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Chapter 8
The Everyday Work and Auspices of Authenticity
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Early in the 2008 US presidential primary season, *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd asked whether Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton could cry her way to the White House (*NY Times*, January 9, 2008). Dowd’s column referred to Clinton’s emotional moment before news cameras following rival candidate Barack Obama’s win in the Iowa caucus. The alleged “unmistakable look of tears in [Clinton’s] eyes” prompted Dowd’s question. The start of her column is pertinent to everyday understandings of authenticity and we quote it at length.

When I walked into the office Monday, people were clustering around a computer to watch what they thought they would never see: Hillary Clinton with the unmistakable look of tears in her eyes. A woman gazing at the screen was grimacing, saying it was bad. Three guys watched it over and over, drawn to the “humanized” Hillary. One reporter who covers security issues cringed. “We are at war,” he said. “Is this how she’ll talk to Kim Jong-il?” Another reporter joked: “That crying really seemed genuine. I’ll bet she spent hours thinking about it beforehand.” He added dryly: “Crying doesn’t usually work in campaigns. Only in relationships” (P. A21).

These comments serve as a springboard for our concern with the authenticities of everyday life. Of interest in this particular case is the question of how genuine the tears were. Were they spontaneously from the heart or planned beforehand? Equally significant, how would this ostensibly impromptu moment be perceived by the electorate? Would it be viewed positively as a sign of Clinton’s true humanity, or skeptically as manipulative campaign spin? The last reporter’s assertion about the context of genuineness is especially relevant, as it deals with what we will refer to as the “auspices” of authenticity. What would be made of Clinton’s tears under the auspices of a political campaign, as opposed to, say, a private personal relationship?

The comments indicate that crying can signify many things—something reassuringly “humanizing,” “weakness” in the face of challenge, clumsiness with respect to campaign tactics, and political manipulation. The meanings have varied moral vectors, from being a matter of character to being an indicator of international
political effectiveness: from being bad to being good because it’s humanizing, and from being theatrical to being natural or unspoiled. If we had been privy to how the discussion played out in the reporters’ subsequent conversations, we would have encountered additional meanings generated from unfolding judgments about public perceptions, opinions about the relative value of the meanings offered, and possible debate about the ground rules for how to evaluate personal behavior in the political arena.

Dowd tells us that the exchange occurred between reporters and transpired in what we take to be a newspaper office. Meanings offered and received, and judgments made, are subject to the communicative expectations that typically characterize such times and places. For a newspaper office and eventual news publication, we might guess that meanings conferred would be evaluated for their correspondence to what really happened, their newsworthiness, and their potential reader interest, among other media concerns. We would assume this setting to offer expectations different from a therapy session, say. The interpretive preferences and authenticity judgments of a psychotherapeutic clinic would likely frame crying in psychological terms, implicating the emotional well-being, deep character, and interpersonal effectiveness of the client rather than her campaign savvy or her political werewifish. As we will argue, in this situation—as in all realms of everyday life—authenticity is worked up and judged by situationally distinct practices, expectations, and standards. What passes for real or genuine in one set of circumstances may not receive the same interpretation under different conditions. Such are the auspices of authenticity work and, while the work and the auspices are reflexively related in practice, we will take each of them up in turn for purposes of presentation.

Everyday Authenticity

This chapter deals with the operating contours of everyday authenticity and raises two questions broached above: How is authenticity produced and appreciated in everyday life and how are constructions and perceptions of authenticity mediated by the background expectancies of various circumstances? The unsettled status of the authenticity claims offered in the extract from Dowd’s column and the likelihood of the claims’ continuous meaning-making, prompts us to adopt a social constructionist perspective (see Holstein and Gubrium 2008), which frames these matters in terms of the descriptive and accounting actions, resources, and circumstances that constitute everyday realities (see Gubrium and Holstein 2009). Accordingly, we turn to the lived give-and-take of those concerned with authenticity and consider how they assemble everyday senses of what is and isn’t truly genuine.

While authenticity typically is considered to be a quality inhering in persons, objects, and events, there also has been growing attention to its everyday dimensions. Richard Peterson (2005), for example, argues that the authenticity of a wide variety of popular cultural objects (e.g., country music, fine wines, and tourist destinations) is socially constructed and subject to continual change. There is increasing research evidence and public awareness of the extent to which appearances of authenticity are artfully marshaled in the interest of selling products or even one’s self (see Cloud 2008; Gilmore and Pine 2007; Poeh 2007). Quoting Lionel Trilling (1972), Peterson argues that the “poetem of authenticity” is common in contemporary product marketing. Peterson continues, suggesting that “issues of authenticity most often come into play when authenticity has been put in doubt.” According to Peterson, this would apply to the selling of political candidates as well as to French wines and tourist destinations.

Peterson’s view latches issues of authenticity in the context of its overt challenges. Presumably, when authenticity is not in doubt, the phenomenon retreats. Here, we take a more expansive view, one centered on the ubiquity of everyday authenticity concerns. Issues of authenticity infuse all aspects of talk and interaction, as those concerned search for, designate, and respond to the real or its facsimiles as a basis for getting on with life. There is no “time out” from the task of conveying or discerning authenticity if one seeks to be a credible member of a course of interaction and scene of everyday living. Claims to authenticity can underpin all assertions of identity, emotion, truth, accuracy, and reliability.

We view the authenticity of everyday life as centered on its in situ social construction, as operating in practice and in relation to local relevancies. As we saw in the reporters’ interpretations of Hillary Clinton’s tears and we can witness in myriad other ordinary examples, everyday authenticity is not an inherent quality or personal attribute, even while it is commonly referenced as such. It is, instead, a characteristic established or assigned through the mundane practices of meaning-making (see Gubrium and Holstein 2009; Peterson 1997, 2005; Trilling 1972).

If authenticity is produced, we might refer to its constructive activities as authenticity work (also see Peterson 2005). This is one of two operating dimensions of everyday authenticity. The term “work” suggests that those concerned skillfully engage the task of interpreting authenticity—giving or receiving the impression that something or someone is authentic, genuine, or real. In this sense, authenticity work is purposeful. It is craft-like in that it relies on the artful application of communicative tools. But as a matter of everyday practice, this work is not essentially self-conscious. Rather, the concrete challenges of everyday life command most interactants’ attention. The integral authenticity work involved is mainly seen but unnoticed. Like most other aspects of talk-in-interaction, it is practiced without necessarily being planned or cognitively intentional (Potter 1996).

The second dimension of everyday authenticity relates to the audiences and circumstances of the work involved. If authenticity is interactionally produced, it materializes under particular auspices—the interpretive expectancies, resources, and preferences surrounding authenticity work (Gubrium and Holstein 2008). Aupices may be as informal as the sequential environment of a casual conversation or as formal as legal proceedings. They offer substantive parameters and preferences.
for what might pass for authenticity, the conditions of possibility for the authentic, as it were (Foucault 1977). While authenticity work is the mechanism by which objects and events are presented and come to be treated as authentic, its operation alone cannot reveal the substance of what is or is not authentic, or the ways that local contingencies mediate the appearance of authenticity.

The term “authentic” is often associated with qualities such as truthfulness, genuineness, and realism. An authentic person or self is one who is in touch with his or her real phenomenological and emotional experience and who reveals his or her own true thoughts, feelings, and actions (see Vannini 2006). While scholarly treatments of authenticity have produced myriad conceptualizations, our preference is to hold those in abeyance and turn instead to indigenous authenticity practices. Instead of predefining authenticity, we seek to describe how ordinary senses of the concept develop in the course of its mundane consideration. We view authenticity as a feature of everyday life, as a practical matter of providing, receiving, and judging accounts of the authentic, in particular accounts dealing with personal characteristics and interpersonal relationships.

The authenticity of objects, events, and actions is frequently conveyed in familiar expressions such as “I’ve been there” and “Only I know my true self.” These expressions reference those who have been “on the scene” or are otherwise “in the know.” One’s “own story” is a claim to the authentic version of a lifetime of experience (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). But close examination of ordinary talk and interaction suggests that such conclusions are complicated by competing authenticity claims, diverse sources of knowledge, and local epistemological preferences. Authenticity is something interactionally accomplished in relation to the situated relevances at play.

In the matter of life stories, for example, it is commonplace to consider the storyteller who has direct knowledge of the experience being narrated as having privileged access to the real story. An authentic subject—one who is in touch with the truth of matters in question—is commonly considered to possess the most genuine account. But adopting these commonsense criteria as analytic constructs is problematic. It risks confounding the researcher’s topic with his or her analytic resources (see Garfinkel 1967; Zimmerman and Pollner 1970). In considering everyday authenticity claims, the researcher must be careful to clearly identify those processes and criteria that members of situations themselves use to designate genuineness. Researchers should take care to focus on indigenous criteria for authenticity and not adopt them as their own standards. This, of course, requires disciplined attention to the constructed and situated elements of authenticity, those that ordinary members put into play, not a priori, abstract assumptions about what is or is not authentic as popularly understood.

Approaching authenticity in terms of everyday practice centers research on how allegedly genuine persons, objects, emotions, events, and so forth, are identified in everyday life. It focuses on individuals making and responding to authenticity claims and how they, together, determine the genuine, the unreliable, the truthful, or the suspect, for the situated, practical purposes at hand. Those who receive the claims—listeners and audiences—are an important consideration. What they expect to hear in particular circumstances shapes the construction of authenticity as much as the constructive skill of the claimants (see Hyvärinen 2008).

Forms of Authenticity Work

Let us first consider how various forms of authenticity work construct the genuine. In doing so, we take up the question of how authenticity is done in everyday life. In the next section, we will address the what question, which will feature the suspices of authenticity construction (see Holstein and Gubrium 2000 for further discussion of this distinction). We draw upon our own and others’ narrative and ethnographic data for illustration, making no claim that our catalog of practices and suspices is comprehensive. In the course of everyday interaction, we value authenticity because we associate it with properties of genuineness, credibility, plausibility, and the like (see Vannini 2006). But all interactional claims are not presented or treated as equally authentic. Authenticity must be “worked up” by both presenters and recipients. Interactional participants engage in myriad forms of authenticity work in order to substantiate claims to credibility, integrity, and influence. While it would be impossible to provide a comprehensive catalogue, we offer several illustrations here to suggest the range of everyday practices through which a working sense of authenticity is established by speakers and listeners.

Direct Claims

Most obviously, speakers assert authenticity by directly claiming it. Consider, for example, the ubiquity and frequency of proclamations such as “This is the truth,” “candidly speaking,” or “can I speak freely?” Each functions as a kind of authenticity preface (see Sacks 1992), alerting and instructing the recipient that the ensuing account is to be taken as heartfelt and/or genuine, part of the work of setting up a truthful account. The implication is that with such prefices, the accounts that follow are more authentic than those without them. Of course, recipients of such talk seldom take such remarks at face value; they may be circumspect if not cynical about what they are about to hear. Indeed, for some, an announcement such as, “I’m going to be frank with you,” virtually alerts them to the prospect of insincerity or deceit. While a restaurant’s marketing claim that, say, “Authentic Tuscan Cuisine” may shape potential patron’s predispositions and dining choices, the mere prefacing claim is not likely to be sufficient to establish fully the restaurant’s authenticity. As in other everyday venues, establishing and sustaining the sense of authenticity is an ongoing and multifaceted task shaped by the circumstances.
Authenticity Checks

There are myriad motives for offering particular accounts or versions of experience. People have self-serving interests or stakes in matters under consideration, something of which recipients often seem all too aware (see Potter 1996). We can assume that people want to be taken seriously, as honest, sincere brokers of their thoughts and feeling, but those evaluating accounts may nevertheless be more-or-less skeptical of what they hear. Erving Goffman (1959) tells us that expressions "given"—that is, direct narrative accounts or descriptions—may easily be manipulated. Consequently, their authenticity is always open to question. Accordingly, we also look for what Goffman called expressions "given off"—actions that are less easily controlled or manipulated—to reveal actors' actual interests, motives, or selves.

Common examples of such authenticity checks include vigilantly scrutinizing speakers for "stammering" or hurried speech, "shifty eyes," "sweaty palms," or other inadvertent signs of unease about what is being conveyed. If a speaker is unable to "look you in the eye and tell you what's on his mind," as it is often said, his authenticity is commonsensically compromised. We can also find subtle, less clichéd ways in which the presentation of selves and stories is read for signs of authenticity. For example, in a family therapy agency Jabar Gubrium (1992) studied, staff members generally discounted family members' initial accounts of their relations with one another, choosing instead to read the reality of their relationships from the way family members positioned, arranged, and comported themselves during therapy sessions. In particular, staff trusted expressions given off by way of how family members seated themselves more than they trusted explicit verbal accounts of domestic relations, which staff figured could be manipulated for self-serving purposes.

Authenticity work may combine explicit claims and uncontrolled gestures, involving both those who deliver accounts and those who receive them. Most of this work falls somewhere between the overt manipulation of authenticity prefaces and the search for uncontrollable, yet tell-tale signs of inauthenticity as illustrated above. We turn now to some elaborations of those purposeful, yet not fully planned or intentional practices.

Privileged Positioning

One important form of authenticity work involves privileged positioning. For example, those researched, as well as the researchers themselves, especially ethnographers, promote the authenticity of informants' reports by touting the extent to which informants are "there," "on the scene," or "inside" the action, so to speak (see Geertz 1988). "Being there" or "on the inside" provides a figurative as well as empirical anchor for accurate description, supplying a basis for treating such accounts as authentic because their sources are privy to first-hand experience.

Establishing a privileged position on the scene also involves authenticity work. Simply stating that one is an "insider" is generally inadequate to the task. Rather, one's location in relation to the source and scene of the account in question must be independently established. Consider the variety of techniques that Jonathan Potter (1996) enumerates in the following account offered by Jimmy, who is speaking during a relationship counseling session he is attending with his wife, Connie. At issue, among other things, is Connie's allegation that Jimmy is "an extremely jealous person." She argues her point by claiming that Jimmy was unduly aggrieved by Connie's innocently "having a few drinks and messing" with a "bloke in a pub" (Potter 1996:120). Jimmy tries to refute the charge by offering his own account of the situation and actions in question.

Um, when these people came in, it was John and Caroline. And then they had this other fella, Dave with them as well ... Um He e- he came- they all came in the pub anyway. Well, Connie sat beside Caroline. And I sat [farther back]. So you was, you was split between us. They sat in- on the other side. The only words Connie spoke to me for the rest of the evening was "Get another drink. Get another drink" (Potter 1996:163, transcript slightly modified for readability).

Potter notes that this account is full of specific references—definite characters, exact locations, and instances of precise quotation (Potter 1996:163). The description is highly detailed, not general or superficial. The result is a rich account constructed from Jimmy's point of view, presented in a fashion that allows the recipient close access to Jimmy's experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Such accounts permit the recipient to take on the position of the speaker, gaining a sense of understanding from his or her perspective. As Potter suggests, the recipient of the account watches and hears with the eyes and ears of the speaker and will be inclined to accept the version presented by the speaker. The richness of the description establishes the speaker as actually embedded in the actions described, positioning him or her to offer first-hand descriptions because he or she can claim implicitly to be an eyewitness or participant in the actions (Potter 1996:164-165).

Detailing

The provision of rich and abundant detail undergirds privileged positioning, according to Potter (1996). Detailing offers vivid representation of a scene, action, group, or person that is unlikely to be seen as invented or inauthentic. It enhances the work that establishes the sense of being "up close" or "inside" situations, thus entitling the speaker to offer seemingly genuine accounts as a witness, an expert, or actual subject or source of the experience (see Goodwin 1984; Sacks 1992a and 1992b).

While this is apparent in the illustration from relationship counseling, it is even more striking in witness accounts of extraordinary events. Kathleen Haspel (2007), for example, describes the striking degree to which eyewitness accounts
I had a couple of conversations with God and one he actually said, "He will be back." [pause] And so I of course read that to mean he [her ex-husband] will be back and we'll have our relationship back together again... and um [pause] and another time [pause] I was really upset, it was [date of the incident] and, and um, I went outside at work. I was just too stressed, I couldn't work, and I went outside and said, "God, what am I supposed to do?" ... And this voice, just like in the story of Noah, said, "Let go." I called my counselor right away and I said, "Oh my God! God just told me that I have to let go of [her ex-husband]!" He [the counselor] said, "What exactly did he [God] say?" I said, "He said let go." He [the counselor] said, "Well, it may be he didn't mean let go of [the exhusband], he meant let go of trying to control the situation" (Miller and Owens 2008:16-17).

This account could easily be dismissed as exaggerated, fabricated, or even delusional, but the inclusion of imported dialogue may produce just the opposite effect. Gale Miller and Erica Owens (2008) argue that the use of what they similarly refer to as "constructed dialogue" serves to authenticate what might otherwise be questionable claims to have spoken with God. Constructed dialogue, they contend, is a rhetorical device consisting of utterances that appear to literally report the speech of one's self or others who may or may not be physically present in ongoing social interactions (Tannen 1986, 1989). Elsewhere this has been called "reported speech" (Wooffitt 1992), "replayings" (Goffman 1974), "embedded speech" (Goffman 1981), and "active voicing" (Wooffitt 1992). Such utterances are expressed as literal quotations of one's own or others' actual words that have presumably been communicated in other conversations (Bergman 1993).

According to Miller and Owens, imported dialogue enhances the genuineness of accounts by animating speakers' descriptions (Goffman 1974) and vicariously importing real time into interpretations of the circumstances (Bergman 1993). Speakers use imported dialogue to invite listeners to vicariously engage events and conversations that took place elsewhere, and to treat them as eye witness experiences, not merely reports of those experiences. In this instance, it is especially noteworthy that the speaker quotes God, her therapist, and herself in the course of the narrative. This lends claim to close, nuanced knowledge of what all parties to the situation were saying, both ordinary and cosmic conversational partners. The imported dialogue supplies intimate detail of the reported conversations, detail that only an insider or actual partner to the dialogue could have recounted. By using direct quotations, the speaker conveys the sense that the talk did, in fact, take place, and was not imagined or fabricated. In addition, God's participation is authentic in the sense that the talk did, in fact, take place, and was not imagined or fabricated. In addition, God's participation is authentic in the sense that the talk did, in fact, take place, and was not imagined or fabricated.
Showing True Commitment

When authenticity is considered in relation to identity, one’s “true self” may be at issue. Authenticity work can involve showing that identity claims reflect true commitments, actual feelings or conditions of the heart, not simply overtures to fashion, social pressure, or momentary preferences. Consider the following extract where a member of a youth subculture was questioned about his identity as a “rocker.” “R” is the respondent and “I” the interviewer; the transcript has been simplified for readability.

I: When and how did you get into being a rocker?

R: It must have been when I was about fourteen or fifteen, some friends at school were

I: mmm

R: an they-an I said oh heavy metal’s rubbish, they said nah it’s not an they gave me some tapes to listen to an I did enjoy it, did like it ... and that’s when I sort of started getting into it. Before I sort of liked things like Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet. Huh hh

I: mmmmm and then I [mean how-]

R: [but that’s cos I hadn’t heard heavy metal you see (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995:140-141).

Sue Widdicombe and Robin Wooffitt (1995) suggest that this is an instance where the respondent has been challenged to defend his identity as an authentic rocker, as opposed to, say, a mere follower of a musical fad. Widdicombe and Wooffitt note that the respondent initially indicates that he said “Oh heavy metal’s rubbish.” In doing so, the respondent acknowledges that coming to like it was against his initial predisposition. The authenticity of his claim to be a rocker is further underscored by the use of imported dialogue, as the respondent directly quotes himself in conversation with others. He goes on to say that he hadn’t liked heavy metal before because he “hadn’t heard [it].” The work being done here effectively conveys that the respondent did not take on the rocker identity simply to follow his friends, but did so because of the quality of the music itself. He did genuinely enjoy it and eventually got “into it.” His commitment to being a heavy metal rocker is portrayed as genuine, as the respondent demonstrates that his decision to switch has gone against prior preferences. Again, supplying detail is important in authenticating the process of change, as is the sequencing of events that essentially “inoculates” the respondent against accusations of succumbing to peer pressure (Potter 1996).

A Separate Dimension

If the gathered reporters Dowd wrote about commented on Hillary Clinton’s apparent tears and, in the process, communicatively worked on the tears’ authenticity, we also were told that this transpired in a newsroom. The prevailing warrant for genuineness centered in this case on its newsworthiness and political meaning. While it may be clear in this instance, it is important to point out that the auspices of authenticity are not always apparent in talk and interaction. Recall that it was Dowd who told the reader that the exchanges were taking place in a newsroom (office) and that the speakers were reporters. This adds to issues of everyday authenticity in its own right, because a different corpus of empirical material has entered into the mix, namely, ethnographic knowledge of the circumstances of the exchanges. This brings the whole of everyday authenticity into the picture.

The auspices of authenticity work vary widely in contemporary society, the operating criteria of which range from circumstances whose standards are rooted in sentiments, thoughts, and actions, to those with preferences based on religion, science, or even magic. The apparently genuine emotional expression taken to be authentic under the auspices of one setting may turn into a norm for what the “real thoughts and actions of the matter” are in another, the former having invoked religion, say, and the latter science. Whether or not such invocations are religiously or scientifically justified, their everyday uses provide authenticity warrants in their own right (Hammersley 2008:120-121).
The Broad Range of Ausecuses

Extensive fieldwork has focused on authenticity work that transpires in institutional settings and we will take up an example of this shortly (see Gubrium and Holstein 2001). But it bears emphasizing that authenticity work is socially ubiquitous and takes place across the diverse nooks and crannies of everyday life, from schools and reformatories, to kitchens, playgrounds, and street corners. This was made apparent long ago in Clifford Shaw’s (1930) study of a delinquent boy he called “Stanley,” whose “own story” was presented in Shaw’s book The Jack-Roller.

In the book, Stanley informs us that the genuine criminal in his social world is no small fry, to speak. Among his fellow inmates at the reformatory where he did time and on the neighborhood street corners where he hung out, the genuine “crook” was someone who engaged in serious crime. Because Stanley was only a petty thief, his authenticity as a consequential member of this peer group was constantly in question. Under the auspices of the reformatory or the street corner, Stanley’s identity lacked the mark of authenticity expected in these settings. No amount of authenticity work on Stanley’s part readily moved him into the big leagues. Stanley puts it this way, virtually pointing to the standards in place at Pontiac, the reformatory in which he did time:

So I listened with open ears to what was said in these groups of prisoners. Often I stood near some of the tales of adventure in crime were related, and I took in with interest. Somewhere I wanted to go out and do the same thing myself. To myself I thought I was somebody to being a year at Pontiac (reformatory), but in these groups of older prisoners I felt ashamed because I couldn’t tell tales of daring exploits about my crimes. I hadn’t done anything of consequence. I compared myself with the older crooks and saw how little and insignificant I was in a criminal line. But deep in my heart I knew that I was only a kid and couldn’t be expected to have a reputation yet. I couldn’t tell about my charge, for it savored of petty thievery, and everybody looked down on a petty thief in Pontiac (108-109).

Later in the book, we learn from Stanley that the auspices of the street corner deployed similar identity preferences. Stanley may have literally been a street criminal and convict, but his “street cred” was minimal in the haunts of “real” criminals.

The Substantive Control of Authenticity

Institutions of various kinds can provide the formal contours for everyday authenticity as well as the practical controls over what is taken to be authentic. If operating preferences for conduct and, by implication, for authenticity, have been identified for places such as neighborhoods and street corners (e.g., see Anderson 1999, Whyte 1943), formally organized institutions substantively underscore expectations for what is authentic. We do not mean that the institutional auspices of authenticity are more compelling than those of informal settings in asserting standards and consequences for what is or isn’t viewed as authentic. Indeed, Elijah Anderson’s (1999) ethnography of the “code of the street” suggests quite the opposite. Anderson shows that locally inauthentic performances in neighborhood settings can lead to violence, even death, in the circumstances. The formality of authenticity controls, however, is greater in organizations, where the authentic and the inauthentic is specified in explicit directives, texts, the job descriptions, and in formal decision-making schemes (see Young 1995; Fox 2001:176-192).

Gubrium’s (1986) ethnographic research on the descriptive organization of senility brings the significance of institutional auspices into bold relief in this way. In his fieldwork in Alzheimer’s disease caregiver support groups, Gubrium heard many accounts of “what it’s like” to become senile and “what it’s like” to care for a loved one who is losing a mind. The accounts were continually evaluated for their genuineness. Of particular interest was how the newly emergent auspices of the Alzheimer’s Disease Association (ADA)—a national organization promoting research and sponsoring local chapters and self-help groups for caregivers—shaped the substantive meaning of the disease for family members, especially the meaning of heartfelt concern and authentic caregiving.

The early 1980s were a time of transition in understanding cognitive impairment in old age. There was a sea change in the offing, from the view that senility was a normal part of aging, to the medical view that cognitive impairment was a disease. Stories told early in this period had dramatically different meanings and consequences than similar stories told later on. Early on, under the auspices of the normal aging model, stories of senility were accounts of woe, inevitability, and acceptance. Later, under the emerging auspices of the medicalized view, which the ADA promoted, there was woe to be sure, but it was combined with the search for a cure and the hope for recovery. As far as the caregiver was concerned, as the overall view of senility shifted, genuine caregiving changed from something one owed to aged love ones and simply did, to something with distinct phases of adaptation. For many, passage through the stages needed to be embraced “for everyone’s sake.” This had a bearing on what genuine caregiving became, altering the substantive criterion for authentic accounts of experiences that more or less accorded with the emerging understanding that caregiving had particular experiential parameters.

The various support groups Gubrium observed, which included ADA as well as non-ADA sponsored groups, struck him as quite different in the application of criteria for genuine caregiving. Some groups, especially those sponsored by the ADA, preferred highly formulaic renditions of the caregiving experience that accorded with the new understanding (cf. Loseke 2001). The ADA distributed voluminous promotional literature to local chapters that described the “characteristics” of dementia and the “stages” of caregiving, which support group participants read and shared. There were other groups—more likely to be independent—in which no particular version of these matters was valued over
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the afflicted (another stage of the process). Under the auspices of these groups, such preferred accounts were locally evident in both speech and text, as one or another participant read brochures about stages monitored utterances for how well they reflected the formula story surrounding what it meant to be an authentic caregiver.

In time, Gubrium’s research informed him that the everyday authenticity of accounts needed to be figured in relation to its diverse auspices. In everyday life, authenticity cannot be evaluated in terms of fixed criteria. Abstract or decontextualized standards of genuineness don’t tell us much about how authenticity operates in practice, nor about the substantive controls in place as matters of local preference, authentic accounts were not just skillfully told and appreciated or discounted, but related to the auspices of authenticity work. As a consequence, Gubrium found that there were diverse local possibilities for being authentic in the matter of caring and providing care.

In their own way, caregivers themselves shared and understood the diversity. On one occasion in the field, a caregiver made a poignant and analytically telling remark that echoed delinquent Stanley’s sensitivity to the auspices of authentic criminality. The caregiver was a participant in one of the relatively informal support groups Gubrium was observing. Commenting on the support group she had attended across town and comparing it to the group she now frequented and preferred, the caregiver flagged what was genuine for her:

I just can’t bear to go there (across town) anymore. All I heard there was stage one, stage two, and the next step. Here, the stories you hear sound more like what I’m going through. I learn more from that and it makes me feel better (Gubrium 1986, fieldnotes).

In one narrative stroke, the remark pointed to the reflexive interface of authenticity work and its auspices (see Gubrium and Holstein 2009). The caregiver recognized that auspices matter in composing and responding to accounts and chose to alter the challenges to the accountability of her own story, thereby effecting its everyday authenticity. The upshot of this as far as auspices are concerned is that the control asserted by organizational or circumstantial auspices may be substantial, but it is not irresistible.

Conclusion

To expect a final answer to the question of what is genuine or authentic is to expect the impossible in practice. Standards, generalized criteria, or codes are not fixed in everyday life, even while they are perennially invoked in talk and social interaction. As D. Lawrence Wieder (1974) demonstrated in his pioneering study of the everyday operation of the convict code in a halfway house for drug offenders, standards of accountability, including what is truthful or genuine, are resources others. In the former groups, what rang true was articulated in more or less detail according to the ADA formula. Compelling accounts of the caregiving experience tended to follow a stage-like script of what one “goes through” in the process. This combined with a stage-like understanding of what happens in time to the care receiver. In contrast, in the independent groups, participants were generally satisfied to simply and often emotionally compare notes and experiences, learning from each other about themselves and about the progress of afflicted loved ones’ disease experience. Narratives in these groups emerged in terms of what social psychologists call a “social comparison process,” where meaning making develops with the flow of individual comparisons rather than in terms of an overarching framework (see Festinger 1954).

In the ADA groups, infractions of local understandings were quickly noted and often plausibly substantiated. For example, on one occasion in one of the ADA-sponsored groups, a participant offered what Gubrium initially viewed as a rather detailed and engaging account of her husband’s growing forgetfulness and her associated caregiving experience. Her authenticity work was palpable. This was followed by heartfelt comments on the need to be valiantly devoted to the care of Alzheimer’s disease sufferers because of the disease’s relentless ravages. As an outsider, Gubrium was absorbed by how true-to-life the story sounded, in its detail and depth. He could only think, “Yes, she’s been through it; she knows what it’s like firsthand. One could learn a great deal from her experience.” But participants’ responses showed that the authentic account in such groups doesn’t take this shape, as seemingly truthful, engaging, and detailed as it otherwise seemed to be. What group members wanted to hear instead were truthful and engaging stories that accorded with a preferred experiential timeline, one paralleling Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s (1969) popular stage model of the dying process. Time and again, participants were cautioned and cautioned each other that there were distinctive aspects to caregiver adaptation. Caregivers whose accounts challenged the view that the caregiver “goes through stages of this thing” were considered to be “denying” the real story, which was seen as a distinct stage of adaptation. In such groups’ formulation of the authentic story, accounts of unceasing devotion—as detailed and mundanely embedded as they were—were viewed as delusional, echoing what many ADA brochures, chapter newsletters, and facilitators conveyed about the Alzheimer’s experience.

The substantive control of authenticity not only was encountered in challenges to such accounts, as they were in the neighborhoods Whyte and Anderson studied, but were referenced and could be read in texts well before and long after an account transpired. A participant could, in effect, gain knowledge of preferred authenticities without the actual experience of sharing accounts. The everyday truth of the matter in ADA-sponsored support groups was that one was being infinitely more realistic about the caregiving experience if one admitted that there were limits to devotion (a stage of the caregiving experience). This meant that, in time, one needed to think about oneself, the burden of care on the family as a whole, and should seriously consider nursing home placement for
for, not determinants of, the everyday work of authenticity. In everyday life, authenticity should not be viewed as hovering above and monitoring experience. Rather it is a rhetorical touchstone for constructing and responding to the real in relation to persons, actions, and events. In this context, assessments of authenticity center on the question of what is genuine enough in the circumstances in which it arises. This requires an aesthetics that draws inspiration from the local preferences and the work of authenticity. To say "that's really genuine" is as much a reflexive measure of situated utility as it is a judgment about authenticity in its own right. Universalized standards that operate as a research orientation eclipse the operating aesthetics of everyday life.

In today's world, with its remarkably diverse auspices of authenticity, the possibilities for being genuine, authentic, or inauthentic are more extensive than ever. There are more kinds of accounts, more circumstances, and more preferences about an increasing number of matters of "realness" than ever before. The in situ analysis of everyday authenticity work spotlights this expansive, complex landscape. It informs us that the moral horizons of the genuine are more intricate and variegated than they ever have been. This means, of course, that authenticity is perennially "up for grabs" in our everyday lives. Moreover, as the authentic is increasingly commodified—for everyday consumption as well as commercial profit—it risks being seen as increasingly "synthetic" (Cloud 2008). This implies burgeoning possibilities for the production of the "fake-real" (Gilmore and Pine 2007), the working genuineness of a postmodern environment.

While most of us are aware of such fabrication in the world of product marketing, advertising, and increasingly everywhere, this does not necessarily warrant wholehearted cynicism vis-à-vis the authenticity of everyday life. When it comes to everyday selves and experience, the distinction between the real and the concocted is blurred as an integral part of the world we live in. The de-differentiation (Lash 1990) of reality and its representations that characterizes postmodernity is especially germane with respect to authenticity. As a product of situated interpretive practice (see Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Holstein and Gubrium 2000), the authentic is constantly at stake throughout the course of interaction. What it is and is not authentic is always a locally practical matter, presenting authenticity as an everyday concern with what is circumstantially relevant and useful.

References


