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The Romance with Personal Meaning in Gerontology: Cultural Aspects of Life Themes

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Abstract

Life narratives have wide appeal because they promote the modern ideal of freeing people to reflect on their life and to share personal meanings and experience in public. Constructing a life story may aid adult development and well-being. This article explores how to enhance these benefits, but criticizes the idealization of stories and their benefits. Using life stories from 16 randomly selected clinically depressed and nondepressed elderly persons, this article examines the narrative structures and how these relate to mood and to ideal images for the self. Findings show that some normative styles for self-representation (i.e., personal themes) serve to express distress instead of positive well-being. The discussion points to cultural and historical forces shaping our ideas about themes in stories. Life stories do privilege personal meanings, but the settings and form constrain their value as research data and their effectiveness as vehicles for enhancing well-being.

Keywords

Narrative; Depression and well-being; Self and personal meaning

Gerontologists are increasingly attentive to the domain of personal meaning and the life story narrative in particular. In its nascent stages, research on personal meaning provides rich insights and concepts on aging and the elderly. Yet, while qualitative researchers use data on personal meaning to criticize behavioral and biomedical perspectives, self-critiques of qualitative work are scarce. It is argued here that we regard the realm of personal meaning and lived experience almost romantically, as a wellspring sustaining positive adaptations and functioning in late life.

Life story telling is beneficial, according to current wisdom, because it “empowers” the narrator to represent, in public, *personal* experiences and meaning. We favor the life history enterprise because it promotes our cherished modern ideal of freeing people to voice their experiences (Gilligan, 1982; Tannen, 1989) without control by others. An appeal of the life story derives from our view of them as self-directed and self-reflexive expressions, “opportunities to allow people to become visible and to enhance reflexive consciousness” (Myerhoff, 1982; p. 101). This activity may even aid psychological development and well-being. However, major questions remain about the validity of these assumptions as well as the basic traits of the life story itself.

The goal of this article is to critique and refine concepts of the life history and its benefits, using a substantive analysis of a set of life stories. The aims are to describe the central image that structures the whole life story, and to assess how the image relates to a speaker's experience of current life and to social ideals for self-representations. The work reported here derives from a larger study of cultural values, personal meanings, and positive functioning and well-being in late life (Luborsky, 1990, 1987; Luborsky & Rubinstein 1987, 1989).

A few basic questions are pursued here. If life stories foster the expression of personal experiences and meanings, how can we help the process? What is the source and nature of the goal, or "teleological horizon" for the free expression of personal meanings, and who benefits from that activity? Which script for the lifetime is socially valued and legitimated, and which is not? It is argued here that the medium of the life story does privilege expression of personal meanings, but the social settings and form of its telling constrain its positive effects. Further, the researchers' visions of inner life meanings are influenced by cultural and historical factors.

Background to Studies of Life History Narratives

The life stories discussed here are persons giving uninterrupted, non-directed, accounts of their whole lifetime. In general "life history" is a loose umbrella term. The term encompasses stories "in the person's own words" but written by an interviewer, structured interviews, and even the free association processes of reminiscences (Butler, 1968) that do not aim to represent the entire lifespan.

Important empirical insights into life stories were provided by study of the linguistic structure of the tale (Agar, 1980; Linde, 1987; Labov, 1972), the contents of the life events as lived (Kaufman, 1987; Mandelbaum, 1974; McAdams, 1988; Watson & Watson-Franke, 1985), and the biographical process as itself emergent from the collaborative setting of story telling (Crapanzano, 1981, 1980). Critical reviews suggest that the stories not only "speak for themselves" (Frank, 1979) about the narrator, but also reveal the social relationships and historical contexts of their telling (Ginsberg, 1987) as political statements. More recently, the self-narrative process was proposed as a model *for* individual development and adaptation (Becker, 1993; Bertaux, 1981; Bruner, 1986; Bury, 1982; Cohler, 1991; Williams, 1984) attuned to the individual's own subjective life-span construct (Whitbourne, 1986).

Life Story Research as Practiced

Very rarely glimpsed in scholarly writing is the entire text of the tale or the diverse styles of telling. Instead, we glimpse it in fragments selected by authors, despite its being upheld as a means to empower individual voices. Current methods are not sensitive to variations in the structure of life narratives. Analyses tend to eliminate important natural features of subjective views of the world and self by the methods of questioning (Cohler & Grunebaum, 1981), recording responses, and writing up results according to scientific norms for a chronologically linear logico-deductive report formula (Ricoeur, 1977; Clifford & Marcus, 1986) and a "smoothing out" of discourse that does not fit that form (Mishler, 1991; Spence,

1986). Clearly, that conventionalized formula does not correspond to all subjective representations of the self (Gergen, 1984; Mishler, 1986). The influence on the data of socially normative formula for the self tends to be neglected (Plath, 1980; Schiebe, 1984). Ironically, life stories are touted for revealing the true interior of a life in the speakers “own words,” but in practice, most studies approximate the alchemist’s efforts to render a vision of hidden gold essences by reorganizing base substances (Luborsky, 1990). In brief, the raw data of life histories are highly processed according to situational, professional, and cultural norms not controlled by the person whose life we depict.

Our failure to control for the culturally-based editing of raw life story data could be said to be equivalent to historians or psychiatrists working from secondary sources but treating them as primary sources (Schafer, 1981). We have a lot to learn about the nature and types of the life story. Such insights can improve our knowledge about the narrators and the possible effects of performing a life story. The immediate goals are twofold — to determine preconceptions embedded in research questions, methods and settings, and to develop more appreciative attitudes (Schafer, 1979) for diversities in story telling styles.

Benefits of the Life Story

The life story is valued for helping people to regain self-worth and meaning in life by reconnecting to earlier accomplishments, fond memories, and valued identities (Kaminsky, 1984; Myerhoff, 1978, 1984). More than just a happy escape into the past, the activities of reinterpreting one’s past purportedly lead to an improved sense of personal identity and meaning.

Despite the persisting vogue for life stories, evidence for strong outcome benefits remains elusive. Studies show equivocal effects, no effects (Brink, 1985; Lieberman & Falk, 1971), and even adverse effects (Berghorn et al., 1986; cf. Thornton & Brotchie, 1987). Depressed people reportedly reminisce less than nondepressed people (McMahon & Rhudick, 1964). Notably, recent studies overlook the initial formulation of life review that defined it as a mixed blessing that may rekindle unresolved conflicts and awareness of unmet wishes or needs (Butler, 1968; Cohler, 1982; cf. Csikszentmihalyi & Beattie, 1979) and not promote reintegration and well-being. For example, prompting a person to reappraise their past and current situations may distress people who manage adversity by purposeful nonreflection or denial. We know that denial may be adaptive in early bereavement and in a variety of illnesses (e.g., Cohen & Lazarus, 1973; Stein, Linn & Stein, 1989). That is, taking stock of one’s life may distress the speaker, but satisfy others because it affirms the broader social ideal of encouraging self-definition and expression.

Cultural Context of Interest in the Life Story

The quest for personal meanings in life stories is itself a feature of recent cultural history. These can only be summarily noted here. Two traditions in Western culture and history contribute to our taste for individual stories and life themes.

One has been the historical emergence of concepts of *inferiority*, subjectivity, and privacy. Historical demographers have explored the development of the new notions of the interior and private arenas within the family, household, and individual (Aries, 1965; Burgiere,

1987; Perrot, Aries & Duby, 1990) differentiated from the collective public life and social statuses. A second was the emergence of the ethos of personal independence and *autonomy*, in contrast to individuation as part of a group. The modern Western ethos grew only after the onset of industrial economic-political conditions created systems of impersonal bureaucratic control over persons' public lives (See Dumont, 1965). That ideal (autonomy) minimizes interdependence in social life and growth (cf. myths of nuclear households as independent, Segalen, 1986), and underlies Western psychological models of the self as a single, autonomous, coherent whole (Geertz, 1986; Marsella & White, 1982; Shweder & Bourne, 1984). One important consequence is that Western thought equates the biographical unit with the biological body. These two cultural dynamics shape our vision of the life historian as a broker for the inner experiences of individual biographical entities.

We tend to romanticize the realm of personal meanings as a vast resource of adaptation and coping. Qualitative researchers in behavioral and social sciences, in particular, have tended toward this romanticization. Recent efforts are producing a more critical view (Becker, 1993). As objects of infatuation, personal meanings are viewed as an inner garden of "natural-being," unsullied by external public constraints on expression and autonomy (cf. Rosaldo, 1989). As life historians we may be duplicitous in shifting the focus to individuals from the social conditions of life (Cohen & Sokolovsky, 1989; Estes & Binney, 1989; Pietrukowicz & Johnson, 1991). Studies of life story themes exemplify these trends, as suggested earlier. We tend to idealize personal themes as adaptive and developmentally normative (Kaufman, 1987; Myerhoff, 1982; Whitbourne, 1986). In brief, we need empirical studies of the types of life narrative texts and of how these relate to the conditions of life of the narrator.

Methods

The author elicited life narratives from elderly people in a large urban geriatric center. The site includes two apartment towers for functionally independent elderly, a nursing home, Alzheimer's disease units, a full spectrum of medical, psychological, and social services, and out-patient clinics.

Subjects

Random selection provided 16 informants from a computerized database of the entire population. These included 8 with a range of depressive symptoms including Major Depression, and 8 nondepressed including 3 with a prior history of depression. Informants with cognitive impairments or major physical disabilities were excluded from this study. They averaged 84 years of age (range, 71 to 99) with 10 years of residence.

Independently, physicians, psychologists, and psychiatrists conducted mental health assessments using established multidisciplinary clinical staffing patterns. The staff assigned a consensus diagnosis by combining these findings during case conferences. The differentiations are: depression, to represent a range of depressive symptoms (GDS = 10 and < 22; Geriatric Depression Scale, Yesavage et al., 1983), including clinically defined major depression judged by DSMIII-R checklist criteria for mood disorders (APA, 1987), and nondepressed (GDS < 10). Residents with cognitive impairments are excluded (Blessed test

scores > 7; Blessed, Tomlinson & Roth, 1968). Symptoms of depression (e.g., sadness, appetite loss) are part of the normal spectrum of affect over the life course. Clinically defined depressive disorders are *less* prevalent among the elderly than among other ages, ranging from 6% to 15% (Blazer, 1989). Depression is more prevalent in old age homes (Hyer & Blazer, 1982). At the study site 40% of residents exhibit depressive symptoms; 12% met clinical criteria for Major Depression (Parmelee, Katz & Lawton, 1989).

Procedures

Life stories were elicited during the first of three interviews about current and past life for a larger study. Using a standardized method developed previously, the Sequence and Templates in Narratives (STN) (Luborsky, 1990), the researcher asked two sets of questions. Typically, from 4 to 20 minutes are needed for the initial story, and 15 to 30 minutes for the whole section. The goal is to provide brief stories for systematic comparison, not an exhaustive atlas of the individual.

First, one standard query serves to elicit the life story, "Now that we have met and talked for a few minutes I'd like to know more about you and your life. Would you describe your life for me, whatever comes to mind about it? Start where you like, take as much time as you need." By design, the prompt has few cultural propositions (D'Andrade, 1976; Metzger, 1974) or cues about scripts to use for the reply (Agar, 1980; Mandler, 1983; Mishler, 1986). That is, phrases such as "important events in your life" were avoided because they evoke simple accounts indexed to socially normative markers (school, marriage, work) and seemed to irk people: "Nothing special about me, I wasn't President or anything." Informants spoke without interruption for as long as they liked, until they stopped.

Second, two questions ask informants to depict the whole life using a pair of contrasting images to structure the story: a sequence of book chapters and a mural with many scenes and themes. The goal of these summaries is to reveal a person's affinity for a particular image. The chapter's frame provides a linear chronology of socially normative and bounded categories. The mural image provides for the simultaneous presentation of diverse experiences and events without attention to sequence, boundaries, and coherence. The chapters and murals reveal chunks of salient life experience and meanings.

Rationale

Care must be paid to the methods, due to the issues above about the influence of culture and linguistic conventions for self-expression. Particular realms of experience are easily described in one medium, such as poetry or narrative, but not in others. For example, Vera Brittain's biographers confront her pattern of devoting herself entirely to different mediums (novels, letters, a diary) at different times (Peterson & Stewart, 1990; Stewart, Franz & Layton, 1988). Thus, we should ask, what modes of experience are privileged by life stories and by different prompts for the story? A review of the prompts used to collect life stories shows researchers use a host of images. For example, "slices of a pie," (Whitbourne, 1986); chronological life graphs and "important turning points," (Lowenthal, Thurner & Chiriboga, 1975); "chapters in book," (Kaufman, 1987; McAdams, 1988); "tell me your story," (Myerhoff, 1978). Each orienting image used for the query-frame may cue particular kinds

of information and styles of telling. That is, the orienting images given by the researcher in the question aid expression of some identities and experience, while hindering others. This implicit prefiguring of frames and genres for telling a lifetime is of direct concern to the study of personal meanings.

The length of the stories and the method are suited to the goals. The undirected story reveals salient meanings and events in the person's own words and narrative structure. The narrator alone decides the length of time required to depict the whole lifetime. Answers to the two structured questions provide for direct comparison with codings of the naturalistic narrative as a way to gauge informants' preferences for narrative structures. Prior studies of retirement, bereavement, and ethnicity identified these dimensions, their correlates, and refined the methods (Luborsky, 1987, 1990; Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1987, 1990). Major contrasts in retirement behavior, mourning, and self-concepts are linked with these dimensions. These studies showed that the life narratives are a valid brief index of the personal meanings and thematic structures that emerge in multiple in-depth interviews. Thus, the STN method, which combines codings of the life narrative and the structured chapters and mural scenes questions, offers sufficient materials for comparative analyses of personal themes and meanings.

Ethnographic Context

Giving a good verbal performance is an important act in this setting. Speaking one's whole life enacts a neglected dimension of their being, one not usually encouraged in institutional settings (Lyman, 1989; Shield, 1988). Further, doing a good job of story telling is pragmatically valuable as a way to show you are a person who is competent and cognitively intact. "Having your marbles," more than physical impairment, is a crucial basis of social differentiation by the residents. Managing a public visage as cognitively intact (cf. Langness of LeVine, 1986) was salient due to the segregation of mentally intact elderly in apartments from those in the nursing home.

Analysis—Detailed verbatim transcripts of the narratives were prepared. The corpus of texts was analyzed using a case comparison method. Each story structure was evaluated in terms of the main organizing metaphor by examining how the narrator cast together the life events, experiences, and meanings to convey a sense of the whole life. A brief background to the concept of organizing images or metaphors will first explain the analyses.

Background to the measures

What is the sense of wholeness to a life? An image or metaphor, by referencing a larger orienting construct (Moore and Myerhoff, 1972) is integral to constituting a sense of wholeness and identity. Fernandez (1986) argues that the *wish* for a sense of wholeness best explains the power of an image to transform perceptions, and not any traits of the image itself. Ewing's (1990) insightful work argues for the contingent and situated, not continuous, nature of coherence and wholeness in personal identity.

Metaphors serve as orienting constructs that sustain a sense of wholeness. They do so by the dissolving of prior images or disparate elements (Wagner, 1986) to give a fresh coherence to

the multitude events and periods of a lifetime. Guiding metaphors (Moore & Myerhoff, 1972) cross-reference separate domains of meaning to supply information from a familiar to a lesser known domain, thus merging them to form a new one. Reference to a central guiding metaphor serves to clarify who and where individuals are and what they are doing. An example may help clarify this point.

A metaphor instills the strongest sense of coherence or wholeness when the images are farthest away from concrete events and experiences (Nisbet, 1969). Familiar metaphors include societal or individual “progress,” “growth,” and “development.” These are propositions or cultural constructs that cannot be found at any point in a day or year of a lifetime. The images provide a powerful orienting image and a set of compelling motivations that serve to guide social and individual life. One such powerful shared orienting image is the cultural life course (see Fry, 1990). I will show that the life course is but one socially normative collective image for constructing a lifetime story, one that is unpalatable to some informants.

Measures

The transcripts were analyzed to assess two key dimensions: the main orienting image or conceptual template, and the temporal sequence of topics using the standardized STN coding procedure (Luborsky 1987, 1990). Inter-rater reliability was 82% on the first sort. Orienting images for the life story were coded as either a *cultural life course pattern* of successive life stages and identities, or a central *personal theme*. The sequence of story topics was coded as either a single temporal sequence from birth to present labeled as *linear*, or non-chronological concatenated series of episodes of life in different domains labeled *recursive*. Recursive stories, for example, proceed from telling of school, work, and retirement life, then circle back to cover dating, marriage, and then family life. Such stories tend to marshal a variety of episodes and beliefs to assert a key point, but lack a linear chronology.

Findings

The 16 life stories ranged from 1.5 to 60 minutes long. Transcribed texts ranged from 58 to 3,633 words, the mean was 735 words.

We conducted 8 Fisher Exact Probability tests comparing depressed and nondepressed informants to examine: narrative orienting image, sequence, chapters, murals, complaints about the structured questions, age, sex, and health. The .05 level of significance was used for Type I errors. The Bonferroni adjustment indicated that a probability level of .0062 is needed to detect the Type I error at the .05 level. Both the orienting image and the topic sequence were significant ($p = .00069$) using the Bonferroni adjustment. Thus, the orienting image and topic sequence distinguished the speakers according to current mood. The 8 nondepressed speakers told their life stories using the cultural life course template, and followed a chronologically linear sequence. Of the dysphoric subjects, 7 of the 8 gave stories organized by theme templates in a recursive, non-chronological linear sequence of events and experiences.

Lives narrated according to a personal theme seemed problematic to tell, and these speakers would ask us to direct them, “You ask me the questions and I’ll answer, it’s too hard.” The

differences between depressed and nondepressed narrators in terms of organizing image and topic sequence are statistically significant ($p = .0069$, Fisher Exact Probability test).

Four short examples illustrate these differences. The life story texts are presented in their entirety. Each line represents a “chunk” or unit of meaning as indicated by intonation and by pauses in the speech (Chafe, 1980; Mishler, 1991). Marge and Rita were diagnosed as depressed. Celia and Steve were non-depressed.

Marge:

I'll tell you something.

I have nothing to tell you.

I told you that before.

I, I was a housewife.

I had eight children.

I kept the house clean.

I washed laundry. I ironed. I, I fed my children.

I sent them to school.

What else can I tell you?

I don't have nothing to tell you.

Rita:

I was. When I came here I was 14 years old.

I had a sister here to whom I came.

I went to work at 14.

Took some schooling on my own.

This is how I went on and worked.

I paid for my rent, I paid for my food,

I was independent and I was 14 years old.

I had nobody to depend upon.

My sister that I came to, she didn't know me, I didn't know her.

We were from one father, not from one mother.

And when she went to the U.S. I was an infant.

But she knew just by corresponding there was a little sister here.

So the little sister was 14 years old when she came here.

And that, that's the whole story in a nutshell!

Celia:

There was nothing unusual about my life.
I grew up here,
met my husband at a very very young age,
but we didn't know that we were going to marry someday.
His sister, the one that lent me that note, was my Sunday school teacher.
And he was also in my class. I knew his brother very well.
His brother was dating my girlfriend.
And, through him, I started going out with my future husband.
And we married at a very young age.
And we had a wonderful, wonderful life together.
We had two sons.
We, they married at young age too,
and I would say that they are now undergoing the same type of life that my
husband and I had.
I have five grandchildren,
I have eight great grandchildren.

Steve:

I was born and raised in Philadelphia.
And I went to high school and college.
And er, some years back then I was in my twenties,
I moved to Florida.
I lived in Florida four and one-half years.
And I came back here. And I was interested in art
and had a gallery where I sold pictures, paintings, framing.
Framing was a profession, was the biggest item that I had.
And I was on Chestnut Street, you know where that is?
17th and Chestnut. Which was the center of town.
And I used to come to work by,
I had my automobile but I used to have a bus which brought me center of town.
And er, I met, scores of people that I have, friends, that I've known for years.
In, in the business that I was in I met judges, congressmen, priests, lawyers,
doctors,

and then anyway, I became familiar with a lot of people.

Now sports wise, I was sports-minded.

Played soccer as a, baseball as a boy.

What else could I tell you?

The depressed narrators describe a key theme (independence, Rita) or speak from a single self-voice (Marge, the obsolete and exploited caretaker). In contrast, the nondepressed speakers present several voices, each one situated in a successive life stage or activity (Steve and Celia). A focus on conflict about (or wishes for lost) independence, or a sense of obsolescence were the thematic images around Rita and Marge, and they display events to justify those points. In contrast, Steve's and Celia's narratives convey the stance that their life was "not unusual," and was a "typical" life in the image of the culturally shared life course categories. Steve's account covers the main social points: birth place, schooling, travel, career. The closing section depicts the ideal of a well-rounded whole person: sports-minded, socially well-connected, ("scores of people") and successful (cars, job). Also, the life stories of the depressed, compared to the nondepressed speakers, give minimal narrative action or evaluations of life events.

The next analysis examined answers to the structured alternate story frames task. The goal was to determine if informants preferred the book chapters structure (emphasizing the collective, normatively segmented linear script) or the more individualistic thematic scenes in a mural. Nondepressed informants insisted that the chapter task felt more appropriate, but they were flexible and performed both tasks. They depicted a complex life with far more chapters than mural scenes (in a ratio of 5:1). In contrast, the depressed informants gave fewer chapters but more portrait scenes (in a ratio of 2.5:1). These findings are very meaningful from a qualitative view. The differences in complexity are consistent with studies of self-representation and mood (Kuiper & Higgins, 1985; Linville, 1985). The depressed informants objected: *"I just don't see my life broken up that way, it's all mixed together."* Some of them stated *"No title for the whole thing, it's more like an empty book with a blank cover,"* or *"they are just one on top of another."* Depressed subjects refused to give a chapter account, claiming *"it doesn't fit into neat categories like that,"* and *"it's not been a smooth progression for me."* Thus, these speakers found the chapter image ill-suited to the task.

Spontaneous voicing of dislike for one image easily meets significance ($p = .0195$) for a single Fisher Exact Probability test. It does not meet the conservative statistical requirement at the .05 level for the Bonferroni adjustment. As noted, the literature supports the significance of this relationship. The findings are presented here to encourage further study of the personal meaningfulness of particular orienting images and structures.

Discussion and Implications

Several insights can be gained by systematically comparing this set of 16 narratives. The method differs from customary approaches based on in-depth study of single cases. First, there are big contrasts between the life stories. These are categorical differences in the

images, topic flow, and focus, and are not a matter of degree. Second, narrators express a clear affinity for some images and not others. Clear ethnographic differences are also significant by reference to statistical and clinical diagnostic criteria. Importantly, explicit personal themes are not a salient feature of all life history narratives.

In summary, nondepressed, “normal” informants were more flexible in self-representations and preferred temporally linear stories built upon the shared image of the normative life course. In contrast, those who met the clinical criteria for depression were less flexible at adopting alternate formats for self-representation. Notably, they spontaneously stated a preference for thematic stories structured around individual concerns. From the view of these life stories, nondepressed informants are flexible and adept at constituting several selves situated in each life era and domain, and do not assert a single theme or identity across all eras of life.

One anthropological view is that the orienting metaphor of the cultural life course per se (not the speaker) is a flexible resource, and the metaphor facilitates the fluid succession of meanings across time. That is, the life course image provides a palette of routinely changing life stages and identities that are both formulaic meanings for life experiences and telling, and are also transitional and potential arenas (Winnicott, 1971) within which individual, situational, and cultural meanings can be blended to reconstruct a self across the lifetime. The personal theme, in contrast, may be problematic and inimical to successive self-reinterpreting. It poses a singular, fixed, enduring global meaning less readily deconstructed and detached from the self — unlike the life course, there are no intrinsic transitions. Such a personal identity or meaning is problematic for telling of situated selves. Apparently, the personal thematic image and non-chronological style best articulates each informant’s sense of personal distress or conflict. They are as much “idioms of distress” (Nichter, 1981) as mental health ideals.

The image used to tell one’s lifetime does appear an “experience-near” construct for the total lifetime, one the narrators tell us is the most fitting and savory. We may conjecture that some lifetime images are not just unsavory, but speakers regard them as an ineffective way to make a point in speech (D’Andrade & Wish, 1985). For example, it may be contradictory to assert one’s life was terrible and painful by using the script of the normal collective cultural life course pattern.

The cultural life course, in contrast to the personal theme, emerges here as an implicit, collective symbol. It helps to express the speaker’s sense of being an individual part within the whole of society. In contrast, the more idealized, explicit personal theme indexes a negative individualistic or atomistic statement of experience. Each image imparts a specific statement or stance regarding the individual’s general sense of their present life. The structure of a narrative itself serves to express very powerful affective and evaluative information about the speaker’s feelings about the lifetime. More attention should be devoted to life stories as a whole.

Critical and Empirical Implications

Notably, informants in this study used one formula (the single enduring self) to express feelings of a sense of distress, marginality, or of a lack of fit between personal, situational, and collective components of the self-representation in a smoothly unfolding biography (Becker, 1993; Bury, 1982; Schiebe, 1984; Williams, 1984). Themes may be an expression of distress, or reveal unresolved personal conflicts. I believe these findings challenge qualitative researchers to reevaluate the validity of describing all lives in terms of a theme or themes. Those who seek to empower an elderly person by asking them to describe the “themes in your life” may unintentionally perpetuate the hegemony of culturally idealized concepts of the thematic self, an image here linked with personal distress, not well-being.

One implication for qualitative and quantitative gerontology is that we need a more sensitive and appreciative attitude to the structural frames and content of entire life stories. Appreciation of these differences will broaden our understanding of individual lives. It will also sharpen our vision of the vistas and agendas for empowerment of the researchers and informants.

We need to ask many more questions. For example, how is the nature of and capacity for the self-representations that anthropologists use to build descriptions of a group or culture shaped by cognitive, or physical impairments and pathology (Langness & LeVine, 1986; Murphy, 1987; Schiebe, 1984), psychological development and aging (Labouvie-Vief, 1990), or mood (Kleinman & Good, 1985; Seligman et al., 1994)? It is a challenge for medical professions studying illness to get past the symptom or case diagnosis to see the person. I suggest that studies of narrative, discourse, and metaphor have demurred on issues of how individual “pathology” and differences may shape the ethnographic materials used to build up portraits of peoples and cultures. Clinical studies show that mood states alter styles of attributing meaning and styles of representing experience (Seligman et al., 1984), and alter the ability to do complex intellectual tasks. A strength of anthropology is that it treats labels such as “abnormal” and “deviance” as culture bound moral judgments that reflect the natives’ world-view as much as the “world” or people themselves. Yet, the findings described here should lead us to more critically examine how knowledge of a group or culture is shaped by mood state and health-related styles of articulating knowledge besides social factors.

The meanings represented in life stories may be those that are still being made, are yet unresolved, or were the resolutions to prior meaning dilemmas for the individual and now are an important frame for the self. Specifically, stories organized around a key personal theme are told by informants who find coherence and meaning problematic, not implicit, and thus explicitly assert or work to claim it. The speaker does not see the social and personal life biography unfolding as expected. For such informants, the collective life-cycle images leave much of personal experience inchoate. Interestingly, these are the most vital and gripping accounts. Also, stories built around the life course script (nondepressed narrators) depict a developing sense of meanings and personal identities, rather than a struggle to invent individual meanings. Informants assert that the collective image effectively conveys personal meanings and experience; they seldom express inner personal experience using this image. One feels such stories are “dry” and less compelling.

Thus, an explicit reflexive personal identity which is fixed, enduring and prominent throughout the account occurs among informants who experience distress or a disjunction in existential meaning, or experience marginality. In contrast, narrators who present multiple flexible, situated identities across the life story are culturally defined as healthy, normal. Second, and very importantly, the telling of a whole life is problematic for some informants who ask us to direct them, “You ask me the questions and I’ll answer, it’s too hard.” These tend to be the stories narrated according to a personal theme, not the life course.

This finding is counterintuitive to some models of identity process and the life history derived from Western ideals of an explicit “life theme” that anchors an adult’s sense of coherence and integrity and helps to organize experiences and events. But the personal themes, from an empirical view, may be less valid for some informants, compared to those modeled after a flexible, situated model of co-authored selves. They seem engaged in asking, “How do I find myself here, and where am I headed?” I suggest that, since studies from a range of disciplines show certain life meanings have dysfunctional (Beck, 1979) or negative health consequences, the concept of “personal themes” in current usage requires further examination, in light of these studies of life stories.

Anthropologists and others should further consider our pursuit of the life history enterprise (or the quest for personal themes). We might wish to ask if, in our pursuit of life themes, we may be duplicitously reinforcing the sociopolitical conditions and individual experiences of distress for some narrators, despite the contemporary view of life stories as an aid to realizing a universal good of self-reflection, expression, and development.

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