impact throughout Psychology. Combining psychoanalytic thinking and ethical philosophy, he described healthy personality functioning as a surplus of vitality and awareness. Erikson (1950) noted that such flourishing is achieved only through developmental unfolding. It requires cultural systems that create and support the individual's development as they intersect with historical time. From this view of personality development as biographical and embedded, he discussed the well-known eight stages of lifespan development. In adolescence, individuals rework their childhood identity as they face the social norm of assuming an adult role in society. This requires the formation of a biographical identity that emerges during adolescence. Erikson (1959) identified the importance of looking back at one's personal past across life but particularly as part of his final developmental stage in which one

might achieve integrity or lapse into despair. He described this task as being largely faced and preferentially important in later life (although evident in other adult stages). Erikson described how older individuals might 'grow the fruit of the seven stages' through reviewing the personal past and coming 'to accept one's one and only life cycle and the people who have become significant to it, as something that had to be, and that by necessity, permitted no substitutions' (p. 143). He suggested that each of us strive to recognize that we and all other individuals represent the intersection of the unfolding of a human biography in a certain historical moment. Understanding this, Erikson believed that each individual should attempt to look back at their personal past with a sense of integrity: to achieve the sense that regardless of physical or economic threats, one can defend the dignity of the way that they have chosen to live. Erikson (1979) suggested that everyone meets at least some measure of despair in looking back at life. This involves reviewing parts of the past in which individuals have assumed a role that has left them feeling that some essential aspect of self went 'unlived'. The task is to integrate such conflicts into a broader view of one's life, potentially even developing wisdom through one's life review. This will not always occur. The inability to gather together the life lived in a satisfying way results in a sense that life has been too short and there is no time left to attempt another life: one that provides a route to dignity, integrity, or wisdom.

In sum, Erikson's writings are foundational in the current study of remembering the personal past. Most notable are his ideas of personality development as biographical, the notion that there is much to be gained by looking back (particularly in the second half of life) and his description of how looking back can lead to sincere and even moral acceptance of the life lived but also to despair and yearning for more future, for more time left to live.

### Life review as an adaptive process for considering the personal past: Robert Butler

Butler (1963) was one of the first to argue for review of one's personal past as an adaptive process. In the psychiatric and clinical psychology sphere, claims about the reasons for and consequences of thinking about one's past have changed dramatically over time. For example, earlier views of reminiscing about one's personal past were quite negative. As one example, Bühler (1935, 1968), a clinical psychologist, outlined a healthy progression to life fulfillment that includes reviewing one's life. She, however, described clear dangers (i.e., disappointment and resignation) in looking back on one's personal past. Coleman (1986) noted that, even into the 1960s, reminiscence about one's personal past was viewed as a pathological symptom: older adults were particularly seen as reliving the past basically to escape a dreary present.

In contrast to the prevailing, negative views of his time, Butler (1963) built on Erikson's earlier work to do his own theorizing about the process of looking back at one's past. Erikson had described how reviewing one's personal past can lead to, in brief, either integrity or despair. Instead of emphasizing the potential despair in looking back, Butler

focused on the possible gains. His ideas concerning reminiscence and his coining of the term *life review* provided a turning point: he championed the now well-accepted view of remembering our personal past as beneficial. He described it as an 'unrecognized bonanza' (Butler, 1980, p. 35) for guiding adults toward positive mental health. Butler (1963) argued that recalling the past had mistakenly been viewed as a symptom of psychological dysfunction because data at that time came primarily from individuals facing mental health issues.

He described the life review as encompassing unbidden and volitional reminiscing that occurs largely as a result of the loosening of defense mechanisms. He defined life review as 'a naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts' (Butler, 1963, p. 66). The process of the life review, according to Butler, is to consciously recall one's personal past so that it can be integrated into the life story. Unresolved conflicts should be integrated to provide a more meaningful picture of life and effect a reorganization of personality (for an analysis of this process, see Bluck & Levine, 1998). Butler noted that awareness of mortality may make life review most common in old age but stated that people of all ages recall their personal past to use it as a source of guidance from time to time.

In short, Butler's introduction of the life review was a turning point. He changed how both clinical and basic researchers viewed individuals in relation to their recall of the personal past. His writings led to the view that reviewing one's past can be adaptive and is potentially necessary for creating self-awareness and for healthy functioning. He suggested that both clinicians and researchers open their minds, particularly in regard to older persons, stating that 'recognition of such a vital process as the life review may help one to listen to ... and to understand the aged... (p. 72).'

### Increasing the personal past through time: Carl Jung

Jung (1933) described how individuals become aware of their movement through time, weighing their personal past in relation to the future. Life is seen as involving different psychic stages in which remembering plays qualitatively different roles. For example, he argued that young adulthood demands a largely extraverted orientation to establish work and family roles. As time progresses (i.e., in the second half of life), individuals turn inwards to explore their subjective experience, including their personal past. As individuals become more fully conscious with age, instead of driven only by nature or instinct, they confront the notion that they are unique, are moving through time, and so will eventually die. Jung claimed that consideration of one's past is a necessary aspect of self-reflection but that how this remembering is carried out has consequences for further growth. Individuals' own willingness to reflect on the personal past and their style of reflection shapes their continually developing personality. He warned against simply recounting former glories or reviewing one's life in terms of major accomplishments in normative roles (e.g., as parents, spouses, and workers). Such review is seen as indicative of a wrong-

headed hope that past accomplishments will guide us effortlessly forward. Instead, Jung saw reflection on the past as an opportunity for personal growth: a goal, particularly in the second half of life, is to use our personal past to create both individual and cultural understanding.

In sum, Jung emphasized that people look back on their life for different reasons depending on where they are in the lifespan. He acknowledged that people may engage in social comparison to assess whether they 'measure up' in terms of normative life landmarks but that there is a more intimate, inner level of self-evaluation that is accomplished via reflection on the personal past in order to face life's ending. He further emphasized that there are individual differences in how one considers the personal past: one individual may engage in ruminative or escapist obsession with their past, or false reliance on the early years of life for later guidance. Another individual recalls the past to make meaning of the life lived, allowing for personality growth as relevant to their current life phase.

### The personal past runs on a social clock: Bernice Neugarten

Bernice Neugarten was also led to consider the personal past through her ideas about time, particularly the *social clock* (Neugarten, 1973). The idea that development across adulthood is increasingly governed by social, cultural, and environmental as well as individual constraints and opportunities is now well accepted (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1998). Neugarten (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965) argued from a sociological perspective that although early childhood could be characterized as running on a biological clock, much of adulthood is governed, at least conjointly, by a social clock. That is, the adult individual is aware that they have a personal past and that they are moving through time, as is everyone in the social world around them. They thus look back, comparing their own personal past with expected societal norms for age-related milestones and achievements. Follow-up work in psychology suggests that individuals have internalized social clocks that may be specific to gender and personality and that people differ in their adherence to such clocks, particularly across young adulthood (Helson, Mitchell, & Moane, 1984). In general, this emphasis on the timing of life's events to coincide with social markers highlights life's temporality, thereby bringing individuals attention to their personal past. Through the social clock, individuals come to understand that as they age, their personal past stretches out behind them and their potential future shrinks. Neugarten and Datan (1974) primarily argued that it is in the beginning of middle age that perceived sense of life time begins to play a psychological role not seen earlier in life. One no longer measures life as time since birth (i.e., focusing only on the personal past) but sees the personal past in relation to time left to live within a limited life cycle. The individual compares their own past progress through the life cycle with a normative view of the expected, societal timing of major events and transitions.

Neugarten's major contribution to understanding how individuals consider their personal past is the social clock through which individuals can assess their past progress in

life in relation to normative societal expectations of what one 'should' do with a life. The notion that one becomes more fully aware of their movement through the life cycle in midlife suggests this phase as a turning point for one's consideration of the personal past in relation to time. This shifting view allows one a sense of self across time: we see ourselves in relation to who we have been in our life up to this point, in relation to what awaits in the future.

### **Binding the personal past and present: Simone de Beauvoir**

de Beauvoir (1972) claimed that, while accepting new roles across life (e.g., the ex-girlfriend, the lawyer, and the grandmother), individuals use their personal past to maintain an essential solidarity with who they have been, thereby acknowledging the inner being that continually lives on regardless of age. Given the importance of this continuity of being, she asked how memory allows us to 'retrieve our lives': to bind our past and present through telling ourselves our own history. Binding our personal past and present is not always easy. It requires that such history was recorded and is now also available for recall (because remembering also involves forgetting). It also requires that memory phenomenology is rich enough to string events into a story that one recognizes experientially as representing their own personal past. She also highlighted meaning: the meaning imbued at the time an event occurs changes over time (i.e., a week, a year, and 50 years later). As a result, one might barely recognize certain events because the meaning given to them now differs so from the meaning given to them when they were experienced. Death and loss, increasing with age, present another challenge. As loved ones die, the sense of self as continuous can be weakened over time: the memories shared with others, and the memories that others carry for us, are gone.

Like others, de Beauvoir was sensitive to changes in time perspective, adding that although the future is open and uncertain, the past is fixed. This affects the quality of mental life in early versus later adult years: individuals face the risk of feeling, later in life, that they have an immutable past and a limited future. Other individuals, however, draw on the richness of the past. Realizing that only so much time is left ignites those individuals with a passion to live fully, to complete creative projects and strive to leave a legacy.

In sum, de Beauvoir's writings were dense with ideas, many of which form a basis for current thinking about the personal past. She captures the notion that remembering one's past is not simply replaying a recording but requires effort and searching, more so as time passes and individuals collect a lifetime of events. Her writing describes phenomenology and meaning as crucial to the shifting experience of the past across adulthood: a fundamental aspect of remembering is to relive the past in a way that binds together lived experience to create an essential sense of self over time.

### **Reinterpreting our personal past: James Birren**

Among countless contributions, Birren (1958a), as a forefather of Gerontology (Birren 1958b), wrote about how individuals might adapt to the dynamic changes occurring at biological, psychological, and social levels as they age. He (1968)

argued for the development of infrastructure (e.g., funding opportunities, faculty lines, and centers of excellence) to encourage the nascent field of Gerontology and for support to create 'an optimum environment...so individuals can reach their full biological and psychological potentials, not only in youth and middle age but in old age as well (p. 13).' To this end, Birren became interested in how lives could be enriched through looking back at one's personal past (see also Coleman, 1991), beginning with the concept that individuals would benefit from a process that helped to reconcile their real, ideal, and social-image selves (Reedy & Birren, 1980). The three selves were thought to become increasingly unified across adulthood, but he suggested aiding this process by guiding individuals to dynamically review the content and themes of their lives, to lead them toward greater fulfillment. Note that this introduces the view that both the self and the personal past are somewhat malleable. Following Murray's (1938) personological tradition, he suggested that one's biographical identity can be redefined and reinterpreted over time (Birren & Hedlund, 1986). This challenged cognitive psychology's view of memory (at that time) as an objective record of a lived reality. Later, with Donna Deutchman, Birren developed a process he termed the *Guided Autobiography* (1991; also see de Vries, Deutchman, & Birren, 1990), which continues to hold a prominent place among techniques for therapeutic reminiscence (e.g., see Webster & Haight, 1995).

In brief, several of Birren's ideas stand out as particularly shaping researchers' and practitioners' current views. He provided evidence that the content of one's personal past could be actively remembered, reviewed, and re-evaluated, leading to beneficial psychological outcomes and self-integration. In doing so, he challenged the view of memory as an objective record (see also Bartlett, 1932; Neisser, 1978), focusing more on one's subjective interpretation of the past and its meaning to the individual. In developing the Guided Autobiography technique, he further legitimized the therapeutic use of reminiscing about one's personal past.

## **REMEMBERING THE PERSONAL PAST TODAY**

These early scholars (and many others) provided the sometimes unacknowledged roots of today's thinking about the personal past across a variety of Psychology's sub-disciplines (Cognitive, Personality, and Lifespan Development). We review three such research areas, as exemplars, highlighting the links to insights of the early scholars. Note that each of these areas focuses on how individuals use the remembered past, often in striving toward various aspects of well-being. As such, much current research on the personal past has a therapeutic or applied nature.

### **Reminiscence-based intervention research**

Reminiscence-based intervention research focuses on improving older adults' well-being through encouraging reflection on the personal past. Erikson's (1959) description of the process of attaining integrity and Butler's life review (1963) both describe evaluating the life lived as a route to mental health. Several early theorists described the complexity and vagaries of this task, thus highlighting that people

may benefit from guidance when reviewing their past. Basic research on the personal past has resulted in the emergence of several forms of reminiscence-based therapeutic interventions that outline techniques for such guidance.

Birren and colleagues' (1991) development of the *Guided Autobiography* provided some of the earliest empirical support for reminiscing about one's past as a therapeutic technique. There are now a wide variety of interventions (e.g., music-based, Ashida, 2000; poetry and drawing, Bohlmeijer, Valenkamp, Westerhof, Smit, & Cuijpers, 2005). Recent reviews (Webster, Bohlmeijer, & Westerhof, 2010) divide interventions into the following: (i) *simple reminiscence* that uses an unstructured group approach to review past, mostly positive experiences, shared with others to foster positive outcomes; (ii) *life review* that uses a structured, one-on-one, approach to evaluate and integrate positive and negative experiences from one's entire life, to develop a coherent life story; and (iii) *life-review therapy* aimed at ameliorating mental health concerns in specific populations (e.g., depression). Research has become more sophisticated over time with the most rigorous using clinical-trial type designs including a variety of control groups with both immediate and follow-up assessments (e.g., Cappeliez, Smit, & Westerhof, 2012; Haight, Michel, & Hendrix, 2000; Korte, Bohlmeijer, Cappeliez, Smit, & Westerhof, 2012).

A variety of outcomes of reminiscence techniques have been empirically tested, and many of these are in line with early thinker's ideas about the potential outcomes of considering one's personal past. That is, research on reminiscence techniques have examined outcomes such as depression (e.g., Bohlmeijer, Westerhof, & Emmerik-de Jong, 2008), psychological well-being (e.g., Wang, 2005), social integration (e.g., Ando, Morita, Akechi, & Okamoto, 2010), death preparation (e.g., Vaughan & Kinnier, 1996), improved self-concept (Tennessee Self-Concept Scale; de Medeiros, Mosby, Hanley, Pedraza, & Brandt, 2011), and ego integrity (Koffman, 2000). Consistent with Butler, Erikson, and Birren's emphasis on reviewing the personal past as particularly salient in later life phases, the majority of interventions to date have targeted older adults (e.g., Chiang *et al.*, 2010; Watt & Cappeliez, 2000).

Recent meta-analyses have attempted to determine the most effective techniques for reviewing one's past and the most reliable outcomes (e.g., Bohlmeijer, Smit, & Cuijpers, 2003; Chin, 2007; Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001). One consistent finding is that guided reminiscing about one's personal past can reduce depressive symptoms. Pinquart and Forstmeier (2012) examined 128 carefully-chosen studies. One of the largest effect sizes was for the reduction in depressive symptoms, and these showed persistence in effects over time (on average about 5 months follow-up). Ego integrity, positive well-being, mastery, and social integration also had positive effects.

Note that the early thinkers, particularly de Beauvoir and Erikson, also warned of potential dangers of reviewing one's personal past; that such review could lead to despair, a sense that time left in life was short and yet goals were left unfulfilled. With Butler's introduction of reminiscence and life review as adaptive and not pathological, the tide turned. But there may be some concern that we have now gone too far in the direction of seeing reminiscence as a panacea

(Bluck, Levine, & Lauthere, 1999). That is, very little recent work has focused on the potential negative outcomes of reviewing one's past despite the fact that individuals report reminiscing about their personal past for such reasons as bitterness revival and escapism (Webster, 1997). Some researchers are revisiting the notion that thinking about one's personal past can have both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes. Mclean and Mansfield (2010) provided a nice review of the autobiographical reasoning literature indicating that there can be autobiographical reasoning can lead to negative well-being in some individual contexts. Their work suggests that research needs to take into account individuals' life phase and cultural context, the content on their reasoning before making generalizations about the benefits of revisiting one's personal past. Similarly, applied researchers suggested that interventions should ensure that reminiscence techniques are tailored appropriately for use with different populations (e.g., veterans and nursing home residents), so as to avoid encouraging rumination on negative events and regret-provoking life circumstances (e.g., Karimi *et al.*, 2010; McKee *et al.*, 2005).

Thus, consistent with Butler and Erikson's early conceptions of reviewing one's personal past, and the clear direction for guided interventions provided by Birren, current applied research bears out the idea that thinking about one's personal past can be useful in encouraging mental health. Additional theoretical and empirical work is needed to understand the specific conditions under which reminiscence leads to positive mental health outcomes and when it might instead (as warned by Erikson and de Beauvoir) trigger rumination or regret concerning one's personal past.

### Psychosocial functions of autobiographical remembering

The pioneers referred to a variety of uses (i.e., functions) of remembering one's personal past. They did not focus only on the mechanisms of memory but instead explored *why* humans remember the events and experiences of their own lives. These early thinkers postulated such uses of remembering as evaluating one's past to accept the life lived (Butler, 1963; Erikson, 1959), to maintain self-continuity (de Beauvoir, 1972), to promote meaning and self-growth (Jung, 1933), to evaluate social ties and social standing (Neugarten *et al.*, 1965), to maintain relationships (de Beauvoir, 1972), and to guide behavior in times of uncertainty (Butler, 1963). Today, we refer to these uses of remembering as the *functions* of remembering the personal past (e.g., Bluck, 2003; Pillemer, 1998; Webster, 1997).

Some research on autobiographical memory has embraced this functional approach (Bruce, 1989; Neisser, 1978) asking not only how memory operates but also how humans use memory to serve them in daily life (Baddeley, 1988). This approach views the individual as existing in ecological context such that person-environment fit guides how events are remembered and reconstructed as individuals call upon their personal past to serve current needs (Bluck, 2009; Bluck, Alea, & Demiray, 2010; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). The empirical taxonomies of functions of thinking about the personal past that have been developed (Watt & Wong, 1991; Wong & Watt, 1991) build directly on ideas

generated by the early scholars about the functions of remembering one's personal past. For example, Webster's validated Reminiscence Functions Scale (1997) includes identity, problem solving, death preparation, teach-inform, conversation, bitterness revival, boredom reduction, and intimacy maintenance. Another approach (Bluck & Alea, 2002) proposes three broad functions of autobiographical remembering that clearly tie back to themes proposed by the early scholars. The *self-function* involves using memory to maintain a sense of self-continuity (Conway, 1996). The *social function* emphasizes how memory aids in relationship formation and maintenance (Alea & Bluck, 2003; Nelson, 1993). The *directive function* involves using memories to make plans for the present and future (Pillemer, 1998).

What support is there for individuals actually using the personal past to serve these functions? Although much of the early thinker's ideas were based on introspection, analysis, and case study, diverse empirical methods are now available to examine the functions of remembering the personal past. Qualitative coding of memory narratives provide rich data on functional themes (e.g., Baddeley & Singer, 2008; Kulkofsky, Wang, & Hou, 2010; Pasupathi, Weeks, & Rice, 2006; Wang & Fivush, 2005). Self-report measures, such as the Reminiscence Functions Scale (Webster, 1993, 1997, 2003) and the Thinking about Life Experiences Scale (Bluck & Alea, 2011), provide assessments of the frequency with which individuals draw adaptively on their personal past. Recently, experimental evidence for adaptive functions is also mounting (e.g., Alea & Bluck, 2007; Bazzini, Stack, Martincin, & Davis, 2007; Beike, Adams, & Naufel, 2010; Bluck, Baron, Ainsworth, Gesselman, & Gold, 2013; Kuwabara & Pillemer, 2010; Philippe, Koestner, & Leikes, 2012; Pohl, Bender, & Lachmann, 2005).

The early scholars suggested that individuals of all ages reflect on the personal past (Butler, 1963; Erikson, 1950) but that individuals were likely to show idiosyncratic tendencies in their thinking (Jung, 1933) and that there were shifts in time perspective in midlife (Neugarten & Danan, 1974). Current findings confirm these early speculations (Pasupathi et al., 2006). Younger adults more often use memories to create identity and maintain self-continuity (Bluck & Alea, 2008, 2009; McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008; Niedźwieńska & Świeży, 2010; Rice & Pasupathi, 2010; Singer, 2004; Webster & Gould, 2007), or to guide future behavior (e.g., Alea & Bluck, 2012; Bluck & Alea, 2009; Webster & McCall, 1999). All ages, however, use the personal past to develop and maintain social bonds (e.g., Alea, Arneaud, & Ali, in press; Alea & Bluck, 2007; Alea & Vick, 2010; Bluck & Alea, 2009; Cappeliez & O'Rourke, 2006; Webster, 1995). Consistent with Jung and Erikson's ideas, individual differences (e.g., by age, gender, and personality) in memory's psychosocial functions have also been demonstrated empirically (e.g., Baddeley & Singer, 2008; Cappeliez & O'Rourke, 2006; Cully, LaVoie, & Gfeller, 2001; Rasmussen & Berntsen, 2010). Cultural variations, highlighting the effects of social context (e.g., Neugarten et al., 1965) on how one looks back at their past, are emerging (Alea & Bluck, 2012; Kulkofsky et al., 2010; Shellman, Ennis, & Addison, 2011; Wang & Conway, 2004). As such, many of the insights generated by the early scholars have been demonstrated empirically using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

### Construction of identity as a life story

Research on the *life story* is another branch of Psychology that builds on early scholars' ideas about the personal past. McAdams's model (1985, 1993, 1996; Hooker & McAdams, 2003) describes the life story that forms in adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000) as 'an individual's internalized, evolving, and integrated story of the self' (McAdams, 2008b, p. 242). Following Erikson (1959), the life story focuses on creating a narrative of one's biographical identity. As mentioned by early scholars (Jung, 1933; Neugarten & Danan, 1974), looking back at one's personal past is partially guided by a normative cultural script (Berntsen & Rubin, 2002, 2004) but also includes significant events that are influential for one's unique development (Glück & Bluck, 2007). One thriving research area specifically investigates *self-defining memories* in the life story (Singer & Moffitt, 1991–1992). These are vivid, emotional recollections about past moments in life that represent core components of a person's sense of self.

Butler (1963), as well as Erikson (1979) and de Beauvoir (1972), emphasized the need for integration of both positive and negative events so that the personal past made sense and felt purposeful. Resonant with early notions of awareness of time lived and time left to live (Neugarten et al., 1965), the current conception of the life story includes both one's personal past and expected future. Today's research on the life story is in keeping with Butler's (1963) life review as involving the recall and integration of specific important events from one's life into a coherent, acceptable whole. Empirical studies now focus on the processes by which individuals can string together the events of their lives into a life story. These include work on autobiographical reasoning (Bluck & Habermas, 2000; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011), narrative processing (Singer & Bluck, 2001), life story coherence (e.g., Habermas & de Silveira, 2008; McAdams, 2006), meaning-making (e.g., Blagov & Singer, 2004; McLean & Pasupathi, 2012; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Park, 2010; Thome, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004), and finding redemption in negative experiences (e.g., McAdams, 2008a; McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008; McLean & Pratt, 2006).

The reinterpretation of one's identity through an evolving life story is consistent with de Beauvoir and, particularly, Birren and colleague's notion that one's personal past is at least partially malleable. Indeed, McAdams (e.g., 1993) Life Story Interview and Guided Autobiography methods are highly consistent with Birren's early work. This acknowledgement of memory's malleability leads to the view that reconstructing and reinterpreting one's personal past can have an impact on present well-being (e.g., Alea & Bluck, 2012; Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005; Pals, 2006). Today's research gives credence to pioneering ideas that the past is not just lived but interpreted, and reinterpreted over time, and that how one re-evaluates their personal past is related to mental health. It also builds on early notions that as one moves through the adult lifespan, the personal past is constantly changing and must be effortfully collected together (de Beauvoir, 1972; Erikson, 1959). Biographical identity as reflected in one's life story has now been demonstrated to change with age (e.g., McAdams et al., 2006; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals,

2007; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007). In one study, for example, Singer and colleagues (Singer, Rexhaj, & Baddeley, 2007) found that older adults' self-defining memories are more positive and integrative than those of younger adults. Research also suggests that people often view themselves as getting better over time (Ross & Wilson, 2003) and reinterpret past events in hindsight in order to gain greater understanding of their life (Freeman, 2010).

One important distinction between early theorists and much current day work on the life story is that the early thinkers often emphasized the integration, restructuring, and malleability of the life story as particularly salient in older adulthood. Current research, however, has focused on the development of the life story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000), with emphasis on adolescence (e.g., McLean, 2005) and young adulthood (e.g., McAdams *et al.*, 2006; McLean & Pratt, 2006) as well as attention to generativity in midlife (McAdams, 2006). That is, although research has focused on adulthood, it has not placed particular emphasis on the late life and into the *fourth age* (Baltes & Smith, 2003). More recently, however, research with older adults' has begun to increase (e.g., Bauer *et al.*, 2005; McLean, 2008; Pals, 2006; Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006; Singer *et al.*, 2007).

## REMEMBERING THE PAST IN THE FUTURE

As demonstrated, the ideas of the early thinkers are clearly evident in several current sub-disciplinary literatures in Psychology that focus on the personal past. We end with a brief mention of three emerging areas in the study of the personal past that also build on ideas of the early pioneers.

### Mental time travel

Several early theorists describe the 'sense of reliving' that comes with recalling the personal past (de Beauvoir, 1972; Neugarten & Danan, 1974; Jung, 1933). That is, they allude to the human ability to experientially travel back in time through memory. Research on mental time travel is a rising literature focused on the human ability to travel psychologically to both the personal past and the anticipated future (Carstensen, 2006). Lifespan developmental research emphasizes life's shifting time horizons as central to the aging experience (Baltes *et al.*, 1998; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). New research suggests that adults at different points in the lifespan think about their own personal past and future in different ways (Newby-Clark & Ross, 2003) because of the differing amounts of time passed and time left to live in their own lives (Staudinger, Bluck, & Herzberg, 2003). Although older adults self-report their past and future as experienced differently from the young (e.g., Carstensen *et al.*, 1999; Demiray & Bluck, 2011), neuroimaging studies suggest that past and future thinking rely on similar, overlapping neural networks—*independent of age* (Addis, Wong, & Schacter, 2007; Viard *et al.*, 2011). One avenue for future studies is to combine behavioral, neuroimaging, and qualitative analyses to elucidate how individuals experience the personal past, in relation to the imagined future, at different points across the adult lifespan. This would thus include not only the 'sense of reliving' of the personal past, as detailed by the

early pioneers but also understanding the phenomenology of looking ahead to the expected future.

### The personal past in different life phase contexts

Current work has sometimes followed the gist of pioneers' ideas without always capturing the nuances. For example, Butler (1963) did not describe life review as exclusive to late life, and Erikson (1959) suggested individuals revisit psychosocial tasks across adulthood. Recent researchers have also argued theoretically (Bluck & Alea, 2002) and empirically (e.g., Webster, 1997) that recalling one's personal past is a lifespan phenomenon. The majority of research on reminiscing about the personal past, however, has focused on older adults, and most reminiscence techniques have been tested with older adults although younger groups may also benefit (Pinquart & Forstmeier, 2012). Those who study life stories often focus on the developmental emergence of the life story and its relation to identity in early adult life phases. Researchers proposing reminiscence and life review interventions have emphasized late adulthood. Despite this tendency for different research areas to favor the study of certain adult life phases, most researchers agree that looking back on one's personal past is indeed a lifespan phenomenon. In identifying a future research agenda, scholars might proceed on two fronts: charting differences and continuities in reviewing one's personal past across the lifespan, and also focusing on how the personal past acts as a resource given the complex context of each specific life phase (de Beauvoir, 1972; Jung, 1933). One specific life phase discussed by the early scholars, but little researched today, is the end of life (de Beauvoir, 1972; Butler, 1963; Jung, 1933). The role of the personal past in life's final stage, in dying or preparing to die, should not be ignored (e.g., Dignity therapy; Chochinov, 2012).

### Reflection on the personal past as a path to wisdom

Both Erikson (1959) and Butler (1963) described wisdom as one potential outcome of reflection on one's personal past, and reminiscence-based interventions have shown some positive outcomes for wisdom-related variables (e.g., ego integrity; Koffman, 2000). The nature of the link between wisdom and the personal past has recently received more attention with Glück and Bluck's (in press) MORE Life Experience model of the development of wisdom. The model draws on previous wisdom theories including Ardelt's (2005) view of reflection on life as a component of wisdom and the idea that wisdom involves not only having life experiences but also reflecting on one's past experiences (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000; Staudinger & Gluck, 2011). The authors propose that wise individuals have MORE (i.e., Mastery, Openness, Reflection, and Emotion Regulation/Empathy). Note that a critical element in the model is reflection on one's personal past. The model describes how wisdom develops through the life events that an individual encounters and how they navigate those events, but crucially in the way that such events are reflected upon and integrated into the life story over time. The MORE resources are used when events occur (particularly negative or challenging events), but in keeping with Erikson (1959) and Butler

(1963), wisdom is construed as developing largely from looking back with a reflective stance at one's personal past. As such, the wisdom literature is another area where research on the personal past should blossom in the future.

## CONCLUSION

The depth of thought and keen insight of early scholars across disciplines (Philosophy, Sociology, Gerontology, Psychiatry, and Psychology) have provided roots for the current study of the personal past. The present paper provides a relatively succinct review of the historical roots of research on the personal past, detailing the legacy of six early thinkers in this area. Together, they provided current researchers with a view of reflecting on one's personal past as a complex, sometimes effortful process that occurs across all of adulthood but may hold particular meaning in the second half of life. They led us to understand that individuals measure life time with a social clock, making normative social comparisons, but that they also look back to the personal past to experience an essential sense of self over time. They described how both the past and the self remain malleable, even in later life, and how the quality of the life lived, and the life remembered, is shaped in intersection with historical time.

Our review demonstrated the links between the ideas of the early pioneers and current sub-disciplinary literatures (i.e., reminiscence interventions in Gerontology and Lifespan Developmental Psychology, the psychosocial functions of autobiographical remembering in Cognitive Psychology, and the construction of identity as a life story within Personality Psychology and Personology). These disparate current research areas have been shown to draw on shared historical constructs and are unified by their common focus on a single phenomenon: the human propensity to remember the personal past. As researchers in this area, we may build a more meaningful future by taking into account the common historical roots that unify our diverse efforts as Psychologists to understand how individuals look back on the past, on the life already lived.

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