



Exploring the adolescent-self through written and visual diaries

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ABSTRACT

Memories about our childhoods and adolescence may not always be accurate, but they do influence how we position ourselves as adults. In this paper, I assert that written and visual diaries can be used as a way to access the most accurate version of one's younger years, and thus, they can help one explore their self-narrative and enhance their self-understanding.

In this auto-hermeneutic inquiry, I studied the therapeutic potential of exploring my own early diaries and attempted to answer how reviewing one's early thinking and emotions might influence a person's current self-identity. In this research, I identified three aspects that enriched my understanding of my adolescence, and hence, my current self. First, the recurring narratives found in my adolescent diaries enhanced my understanding of the way I feel about particular things today. Second, I realized that the narrative I built around my teen self was not actually an accurate representation of my younger self. Third, using my diaries allowed me to identify important correlations between my past experiences and my current self.

I conclude that adolescent diaries are one useful way to explore autobiographic memory and self-identity. Realizations drawn from earlier diaries can then be explored further through art therapy.

Background

Adolescence and identity development

A person's sense of identity is what gives an individual the feeling of self-sameness and continuity (Erikson, 1970). According to Blasi and Milton (1991), a person's sense of self emerges in adolescence through changes in three fundamental areas. First, the adolescent reorganizes their needs and identification with their parents. Second, the adolescent identifies new social roles and relationships embedded in their respective culture and society. Third, the adolescent explores independence and experiences a new sense of individuality and purposefulness. Going through these life changes, most teens will have developed their conscious individual identities and their personal characters by the end of adolescence.

Identification is a central process in childhood. Children and young adolescents commonly identify themselves with their parents and other significant people in their lives in order to make sense of themselves (Berenson et al., 2005). During adolescence, an individual goes through the process of finding their ego identity by testing their limits, values, and relationships with people and things. At this stage, one begins to

merge and reorganize childhood identifications. If an adolescent is encouraged by their own personal explorations, they will likely emerge from this phase with a strong sense of self and personal autonomy. However, adolescents who remain unsure of their beliefs or desires during this phase may remain uncertain and confused about themselves in adulthood (Schwartz et al., 2011).

It is not only individual identity that forms in adolescence—accomplished by identifying and embracing one's own values—but also one's social identity, which emerges through internalizing these values. To achieve a coherent sense of self, the adolescent needs to successfully integrate their individual identity (i.e., their “cognitive, sexual, moral identities”) and their social identity (i.e., their social roles as a “worker, parent or citizen”) (Marcia, 2002, p. 202). Here, the adolescent faces a “diffusion of roles,” whereby they are required to locate themselves between their inner needs and the unavoidable demands of the social world. During this period, adolescents often assume an imaginary audience, seeing themselves as the objects of others' observations and evaluations (Elkind, 1967; Issa & Nadal, 2011). For some, the roles that are imposed upon them may be experienced as restrictive to the ego identity (Knafo & Schwartz, 2004; Patrick & Gibbs, 2012). The incorporation of the different roles can weigh heavily on the young person at

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times, and thus, the adolescent might move between states of being a regressed child and a daring adult (Marcia, 2002). The push and pull between the adolescent's ego identity and their social identity can also lead the young person to feel invalidated. Nevertheless, most adolescents are able to negotiate this difficult terrain that leads to adulthood. Once the adolescent has established their individual characteristics and values through the reorganization of identifications and the incorporation of social roles, they experience individuation and form an authentic identity (Pasupathi & Weeks, 2011). The individual who succeeds in forming their self-identity is able to identify their personal philosophy toward life, as well as their ideals and goals.

Yet, while the literature has discussed normative adolescent development in detail, it is important to emphasize that adolescence is not always a linear expression of growth. Indeed, adolescent development is a complex process influenced in part by an individual's ethnic, racial, gender, historical, and biological identities. Thus, culturally diverse adolescents may go through additional changes, challenges, and adaptations (Brittian, 2012). Furthermore, when an adolescent encounters difficult life situations like their parents' separating, transcultural migration, sexual or physical abuse, chronic illnesses, or the death of a loved one, this can profoundly impact normal adolescent development by creating disruptions in identity formation and social, cognitive and emotional development (Frydman & Mayor, 2017). Such adversities impact adolescent's ability to form and sustain social relationships, affect regulation abilities, and self-control (Frydman & Mayor, 2017).

In sum, the life story that represents our current identity is formed during our adolescent years, and that life story creates the primary basis for constructing all future experiences. Habermas and Bluck (2000) stated that there are many references to our adolescent years in our life stories because our self-written stories and self-defining characteristics emerge during those years.

Autobiographical memory

Autobiographic memories refer to the complex mental representations of the self and the events one has experienced (Conway & Rubin, 1993). Examples of autobiographical memories include early experiences in childhood, the first day of school, and special events. Generally, according to Brewer (1986), autobiographical memories can be divided into three categories. The first category is personal memories, which are memories specific to a particular event. The second category is autobiographical facts; these facts are information that one knows to be absolutely true but are unable to remember, such as the date one was born. The final category of autobiographical memories is generic personal memory, which identifies more abstract concepts about oneself, such as personal preferences (Roediger et al., 2017).

Autobiographic memories and how they connect to one's sense of self have long been investigated by philosophers and theorists. In relatively recent studies, Addis and Tippett (2008) examined how autobiographic memory contributes to the continuity of self, Wilson and Ross (2003) investigated the functions of autobiographic memory in identity formation, and Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) explored how autobiographic memories are constructed in the self-memory system. There has also been research focused on understanding the connection between memories and self-identity through neuroscience. For example, D'Argembeau et al. (2008) examined the neural correlations that are activated while reflecting on one's past and present selves, and Martinielli et al. (2013) investigated neural network activations that are correlated to different memory types. One's memories, such as remembered past events, feelings, or social relationships, constitute and assure the stability of the individual's sense of self (Habermas & Kober, 2015). This is why a family member passing away, a significant job loss, a divorce, or the loss of a limb can threaten self-continuity. At such times, autobiographical memories often compensate for the negative effects of the distress (Habermas & Kober, 2015).

Diaries in psychosocial identity development

Diaries, which are frequently addressed to the self or to an imaginary other, are understood as spontaneous, personal writings and visual expressions about experiences, feelings, observations, and thoughts (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Metsäranta et al., 2019; Travers, 2011). Traditionally, diaries are understood to be written accounts, however, they can be in visual forms, or combine visual and written entries. Because diaries are often used relatively consistently over time (e.g., every day or twice a week), the time between an experience and its recall is usually short, thus reducing recall bias (Travers, 2011). Diaries allow an observer the chance to examine the lived experience through the owner's spontaneous words and visual expressions in a natural context.

Research has shown that diaries can be used for anxiety and stress reduction (Burt, 1994), coping (Travers, 2011), self-reflection and developing insights (Kenton, 2010), cognitive processing and emotional expression (Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002), and improved self-efficacy (Fritson, 2008). Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) also benefits from diaries since diary entries can help track moods and triggers, thereby assisting clients in establishing adaptive coping skills and to adjust to life changes (Fritson, 2008; Vogel, 2012).

Although not as common today as it once was, keeping notebook diaries—or since the development of the internet, writing online diaries like blogs—is still a prevalent activity practiced by teens, often starting around mid-adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). While the literature has focused on the effects of diary keeping, little is known about the initial motivation for adolescents to begin keeping diaries. As noted by Habermas and Bluck (2000), one early research effort into diary keeping, Bernfeld (1931) discussed how adolescents stated they kept diaries to leave a document to look back on in the future. Additionally, several studies have discussed the mental health benefits of diary keeping, which might also address why some adolescents choose to keep diaries, as they can act as a container of emotions and can work as an instrument for the adolescent's need for approval and validation. Anxiety and stress are quite common during adolescence due to the significant physical and psychological changes that take place during this period. Moreover, in societies where differences are not tolerated well, a teenager might not receive enough validation because of the norms of their culture or religion. In such instances, a diary can be used as a coping tool for the adolescent to achieve external validation through the sharing of their worldview with an imaginary audience (Issa & Nadal, 2011).

While the word journal and diary can be used interchangeably, diary keeping often refers to an act of writing down daily events, feelings, and thoughts, while journaling is sometimes used for a more specific aim, such as the processing of professional experiences. Solicited journals are sometimes used for research purposes. Solicited journal keeping is a research technique whereby participants are instructed to record and reflect on their thoughts, sensations, events, or behavioral experiences for the purpose of a study (Milligan & Bartlett, 2019). Such journals can provide rich qualitative data (Daniels & Harris, 2005; Travers, 2011); however, because this type of journaling is guided by a research goal, it does not necessarily provide the same space for unstructured daily reflection as a personal diary.

Diaries in therapy and potential use in art therapy

Diaries and reflective writing have been used as a self-help tool for addressing eating disorders (Alexander, 2016), processing migration experiences (Wright, 2009), and dealing with the loss of a loved one (O'Connor et al., 2003). Diaries can help the individual connect to themselves, learn about the self, and develop a record of a healing journey (Alexander, 2016). Wright (2009) discussed how expressive writing helped her maintain agency and become her "own therapist" (p. 623). She pointed out that writing allowed her to process things she might have been too ashamed to share in front of a therapist: "I am not shamed by the words I write, in the way that I might be if I were to sit in

relationship with ‘a therapist’ and speak them” (Wright, 2009, p. 628). Thus, in addition to providing people with a safe space to process their emotions during difficult times, diaries can also be used in psychotherapy to address particularly difficult topics. Adams (1999), for instance, discussed how therapists could offer personal writing as a therapeutic tool to their clients. Such writing can allow one to slow down and pay more attention to their inner self, which is why writing about feelings or thoughts related to relationships, life events, or the self can be a useful reflexive process (Adams, 1999).

Although diaries are commonly understood to be written accounts, the incorporation of visual expressions in a diary is not uncommon. Just like a text-based diary, a visual diary or journal offers a way for one to express themselves. Ganim and Fox (1999) suggested that visual journaling can facilitate connections between the “visual, intuitive and feeling-centered” right brain and the “verbal, logical, thought-centered” left brain (p.7). Thus, researchers have explored the use of visual journaling with medical students to reduce stress and anxiety (Mercer et al., 2010), with interns to understand and reflect on clinical internship experiences (Deaver & McAuliffe, 2009), and with patients in art therapy to reduce vicarious trauma symptoms (Gibson, 2018). In these studies, visual journaling was suggested by researchers to process clinical experiences in order to address stress or anxiety. In yet another investigation, therapists used visual journals with military veterans to reduce depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms (Mims, 2015). In this last work, the study participants were provided with a notebook and were asked to respond to a particular directive such as “my inner and outer selves” in their visual journals within a group setting (Mims, 2015, p. 102). The results of this study suggested that visual journaling led to increased self-confidence, self-understanding, and hope. Taken together, these prior studies point to the mental health benefits that can be gained by textual and visual journaling.

Methodology

For the present research, I used an auto-hermeneutic methodology to understand the relationship between the lived experiences, emotions, and thoughts found in my own adolescent diaries, and my currently perceived self-identity. Using auto-hermeneutics enabled me to utilize my own diaries as a tool to explore the ontological phenomenon of memory and the perceived self. Thus, I investigated whether returning to my adolescent diaries could help enhance my currently constructed sense of self, perhaps leading to positive psychological change.

My initial hypothesis was that I will better identify my current beliefs, strengths, fears, values, and norms by exploring my adolescence; by comparing the meanings of the memories as an adult versus what I understood as an adolescent; and by reconstructing the meaning I attributed to the events that helped shape my self-identity.

The hypothesis is illustrated in Diagram 1. I theorized that exploring my past self through my diaries would help me understand more fully who I am, thereby enhancing my current sense of self. It was my belief that both older and current visual and written diaries can provide safety

and comfort for clients to explore the self while in art therapy. This inquiry was meant to be a preliminary exploration for further work to investigate the use of visual and written diaries for providing an alternative understanding of identity development.

Auto-hermeneutics

Auto-hermeneutics is a research approach that “offers a systematic way to explore and describe the ontological nature of one’s own personally lived experience” (Gorichanaz, 2017, p. 1). Hermeneutics has its roots in phenomenology, which is the philosophical pursuit to find the essence of matters in the way that they appear to the experienter’s consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). In other words, phenomenologists attempt to describe a phenomenon through the eyes of one who experienced it. Hermeneutics reflects on and articulates such human experiences by analyzing language. As a phenomenological research approach, hermeneutics involves the interpretation of “interview transcripts and participants’ experiential accounts” (Gorichanaz, 2017, p. 3). When engaged in auto-hermeneutics, the researcher ponders their own past and uses their memories to deepen their understanding of the phenomenon under study (Dennett, 1992). Auto-hermeneutics thus engages in systematic self-observation and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) for data collection and analysis (Gorichanaz, 2017).

Using one’s own diaries as a way to understand the self is not new. In her classic book, *A Life of One’s Own*, Marion Milner (1934/2011) engaged in diary keeping for seven years to understand the aspects of her life that made her happy. She wrote down the things and moments in her life that made her feel happy, and then, later, she reviewed her diaries to look for commonalities among those joyful things and moments. Milner (1934/2011) noted that the attempt to understand the events that made her happy helped her observe “the small movements of the mind,” which helped her realize that there were multiple ways of perceiving (p. 44). Through her auto-inquiry, Milner (1934/2011) found that her awareness widened and that she was “feeling what I saw as well as thinking what I saw” (p. 139). Milner’s diary keeping and observations of daily life helped her broaden her awareness of her feelings and thoughts about significant, joyful events.

I suggest that using diaries to reflect on one’s past self can help people expand their perceived identity awareness. Thus, I put the phenomenon of the perceived self at the center of this investigation and asked if exploring and attempting to understanding one’s adolescent-self could change the way a person perceives their current identity, and if so, in what ways. I thus engaged in auto-hermeneutic research, as it seemed to be a suitable approach for examining one’s personally lived experiences through one’s own writings and artworks like those found in diaries.

In order to best identify my perceived adolescent-self, I first engaged in bracketing (see the following section). I then reread and reviewed the diary entries I made between the ages of 12 and 17. These diaries included both artworks (with explanations below the art) and writings

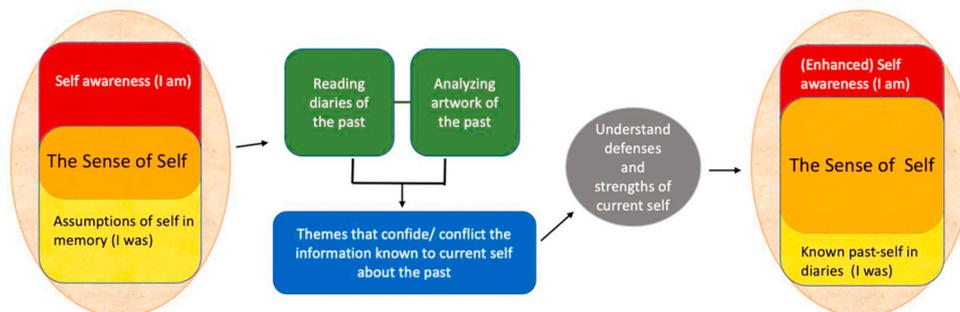


Diagram 1. Study Diagram.

The map shown in Fig. 1 helped me identify how I connected these things and experiences in the past, as well as how they connected to me today. Lastly, in the third step, I wrote down all the things I assumed about my current self. Altogether, this three-step technique not only helped me bracket my assumptions about my adolescent-self but also allowed me to identify differences between my current self and my assumed adolescent-self.

Data analysis

As discussed above, the data consisted of diary entries and artworks found in four diaries. These diaries, which were kept regularly between June 2001 and September 2006, consisted of 168 diary entries and eight images. In all, I coded 183 items (statements or sentences), all in my native language, Turkish.

The data analysis had three components. First, using an IPA approach, I attempted to see how the world was constructed through my adolescent-self's eyes (Smith et al., 2009). While doing so, I attempted to capture what kinds of interpretations my younger self made about the world and what types of emotions likely arose within "her" at that time, based on the interpretations I made about my younger self (Lincoln, 2005). This first data analysis step included reading each diary entry line by line in order to get a sense of general themes, to understand changes in subjects and contexts, and to get an overall understanding of the lived experience of my adolescent-self. Second, to further familiarize and immerse myself in the data (Moustakas, 1990), I read the diaries a second time while paying more attention to the emotions and the thoughts that the diaries conveyed. Third, I searched for meaning units by highlighting all the sentences, statements, or paragraphs that directly or indirectly conveyed an expression of emotion or a thought that connected to my lived experiences. When there were more than three meaning units conveying the same emotion or thought, I clustered them under a particular category (see Diagram 2 for an illustration of how the themes emerged) (See Fig. 2).

In pursuing this research, I attempted to observe the constructed self-narratives through the eyes of my adolescent-self. I let the content itself lead me to underline the emotions and thoughts about my daily lived experiences. Once all entries were read and the meaningful statements highlighted, I went through the data and clustered each statement that conveyed a similar expression or thought. For example, most of the statements in the diaries were related to my family relationships, friendships, academic performance, and internal emotional and psychological states. However, I did not classify the statements based on these categories. Instead, I coded the statements based on whether or not they conveyed a significant statement about how I had expressed myself. Statements like "I felt so mad," "I will always be loyal to my own values," and "Why is there nobody around me?" were coded under the categories

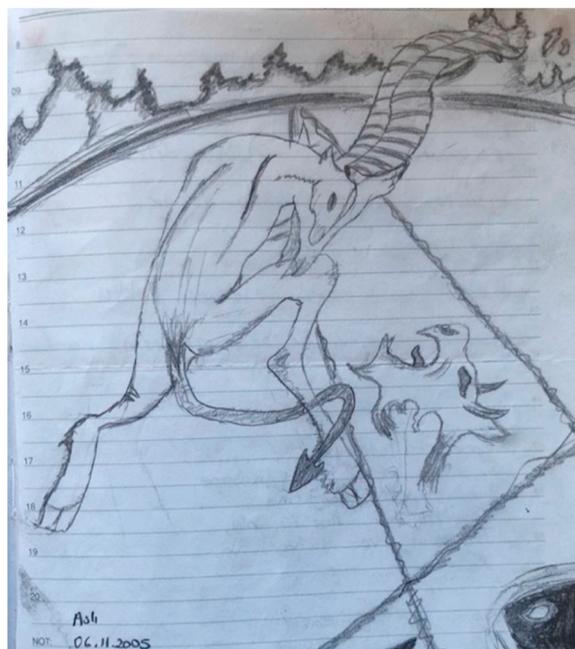


Fig. 2. Example of an artwork from a 2005 diary.

"feeling down/negative emotions," "finding strength," or "disconnection," respectively, no matter the context in which they were originally written.

Based on the categories that emerged through meaning units, in the final step, I documented the themes from the different categories (e.g., sadness, resilience, worry, etc.). In order to see the frequency and incidence pattern of these themes, I created a table to record how often each meaning unit occurred per theme in each year (see Table 1 in the Findings section of this paper). By engaging in IPA, I was able to identify and organize the themes I found throughout the diary entries, and this work also allowed me to explore the convergent and divergent patterns and variations in the data (Smith et al., 2009).

Findings

As described in detail above, the phenomenon under investigation in this auto-hermeneutic study was memory and changes in sense of self. Therefore, throughout the data analysis phase, I consistently kept notes on the meaning units and why I chose each one. This notetaking was not a linear process; rather, it was iterative, and I revisited it often throughout the analysis and the write-up periods. The notes provided

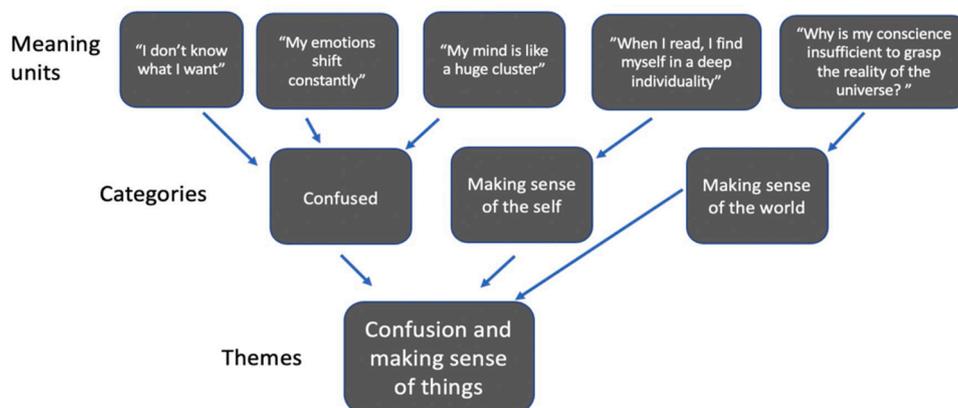


Diagram 2. Illustration example of how themes emerged.

me a mechanism to articulate my thoughts and perspectives, and they allowed me to clarify my thinking. They also helped me see what in the data surprised or confused me, as well as what confirmed or challenged the assumptions I held about my adolescent-self. Additionally, through consistent notetaking, I was able to track whether exploring my various adolescent emotional and thought patterns changed my present understanding of myself, and if so, in what ways. Coding and categorizing my thoughts and feelings under the themes, as well as reflecting on them through my notetaking, helped me bridge the gap between the data in the diaries, my reactions to the data, and the overarching theory I was testing—whether accessed themes in one’s adolescent diaries can change how one thinks and feels about themselves in the present day.

Exploring my diaries written between the ages of 12 and 17 led me to identify six central themes (see Table 1). *Resilience* was the most commonly counted theme among the entries, with a total score of 43. Statements coded under this theme included ones like “I don’t intend to change my self, no matter what others want me to be” (January 2003). *Sadness/melancholy* was found 36 times. Statements here included, “Tears stream down my face, but my mind says, don’t be sad” (March 2003). Phrases related to the category of *confusion/making sense of things* were found 30 times, notably increasing after age 16. Under this theme were sentences like “My emotions shift constantly” (November 2002) and “Why is my conscience insufficient to grasp the reality of the universe?” (May 2006). *Worry* was one of the more frequent meaning units, appearing 28 times. Statements coded under this theme included sentences like “I don’t know what to do” (March 2003). *Loneliness* was found 25 times in the diaries, such as in sentences like “I only want to talk to you [the diary]” (December 2003). Finally, *rebellion* was found 21 times, and it included sentences like “We need a rebellion among the group of introverts” (May 2002).

Reviewing the categories and their counts, one finds clear fluctuations in the theme occurrence frequency table (see Table 1). For instance, while the themes of *rebellion*, *loneliness*, and *worry* were seen more frequently at the ages of 14 and 15, they subsided as I grew older. As I approached the age of 17, *resilience*, *confusion*, and *sadness/melancholy* increased dramatically. There may be straightforward reasons as to why these changes in feeling might have occurred but sharing my adult reflections on the changes among the theme occurrence frequencies could reveal overly personal or perhaps irrelevant details about my adolescent life. I thus chose to refrain from providing in-depth details or commentary about my past, which, I believe, allows this study to be more relatable and relevant to readers.

In addition to the six found themes discussed above, there were other meaning units that did not occur in sufficient numbers, and thus, they were eliminated while clustering the meaning units into categories. For example, I once wrote about how much I enjoyed an event, stating, “I had so much fun.” However, as there were no other statements in the diaries aligning with the emotion found in this sentence, this meaning unit could not be clustered.

Table 1
Theme Occurrence Frequency.

Theme	2001 (Age:12)	2002 (Age:13)	2003 (Age:14)	2004 (Age:15)	2005 (Age:16)	2006 (Age:17)	Total
Resilience	1	2	5	8	12	15	43
Rebellion	1	2	3	8	4	3	21
Loneliness	2	5	7	8	3		25
Worry	4	6	8	6	3	1	28
Confusion/making sense of things	–	2	3	4	10	11	30
Sadness/melancholy	2	2	3	5	9	15	36
							183

Discussion

The coding process took place between July 2020 and September 2020. During this time, I consistently updated my notebook to reflect on the thoughts and emotions that arose in reaction to what I was reading. This process allowed me to clarify why some entries had a more powerful effect on me as an adult than others. As a result of this analysis, I explored three key aspects about myself that would not have been clear to me had I not conducted this investigation.

Firstly, some of the recurring narratives enhanced my understanding of why I felt a certain way about particular things. For instance, I remember not liking school between the ages of 14 and 17. However, prior to this research, I did not recall many of the events that led me to dislike school. In one of my oldest diaries examined for this research, I read about how I experienced social rejection due to puberty arriving relatively late to me compared to some other middle school girls. Reading about events through the eyes of my teen-self allowed me to understand why I have continued to feel negatively about middle school to the present day. One’s life story integrates individual, distinct memories and moments into a cohesive narrative of self; autobiographic memories, then, are a means for understanding and processing what has transpired in the past and how those events relate to who we are in the present (Fivush, 1998; Prebble et al., 2013). However, emotional memories are not always accurate (Laney & Loftus, 2005), or complete (Smeets et al., 2004). As adults, we narrate our self-identities through our memories, yet human memories are often inconsistent, distorted, or insufficient for explaining emotional or behavioral patterns (Alberini, 2010; Kensinger, 2009). Critically reviewing one’s diaries allows the individual to return to the roots of their feelings about events or times in their life that they may not remember accurately. Thus, this process has the potential to help address, process, and resolve earlier feelings.

Secondly, I observed that many of the diary entries did not convey the types of emotions I had expected from my adolescent-self. For instance, as an adult, and prior to this research, I often talked about how rebellious I was in high school, as well as how much I enjoyed my solitude as a teen. However, after analyzing the diaries, I found that I had not experienced the feeling of rebellion as often as the feelings of confidence/resilience and sadness. This finding made me realize that at some point in my life, I chose the narrative of rebelliousness (among others) to represent my adolescent-self. Yet, reviewing the diaries allowed me to see clearly that this was not how I actually presented myself to the world as a teenager. One’s autobiographical story helps the individual organize their memories and to establish “self-continuity and self-understanding” (Habermas & Bluck, 2000, p. 748). However, the remembered self might not always be an accurate representation. Based on how one constructs their self-narrative, the individual might unconsciously or consciously choose to identify with one memory over others. In my particular case, it appears I identified with events where I presented as “rebellious” more than I presented as “sad” or “worried”.

Observing what I *truly* experienced and how I *really* felt via the diaries allowed me to reflect on who I *was* then, as well as who I *am* in relation to her today. The process helped me understand my current strengths, defenses, and thought patterns more fully.

Lastly, as I read through the diaries, as I mentioned above, I found myself responding emotionally to some events more than others. I found that certain entries discussed subjects that strongly contrasted with how I feel about the same subject today. Viewing both contrasting and converging values and behaviors between my adolescent-self and my adult-self allowed me to see which values have stayed with me and which ones were the result of my identification with others (Blasi & Milton, 1991). This allowed me to reflect on which of my values and beliefs have changed over time. Furthermore, I was able to identify current issues and challenges that were present in adolescence, as well. I believe these are ongoing concerns that could be addressed in therapy as an adult.

Reviewing the theme occurrence frequency table, it is clear that my emotions and thinking shifted. As Table 1, during the ages 12–17, I experienced significant emotional changes, from feeling anxious to feeling both sad and resilient. However, it is important to remember that my diary entries are not fixed accounts of who I was. Indeed, adolescence is a time when identity is in great flux (Klimstra et al., 2010), thus I

discovered a certain fluidity in my adolescent writings. For example, entries discussing worry were relatively prominent at age 14, and even though this feeling generally subsided as the years passed, I found that my 17-year-old self still occasionally reverted back to a younger attitude, one where I would write about the same kinds of worries I had when I was 14.

In general, while reading about the events that took place and the emotions I felt as an adolescent, I had the opportunity to respond to these events emotionally as an adult. As mentioned before, through this process, I was able to locate the origins of some of my thoughts and feelings about certain phenomena, leading me to enhance my understanding of my current self. I believe this type of exploration would be helpful to individuals in art therapy. The process of observing one's own diaries allows the individual to unpack their own sense of self in ways that perhaps they had not expected.

Once I concluded the data analysis, I created a mixed media artwork (see Fig. 3). The artwork represents the synthesized information gathered through this investigation. Ultimately, I was able to understand my adolescent-self for who she was, which, in turn, allowed me to better integrate my current adult self with my past adolescent-self. The artwork symbolically represents how this inquiry helped me merge my perceived past and my present identities.



Fig. 3. Arts Based Representation of Integration of Current and Adolescent Self.

The embrace is an artwork that aims to represent the synthesized information gathered through this inquiry. I engaged in explaining this artwork through a poem, because this is the clearest form I could explain this artwork and its connection with this paper. As Eisner says, “human feeling does not pollute understanding. In fact, understanding others and the situations they face may well require it” (1997, p.8). Explaining this artwork with sentences was going to be dull, incomplete and insufficient. So, I accessed poetry to illuminate it.

The Embrace

When I encountered me again, I couldn't recognize her.
She was strange, unfamiliar and young
Was afraid and longing to grow up,
And find herself.
Before I begin, I was concerned that I would become her as I
witness her,
and lose my objectivity, whatever that means.
But I was wrong, I *could not* be her, she was a different person.
When I looked at her art, her writings and poems, I felt as if I
am looking at a mirror,
Yet I don't recognize this face
And so I kept reading and looking
And trying to make sense, to familiarize

And after a while...
I *could* see myself in her
This must be, I told myself, the *emerging self* in adolescence
I witnessed, the emerging me...
I sensed her through her writings, we were in dialogue.
She said to me, “one day, I will read these as a different person, and I won't feel how I am feeling right now...”
She was witnessing my ghost-presence from the future.
And I kept reading, and looking,
I accessed the emotional knowledge in her diaries
As my recognition of who she was and who I am in relation to her increased,
I *felt* for her.
And I felt for *me*.
I interpreted her and represented where we are now
Then, we said goodbye, perhaps for another tens of years.
I embraced her, and she embraced me.
In *our* diary, in our container of emotions,
We embraced each other.
And everything we assumed about each other,
How I *was* as a teen, how I *would be* as an adult,
Made sense.

Implications

Of course, not every adolescent keeps a regular diary. Even for those that do, many may not hold onto their diaries into adulthood. However, for those who do preserve their writing and artwork, bringing them to art therapy and reflecting on them visually while working alongside an art therapist can facilitate deep insights into one's earlier identity and development. A client reviewing their diaries can be an observer to their own lived experiences, and I believe this process allows a certain psychological distance that can help the client process difficult topics. In art therapy, a client can then explore the topics found in their old diaries through visual media. In turn, the therapist can provide support and containment during times when the client might be triggered. Although inquiries on diary keeping and processing in relation to art therapy is limited, future studies might explore the use of adolescence diaries in art therapy.

Exploring one's adolescence by observing early diary entries allows one to evaluate how and why their values and beliefs have changed over time, as well as what core ideas, principles, and characteristics have continued into adulthood. The findings of my investigation suggest that while processing past experiences, diaries can benefit to restructure self-narratives. Reviewing older artworks, poems, and diary entries while in art therapy can open new doors for discussion and enhance understanding, leading one to find resolutions to adult issues. For the art therapist, by utilizing a client's earlier artworks and writings, they can help their client identify individual stressors, strengths, and coping skills, thereby helping their client enhance their self-understanding.

I also suggest that art therapists can offer visual journal keeping for clients who might need space and solitude for art making. Keeping such a journal close by allows the client to sketch their daily (or periodic) thoughts and emotions, which they can then bring with them to their therapy sessions. These journals can operate as a "safe space" outside the therapy room. While prior art therapy studies have discussed the use of visual journaling for processing clinical developments, as far as I know, there are none that I have found that have investigated the potential benefits or drawbacks of diary keeping, whether in visual or verbal form, in-between therapeutic sessions.

Ethical concerns

Reviewing early diary entries can remind one of past traumatic events that were suppressed, which could be triggering. There is a real risk of re-traumatization. Therefore, individuals with triggering past experiences might well benefit from reading their earlier writings along with a therapist.

It is also important to point out that not every population responds well to diary keeping. Adams (1999) emphasized how people with severe mood or thought disorders or severe depression might experience negative consequences as a result of expressive writing. While people with mood disorders generally benefit from writing for the purpose of emotion regulation, in some cases, mania may be aggravated by the act of personal writing. Adams (1999) also pointed out that people with schizophrenia might feel as if they are getting lost in their thoughts while in the process of writing. Nevertheless, keeping reflective diaries for therapy sessions can provide many clients with the safety, structure, regulation, and containment they need to find resolutions to long-standing issues.

Limitations

This research and my findings have several limitations. First, as mentioned earlier, not everyone holds onto their diaries or artwork from

when they were adolescents. Thus, clearly, the techniques discussed in this study only apply to those who have enough material to use. Second, since encountering one's adolescent-self has the potential to bring up traumatic memories for some individuals, the process is not suitable for all situations. Third, this paper only focused on my attempt to understand my current self by reading my diary entries; thus it does not suggest any generalizability. Finally, although I investigated the phenomena of the perceived self and memory, there are other phenomena that could be explored in diaries, such as adolescent coping, attachment, psychotherapeutic processes, or the organization of autobiographical memory. All of these are good areas for future study.

The auto-hermeneutic approach taken in this investigation meant I was the only person who read, reflected, interpreted, and analyzed the content found in my diaries. However, the auto-hermeneutic approach could undercut the general validity of this work to some degree. As I was the only researcher involved in this study, my biases were not checked by other team members, and because this research did not involve a research team, there could be no inter-rater consensus. Furthermore, it was also impossible to perform member checking of the participant, as "she" was my younger self. To increase the study's validity, I used bracketing and approached the data with an open mind. At those times when I was feeling exhausted or was getting lost in the data, I distanced myself from it for the period of a week and then returned to the material fresh. Even though the methodological approach I utilized might have validity risks, it allowed me, the researcher, the ability to compare and contrast my current views, thoughts, and emotions with those of my younger self.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between my perceived adolescent-self and my true adolescent-self by analyzing the verbal and visual expressions found in my adolescent diaries. I also identified current thoughts and emotional reactions to the entries and artworks through the process of note-taking. By reading the entries and poems and viewing the artworks, I was able to understand which values and characteristics have stayed with me as parts of my personality and which identifications and beliefs have been relinquished over time. In this work, I also explored whether any new understandings gained through the examination of my past-self would change how I sense and position myself today. By doing so, I was able to trace the roots of some of my most challenging thoughts and feelings. Locating the roots of particular emotions in the diaries allowed me to perceive my adolescent-self in a new, more realistic light. I found that how I perceived my younger self before undertaking this investigation change after reading the entries and examining the artwork. Indeed, aspects about my adolescent-self found in the diaries were often surprising, but also quite enlightening in terms of providing me with a better understanding of my current identity. Thus, I believe that this method of delving into one's adolescent diaries could be useful for adults seeking to understand their current selves better, since significant information and long-standing patterns can be gleaned through the process.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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