Understanding how narrators use ‘autobiographical memory’ to construct oral testimony that deals with a life history is integral to their analysis. Considering personal experiences in this way complements broader approaches to historical narratives of human experience, such as those of migration. Anthropologists and oral historians Jacob Climo and Maria Cattell argue that while memory may be incorrect with regards to factual truth, it always reveals personal truths. Memory is used to maintain consistent individuality and to give coherence to past experiences. While autobiographical memories are not always factually accurate, they contain ‘an abundance of truth in regard to personality, self expression, personal identity, future planning, and other self oriented aspects of memory’.1 Oral historian Alessandro Portelli claims that the specific value of oral history lies in changing memories, which reveal narrators’ efforts to make sense of the past and to give form to their lives.2 This article identifies five types of strong autobiographical memories found in the life histories of interviewees. These migration memories are divided into five categories: sensory, nostalgic, emotional, work, and entertaining stories. Analysing these migration memories in this framework provides insights into why these experiences persist in narrators’ life stories.

Identifying vivid autobiographical memories not only aids our understanding of oral testimony as a historical source, but also highlights sentiments concerning migration from the narrator’s current perspective. My narrators’ testimonies covered many topics not directly related to their initial move to Australia. Consequently, the interviews include all types of memories and reflections; not just


those immediately concerned with migration. In fact, these ‘unrelated’ memories indirectly highlight how interviewees feel about their migration experiences at the time of the interview. For example, nostalgic memories may stem from feelings of homesickness, and work memories reveal narrators’ feelings of personal identity and accomplishment linked to migration. In order to understand narrators’ life stories, it is important to locate their migration experiences within other important life events.

This article is based on my research into narratives of New Zealanders who migrated to and from Australia from the late 1960s through to the early 1990s. The selection of participants was two-fold. Firstly, 274 New Zealand migrants from the Australian and New Zealand region responded to a call for participants in local and national media by filling in surveys providing demographic and migration details. The majority also wrote narrative accounts of their migration experience or life history. Although participants were self-selected, the sizeable number of the sample guaranteed a wide range of experience, age, educational background, and location. Out of this sample I then selected a group of thirty-six individuals, with whom I conducted full life history interviews in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Canberra, Brisbane, Wellington, Christchurch, and Auckland. Based on the survey responses I was able to select participants who were representative of different migration experiences, time frames, and demographic criteria. In this article I have only used the oral history transcripts from these interviews. This methodology sheds light on individual experiences rather than wider migration patterns between New Zealand and Australia.

3 All interviews conducted and currently held by author: John Annison, Yarra Valley, Melbourne, New Zealand, 9 December 2009; Suzanne Belladonna, Ilam, Christchurch, New Zealand, 24 January 2010; Patricia Cassone, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand, 6 November 2010; David Cavanagh, Ilam, Christchurch, New Zealand, 2 December 2009; George Clarke, Bondi, Sydney, Australia, 19 April 2010; Jennifer Cooper, Yarralumla, Canberra, Australia, 22 April 2010; Martin Crotty, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia, 23 September 2010; Diana Harlow (pseudonym), Werribee, Melbourne, Australia, 12 December 2009; Murray Hunt, Willerton, Perth, Australia, 4 July 2010; John Husband, Mawson, Canberra, Australia, 21 April 2010; John McNeil, Spreydon, Christchurch, New Zealand, 21 February 2010; Joanna Matheson, Island Bay, Wellington, New Zealand, 22 May 2010; Annette Moody, Mt Wellington, Auckland, New Zealand, 5 November, 2010; Frank Pawson, Merindah, Melbourne, Australia, 10 December 2010; Julie Podstolski and Matthew Clements, South Fremantle, Perth, Australia, 3 July 2010; Peter Potaka, Wellington CBD, New Zealand, 20 May 2010; Bruce Ringer, Brighton, Brisbane, Australia, 19 September 2010; Rosa Tanga (pseudonym), Wellington CBD, New Zealand, 23 May 2010; Toni Te Kowhai, Blacktown, Sydney, Australia, 18 April 2010.
Migration patterns changed significantly from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, and for this reason I focus on this period. Prior to 1967, migration between New Zealand and Australia was fairly even. From 1967 onwards, however, the numbers of New Zealanders living in Australia increased sharply, while numbers of Australians living in New Zealand decreased. Demographers give several reasons for this trend: New Zealand’s weaker economy; increasingly affordable trans-Tasman flights from the 1970s; and the emerging trend in the 1970s of New Zealand baby boomers going on their ‘Overseas Experience’. From 1967–1971, an average of 21,000 New Zealanders moved permanently to Australia each year. The second major wave of migration, from 1978-79 through to 1980–81, saw an average of 32,000 New Zealanders move to Australia each year. During the early 1980s, this trend fell as Australia experienced recession and unemployment. As Australia’s economic conditions improved and those of New Zealand worsened, the flow of migrants revived. In 1988-89 a third major wave of migration peaked when 44,000 New Zealanders moved to Australia. By 2010, migration from New Zealand to Australia once again peaked. The modern period of trans-Tasman migration is distinguished by the sustained and cyclical nature of the large scale population loss from New Zealand to Australia.

In spite of this significant migration pattern, historians have paid scant attention to the migration of New Zealanders to Australia. Historical outlines of the shifting movements of Australians and New Zealanders across the Tasman have been recorded since the nineteenth century. Recent scholarship has examined motivations for migration to Australia, the effect of migration on cultural and national identity, and transnational relationship for both Maori and non-Maori

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migrants to Australia.\(^8\) Demographers have also investigated the changing patterns in New Zealand post-war migration to Australia.\(^9\) However, due to its quantitative nature, demographic and statistical works have focused on economic factors, population movement, settlement, and distribution. As a result of approaches limited to economic outcomes in both historical and demographic scholarship, research on migration between New Zealand and Australia is, at present, piecemeal and does not adopt oral history methodology. In contrast to these approaches, oral history provides detail on the subjective and long-term impacts of migration through personal narratives.

Significantly, New Zealanders do not figure in Australian historiography on immigration. Scholars do not use case studies of New Zealand migrants and omit details about their motivations and experiences of integrating into Australian society. Although Australian historians acknowledge the large numbers of New Zealanders who have moved to Australia since the late 1960s, the phenomenon has not been examined in any great detail.\(^10\) This disinterest in the migrant experiences of New Zealanders by Australian migration historians might be attributed to New Zealanders’ relatively easy entry, movement and their presumed integration into Australian society. Oral history has the potential to undermine some of these assumptions and offer new insight into the experiences of New Zealand migrants to Australia. I consider the provenance and significance of ‘autobiographical memory’ in participants’ narratives. New Zealanders who have moved to Australia are a viable migrant group deserving of attention in Australian migration historiography. Through interviews, I reveal

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\(^8\) Paul Hamer, *Maori in Australia: Nga Maori i Te Ao Moemoea* (Wellington: Te Puni Korkiri, 2007); Alison E. Green, ‘New Zealand Migrants to Australia: Social Construction of Migrant Identity’ (PhD diss., Bond University, 2007).


the human aspects of migration not represented in official demographic statistics and records. In relating these experiences, I aim to uncover how individuals’ migration experiences are shaped by their pasts, private desires, goals, and relationships, and the impact these have upon individual migration experiences. Oral history is particularly well-suited to illuminating these research agendas.

**Autobiographical Memories in Life Histories**

Autobiographical memories can be retained for a number of reasons. Oral historian Alistair Thomson points out that an experience is much more likely to be consolidated in long-term memory if it is perceived as significant.¹¹ As Valerie Yow and Donald Ritchie argue, humans cannot remember every detail from a scene; we take in only what seems important.¹² An event that has dramatic impact, subject to physical sensations or powerful emotions, is more likely to be remembered clearly—to be ‘storied’, as Thomson puts it.¹³ While recurrent processes may generally be better remembered, a single unique incident that turns out to have long-term significance often proves to be particularly memorable. Memories perceived as significant are more likely to be told and retold many times over. Thomson argues that ‘the creation and rehearsal of a memory story is fundamental to the consolidation of long term memory’.¹⁴ Retelling stories, writing down accounts of the event in a letter or diary, looking at photos, or partaking in joint reminiscence sessions with friends all help narrators fix an event in their long-term memory.

Such strong autobiographical memories in life history interviews can be recognised by their manner of telling and content. For present purposes, a ‘strong memory’ is a discrete story that a narrator tells, without prompting, for some length of time. These memories include detail, dialogue, sensory description, climactic conclusions, and emotions expressed through laughter, enthusiasm or sadness. They have been told before to family and friends, and are sustained by photo albums and shared discussions. In terms of content, these memories

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¹³ Thomson, ‘Memory and Remembering in Oral History’, 85.

¹⁴ Ibid., 85.
are generally experiential rather than factual. They are always personal, and include narrators’ own emotional responses to the event and retrospective evaluations about their identities and life journeys.

Strong memories identified in the interviews and discussed in this article generally fit into five common categories: sensory migration experiences; nostalgic accounts of childhood and youth; memories of heartbreak, loss and conflict; work and career tales; and entertaining stories. In the following sections, I consider why and how these types of experiences became vivid long-term memories for narrators and that these seemingly unrelated memories also help to illuminate their feelings and reflections about migration to Australia.

**Sensory Migration Memories**

Narrators’ memories of arriving in Australia are often rich in sensory detail and vividly descriptive language. New and different sensations captured their attention during the first few hours and days in Australia. Although most narrators had not shared their migration stories previously, their sensory migration memories remain clear. Alistair Thomson and James Hammerton have found that some English migrants to Australia, who have since returned to Britain, find audiences for their migration stories by writing memoirs and giving public talks on their Australian experiences. Interestingly, many New Zealanders in Australia do not repeat their migration memories as they feel they would bore others. When I asked Frank Pawson if he ever talks about his memories of moving to Australia, he replied, ‘No. Nobody’s interested. Truthfully. You’re the only one that’s ever asked me’. This was a common response. Narrators did not feel that their move to Australia was significant or important enough to constitute ‘history’. While narrators often relate migration memories vividly, complete with sensory detail, this is more likely due to the personal significance of migration to the narrators rather than frequent reminiscence.

The longevity of narrators’ sensory memories, despite a lack of retelling, suggests that aspects of Australia were new and foreign to migrants from New Zealanders. Novel sounds, sights, tastes, tactile sensations, and smells lodged themselves permanently in migrants’ long term memories. Memory studies research in the field of psychology maintains that sensory information will

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16 Frank Pawson, interview with author, 10 December 2010.
almost certainly fade quickly with time if not consciously recalled. Narrators who migrated to Australia retain their sensory memories because, at the time of arrival, they consciously noticed and internally catalogued the new sensations of Australia. New Zealanders are generally not seen as having a 'migrant experience', as such, because of their familiarity with, and similarity to, Australians. However, cultural similarity does not preclude culture shock. Thomson and Hammerton note the tension between familiarity and strangeness in British migrants’ experiences of Australia: even subtle changes were disorientating and some differences required significant adjustment. The persistence of narrators’ sensory migration memories suggests that they did experience a mild form of culture shock as they realised that Australia’s climate, landscape, ethnic make-up, and society was quite different from that of New Zealand.

Narrators’ senses were heightened during the earliest stages of migration from New Zealand. The arrival by plane and the first few moments after disembarking, particularly the sensation of leaving the plane and stepping out into Australia’s heat, are still clear in many narrators’ memories. John Annison recalls arriving in Sydney:

*I got off the plane and I remember walking down the stairs and they were behind the wing. Walked down the stairs and thought, ‘Gee there’s a hell of a lot of heat coming from the engine’. And when I got round the front I realised it wasn’t the heat from the engine, it was the heat of Sydney.*

Other narrators recalled similar experiences. Murray Hunt got off the plane at Port Hedland where it was thirty-six degrees: ‘I just remember this sudden sort of gust of hot. It seemed like you were walking into a furnace or someone had opened a furnace door’. Indeed, the Australian weather, such as unfamiliar heat, storms, winds and rain, occasioned many strong sensory memories.

For some narrators, first impressions of Australia’s landscape were visual and focused on new colours. The red soil and heat of Gove imprinted itself in Bruce Ringer’s memory. John McNeill, who migrated in 1965, describes his destination of Townsville as ‘a very red sort of town’ because of the outback

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20 Murray Hunt, interview with author, 4 July 2010.
21 Bruce Ringer, interview with author, 19 September 2010.
dust everywhere. Likewise, Frank Pawson recalls his first view of Melbourne from the ship: ‘I remember looking out coming from Sydney, looking at the mainland from the sea, and wondering what on earth we were coming in to because everything was brown. It was brown as brown’. Trish Cassone found Sydney’s grass a shock: ‘going from winter in Auckland where, you know, your grass is normally as green as microwaved peas, the grass was really brown’. Matthew Clements was struck by the different light in Sydney: ‘it was so strong, the light was so strong and very glarey’.

Many migrants settled into Australian cities and the comparatively bustling urban spaces of Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney brought with them new sensory experiences for New Zealand migrants. Once again narrators were particularly struck by differences from New Zealand. For David Cavanagh, fresh off the plane from his raucous farewell party in Invercargill, it was the smell of petrol:

> The smell of the petrol was the first thing. I could still smell it now. Victorian petrol had a strange smell. I don’t know what it is. Every now and again, even when we were in Perth, we’d get a load of fuel there that had the same smell...it’s a sweet sickly smell and I just didn’t know what, but it struck me really strong.

It is significant that this sensory memory remains evocative for David even many years after his migration. The smell of Victorian petrol still has the power to trigger those first moments in Melbourne. For some narrators, the exotic noises, smells and tastes of multi-ethnic Australia created lasting sensory memories. Peter Potaka was mesmerised by Melbourne’s butchers, fish shops, and different ethnicities. For him it was an auditory experience: ‘I listened to the languages and I listened to the accents and I thought “Oh!” And we went off to a race meeting and then the same thing there. You know all the different languages going on around you’. Exposure to new sights, smells, tastes and sounds created lasting migration memories for narrators.

### Nostalgic Memories

23 Pawson, interview.
24 Patricia Cassone, interview with author, 6 November 2010.
26 David Cavanagh, interview with author, 2 December 2009.
Narrators who had a happy upbringing talked at length about their memories of growing up in New Zealand. These nostalgic memories remain strong and arouse powerful emotions. This is partly because they help narrators remember loved family members. Suzanne Belladonna’s memories of fishing with her father at Picton are an important connection to her deceased, and much missed, father. Suzanne and her family still often holiday in Picton when they visit New Zealand. These family stories persist because they are often recalled at family get-togethers. Rosa Tanga has many happy memories of growing up in a big family, but admits that the memories stick because they are often retold. She reflects, ‘I think because I was number seven the same stories tend to get recycled around and sometimes you’re never quite sure if you remember them or if it’s just if you’ve heard them so many times’. Nostalgic memories are also powerful because narrators identify them as key moments in their personal development. Martin Crotty feels that his time in Christchurch studying history at the University of Canterbury was ‘the making of me intellectually’. He positively associates these years with his career as an academic, and therefore feels ‘nostalgic about them [those years] rather than hankering for them or being homesick for them’. Indeed, migrants are often aware that they see the memories of their youth through rose-coloured spectacles. These nostalgic memories are important because they identify key moments in migrants’ lives that bind them to friends, family, and also explain their present identities.

It is significant that narrators emphasise and retain strong memories of their New Zealand upbringings because it is these memories that maintain a continued connection to New Zealand. Toni Te Kowhai’s nostalgic memories of her grandmother’s Lewana bread and homemade plum jam spark homesickness for New Zealand. The smell or taste of these foods ‘pulls on the heartstrings’ and put her in a ‘time warp’. Memories of adventures in New Zealand’s great outdoors foster a continuing love for New Zealand’s landscapes. Narrators who particularly love New Zealand’s countryside have strong memories of growing up outdoors. Benjamin Pittman left New Zealand to escape the ‘controlling system’ and anti-Maori racism. He maintains, however, a connection to his family farm in Northland. On his anticipated return to New Zealand, Benjamin plans to live on his farm and act as ‘the keeper of the family archives and as

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29 Rosa Tanga (pseudonym), interview with author, 23 May 2010.
30 Martin Crotty, interview with author, 23 September 2010.
keeper of the family history’. Indeed, on trips back to New Zealand narrators often revisit the places they grew up. During a recent visit to Wellington, Diana Harlow took her grown daughter to visit her old school. Although Diana used to hate school, more recently she has realised that it ‘did do something good for me’ and joined her Old Girls Association. Like Diana, a number of my interviewees have joined the Old Friends website in recent years to link up with past schoolmates or attend school reunions. Nostalgic memories are often strong because they foster a meaningful connection to New Zealand.

Common references in such memories are: idyllic holidays, freedom from parental supervision, a simpler lifestyle, and playing games with friends and siblings. For example, Jennifer Cooper spoke at length about her experiences growing up on an orchard with her hippie parents. Some of her clearest memories are of the family’s involvement in the Auckland tramping club:

> I can remember going to the Ureweras with him [her father]. Quite often if he was doing the driving and not the tramping—cause somebody had to take the truck round to the other end—he would take Hugh [her brother] or me with him and we would stay with the truck. I can remember finding we were camped in a nice place with a stream and I’d build dams and collect flowers and do all that sort of thing. Absolutely glorious. So we saw a lot of the countryside. And also the ATC was building the hut at Ruapehu, the Memorial hut and I think my father was president at that stage or I think I’ve seen a photo of him opening the hut, you know at the hut opening. And so we used to go down and be involved in working bees and things like that too.34

This is just one section of Jennifer’s account of her ‘magical childhood’. In this quotation, Jennifer uses specific details and a nostalgic tone to bring back fond memories of times with her father and brother. She refers to a photo that reinforces this memory. Just like Jennifer’s memory, many narrators’ nostalgic childhood memories took place outside and with family, which suggests the importance of the New Zealand landscape and family in narrators’ nostalgia.

Other narrators had strong memories from their first years out of high school when they became independent. This was often a time of new freedoms, romance and discovery. Julie Podstolski (JP) and Matt Clements (MC) spoke at length about their university share housing experiences in Christchurch, first meeting, and subsequent romance:

33 Diana Harlow (pseudonym), interview with author, 12 December 2009.
34 Jennifer Cooper, interview with author, 22 April 2010.
I remember, one of the first things that happened was I made a cup of coffee for each of us. And I must have been nervous because I put—I used to have two spoons of sugar in those days—so I put two spoons of sugar in. And then I put another two spoons of sugar in. And I remember he was thinking ‘Wow she has a lot of sugar’. But it was just nerves. That’s one of my first memories. And we just really, oh that’s right, he liked my music collection. I moved in with my records and I had quite a few David Bowie records and he thought ‘Oh wow, these records are pretty good’. And so we had a common interest in music. But really I think it was just we were just thrown together. And so that’s how we met.

Mm, so we were completely stunned that a Fine Arts student wanted to move into a flat with six engineers or something. You’d have to be crazy really. But I always remember she sort of marched in and said ‘I’ll have that room’. And we were like ‘I think we’re supposed to be choosing here’. But it was like too late you know. That was it. So she moved in. And yeah it was a bit like a hurricane moving into the flat you know. It was different sort of person. On my part I think I was very impressed that she was an artist. This is something that’s come through from my mother’s side. She was very much brought up versed in the arts were a very important part of her heritage...So I was impressed by the fact. When she moved in she had these huge paintings, you know the size of that television, of super real cows...And I remember having to carry these things in you know. It’s kind of an abiding memory I have, moving these paintings inside.

Julie and Matt’s memories are striking because they include very specific detail (two teaspoons of sugar), dialogue, and humour. It also became clear that this was a memory that had been repeated before. In Julie and Matt’s kitchen there was a photo taped up on a cupboard showing Julie holding a picture of Mick Jagger over half of Matt’s face. Julie noted that the photo often sparked reminiscence: ‘That picture on the wall there that we showed you, that gets a lot of questions. Almost everyone who comes in here has a look at that and asks about it’. Julie also noted that their three daughters like to hear about how they had met. Stories that narrators had previously shared with their families often contained emotion, detail and humour. Nostalgic memories are a reassuring aspect of life stories; they emphasise the formation of narrators’ identities while also linking them to loved ones and their homeland. They give narrators

Julie Podstolski and Matthew Clements, interview with author, 3 July 2010.
a sense of continuity between their pre- and post-migration lives, particularly with relationships.

**Memories of Heartbreak, Loss, and Conflict**

The third type of memories evidenced in the life histories of these narrators are stories of heartbreak, loss and conflict. Often these accounts of family dysfunction, death, or illness are accompanied by tears, anger, or frustration, even as they are recalled years later. These vividly emotional memories are known as ‘flashbulb’ memories. Flashbulb memories are created when an event has special personal significance and is accompanied by a heightened emotional state. The resulting memories endure, even if they are not often talked about.

In these interviews, narrators recalled negative emotional experiences more clearly than positive memories. Even though happy events (such as falling in love or having children) were important to narrators, they usually described these experiences briefly or with clichés. This reticence could be due to the personal nature of such tales or to a cultural distaste for sentimentalism. Yet, narrators still shared private, sad, or fearful stories. Dramatic, usually negative, events are of pivotal importance in a life story and are imprinted on the memory in rich emotional detail.

Flashbulb memories of difficult events often cause narrators to re-live upsetting emotions during interviews. For example, Jo Matheson became visibly upset when she reminisced about contracting Sydenham’s chorea while at Intermediate school:

> At that stage my two little sisters were like just learning to walk and they were really excited that I was at home. So they used to like come in, then I would hit, knock them over because I couldn’t control my arm and then I would get upset, then they’d get upset... And then they [her parents] went back to the doctor. He said ‘No, you have to stay in bed’. And I used to fall out of bed. And we had these beds that had a little bed head with a little drawer attached to it and I’d keep knocking it and hitting myself and my Dad had to take it off. And I remember that being quite traumatic cos I was obviously really ill but I didn’t really understand.

The story ends with Jo crying, surprised at the power of memory to renew difficult feelings from her past. Jo was shocked at the strength of her reaction.

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37 Ibid., 59–60.
38 Joanna Matheson, interview with author, 22 May 2010.
She had never talked about the experience with anyone outside her immediate family before and did not often recall this time. Likewise, when John Husband recalled hearing about his sister’s death he commented that it was ‘one of those things you just never forget’. As he talked, John found himself ‘getting choked up’ and reflected ‘it’s just like it was yesterday’.  

While some strong emotional memories were unconnected with migration, others were very relevant to migrant experiences. Strong memories of homesickness are the most obvious examples of difficult memories related to migration. Distance from family in New Zealand often led to great heartbreak, especially in the face of illness or death. Traumatic events could prove more difficult to cope with in an unfamiliar country with fewer support networks. Often, the connection between difficult memories and migration is implicit. The most powerful stories in Trish Cassone’s life history are the death of her parents, her experiences in the Sydney bushfires, and her Australian sister-in-law’s death from cancer. While her parents’ deaths were inherently traumatic, her distance from them at the time made the memory far more upsetting. In fact, Trish was unable to speak about her mother’s death in any detail as she found it too difficult. Trish’s experience in the Sydney bushfires was exacerbated by her feelings of isolation. Her husband was away on a business trip and she had no close family nearby. Unused to bushfires, Trish found the experience particularly shocking and terrifying. When Trish talks about her sister-in-law’s death, it is clear that living in Sydney strengthened her relationship with her husband’s Italian family. As a result of her migration, the death was far more painful. She experienced the cultural differences of a European funeral and grieving process from the inside and was indelibly marked by it. Migration alters narrators’ lives, including their emotional experiences. While migration does not cause these emotional events, it can change the tenor of experiences. When analysing migration narratives it is vital to consider all powerful negative emotions, even if they seem unrelated to migration, as they often contribute to a fuller understanding of narrators’ migration narratives.

**Work Memories**

The fourth common type of strong autobiographical memories that emerged from these interviews is stories about careers and jobs. Male narrators in particular often became sidetracked when talking about their work, and wanted...
to give a detailed chronological account of their working lives. The strength of work and career memories is due to several factors. Charlotte Linde, in her work on life histories, argues that for most people their jobs are a major component in understanding their own lives. Their choice of job and subsequent career path are central factors both in demonstrating who they are as people, and at the same time confirming that their choice to emigrate was the correct choice. Linde suggests that a narrator’s job is often central to their self-perception and identity. By telling stories about their work, narrators illustrate key beliefs about their character and life journey. Work also provided the context for ‘entertaining’ stories, which meant that many migrants had told these tales before to interested listeners. Their work stories had been fixed in long-term autobiographical memory through rehearsal.

Narrators’ often use work stories to illustrate that migration marks a positive turning point in their life history. This approach reveals their determination to view their past optimistically. Recent scholarship reveals that our brains are hardwired to place high value on our past and faith in our own decisions. Tali Sharot writes,

> This affirmation of our decisions helps us derive heightened pleasure from choices that might actually be neutral. Without this, our lives might well be filled with second-guessing. Have we done the right thing? Should we change our mind? We would find ourselves stuck, overcome by indecision.

When migrants look back at their working lives, they tell stories that validate their decision to emigrate. For male narrators recalling a successful career justifies their decision to migrate, because they often migrated for career or financial reasons, and were usually positioned as breadwinners. For example, Murray Hunt talks at length about his work as a warehouse manager and industrial relations officer at various Western Australian mining sites. Murray valued his career because of the financial rewards:

> I’d never seen that sort of money in New Zealand. Mum and Dad had never had that sort of money. I can always remember Dad telling me, he said ‘You don’t know how lucky you are’. He said ‘When I was your age if I had to buy a suit for work I’d have to save up and it would possible take me three or four pays to actually be able to afford to buy a suit’. He said ‘Here you are’—this was on New Zealand wages—‘you can go out and buy a suit today or on your

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next pay day and still have all your ancillary costs taken care of’. Although Murray still feels somewhat ambivalent about his decision to migrate and misses New Zealand, he justifies his decision to stay in Australia by his lucrative and interesting career. Many narrators attribute their success to Australia to the work they found upon emigration. Australia is often considered the ‘lucky country’, because it provided them with opportunities and financial security.

George Clarke’s narrative is an example of a work story that contributes to his identity and confirmed his decision to move to Australia. George, who migrated to Australia in 1969 to make money in the Sydney steel works, told a detailed and humorous story about getting a job at Maitland Prison. He then talked at length about his subsequent career and becoming the first Maori superintendent of a Sydney prison. George’s work stories show his pride in achieving a successful career and financial stability. During the interview, he told a number of detailed and fascinating stories about his cultural intervention work with high-risk Maori and Pacific Islander prisoners without any interruption or prompting. This cultural intervention work for ‘his people’ is very meaningful and connected to his Maori identity. The following story is typical of his testimony:

I had a Maori fella here who was from home, Ngati Porou. He was in jail for murder. And he was in our super-max and [had] been in isolation for the last six years because he was too dangerous for staff and other inmates. It got to the stage where the department had no option but just to lock him away by himself. Then I received a phone call saying ‘Can you come down and introduce cultural intervention with this fellow?’ So I went down to the Goulburn—that’s our segregation unit there—with an elder from East Ryde. Well I couldn’t get an elder from Ngati Porou—luckily I’m Ngati Porou see—but I got a tohunga from Tuhoe which is next. So him and I went down there. There’s a set process with cultural intervention. First we go through the process of the welcome, the hongi, then we go through the karakia, then we do—myself and the tohunga—do an analysis of what we can see in that fella see. If we think he has mata Maori then the tohunga gets involved, directly involved. But before we get to that stage, I do an assessment. I normally send emails back to the

Hunt, discussion.

Ngati Porou—tribal group of East Coast area north of Gisborne to Tihirau.

Tohunga—skilled expert. In this context, spiritual elder.

Hongi—to press noses in greeting.

Karakia—ritual chant, prayer, blessing.

Mata Maori—Maori spiritual sickness.
family, to the maraes, to get me all the information, not only on that person but on their whanau. And with this fellow there was one Aunty he had living in Wellington that had all the information. And she said to me ‘Well I can’t give it to you cos it’s so embarrassing to our family’. She said ‘And that’s what’s causing this. It’s not only him, my son’s the same’. I said ‘Yeah, well I need to know cos I’m taking a tohunga in there’. It took [a] while for her to give me all the information, so I pass all that on to the tohunga. It gives him an idea how to deal with the issue. And after about our first, second intervention there, the officer in charge rings me up. He says ‘What did you do to this fellow?’ I said ‘Why?’ ‘He’s not the same fellow, he’s talking to us polite and all this’.

George’s story is noteworthy for its compelling detail and dialogue. He uses suspense to gradually build up to the climax of the prisoner’s improved behaviour. In George’s narrative, his work memories consistently emphasise his devotion to achieving his goals, career success, cultural identity, and passion for helping other Maori.

Entertaining Memories

The final category of strong memories consists of those that narrators perceive as entertaining. Often these stories are humorous or adventurous; narrators depict themselves as straying from their comfort zone and experiencing new, unusual or even dangerous situations. Common themes in entertaining memories are: getting lost or into trouble in a new place; working in remote settings; or encountering criminal activities. Narrators have often related these memories to friends or family previously. In conversation and social relations, the ability to ‘tell a good story’ is very important. In her work on life stories, Linde argues that good stories must be reportable, that is, events that are unusual in some way or run counter to expectations. ‘Reportability’ depends not just on an event but on the relationship between the speaker and listener. Narrators told stories about life in Australia that they thought would be novel or surprising to me as a fellow New Zealander. In addition narrators felt a sense of shared national kinship with me which encouraged them to relate humorous anecdotes that stressed Australians’ apparent strangeness. No doubt they used similar selection criteria when entertaining New Zealand friends and family.

49 Marae—courtyard—the open area in front of the wharenui, where formal greetings and discussions take place. Often also used to include the complex of buildings around the marae.

50 Whanau—extended family.

51 George Clarke, interview with author, 19 April 2010.

52 Linde, Life Stories, 22.
Migration provided a rich source of material for many narrators. As mentioned previously, New Zealander migrants were attuned to aspects of Australian life that were different to those of New Zealand society, and their entertaining stories were usually concerned with new and different aspects of Australian life. In addition, many narrators who moved to Australia when they were young were motivated by a desire for travel, adventure and freedom, and often embraced experiences that were spontaneous, risky, and new. Accordingly, a sense of nostalgia for earlier youthful experiences informs some entertaining stories. By telling a good story narrators were able to reassure themselves that their youth and migration had been worthwhile and exciting.

Entertaining stories are frequently polished and engaging due to their prior rehearsal and striking content. Narrators rely on hyperbole, humour, dialogue, accents, and pacing to capture interest. John McNeil’s long and detailed account of how he earned his Sydney Taxi Driver’s license by nefarious means is an example of this:

Here I am, in a part of Sydney I have no clue where I am, at rush hour Friday afternoon in charge of a vehicle I can barely drive. So I thought, ‘obviously I’m meant to find my way back to the driving school’.

So I eventually—by luck more than good management—found my way back to the driving school and the Maori at the desk said ‘Ah you got your license, good. Ok, now next thing you need to do for your taxi license, you have to sit what’s called a location test. And you’ll pop along to Rosebank, Rosebury rather—which is where the traffic unit of the police department was—and make an appointment there. And you’ll sit the test. You’ll sit and write a written paper to test your knowledge of Sydney, so it’ll be a written paper’. And he hauls out of drawer, ‘Now here’s the answers to the questions (both laugh) ‘Twenty-five dollars thank you, good bye’ (laughs). I was starting to wake up to what was going on by about this time (laughs). So, I went off and made an appointment for a couple of weeks time and turned up and just sat the location test. And sure enough the questions answered my answer sheet so I got a hundred percent or thereabouts and I was let loose on the public of Sydney with a taxi license (laughs).53

John states that while he does not reminisce much about his time in Australia, he occasionally tells ‘funny stories and anecdotes’. The previous story is clearly one of these entertaining stories due to the use of dialogue, detail, and humour. One narrator, Annette Moody, acknowledged the performative construction of entertaining narratives with her statement, ‘I’m doing a bit of acting with you

53 McNeil, interview.
today, to keep you interested’. Narrators’ entertaining tales remind us that oral history interviews are partly a performance and are told to amuse the interviewer and an imagined audience.

Conclusion

This article has explored migration narratives through the lens of narrators’ autobiographical memories and has outlined a fivefold classificatory framework for organising such memories. Whilst traditionally oral historians have studied narrators’ collective memories, language, narrative structure or reflection, this study has opted to utilise autobiographical memories in order to highlight events which remain important for narrators when constructing their own life history and demonstrates how they have been retained. This approach further demonstrates the benefits of considering migration in the context of a full life narrative. When studying the migrant experience, it is easy to overlook individual experiences by taking a more general approach. Narrators’ memories are usually told in the context of a conversation and many of my narrators’ autobiographical memories were built up over time and rehearsed in private and shared reminiscence. Entertaining stories in particular highlight the fact that oral histories are determined by the relationship between narrator and listener. Often the narrator is performing with the intent to help and entertain the interviewer.

This study also found that autobiographical memories enable narrators to depict their personality and sense of self. Narrators retain a connection to their childhood and homeland through nostalgic memories, but also through memories of key moments of heartbreak and loss. These types of memories are rich in emotional resonance and meaning to the narrators. Narrators also use work stories and entertaining stories to justify their decision to migrate. Memories of adventure and career success implicitly help narrators claim good choices and positive outcomes. Indeed a common feature of oral history interviews is that narrators use their autobiographical memories to construct a life story which makes sense of their life to the present.

Analysing all types of common autobiographical memories leads to a deeper understanding of narrators’ perceptions of their migration. Certainly, sensory migration memories reveal that narrators experienced Australia as newcomers and see migration as a key moment in their life story. Childhood, work, adventure and grief memories, and the retelling of them, are affected by their

memories of migration and the significance of this migration in their life stories. Other researchers may find that other groups of oral history narrators emphasise different types of autobiographical memories to my sample. Nonetheless, identifying and thematically analysing autobiographical memories can prove enlightening.