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11 ANALYZING NOVELTY AND PATTERN IN INSTITUTIONAL LIFE NARRATIVES

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Life narratives are continually subject to reconstruction. Mundane as they might be, chance encounters, events such as career downturns, and occasions like psychiatric consultations prompt life revision. Emphasized are terms that reference the present, points of departure for the pragmatic revision. In a seminal lecture titled “The Present as the Locus of Reality,” philosopher George Herbert Mead (1929/1930) flagged this decade ago, explaining that, in practice, “a reality that transcends the present must exhibit itself in the present” (p. 11): that, in practice, “it was Mead’s view that the irreducible past is the past of any given present, that which accounts for its occurrence.”

According to Mead, it was the ongoing accountability of the past in the present that served experience’s reconstruction, and Mead did not ignore pattern in experience, but would otherwise be irrevocably patterned. He advocated reflexively combining a view considered it rooted in the practice of everyday life. He advocated reflexively combining a view of the everyday practice of reality construction with a working sense of the irreversibility of pattern in life. He advocated reflexively combining a view of the everyday practice of reality construction with a working sense of the irreversibility of pattern in life. Mead’s perspective and his sense of the immediacy of novelty in experience inform this chapter’s analysis of institutional life narratives.

Analytic bearings

Today’s world is saturated with institutions – schools, churches, human service agencies, clubs, work organizations, and teams sports, among many others. From childhood to old age, they are more accurately seen as practical accomplishments of diverse sites of narrativity. In institutional reckoning, personal wholes are configurations of concern continually subject to reconfiguration. Accordingly, and lyphated, there is the personal-life-story-under-the-suspices-of-schooling, say, just as there is the personal life-story-of-athletic-careers, and the personal-life-story-of-those-institutionalized-for-dementia – each further lyphated by the contingent presents of narrative events, occasions, and locations.

Ethnomethodology provides Mead’s pragmatism with analytic bearings, offering concepts that work empirically to showcase the operation of novelty in experience (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984). Ethnomethodologists use the term “artful” to highlight experiential novelty, parallel to Mead’s use of the concept of experiential “emergence.” As the chapter will illustrate, the everyday construction of life narratives, while “presentist,” is not automatic, but is a practical accomplishment that is locally contingent, methodically organized, and demonstrably novel as well as patterned.

Narrative ethnography

Participants in the construction of life narratives not only reference patterned senses of the whole, but simultaneously work at assembling wholes in locally pertinent terms (see Gubrium & Holstein, 1998). As this increasing unfolds in institutional context, it requires a narrative ethnography, a method sensitive both to communicative practice and to its site situ conditions. It is a method of procedure we have applied in a longstanding program of research on the construction of life narratives in institutional settings (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, 2009).

Narrative analysis is well established across disciplines concerned with the storied flow of life (Clandinin, 1993; Riessman, 2008). Much of it centers on the analysis of texts, the output of a construction process that produces diaries, memoirs, letters, reports, case files, and interview transcripts. Analysis entails discerning and categorizing themes or particular narrative structures, for example. Narrative output, not the practice of narrative production, is the focus of attention (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012). Analysis of the production of locally accountable narratives requires something more – narrative ethnography. It is a form of ethnography that pays equal attention to novelty and pattern in the construction process.

Institutional environments

Life narratives constructed in institutional environments may appear quite different from those produced in formal interviewing. They are often, but not always, shorter, semantically truncated, and relate, often openly, to the working conditions of their production. Being practical, their patterning or coherence relates as much to the participants’ perspectives, institutional preferences, and interactional contingencies, as to internal textual matters such as employment, homization, and characterization. They are constructed by all manner of speakers besides the individual who is the subject of a life narrative, such as professionals and family members. As Michael Bamberg (2006) suggests in distinguishing big and small stories, extended life narratives (big stories) may be more the product of the duration and individualizing conditions of life story interviewing, than the otherwise smaller narratives that are the product of real-time accounts of experience.

Local pertinence

The local pertinence of life story material can be conspicuous when narrative production comes into focus. Rather than being irrevocably lodged in life history, the past becomes another aspect of the juncture of new challenges and reconstruction. Accounts are not only subject to standard credibility criteria such as validity and reliability, but simultaneously run the credibility gauntlet of participating
both reading the material for its informational value and simultaneously negotiating its narrative pertinence.

The occasioned *ad hoc* use of rules is where novelty develops (see Wieder, 1970). The rules invoked on this and other occasions can be viewed as indexing their respective particulars, which in the case under consideration, like in others, references specific case material, situated sentiments about the case material, *in situ* descriptive challenges, and local professional preferences. While experiential patterning in the case emerges out of the consultation, and the case can be compared to cases like or unlike others of its kind, there is no guarantee that the concrete process and contingencies that led it to be described and categorized the way it is will be repeated later. An entirely different configuration of invoked rules might generate the same case description the next time around. A focus on textual outcomes could elide significant differences in textual production.

Ethnographic information is helpful in further understanding what is transpiring in the exchange, in particular how novelty relates to institutional preferences. The residential treatment center served children 6 to 14 years of age, who at the time of the study were referred to as "emotionally disturbed" and behaviorally "out of control." These childhood behavioral conditions are now commonly diagnosed as ADHD and can overlap with the spectrum of autism and Asperger's syndrome. The center's service intervention mandate was officially behaviorist, combining an elaborate behavior modification regimen of assessment and treatment with half-day schooling on the grounds and 24-hour residential care for a period of two years, counseling, speech therapy, and recreational activity.

Most of the professional staff used behaviorism terminology for official purposes, produced case material and reports reflecting that, and justified interventions in the same terms. While children's family histories were an abiding concern, the home was formally construed as a behavioral environment with diverse reward contingencies and outcomes, largely based on past considerations. Visible and countable behavioral acts were emphasized, not thoughts and feelings. For all intents and purposes, families were domestic configurations of stimuli and responses, the behavioral effectiveness of which for children hopefully led to better self-control. In behavioral reasoning, domestic life was construed as a "cool" environment, whose dynamics could be understood in terms of established family和个人, and the realities of visible activity. In sharp contrast, the Garfinkel's (1979) contemporaneous concept of family as a "haven in a heartless world," whose warm and supportive interior defended members against the harsh realities of life, the effective family in official reckoning kept members' emotional lives firmly under control (also see Cugurri, 1992).

At the time of the study, psychiatric reviews at the center were outsourced to three consultants—one was a behavioral psychologist, another was a psychologist who viewed himself as eclectic, and the third was a child psychiatrist with Freudian sensibilities. This in itself produced novelty in practice, especially when different consultants occasionally guided the reviews of the same child. For reporting purposes, their narrative preferences had to be reconciled, usually by the social worker, in writing up case material that reflected the behavioral emphasis of the institution, especially to funding agencies. Normally, consultants were assigned to specific children and, for the most part, the consultants followed up only on the children assigned to them, thus maintaining consistent narrative patterning over time.

While the psychiatrist especially brought a non-behavioral perspective on family and experience to his exchanges with staff members, his opinions and advice were nonetheless widely admired and valued. He was, understandably, professionally concerned with family history and children's pasts, to which the front line staff was repeatedly described as shedding important light on a child's present conduct. Oddly enough, in this context, a warm and supportive domestic environment was key to children's emotional maturity, a view quite contrary to formal institutional reasoning.
Now for the exchange. The speakers are the child's social worker and the behavioral psychologist, substituting for the child's regular consultant, the psychiatrist, who is currently on vacation. Narrative pertinence on this occasion centers on the issue of how to translate past-oriented case material generated under the auspices of child psychiatric consultation into equivalent present-oriented information of professional interest to the behavioral psychologist. Pseudonyms have been assigned to persons and places here and throughout the chapter.

Social Worker: (Reading from case material) Says that the home is pretty shattered emotionally.
(Elaborate)

Consultant: (Offering an equivalence rule) Do you mean everyone's out of control at 671 Bradley Street?

The consultant and social worker discuss the semantic equivalence of shattered emotions and being out of control, eventually settling on the following reverse equivalence rule offered by the social worker.

Social Worker: No, what I mean is just that the parents really feel bad about it and can't seem to get over that. Just that. It's not that things are out of control, more like just deep feelings. (Elaborate)

The discussion of meaning and pertinence continues, focusing next on what "feeling bad" and "deep feelings" constitute in behavioral terms. This is guided by the invocation of rules for translating these particular emotions into behavior, and reflexively leads eventually to rule justification by the very case material the rules were initially meant to translate.

Consultant: (Turning to case material dealing with the "homework") assigned to the parents for managing their child in the household? So then they're still adhering to the assignment, making sure Tommy's on task and making sure what the consequences are, right?
(Asks for information about how the child is being consequences) But they're not exactly happy that it's come to that?

Social Worker: Pretty much, but they're perfectionists and can't seem to handle failure. (Elaborate)

At this point, following a consideration of Tommy's low grades, discussion shifts levels in rule use, from the presentation of equivalence rules, to the invocation of a rule about assigning.

Consultant: (Offers a rule about assigning) Okay, let's not get into their heads. (Moving away from the parents' alleged perfectionism and now referring to a "contractual" or formally agreed upon at-home behavior modification assignment) How are the parents handling the contract? That's the point.

Social Worker: They feel they could be doing better. Tommy was never this bad; he was a happy kid until recently. What could have changed? As I said, they're perfectionists. (Elaborates from case material)

Consultant: (Reminding the social worker of the rule about assigning) Let's never mind that. Okay? Just please stick to what's going on right now. Feelings aside, they're following through (on the contract), right?

Social Worker: That's right.
stories of alcoholism and recovery told under the auspices of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA, 1976). NFL career stories present lives in cliché-like terms, but with institutionally distinct patterning. AA stories typically involve a downward spiral into alcoholism, “hitting bottom,” then resurrecting visible lives by traveling a “twelve step” path to recovery. The discursive pattern of an NFL career has a similar institutional cast, but with a consistently upward trajectory.

But the rubric of formula stories emphasizes pattern at the expense of novelty—in this case the biographical work of assembling diverse and multifaceted details into a coherent career narrative at different points in time. Comparing accounts across time, the stories are not merely trite or purely formulaic, but reconstituted in temporarily and institutionally appropriate terms that are trite accounts emerge. recount their careers from the vantage point of retirement, say, different “trite” accounts emerge. Writing it in Mead’s terms, the irrevocable past follows from the perspective of different persons.

Putting it in Mead’s terms, the irrevocable past follows from the perspective of different persons. Even the irrevocable futures of discernible pasts are implicated. Asked to consider their futures, what recently retired players revisit and reconstruct past events in light of present circumstances. Since the lived experience of the present is composed with alternative possibilities of the present, they’ve been told at a different point in time. Past reflexive change in light traditions in play when told at a different point in time. Past reflexive change in light traditions in play when told at a different point in time. Past reflexive change in light traditions in play when told at a different point in time. Past reflexive change in light traditions in play when told at a different point in time. Past reflexive change in light traditions in play when told at a different point in time.

The sports and news media recently have highlighted the post-football troubles of retired players, especially their financial woes. It’s been said that most players are on the brink of financial ruin shortly after they quit the game, despite the enormous amount of money they earned while playing. In relation to these circumstances, players typically compose their careers in ways that explain and justify a formerly unforeseen pattern leading to post-football travails. Taken together, the resulting accounts are complex compositions of then, now, and the future, told from the perspectives of the working persons.

Consider how Fox reconstitutes aspects of his career when asked what plans he does to do to make a living now that he’s out of the game.

When we were off playing football, our (college) classmates . . . were doing internships. They were working their way up the ladder. While we were on the practice field learning how to tackle, they were learning the game of life. Now, all of a sudden, you played in the biographical work of accounting for a problematic future. Fox recalls experiences at the periphery of his previous career that now coalesce into a currently coherent account for why job prospects at the moment and into the future have been damped by a newly salient past. A juncture in his career that was previously constructed as a positive turning point—where he began to devote all his attention to football—is reformulated as a deterrent to present-day occupational development.

The present lesson on this front again features the novelty of life patterning. Immature-sounding career narratives don’t so much construct players’ lives, as they serve as models of what’s known for formulating sports careers according to one’s current circumstances. Rather than institutional patterning, they institutionalize “the” career narrative, specific events in time work as

invoke circumstantially pertinent formulations. Formerly irrevocable pasts are transformed narratively into new and equally irrevocable pasts that reflexively accord with the events of the present.

**Standpoint and the novelty of the end of life**

The third illustration is taken from old age and showcases how occasioned standpoints can shape constructions of the end of life. Its point of departure is the concept of “narrative foreclose,” which Mark Freeman (2011) coined in his research on narrativity in relation to dementia. Freeman was troubled by the common assertion made by disease sufferers and those otherwise troubled that one’s “life is over” when the speaker continued living. Trouble derived from Freeman’s sense of the mismatch between the life and living. Tying life and living to each other, he asked how it was possible to assert that one’s life was over when living clearly continued beyond the present? Entering the two and taking a different tack based on the idea of biographical work, the illustration shows that the assertion is not so much a misattribution of fact, but an assertion that flags a rhetorical project.

The illustration draws from extracts of narrative and ethnographic material dealing with accounts of the quality of life in nursing homes (Gubrium, 1993). The study did not aim to access residents’ evaluations of the quality of the nursing home or its care, but rather with how residents constructed their lives in their present circumstances. Here, particular attention is paid to how the assertion “life is over” accords with the circumstances of its application. When compared, the occasioned use of the assertion presents considerable novelty in meaning.

The first extract is from one of several interviews with 84-year-old resident Alec, who had been in skilled care at Holly Plaza for three years at the time. He suffered from diabetes and the continuing pain of a double leg amputation. He had been a heavy smoker, now also suffered from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and according the staff exhibited signs of dementia. In the course of the study, interviewer Jay Gubrium came to know Alec and his family very well, especially his 82-year-old wife Cora and their adult children Mark, Nina, and Kitty. The family visited Alec regularly in the nursing home. It did not take much prompting in interviews for Alec to speak about his life, both before and after living at the Plaza. He was naturally chatty and didn’t hesitate to reminisce about what many residents called “the old days,” more recent times, and their present and future lives in the nursing home. Described by staff members as enduringly “active and busy,” Alec was a big man and reported to have lived with “adventure in his veins.” One of his daughters claimed he was the Ernest Hemingway of the family. As a young man, Alec had been a lumberjack and later continued to work in and out of the lumber industry.

The following is a portion of one of many chats with him that converged on a narrative of life now living at the Plaza. Note the eventual assertion of narrative foreclosure. The bold contrast of then and now not only communicates an ending, but is persuasive and emotionally palpable.

**Alec:** You know how it is when you’re that age (his twenties), you’re as active as all get-out. (Elaborates) Look at me now; you wouldn’t know it, would ya? I’m a big guy. Shit, buddy, I was a really big lump then; I got around like none of the other guys (at work). What a life! I looked up to, too. No messin’ around with Alec. No sir! (He elaborates about himself and his life at that time, pausing here and there, marveling and then sighing, as if to convey what he once was in relation to what he’s become.) Hey, what a difference! I’ll bet you can’t believe ya, can you, Jay? (Pause) Can you believe that this ole dying body once upon a time coulda had a life? Can ya, buddy?

Jay: That’s amazing, Alec. Tell me about it.
Conclusion

There is a line of thinking about institutions that takes a perspective on life in rural communities. This perspective points to the importance of community institutions in the maintenance of rural life. It has roots in the work of social theorists like Robert D. Putnam, who examined the role of community institutions in maintaining social capital. Putnam argued that strong social capital is essential for the functioning of democratic societies. In rural communities, Putnam observed, social capital is often more pronounced than in urban areas, due to the close-knit nature of rural communities.

In this view, the rural community is seen as a social experiment in which the effectiveness of community institutions can be observed. The rural community provides a unique context for the study of community institutions, as it is characterized by a high degree of social cohesion and a strong sense of community. In this context, community institutions are seen as essential for the maintenance of rural life, as they provide a sense of belonging and a shared sense of purpose for the community members.

The study of community institutions in rural communities has important implications for the understanding of rural life. It highlights the importance of community institutions in maintaining social cohesion and a sense of community. It also underscores the need for further research on the role of community institutions in maintaining social capital in rural communities.

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