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Three

NARRATIVE EVENTS AND BIOGRAPHICAL CONSTRUCTION IN OLD AGE

Jaber F. Gubrium

The editors of this volume have commented that the “biographical side of human life is as complicated and as critical to fathom as... the biological side” (p. xiii). If biology provides information and insight about life as it derives from the body, biography features the many dimensions of experience, from the knowing self to its diverse meanings, from the personal to the cultural. These are heady matters, as we live not only as embodied creatures, but as creatures that form and retain understandings. This applies across the life course, for the biographical meaning of childhood is as important to fathom as understandings of middle and old age (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

As a contribution to narrative gerontology, this chapter focuses on biographical construction in later life. It is concerned with everyday constructions, not the production of formal biographies. As ordinary members of our worlds, we continually represent ourselves and our experience to others, just as they represent their experience to us, mostly orally but occasionally in writing. This is eminently interpersonal, as representation orients to our selves in relation to the past, present, and future, as well as derives from those who construct our lives from their perspectives. It also is situational, as the lived contexts of biographical construction add to the mix. If traces of the interpersonal and the situational are persistent features of constructed lives, the analysis of lifestories usefully centers on narrative

events (Bamberg, 2006; Bauman, 1986; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Ochs & Taylor, 1992).

STANLEY'S LESSONS AND THE PLAY OF BIOGRAPHICAL CONSTRUCTION

Before turning to exemplary material on the eventfulness of biographical construction in old age, consider the lessons that legendary interview subject Stanley provides. Stanley is a quite extraordinary everyday biographer, astute in the ways of narrative eventfulness. Years ago, sociologist Clifford Shaw (1930) published a biography of this delinquent boy he named "Stanley." The book, called *The Jack-Roller* and now a classic in the social sciences, was subtitled *A Delinquent Boy's Own Story*. The account ostensibly was Stanley's very own, the assumption being that it could be understood on its own terms. As Shaw comments in the first chapter, referring to what was to become a named method, "The case is published to illustrate the value of the 'own story' in the study and treatment of the delinquent child" (p. 1).

However, a close reading of the biography indicates that both interpersonal influences and social context are at play when Stanley represents himself. As Stanley refers to various narrative events in his life, it's clear that what is otherwise construed by Shaw as Stanley's "own story" is astutely organized in relation to the immediate and long-term challenges and consequences of biographical construction. Talking glowingly about his cellmate at the Illinois State Reformatory, Stanley flags the significance of constructing one's life in particular ways on distinct occasions.

He [cell partner] was only seventeen, but older than me, and was in for one to ten years for burglaries. He delighted in telling about his exploits in crime, to impress me with this bravery and daring, and made me look up to him as a hero. Almost all young crooks like to tell about their accomplishments in crime. Older crooks are not so glib. They are hardened, and crime has lost its glamor and become a matter of business. Also, they have learned the dangers of talking too much [and] keep their mouths shut except to trusted friends. But Bill (my cell partner) talked all the time about himself and his crimes. I talked, too, and told wild stories of adventure, some true and some lies, for I couldn't let Bill outdo me just for lack of a few lies on my part. (p. 104)

The passage suggests that biographical construction on these occasions places a premium on the bravado from which social status derives. Construction has definitional consequences for self and others. The lesson is that biographical construction does something besides representing one's

own experience, something related to the interpersonal expectations and representational rules of narrative occasions. Evidently, Stanley and others "do status" in communicating their experiences as "wild stories of adventure." They construct biographies not only befitting their personal experience but suitable to a preferred location in life.

Stanley also teaches a lesson about silence. Here and elsewhere in the book, he recounts the "dangers of talking too much." Besides everyday biography's situatedness, another important lesson is that the nonproduction of biographical material can characterize a narrative event. This goes against the grain of the common understanding in narrative inquiry that biographical production is healing or otherwise contributes to well-being. The moral from Stanley and other studies of everyday storytelling is that active representation can be as socially degrading, if not life threatening, as it is uplifting (see, for example, Wieder, 1974, and Anderson, 1999).

Taking Stanley at his word shows that the ordinary significance of accounts cannot be figured in strictly personal terms. Whether written or oral, biographical constructions do things, for us and to others. Stories have consequences for storytellers and their listeners, on which their eventfulness sheds considerable light. The consequences are not universal but relate to particular circumstances. As we turn to examples of how this applies in old age, it will become clear that simply "looking back" or "looking ahead" in later life is more complex than extended reflection, personal reminiscence, or communicating a positive or negative outlook on life.

The complexity centers on the interplay of the situated and interpersonal dimensions of everyday construction. The situation in question may center on the shared or big story of what it means to be able-bodied in a particular apartment setting. Or it may relate to the popular understanding of what it means to wind up in a nursing home for the rest of one's life. I'll turn to both of these below. Across these narrative environments are individual formulations found in the little stories of personal experience communicated with others. Complexity results from how big and little stories play out biographically in relation to each other on different narrative occasions (see Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, Chapter 11).

The words *play* and *interplay* are used deliberately. While the interpersonal and the circumstantial mediate everyday construction, neither fully determines the results. As the first of the following examples from the gerontological literature emphasizes, "poor dear" narratives in the circumstances in question are widely shared and yet recognizably play out in many ways on specific narrative occasions. The second example shows how individual particulars can contrastingly feature what is shared in common, to the point

that what is shared is hardly recognizable in the differences. As nursing home resident Peter Rinehart's story will illustrate, biographical particulars can be amazingly at odds with what might be expected from the popular view of the circumstances.

"POOR DEAR" NARRATIVES

Arlie Russell Hochschild's (1973) research setting is an apartment building for the elderly, on which she reports in her book titled *The Unexpected Community*. Merrill Court, which is the pseudonym she assigns to the apartment building, is located near San Francisco Bay. It is not in any sense a nursing home, but it does have organized activities for residents. Hochschild worked there as an assistant recreation director while conducting fieldwork. The residents were independent, ate and slept in their own units, and came and went as they pleased or were able. Most were born and raised in the Southwest and Midwest and moved to California in later life.

It is significant that the title of Hochschild's book refers to the unexpected. The element of surprise derives from a common experience of living in urban apartment dwellings. These dwellings typically house individuals unknown to each other. Certainly, some might in time become acquainted, but they are just as likely to come and go anonymously. Individuals housed in apartment units down the hall or on the floor above or below don't much matter in the daily scheme of things. As strangers, residents might regularly pass each other in the hallways or the lobby or smile at one another in elevators. The social tide might occasionally turn into something more when neighborliness or friendships develop, setting the stage for community formation and culture of accounts. But in public places such as apartment buildings, this is rare or superficial.

As far as storytelling is concerned, Hochschild expected encounters in the setting to be bereft of common accounts. She didn't expect there to be a big story around which individual narratives coalesced or took account of. Instead, Hochschild expected residents' (littler) stories to be mostly private, unknown to others. As a result, at the start of her fieldwork, Hochschild was looking for the personal stories she might tap into, compare, and analyze. She didn't presume there would be a larger understanding that could challenge individual residents' accounts or, conversely, could tie things together for them in any way. Merrill Court, she originally figured, would be the site of little stories—individual narratives of coming of age somewhere far from their original homes.

As Hochschild continued her fieldwork, however, she found a setting ridden with shared understanding and related representation practices. Accounts of roles and relationships overshadowed individual tales of social isolation and anonymity. The social dimensions of personal narratives were captivating but also socially telling, she reports, which started to reveal the distinct shared contextuality of her biographical material:

The book tells about their community as a mutual aid society, as a source of jobs, as an audience, as a pool of models for growing old, as a sanctuary and as a subculture with its own customs, gossip, and humor. It tells about friendships and rivalries within the community as well as relations with daughters, store clerks, nurses, and purse snatchers outside. (p. ix)

A key element of the unexpected big story in the setting is what Hochschild calls "the poor dear hierarchy." Figured as a common biographical anchor for individual constructions, it relates mainly to social status, but its use indicates that it has other narrative ramifications. The hierarchy centers on the assumption that, since the mostly female residents of Merrill Court are elderly, there's a good chance that they might become frail, infirm, or disabled. There's a persistent expectation that someone will need to go to a nursing home for a while and sometimes permanently. Those lucky enough to remain in good health, who are active and ambulatory, command considerable presence in the setting. They are visible in the lobby and other public spaces. The status associated with this becomes apparent narratively in terms of residents' related use of the term *poor dear* for those less fortunate.

In rounds of fieldwork, Hochschild heard many and varied stories about residents' conduct. Residents incessantly evaluated each other in terms of good or bad fortune, much of it related to the infirmities of aging. The words *poor dear* were used to describe those less able and, at times, the elderly in general, in comparison to those more advantaged. If much of this related to ill health, this could be extended to other disadvantages, such as insufficient income. Hochschild soon found that the words had vast narrative applicability, extending to all manner of status distinctions.

Poor dear did extensive status work of the sort Stanley flagged and could be counted on to indicate where those who used the phrase were placed in the broader scheme of things. "Poor dear" was the narrative key to a bigger story, one telling of hierarchy in the community. Referring to residents as "poor dears" was a way of narratively assigning a lower position in the hierarchy of luck. It was an important part of how little stories related to terms of reference shared with each other. The term *poor dear* figured as

a common moral indicator, narratively specifying which residents were worthier and which less worthy in local reckoning.

Hochschild describes her emerging sense of the shared narrative relevance of this usage. I'll quote her at length to illustrate the big story that Hochschild eventually recognized, one resonating throughout the initially unexpected community. Note that the big story is not simply reproduced in individual accounts but creatively plays out in diverse constructions. Put differently, if there is a big story at Merrill Court, it is never the whole story. As Hochschild is careful to explain, the social logic that words can flag comes in different versions, applications, and proportions in practice. While *poor dear* marks status in general, it does so by way of diverse invocations. The eventfulness of usage shows that little stories take the big story in many directions in this most surprising of circumstances:

At the monthly meetings of the countywide Senior Citizens Forum, to which Merrill Court sent two representatives, the term "poor dear" often arose with reference to old people. It was "we senior citizens who are politically involved versus those 'poor dears' who are active in recreation." Those active in recreation, however, did not accept a subordinate position relative to the politically active. On the other hand, they did not refer to the political activists as "poor dears." Within the politically active group there were those who espoused general causes, such as getting out an anti-pollution bill, and those who espoused causes related only to old age, such as raising Social Security benefits or improving medical benefits. Those in politics and recreation referred to the passive card players and newspaper readers as "poor dears." Old people with passive life styles in good health referred to those in poor health as "poor dears" and those in poor health but living in independent housing referred to those in nursing homes as "poor dears." Within the nursing home there was a distinction between those who were ambulatory and those who were not. Among those who were not ambulatory there was a distinction between those who could enjoy food and those who could not. Almost everyone, it seemed, had a "poor dear." (pp. 60–61)

What is biographically relevant in everyday life in this context works against the view that biography more or less reflects individual experience (see Georgakopoulou, 2006, Freeman, 2006, and Bamberg, 2006, for a recent debate on this issue). Accounts of lives, whether one's own or that of others, relate to locally shared formulations and the eventfulness of accounts. What one's place in life means individually is by some measure representationally commonplace at Merrill Court. Biography is tied to a shared narrative structure, which in turn is borrowed from broader cultural usage, the term *poor dear* having meaningful resonance throughout society. Yet its ordinary biographical complications feature the innumerable applications

that creatively extend the shared notion of how some are "poor dears" and others are not.

BIOGRAPHICAL DIVERSITY IN LONG-TERM CARE

Lest it be figured that what is shared is ramified in various ways, consider how what is circumstantially commonplace can be contrastingly constructed. With the problem of biographical reproduction in mind, my research in the 1990s turned critically to a setting that is often assumed to congeal lifestories into a common narrative of despair—the nursing home (see Gubrium, 1993). If Hochschild found both shared and creatively extended elements in biographical usage at Merrill Court, my question was, would the nursing home, a "total" institution (Goffman, 1961), be even more influential in shaping residents' constructions into a common narrative? In particular, would the negative public resonances of the nursing home homogenize all biographical constructions into a single story of the nursing home experience? Would each narrative opportunity produce negative stories, in other words?

Critically responding to the public resonances of the nursing home, I deliberately offered to each resident in a series of interviews the opportunity to view themselves and their current circumstance through the lens of their lives as a whole (see Gubrium, 1993, for a detailed description of the study and some of its results). Rather than plunge directly into quality of life and care concerns, which I figured would unwittingly frame residents' account in terms of the popular conceptions of nursing home life, I began the first of each series of interviews with a resident with the request to tell me his or her lifestory. In follow-up interviews, I regularly referred back to what I knew about residents' experiences from initially hearing their stories. As a result, the interviews became narrative events not framed by default in terms of the popular version of the nursing home story. The working question was, would different horizons of meaning derived from the past diversely provide opportunities to speak of life?

The lifestories varied in detail. Some were lengthy and others were short. Some were told vividly and others conveyed in humdrum fashion. Some of the residents quickly became exhausted because they were frail, but most nonetheless wanted to go on and asked me to return so that they could "tell [me] the rest of it." I did return whenever asked to do so, and I persisted in attempting to maintain the lifestory, not the popular nursing home story, as the narrative context of their accounts. I was especially interested in the accounts of long-stayers, residents for whom the nursing facility had putatively become home. Such residents are continuing denizens of their worlds.

If anything, it is long-stayers whose stories might be homogenized by the popularization of their circumstances. Short-stayers are passersby in the nursing home scene, typically temporarily in residence for physical and occupational therapy or for postsurgical recovery.

Here I focus on the stories of two residents, Myrtle Johnson and Peter Rinehart, the extracts of which are taken from material gathered in interviews with them. Their accounts contrast mightily in how they represent what they presently share in common. The difference persisted across repeated interviews, prompted by my regular references to their lives as a whole. The difference and the persistence were typical of other residents, whose stories I eventually categorized into types of biographical construction in the circumstance. While Johnson's and Rinehart's narratives carry idiosyncratic elements, their stories can be viewed as having features shared with those of other residents of their narrative type. If, as we will see, Johnson's story is indeed a narrative of despair and does broadly reproduce the public image of the nursing home experience, Rinehart's story is a narrative of equanimity, whose accounts feature a horizon of meaning quite at odds with the public image.

The first of the two residents, Myrtle Johnson, was a 94-year-old widowed African American woman who had lived in the nursing home for a year. She suffered from Parkinson's disease and arthritis, and had difficulty maintaining balance. According to Johnson, falls had been the bane of old age for her and were the main reason she was placed in a nursing home. Her comments on the present quality of her life and her care in the home offer a stark contrast with the quality of her life in her earlier years.

Like some other accounts, her story loudly echoes the big story in question. Residents such as Johnson reflected on their lives, which they reported to have been filled with hard work, enjoyment, and kindness toward others, and grimly wondered how God could have planned this outcome for their lives. Some shook their heads tellingly as they related their story, lamenting how "it's come to this." I eventually used this phrase to identify a type of biographical construction, one with plots and themes that convey stories of having once been useful and now fated to be useless. In these accounts, the current quality of nursing home life engulfs the lifestory.

In one of the interviews, as Johnson compares an earlier useful life with a life now hardly worth living, she refers to suicide. But she links that with those who don't have the faith to sustain themselves in the circumstances. If it weren't for her faith in God, Johnson explains, hers would be the story of those who take their lives because life is no longer worth living. This happens to them because, she points out, "it's come to this." The following

extract from one of the interviews is illuminating. It flags a biography constructed in terms of before and after. Tragic destiny permeates both her own and others' similar stories:

But I worked hard all my life. And I enjoyed life. I'll say that what I enjoyed the most was when I lived on a farm in Missouri. Now that's where I enjoyed myself the most because I was able to get and do things, you know, help others. If there's one thing I don't like, it's just sittin'. That's what I have to do now. But then I try to make the best of it. But I would say that when I was able to be up and around and work is when I enjoyed myself the most. . . .

Of course I'm not happy sitting here this way. But then it's part of life and you've got to. . . . I say I've often thought about it, just since I've been passing between the chair and the bed. What use is it?

You know, I can realize why some people commit suicide. They don't have faith. People that have faith in God don't commit suicide. But I can see why when people are in my position and don't have faith in the Lord, they commit suicide. I've thought about that so much. You know, you often say, "Well, why did so-and-so do so-and-so?" Well, if you sit down and study about it, you can figure that out. . . . there's nothing. . . . But as long as you have faith in the Lord, you are going to go ahead and take what He sends you. But there's times you really wonder.

Now compare Johnson's accounts with those of a second resident, Peter Rinehart. Like some other residents, Rinehart's story centers on lifelong equanimity and is conveyed in a dramatically different tone. He himself doesn't use the word *equanimity*, but the term suits the purpose of distinguishing the type of narrative he conveys from Myrtle Johnson's and others' accounts, which fall under the rubric "it's come to this."

A 77-year-old widowed white male, Rinehart was paralyzed from the waist down, the result of a fall from a roof, leaving him in chronic pain. The fall figures prominently in his story. But if it divides related biographical matters chronologically into before and after, especially his functional capacity, it does not shape the quality of his life in the nursing home, nor does it serve as a watershed for separating his life as a whole into parts.

Regularly referring to matters conveyed in Rinehart's lifestory, I encouraged him several times in his interviews to compare life now with what it was like in the past. Rinehart responded accordingly, retrospectively tying together now with then. But the ties were not embedded in an account with temporal scaffolding that gave them overall shape or form. Rinehart's accounts differed from the depressing public image of nursing home life, even while he repeatedly talked about how some saw nursing homes, knowingly flagging the big story in question. When Rinehart looked back, then and now were not evaluated in terms of better or worse or in terms of before

and after. Rather, varied thens and nows were compartmentalized and constructed as different pockets of experience through time. If Rinehart's fall was a turning point, before and after that didn't extend to his life as a whole. While its consequences were still felt in the nursing home and he had hoped this might change, the fall was not a basis for his reckoning of life as a whole.

Rinehart was one of two male residents interviewed who had been itinerant travelers. He had worked in sales for the Oster Company and, according to Rinehart, was constantly on the move. The constructive tone of the two men's stories was organized against this background, in which coming-and-going was viewed as the normal state of daily affairs. Home was not so much a headquarters or base of operations as it was one more stop along the way. If anything, home was time-out from the routine matters of daily life. These men *went home* for vacation, they didn't leave it.

For residents like Rinehart, the overall meaning of life isn't puzzling because life's meaning is found in particulars, in its parts and occasions. Their narratives show that if life has a plotline, it doesn't move in a particular direction. It unfolds in moments along a purely temporal pathway. If life has a moral horizon, it's constructed in fits and starts, each of life's pockets having its own evaluative purview. If these stories center on anything it is on incidents along the road of experience, the nursing home being a kind of stopover along the way. For Rinehart, his current circumstance does matter, but it doesn't engulf his story in the way it does for Johnson and some others. He accepts the nursing home as a place offering care, security, and shelter for the weary, who might not otherwise be able to carry on.

Rinehart noted at various points in his interviews that the facility in which he resided wasn't home, but under the circumstances it was the next best thing to it. Care paraphernalia and sickness aside, for traveling men like Rinehart, the nursing home offered respite; it was a kind of hotel, having both the best and the worst qualities of such establishments. Residents more or less were fed, had beds to sleep in, and had their cares attended to, but understandably not to everyone's satisfaction. Rinehart took pride in the quality of his life and what he had accomplished, but his accomplishments were storied independently from his fall or his present circumstances. The following interview extract is telling:

I see people that are worse off than I am. I feel sorry for them, but I'm not looking back with remorse. It's something I can't help. It happened [the disabling fall] and I have to live with it. Life's been happy and pretty good to me otherwise. I made a good living. You take the good with the bad.

When it first happened, I hoped that I would be able to get back to normal. Then I hoped to get... they got me in a wheelchair. I hoped to be able to stay in a wheelchair, maybe graduate to crutches and that. It never happened that way though. But it didn't make me despondent.

Gradually, I began to know that I would probably never walk again and I've been about the way I have been now for the last couple of years. They brought a specialist in from the University of Pittsburgh and he put a brain tap in the nerve center of my brain. But that didn't work.

I'm hoping to clear up the pain in my back so I can, if nothing else, sit up. But I read a lot and that takes time and they treat me good here. The aides come in and I kid with them and that. The rest of the time is about the same as an average day when you aren't working. Only instead of working now, I read. It's a long weekend, you might say.

CONCLUSION

I'll conclude with three important points, each of which has been touched upon. The first one, now clear enough, is that everyday biographical construction is both circumstantially and interpersonally sensitive. If stories of "poor dears" and the nursing home resident are recognizable in society at large, they do not overshadow their everyday constructions. Certainly, because ordinary biographical construction is part of society, it is affected by shared understandings. But, at the same time, narrative events provide for amazing diversity in story production.

The second point is explanatory and relates to how we view the way biographical construction operates in everyday life. The interplay of the biographically general and the biographically particular is complex and varied narrative terrain. Biographical construction should not be reduced to either the general or the particular. Big stories are not just agglomerations of little stories, just as little stories do not fully display what is more broadly shared. Neither should be overshadowed in research. Overshadowing individual accounts with shared stories risks driving everyday constructions into the mold of homogeneous narratives. Likewise, overshadowing big stories with individual accounts risks shortchanging the common challenges of biographical construction.

Finally, the moral contours of the concepts of play and interplay are notable. The concepts provide context for appreciating the complexity of everyday life. They are a way of bringing into view the individual accounts that creatively ramify or challenge what is experienced in common. While the concepts are not as analytically neat and efficient as, say, a vocabulary of causality, their moral bearings are richer and relate more suitably to active narrative agents of experience.

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