

# ***STORYING LATER LIFE***

## **Concepts and Issues in Narrative Gerontology**

Ensomme Gamles Værn

Danish Society of Gerontology

Copenhagen, Denmark

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St. Thomas University



# TOPICS

- **Narrative Across the Human Sciences**
- **Narrative Gerontology**
- **Narrative Identity**
- **Narrative Development**
- **Narrative Environment**
- **Narrative Challenges in Later Life**
- **Narrative Care and Narrative *Self*-Care**
- **Ongoing Considerations**

**A man (sic) is always a teller of tales; he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others; he sees everything that happens to him through them, and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it.**

**(Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée*)**

# NARRATIVE ACROSS THE HUMAN SCIENCES

- N “turn” in psychology, sociology, anthropology, theology, education, neurology, medicine, etc.
- N dimensions of cognition, emotion, identity, personality, relationships, behaviors, beliefs, etc.
- Human beings as *hermeneutical* beings
- Key means of making meaning = stories (*homo narrans*)
- Via N intelligence, “autobiographical reasoning”
- N as “root metaphor” for understanding life/self?

**Every time an old person dies,  
it's like a library burns down.**

**(Alex Haley)**

**Every person is born into life as a blank  
page – every person leaves  
life as a full book.**

**(Christina Baldwin)**

# NARRATIVE GERONTOLOGY

- Starting-pt = appeal & importance of OA's stories
- OA's as storytellers, storykeepers, "Elders"
- Later life as "narrative phase par excellence"
- Developmental tasks of late life as narrative tasks
- Changes in our aging brains facilitate: (Cohen, etc)
  - improved "emotional regulation"
  - capacity for "post-formal thought"
  - urge for "autobiographical expression"
  - drive to engage in "summing up"

# NARRATIVE GERONTOLOGY (cont'd)

- NG draws on N psychology, therapy, sociology, etc
- NG focuses on:
  - biographical (vs biological) aging
  - inside (vs outside) of aging
  - meanings (vs mechanics) of memory, e.g.
- Dominance of “narrative of decline” re aging?
- Yet potential in LL for meaning, wisdom, growth
- Key to *growing* (vs getting) old = Good Strong Story

**Identity IS a life story – an internalized  
and evolving narrative (personal myth)  
that provides a life with a sense of unity,  
meaning, and purpose.**

**(Dan McAdams)**

**Everyone's life is worth a novel.**

**(Gustave Flaubert)**



# NARRATIVE IDENTITY

- My “identity” = the *story* I (re)tell about my life
- I turn the stuff of my life into stories (not stats)
- “Composing a Life” is a creative, textual, narrative, quasi-literary process
- E.g., autobiographical memories = texts, factions
- “Historical Truth” vs “Narrative Truth”?
- Self-story as ongoing process, vs finished product
- ‘Self’ as author, narrator, character, editor, reader
- The novelty of my life (unique, storied, complex)
  - Re chapters, themes, subplots, genre, atmosphere, etc

## NARRATIVE IDENTITY (cont'd)

- Selves-as-novelists; lives as novels (life-literature link)
- We are many stories *and* we are one story (?)
- Many stories of self to tell, & selves to tell them:
  - short/long, general/specific, solo/shared
  - past/future, told/untellable, “big”/ “small”
- Special role of “*self-defining memories*”, “*nuclear episodes*”, “*set pieces*”, “*signature stories*”
- Many autobiographical memories as *anomalies*?
- We live inside our unique *storyworld*

**We are like stories that are  
unfolding according to our own  
inner theme and plot.**

**(William Bridges)**

**We are in the middle of our stories and  
cannot be sure how they will end; we are  
constantly having to revise the plot as  
new events are added to our lives.**

**(Donald Polkinghorne)**

# NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT

- Lives-as-stories are *not* static but develop w/ time
- Ideally (?), toward “good life story form” (McAdams)  
*e.g., coherence, credibility, differentiation, openness, reconciliation, generative integration*
- Stages of of *(re)storying* our narrative identity:
  - *Pre-Mythic, Mythic, & Post-Mythic* (McAdams)
- Adolescence: rise of autobiographical awareness
- Later Life: identity-work (“storywork”) continues



**A life as lived is inseparable from a life as told... the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with them become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future.**

**(Jerome Bruner)**

In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we “tell about” our lives. ... I cannot imagine a more important psychological research project than one that addresses itself to the *“development of autobiography”* - how our way of telling about ourselves changes, and how these accounts come to take control of our ways of life.

(Jerome Bruner)

## NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT (cont'd)

- Moving ahead by looking back, seeing patterns ...
- Our story lags behind, never “covers”, our life
- “Much of our ... lived experience goes unstoried”
- *Developmental tasks of aging = narrative tasks:*
  - re life review, assimilation, re-memembering, making meaning, “reading” our lives – *storywork*
- No limit to ND (c/w no end of meaning in a novel)
- Gender differences in ND: implications for aging?



**To become a couple is to agree implicitly to live in terms of another person's story.**

**(William Bridges)**

**The stories of our culture are those that we hear so often that they cease to seem like stories to us. They are the stories that we take for granted ... the stories we live by.**

**(Roger Schank)**

# NARRATIVE ENVIRONMENT

- We story our lives within larger stories / systems
- Each has unique *narrative environment* that has:
  - codes for telling, listening, interacting
  - assumptions re secrecy, taboo topics, humor
  - unique jargon/language, plus *narrative templates, narrative resources, life-scripts*
  - can be thick/thin, open/closed, flexible/rigid
  - can range from *micro* level to *macro* level



**Thanksgiving  
2012**



# NARRATIVE ENVIRONMENT (cont'd)

- **MICRO** = families, marriages, friendships, communities, churches, institutions – within which we *co-author* each other's lives; thus a fuzzy line between "my story", "your story", & "our story".
- **MACRO** = *meta-narratives* of countries, cultures, religions, gender – each providing us *masterplots* for *storying* our lives. (e.g., Canada-Spain-Denmark-Norway)
- **KEY:** both macro & micro env'ts can shape our lives profoundly; enabling or inhibiting our ND



**Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts.**

**(Salman Rushdie)**

If you keep telling the same sad small story,  
you will keep living the same sad small life.

(Jean Houston)

*[Narrative foreclosure is]* the premature conviction that the story of one's life ... has effectively ended. ... that the future is a foregone conclusion.

(Mark Freeman)



# NARRATIVE CHALLENGES IN LATER LIFE

- The stories we tell about our life *never* “cover” it
- But some are < coherent, open, etc. than others:
  - Narrative *Foreclosure* - re past vs future
  - Narrative *Loneliness / Loss*
  - Narrative *Dispossession* - c/w “storyotyping”
  - Narrative *Knots* – re untellable stories
  - Narrative *Contamination* – problem-saturated
  - Narrative *Impoverishment / Imprisonment*

# *Storying Later Life*



**There is no agony like bearing  
an untold story inside of you.**

**(Maya Angelou)**

**Listeners shape what tellers tell.**

**(William Randall, Suzanne Prior, & Marianne Skarborn)**

***Storycatchers* come whenever we are in  
crisis to remind us who we are [and] entice  
our best tales out of us.**

**(Christina Baldwin)**

# NARRATIVE CARE

- Listening closely *to & for* someone's (back) story
- Helping someone develop stronger self-stories  
i.e., thick, layered, rooted, flexible, varied, open
- Using storytelling/listening for *therapoetic* ends  
(not necessarily “therapy” per se)
- Critiquing the NE'ts that shape one's life stories
- Re-*genre*-ating from tragedy to, e.g., adventure
- De/re-constructing dysfunctional N identities

***“Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger”***

# NARRATIVE CARE (cont'd)

- NC is about:
  - quality of connection vs quantity of time
  - attitude more than activity
  - creating a supportive narrative environment
- NC *contexts* can be:
  - formal-informal, intentional-natural
  - acute care, hospice, support group, etc.
  - therapy, teaching, friendship, marriage, etc.

## NARRATIVE CARE (cont'd)

- **NC *activities* can be:**
  - long & labour-intensive or quick & dirty
  - between the lines of other activities
- **NC *strategies* include:** integrative reminiscence, guided autobiography, scrapbooking, genealogy, stimulating conversation, one visit/one question
- **NC *benefits* are:** > meaning, > mastery, < stress, < depression, improved immune system, etc.

# NARRATIVE CARE (cont'd)

- Is not rocket science
- Is not expensive (c/w technologies & drugs)
- Is implicitly therapeutic (“*therapoetic*”)
- Is about connection, compassion, heart
- Is core care; goes to the *coeur* of who one is
- Is what attracted many of us to the helping professions in the first place!
- Begins at home .....

## NARRATIVE SELF-CARE

- NC requires NC toward ourselves (*N SELF-Care*)
- *NSC* = appreciating how rich, thick, complex, layered, interesting, & *novel* our own stories are!
- *NSC* requires personal storywork, N reflection
- *Strategies* (see also “Narrative Care”):  
*list-making (houses/cars/friends), life-line, journaling, memoir-writing, writing & reflecting on signature stories, identifying branching points, genealogy etc.*



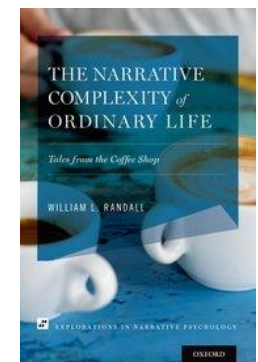
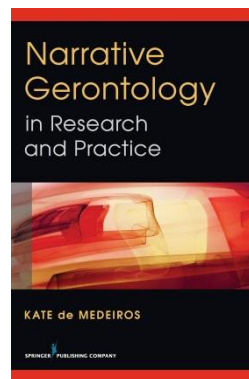
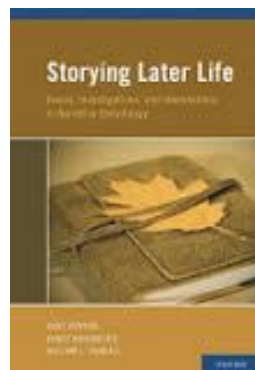
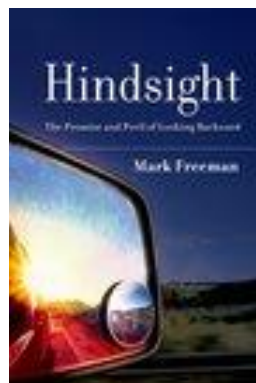
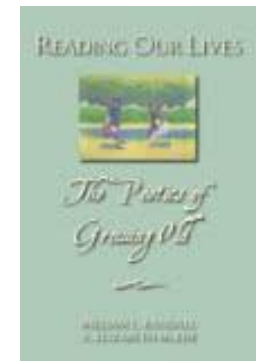
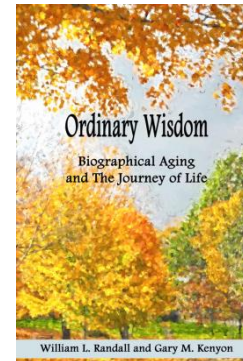
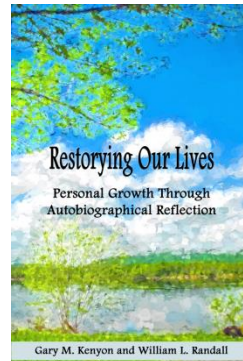
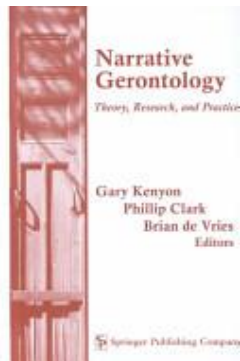
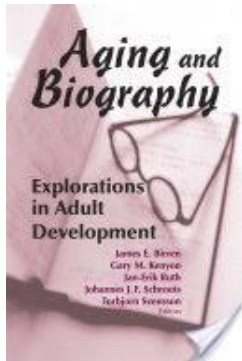
# ONGOING CONSIDERATIONS

- *Narrative & dementia* ... honoring one's story for them; narrative “quilting”, vs “normal” memory?
- *Narrative care* in institutions, communities, etc.
- Role of *narrative environment* (eg. *el pacto del olvido*)
- Role of *shadow stories* (untold / back stories)
- *Storywork /Life Review* not for everyone?
- *Longevity & gender* - diffs in “storying style”?
- *N complexity* of life, community, spirituality, love

## ONGOING CONSIDERATIONS (cont'd)

- *Telling vs writing* our stories; solo vs group
- *Narrative literacy* in the helping professions
- *Narrative resilience* – benefits of storywork?
- Aging & development of *ironic orientation*
- *Small story* construction vs *Big story* contemplation  
- a continuum / back & forth?
- Importance of *nostalgic stories* at the end of life
- Different disciplines, different uses of “narrative”
- Etc., etc., etc.

# SOME RELEVANT BOOKS



# ***MANGE TAK***

**Questions? Comments? Stories?**

**Bill Randall**

**Professor of Gerontology**

**Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Narrative**

**St. Thomas University**

**Fredericton, NB, Canada**

**[brandall@stu.ca](mailto:brandall@stu.ca)**