Women's Life Stories: Transcending barriers of continuity through the development of alternative discourses of ageing and identity

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Abstract: By the time women become *older women*, their identities have probably undergone reconstruction, reorganisation, and revamping. Memories will be rethought, lives will be structured anew, more than once, and attempts will have been made to restore what once was to its original condition. Women find ways to cope with the long-term effects of living life as a woman, and with the ageing process itself. In this paper, I shall draw on women's life stories, to explore the dynamics of discourse and identity, examining differences in narrative styles of the participants and the influence of discourse embedded in our minds and culture. It is the lives of earlier cohorts of women that enable us to see how discourses change over time, how their power wanes or increases – and how women adapt, cope, and resist. Discussed in this paper are the themes of *continuity throughout the life cycle* and *alternative lives*, which can be used to examine and understand the lives of those whose identities fall outside traditional discourses of life cycle development.

Individual identity is a concept that is often used to refer to the "essential" self, the self as socially constructed, or the self as an agent, with an overall focus on individuality, uniqueness, or difference from others. The model of the essential self assumes that there are core features internal to the self, while social construction theory suggests that the self is constructed through societal forces. The third view, of the self as having agency, refers to the ability of the self to think and act in the world on behalf of self, others and/or society.

Beginning from this sociological position on the meaning of identity, this paper explores further views on identity, and particularly the lives of women as they grow older. The women whose life stories are referred to in this paper, who I interviewed in 2003, reveal themselves to be individuals with the ability to act and think as well being influenced by society. There may also be an essence to their sense of selves in terms of the body they inhabit or their brain and its capabilities, or perhaps a soul or other integral life-giving particles, situated at a specific moment of history.

As human beings, we are continually attempting to classify things – to find patterns, and to create order in our world. Scientists are probably the best at this, but social scientists are not far behind, in my view, and even those with no knowledge of research methods continually attempt to sort everything into its proper slot. Conducting research has to include the organising of data, and life stories are no different in that respect. The fact that participants are sorted into collections based on a theme contradicts my own views about labelling and categorising others, but this is the best way to present their stories. The stories are not grouped in order to compare one with another but so that each one can be seen as part of the whole; the theme is the shared experience or the participants' thoughts on the subject. The only solution to the problem of categorising participants, however, is that I disclose that I am aware I am doing it, and that I realise it may not always be comfortable for people to be grouped with other individuals with whom they might have little or nothing in common and whose views might seem in conflict with their own. There is a purpose to the project, however, and as long as individuals are agreeable to sharing their lives and their thoughts on growing older for others to think about, I believe that can make it worthwhile.

Language, Styles, and Life Stories

In his work on life as narrative, Jerome Bruner tells about two landscapes that he sees as part of any single narrative – one of *action* and one of *consciousness*. Landscapes can be understood fundamentally, he says, as what people do and the *internal processes* that accompany that or, describing the actors in way of explanation, "they hope, are doubting and confused, wonder about appearance and reality" (Bruner, 1987: 20). Focusing here on the consciousness aspect, what the life stories of women I have interviewed illustrate, among other things, are different forms of subjectivising. People tell about their lives, using what Bruner might call "perspectival narrative language," shifting from an emphasis on actuality, explained by an omniscient narrator, to the evocation of possibility. The style the participants use influences the style of the finished life story, shedding light on the person herself and how she came to be who she is. Their stories illustrate how language is used in the fashioning of identity, including information on what the external influences on the participant might be and how language is used by the participants themselves, whether intentionally or not.

Feminism is a powerful discourse—though in its multiplicity difficult to define—which at the very least has changed the way many women perceive of themselves in relation to men, marriage and motherhood, and work. One woman I interviewed declared that feminism changed her life by providing an explanation for her ambivalence about marriage and motherhood. While this personal/political identification is part of her persona, she has created her own brand of feminism over time through the pursuit of her own interests including writing feminist poetry. So, while the language of feminism contributes to shaping individual and collective responses to experience, it is also a dynamic intermediary that is influenced by actors engaging with it. Jenkins suggests that "individual and collective social identities can be understood using one model, of the dialectical interplay of processes of internal and

external definition" (Jenkins, 1996: 25). It is useful to view the dynamic in this way – an overarching view of a complex, interactive process, which can include a multitude of variations within the general pattern of interaction.

The style of another women included telling anecdotes and stories of her own about situations she had encountered in her life. This is one of the stories she told me:

> In order to get to a really beautiful place you had to go up this little incline, and I started going up there and my legs just wouldn't go – and I just stopped. And she looked behind and realised I wasn't with them any longer, and she said, 'Come on!' And I said 'No. You go up and I'll see you later.' But see, she wouldn't. . . . Another time I went out and the person I was with just accepted that I couldn't walk and just went on. And then came back and met me. . . But not everybody can do that .

The anecdote, told in response to my question about her health, reflected her acceptance of her limitations and would indicate to others, if she repeated it elsewhere, this aspect of her identity. It also suggested something more than that, about how she would have liked other people to be, with her, in that situation, where her mobility problems interfered with her social life. The capacity to use language in such a meaningful way might have been described by J. M. Bernstein as *narrative self-reflection,* in which past events and turning points are rehearsed and re-articulated in order to preserve some sense of their meaningfulness in the person's life.

A model such as this, if applied to stories or anecdotes about peoples' lives, can enable readers to distinguish between them – to see the differences, and to recognise that, far from being random self-reflection, there can be a great deal of logic to the process. Another type of reflection is *structural self-reflection*, which involves self-evaluation, Bernstein explains, measuring character and personality traits against cultural norms or their perceived suitability (Bernstein, 1990: 55).

A third woman I interviewed had emphasised the importance of duty in her life as a wife and mother, along with the goals of achieving self-satisfaction and maintaining independence. It was through this process of self-reflection, thinking about what she believed was expected of her and what she wanted for herself, that she revealed her hopes, doubts, and attempts to make sense of her life. What stood out in her life story, to me, was the way she expressed herself – her internal processes verbalised, as it were. This attribute came through during the interview and in the story, which contains several quotes of hers from the interview. This was someone who had questioned ideas she had learned as a child about the roles of married women, and who now, as she grew older, might well be under the influence of a combination of both traditional and modern expectations of marriage and work, as many of us are, in some way or other.

Alternative Discourses of Identity, Ageing, and Personhood

Erik Erikson's life stages model of psychosocial development, depicting human development from birth to death, reflects the normative standard based on men's lives (Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick, 1986: 36). Erikson suggests that certain goals must be achieved at a particular stage of life, for instance, identity must be formed at adolescence before the person can move on to the next stage. His model, based on men's experience, while explaining that choice of

vocation is part of the person's development, seems to downplay the significance of working life to one's sense of identity, while overtly focusing on inner personal development. It might be that, because people live longer and are capable of working longer, or perhaps because of the economy, the idea of work – the meaning of it and the actual practice – has become more important than ever. Women re-entering the work force after raising a family might undergo changes in their identity – how they perceive themselves, and describe who they are. Although many women now fulfil the male standard of career-achievement, there are many other women – and men, who do not, and whose identities do not rest upon traditional standards of achievement.

What is at issue here is the relationship between work, identity, and social status. Bill Bytheway points out women, the unemployed, people over pensionable age, and older workers as just some of those affected. "Participation in the labour market still remains a major determinant of status and identity in modern societies," he says. "Paid employment grants us activity, mobility, experience and expertise, as well as income" (Bytheway, 1995: 52). Volunteering can be a source of wellbeing and status for women, although women with a feminist consciousness might perceive of it differently, questioning whether it constitutes "slave" or at least unpaid labour, and whether the voluntary sector is a space mainly for women (Donoghue, 2001: 9).

In 1963 Betty Friedan wrote the Feminine Mystique, a book which is now regarded as one the major influences in the women's liberation movement. Later, she wrote about ageing, noticing that the experts wrote about "the problem of age" the same way they had written about women twenty years earlier. In an article on this topic, she explains how she reached this point in her life, and proclaims,

> There's a breath of fresh air when we suddenly stop dealing with the aged as crocks and deal with them as people who might be productive…Freed in age from certain constraints of biology or role that previously imposed on the personality, personhood can emerge as a precious theme in this new period of life, just as personhood has emerged for women in the last twenty years (Friedan, 1987: 124).

Margaret Urban Walker, whose ideas build on the thoughts of Erikson, Bytheway, and Friedan, defines retirement as "the cessation of the adult role of worker," and in our society, she says, "the retired person surrenders not only a job, but eligibility for a centrally valued moral and social identity" (Walker, 1999: 104). The autonomous individual self-defined through the achievement of a career tends to devalue the experience of many women. Women's work in the home, caring for children, and conducting volunteer work do not add up to a career, and at the end of the life course is what Walker refers to as an "unmapped space." Jobs and careers in the "real world" provide credibility and legitimation, both before and after retirement, a status often denied to those who did not follow this path in life. Thus,

> the apparent assimilation of women to the male-identified model of 'career' followed by 'retirement' may then function ideologically, concealing the reality of continuing work by older women that society compensates neither materially nor socially" (Walker, 199: 105).

A possible alternative to viewing life in terms of career, she says, is to look at our lives in different ways; we can remember the meaning of our being part of "a relationship, a family, a

political movement, a partnership, an enterprise, an institution, a creative process, a ritual event," thus sharing vital images of life from our different communities (Walker, 1999: 108).

Unity, Continuity, and Contradictions

Not too long ago, a woman said to me, "I've lived many lives." This person had worked most of her life but in different areas – in colleges and also in community work, and she had raised children from her marriage. Lives—and identities—can seem to be more fragmented when there is no single title that encompasses all that person has accomplished, produced, and participated in during their lifetime. Sometimes, a sense of continuity is missing. There may not be a continuous line of development that follows the accepted norm or what traditionally had been seen as the norm, whether for men or women. Also, although expectations for life may have been based originally on familiar patterns, even if they include performing what used to be considered the opposite gender role, lives as they are lived can sometimes be difficult to integrate into a meaningful whole. I also interviewed a woman who had been a career woman who experienced a major turning point in her life when she married and became a stay-at-home, first-time mother at age 43 – not a record, but on the whole, a dramatic break in continuity.

It is expected in our society that life experience can be integrated and that our lives should make sense, even though different realities can often collide within any one person's life, among individuals, and between groups. Commenting on the quest for personal and historical stability," Bruner suggests instead that "Life is not just one self-sufficient story after another, each narratively on its own bottom" (Bruner, 1996: 143). Nigel Rapport, writing on contradiction, symbolism, and American immigrants in Israel, upholds anthropologist Mary Douglas's view that, rather than accept contradiction and ambiguity, humans possess a "common urge to make a unity of all their experience and so overcome distinctions and separations in acts of at-onement" (Douglas in Rapport, 1996: 656). The life story can be a means of accomplishing just that kind of unity – a telling of a life in a way that renders it coherent. If there are inconsistencies, these can be smoothed over, and meaningfulness preserved.

As with linear thinking, dichotomous patterns of thought, and coherence, continuity is seen as normal, and usually as being more meaningful than discontinuity or separation. In itself, continuity is neither bad nor good. It can be useful, for instance, in making predictions, as in Deborah Smith's (2004) article on volunteering and retirement, which shows continuity among volunteers pre and post retirement. From Erikson's *stages of life* perspective, along with a subjective sense of identity, continuity is seen as a major component of identity, there being "an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image" (Erikson, 1975: 18).

Mary Catherine Bateson, referring to her own life experience, wrote that "continuity is the exception in twentieth-century America, and that adjusting to discontinuity is not an idiosyncratic problem of my own but the emerging problem of our era…In many ways, constancy is an illusion" (Bateson, 1989: 14). Her aim was to make sense of interrupted and discontinuous lives of the "composite life," illustrating the importance of responding to change and learning to adapt (p. 231).

Is Rapport seeing it differently, when he describes his approach to contrarieties in a study in an English rural village in which he attempts to connect with the experience of his research participants without giving in to the apparent necessity for coherency? Rather, he explains, "complexity, inconsistency and contradictoriness were my watchwords, and the way these suggested a picture of society and culture to be a muddling-through; also a picture of an

individual as a muddling-through" (Rapport, 1998: 666). Instead of a straightforward telling of a life, here were moments when interpretations of past and present contradicted one another, and times when conscious lives moved with intensity from moment to moment – and this is what Rapport writes about. Bateson is also aware of the existence of discontinuity in people's lives, but her approach is to try and understand "how women make sense of interrupted and discontinuous lives" (Bateson, 1989: 15). Charlotte Linde emphasises the necessity of coherence, seeing it as "a social obligation that must be fulfilled in order for the participants to appear as competent members of their culture" (Linde, 1993: 16).

Real Lives

The complexity and contradictions of life are often understated in the stories we tell about ourselves, and there is good reason for that, as Rapport suggests:

> . . .if language, its verbal categories and names, can be seen to be an attempt symbolically to define, make singular, limited and congruous what *at the same time* we know to be multiple, unlimited and incoherent, then contradictoriness is at the very heart of our humanity, of what makes us human (Rapport, 1998: 670).

Is this how we really want to perceive of ourselves – as contradictory, lacking meaningful continuity in life (through work or relationships, for instance), or inconsistent and incoherent?

Robert Atkinson explains our story-making capacity, saying, "Our modern experience reflects the thousands of years of experience our ancestors had before us, struggling and adapting to the circumstances of their existence" (Atkinson, 1995: 39). His interpretation of the significance and purpose of the *life story* includes some key features, as he says,

> Whatever form it takes, a life story always brings order and meaning to the life being told, for both the teller and the listener. It is a way to greater self-understanding, a way to leave a personal legacy for the future (p. xv).

I am quite sure that both of these assertions, by Rapport and Atkinson, are not in contradiction with one another but rather, are similar in their ways of perceiving how life is for human beings, even though the ways of presenting such lives can be diverse.

In projects or studies involving life stories, contradictions or discontinuities in a participant's life would not always be included in the life story. My intention has been to write life stories that are coherent and readable and not to focus unnecessarily on inner tensions nor on interpersonal or social conflict, unless that is how the person would prefer it and it is essential to the story, and not intended to do harm to others. My aim, for the most part, is to write life stories that reflect the manner in which the participants tell about them. If a participant discloses something more of the complexities and discontinuities of life, for the purpose of including it in the life story, then working through this will also be part of the interview process. Unless a participant chooses otherwise, the life stories I write will probably lean more towards coherence than inconsistency and contradictoriness. I would like the story to be meaningful to the participant and reasonably accurate in its depiction of their life although, as suggested by researchers and in examples from the participants' life stories provided in this paper, there is more than one way to tell about a life. It may be that some of the women's life stories will transcend barriers of continuity while contributing to the development of alternative discourses of ageing and identity.

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