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The Importance of Untold and Unheard Stories in Narrative Gerontology

Reflections on a Field Still in the Making from a Narrative Gerontologist in the Making

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Résumé de l'article

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NARRATIVE WORKS
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

The Importance of Untold and Unheard Stories in Narrative Gerontology: Reflections on a Field Still in the Making from a Narrative Gerontologist in the Making[1]

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In this essay, I consider the limitations and possibilities of narrative gerontology. I reflect upon narrative gerontology's fundamental dependence on people's narrative willingness. I discuss both the reasons that stories remain untold and the reasons they remain unheard. Furthermore, I suggest that narrative gerontology would benefit from a stronger focus on the act and context of storytelling rather than merely on what is being told. I suggest that narrative gerontology should pay more attention to the diverse sites of engagement, more or less formalized settings, and spontaneous everyday interactions in which older adults tell stories.

Narrative gerontology has been a recognized discipline for at least two decades (de Medeiros, 2014; Kenyon, Clark, & deVries, 2001). Narrative gerontologists have conceptualized *life as storied* (see Kenyon & Randall, 1999) and human beings as *makers of meaning* (Randall, 2013). The assumption that "life is a biographical as much as a biological phenomenon" is fundamental to narrative gerontology (Randall, 1999). Consequently, one assumes that we can learn about the personal experiences of aging and the social nature of aging from the stories people tell. It has been noted that narrative gerontologists share a passion for life stories and for the life-as-story metaphor (Kenyon, Randall, & Bohlmeijer, 2011). In the research field of narrative gerontology, older adults are invited to tell stories of or from their lives, usually within the

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context of research interviews. This implies that the empirical approaches in narrative gerontology are fundamentally dependent on the *narrative willingness* (Blix, Hamran, & Normann, 2015) of those whom we want to learn more about. Perhaps there is a natural narrative willingness. Perhaps human beings are inherently storytellers (Andrews, 2000) and are a storytelling species (Atkinson, 2007). However, Baldwin (2006) has noted that narrative agency is a matter of *both* being able to express oneself in a form that is recognizable as narrative *and* having the opportunity to express oneself narratively.

I occasionally think about myself as an academic parasite, subsisting on other people's stories. So far, what I have accomplished as a narrative gerontologist has been completely dependent on other people's willingness to tell their stories. At times, this fills me not only with a debt of gratitude, but also with a narcissistic shame, insightfully described by Josselson (2011) as "shame that I am using these people's lives to exhibit myself, my analytical prowess, my cleverness. I am using them to advance my own career, as extensions of my own narcissism, and I fear to be caught, seen in this process" (p. 45). However, my greatest concern is not my debt of gratitude to those who have generously shared their stories with me. Over the years, I have become increasingly concerned with those who for some reason do *not* tell their stories, because they do not want to, because they are never invited to tell them, or because they are never listened to; in other words, those who find themselves as narrators "dispossessed" (Baldwin, 2008). What if Hannah Arendt (1969) was right about the world being full of stories just waiting to be told? Further, what if these stories are waiting and waiting but are still never told? Or maybe worse: what if these stories are told but never paid attention to? And what if these are the stories from which we could potentially learn the most?

With reference to my own and others' research, I will dwell on some of the restlessness and discomfort I have felt lately regarding my own field of research: narrative gerontology. For some time, I have been wrestling with such questions as: Does narrative gerontology favour certain types of stories, people, data, and analyses? Could narrative gerontology's conceptualizations of narrative and narrativity contribute to the narrative dispossession of people (see Baldwin, 2006)? And if it does, what are the consequences?

My Dawning Interest in the Untold

My interest in stories that are left untold was triggered several years ago, while I was a PhD student planning to do life story research with older Sami adults in Norway. The Sami are indigenous people who live in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. These national states have made substantial efforts to assimilate the Sami into the majority populations, through residential schools and strict regulations regarding the use of the Sami language. The assimilation process was paralleled by individual experiences of stigmatization and discrimination (see Minde, 2003).

I had distributed information letters about my PhD study and was waiting impatiently for people to return their written consent letters. I was thrilled every time I found an envelope in my mailbox, and I eagerly phoned the senders to make appointments for interviews. Even greater was my disappointment when some of the people I contacted chose not to participate after talking to me on the phone. Given that they had sent their written consent, I was surprised by such responses, but I politely thanked them for their interest and hung up the phone. However, after experiencing this several times, my level of frustration rose. I started to wonder if there was something wrong with the way I presented the study, or worse, that something about the study was fundamentally flawed. I discussed the matter with my supervisors and they encouraged me to inquire into the matter if it happened again. They suggested that I should ask, in a gentle manner, why the person did not wish to participate in the study after hearing more about it. And so I did, on three occasions. On all three occasions, the people who had second thoughts about participating were women. One of them responded that she was so inspired by our talk that she had actually decided to write her own story and consequently did not want to "give it away for free" to me. Of course, I could not argue with her about that, so I just wished her the best of luck with her writing. I sincerely hope that she eventually wrote her story. However, the two other women stated quite different reasons for changing their minds. They both expressed concerns that their stories would not be interesting because they "had not accomplished much in life," as they had spent most of their lives "in this little village," "at home," raising their eleven children. They encouraged me, rather, to interview persons with "more exciting" stories to tell. When I assured them that stories about life "in this little village," "at home," with children were the type of stories I was interested in, they reconsidered and chose to participate after all. These

experiences made me realize the importance of believing that your stories will be of interest to someone. If you do not believe that they are, you simply do not tell them.

Stories Left Untold

In the book *The Stories We Are: An Essay on Self-Creation*, narrative gerontologist William Randall (2014) notes that "of the countless stories we could tell of ourselves, there are comparatively few we do" (p. 281). He discusses several reasons stories are left untold and suggests that the reasons fall into two broad categories: things we fear and things we lack. In the following, I will reflect on the reasons Randall suggests for keeping one's stories to oneself.

The Fear of Losing One's Personal Power

One reason to keep one's story to oneself is the fear of losing one's personal power. Once we tell our story, we lose our power over it in some sense. Randall (2014) writes, "Any segment or summary of our story, once expressed, becomes subject immediately to the 'storyotyping' of others, to being ground up and spat out by the rumour mill, to being distorted, misinterpreted, read the wrong way" (p. 286). For potential research participants, this fear is not completely groundless.

In the article "'Bet You Think This Song Is About You': Whose Narrative Is It in Narrative Research?" Josselson (2011) tells her story about Teresa. Josselson and four other qualitative researchers were asked to read an interview from different analytical points of view; in Josselson's case, it was a narrative point of view.[2] The question posed to the participant was to *narrate a situation when something very unfortunate happened to you*. Teresa, a student of psychology, told about how she, at the age of 19, had been studying to become an opera singer when she developed thyroid cancer. The surgery saved her life but destroyed her capacity to sing, and she went on to choose another path, eventually becoming a graduate student in psychology (p. 34). The five qualitative researchers read and interpreted Teresa's narrative from their respective analytical perspectives. Then, one of them had the idea to ask the real Teresa to read and comment on the analyses and become a co-author of the book. Teresa was more than willing to read what they had

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[2] The project eventually became the book *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis* (Wertz et al., 2011).

written and eventually wrote a chapter herself, and she was quite articulate about her responses—how she felt that one or the other got her wrong and misunderstood or distorted her meanings. She even insisted on publishing her chapter under her real name, which of course was not Teresa. Josselson discusses a number of ethical and methodological issues related to this project. The reason that I mention the project, however, is that most research participants never have the opportunity to read and comment on our research, much less write about their responses. However, imagine that they did have those opportunities. I would not be surprised if several of the participants in my research would feel like Teresa: misinterpreted and misunderstood. That is because, as Josselson states, "What we are analyzing are texts, not lives" (p. 37). As researchers, we "'coproduce' the worlds of our research. We don't simply 'find' these worlds" (p. 38). "We are not speaking *for* our participants. Rather, we are speaking *about* the texts we have obtained from them" (p. 39). Narrative research could and should not be about repeating participants' stories. Rather, Josselson writes, "If we have done our work well, we are likely, in some ways, to offer a dissonant counterpart to [the participants'] self-understanding" (p. 39). Nonetheless, I acknowledge that the fear of being "storyotyped," being "ground up and spat out" in another version by a narrative gerontologist in a research paper is a legitimate reason for keeping one's story to oneself.

The Fear of Reprisal

Another reason for leaving stories untold, according to Randall (2014), is the fear of reprisal. The risk of punishment could be a good reason to keep one's story to oneself. I realize that there are good reasons for the participants in my current research (regarding the cooperation between formal and informal caregivers for people with dementia) to keep several of their stories to themselves. I would not be surprised if the family members of a person with dementia were reluctant to tell stories that could be perceived as criticism of the formal caregivers whom they are completely at the mercy of. Furthermore, in my previous research on indigenous (Sami) older adults in northern Norway (Blix, 2013), I met people who were afraid that family members would be offended if they talked about their Sami background, which had been carefully concealed or even denied for generations. Closely related to this fear is the fear that your stories will be used against you or somebody close to you.

I recently had an experience that made me realize that in that sense, I am no exception. My father was from a coastal Sami family that lived in an area that was strongly affected by the Norwegian government's assimilation policies, the Norwegianization of the Sami (see Blix, 2015). At a young age, my father and his eleven siblings learned to conceal their Sami identities, and they were all quite "successful" at being Norwegian. Most likely driven by the best of intentions, my Sami-speaking grandparents never provided their children with the opportunity to learn the language. My father did not reveal the secret about his Sami heritage to me until I was late in my teenage years; however, he is now a proud Sami. One New Year's Day, I was listening to the President of the Sami Parliament's New Year's speech on national television, and suddenly I realized that the president was telling my father's story in her speech. I was, of course, both surprised and moved. The president's speech had also caught the attention of others, and one of the following days, the National Broadcast Company (NRK) wanted to interview my father in his home. My very first thought was: My aunts (my father's two surviving sisters) will be *furious* when my father reveals their Sami heritage on national television! I assumed that they would have preferred their Sami stories to remain untold. However, I was wrong. My aunts participated in the interview, and the first time I heard my aunts tell their untold Sami life stories was actually on national television. I had assumed that they preferred to leave these stories untold, and consequently, I had never invited them to tell.

The Fear of Hurting Others

Another reason to keep one's stories to oneself is the fear of hurting others (Randall, 2014). Randall writes, "We may defend our silence in such matters not as dishonesty but as discretion, not as cunning (or cowardice) but as compassion" (p. 288). A dear friend and colleague of mine is conducting narrative research with close relatives of people with advanced dementia (Kuosa, Elstad, & Normann, 2015). Repeatedly, in interview situations, she experienced that the relatives could go on and on with hero stories about the people with dementia, and then, sometimes as she was about to turn off the recorder, they started to tell the difficult, embarrassing, and painful stories; the stories about their husbands'/wives'/fathers'/mothers' changing personalities, incontinence, lack of personal hygiene, etc. Of course, discretion and compassion are

only two of many possible reasons for hesitating to tell such intimate stories about others to a complete stranger, such as a researcher.

Lack of Listening

Randall (2014) notes that a lack of listening is a reason for stories remaining untold. He writes (quoting Keen & Fox, 1974, p. 9): “We need to ‘find an audience for the untold tales … permission to tell the stories that are our own birthright.’ Otherwise, our situation is like that of the tree falling in the forest” (p. 288). This is my consolation when I am overwhelmed with narcissistic shame regarding my research. Over the years, several of the participants in my research have expressed appreciation for being interviewed. For some of them, having the opportunity to “talk about themselves” to someone who is actually interested in listening is a rare but appreciated experience.

Narrative environments (Randall & McKim, 2008) are the contexts in which we tell, or do not tell, our stories. Our stories are kept safe by the people we trust (Randall, 2014), that is, the people who can confirm our stories. These are the people with whom we share many of the events the stories are about. A consequence of living a long life is growing old, and if the people close to you do not grow quite as old as you, there will eventually be nobody around with whom you shared those memorable moments. Baldwin and Estey (2015) refer to this as an impoverishment of the narrative environment.

Randall (2014) notes that it is not just people who keep our stories safe; so do our surroundings, routines, and possessions. Growing old often involves being moved to new surroundings with new routines. Randall writes: “Thus, when we must institutionalize them [the elders]—confining them to little rooms with strangers for companions and a box of knick-knacks and photographs to remind them who they are—we must acknowledge what it is we are doing. We are stripping them of their story” (pp. 290–291). Baldwin and Estey (2015) conceptualize changes that can be associated with aging, such as the substitution of formal, institutional relationships for personal ones when older adults are admitted to long-term residential care, as *narrative loss*. I have experienced the substantial impact of narrative environments while conducting interviews in people’s homes. Photographs and objects in the homes were often incorporated in the stories, and the interviewees often situated their stories and reflections by pointing out the window at houses of neighbors or at the mountains, the sea, and the river. In the rural areas

where I conduct my research, and I suppose in many other areas, nursing homes and assisted living facilities are often centralized. That implies that when elders can no longer live at home, they not only leave their houses and possessions but also their communities, neighbors, and the natural scenery with which many of their stories are entwined. For the participants in my research, moving to a nursing home or assisted living facility also implies moving from a Sami to a Norwegian community, where few of those surrounding them share their language and cultural backgrounds. This can mean having fewer people who can keep their stories safe and an impoverishment of their narrative environments.

Lack of Experiences

Another reason stories remain untold is a lack of experiences (Randall, 2014). A lack of experiences does not necessarily mean a lack of events. Some people live lives filled with so many events that they lack the time and capacity to digest them into experiences. For many older adults, however, particularly those living in nursing homes, that is not the problem. Many nursing homes and assisted living facilities are strongly characterized by routines and a monotonous everyday life, leaving their residents without much to tell about, either to relatives, nursing staff, or researchers. Freeman (2011) has conceptualized the "inability to see one's experience as having any significance beyond itself" as one form of *narrative foreclosure*, a breakdown of the narrative function. I suspect this is one reason some of the women I mentioned above hesitated to participate in my study: they simply did not think about their lives, at home with eleven children, as experiences, at least not as experiences worth storying. I can only hope that their decision to participate in the study after all, and the opportunity to tell their stories to someone interested in listening, made them realize the significance of their experiences and stories.

Lack of Vocabulary and Voice

People may leave their stories untold because they lack vocabulary (Randall, 2014). However, I do not completely agree with Randall, who writes: "We cannot tell what we cannot story, and we cannot story what we lack the words to story" (p. 293). Verbal communication is only one form of communication. According to Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson (1967), one cannot *not* communicate.

They write, "Once we accept all behavior as communication, we will not be dealing with a monophonic message unit, but rather with a fluid and multifaceted compound of many behavioral modes—verbal, tonal, postural, contextual, etc.—all of which qualify the meaning of all the others" (p. 50). Georgakopoulou (2006) has noted that "allusions to telling, deferrals of telling and refusals to tell" (p. 123) should also be considered narrative activities. From this perspective, the above-mentioned women's reluctance to participate in an interview study could be perceived as a narrative activity. Furthermore, Baldwin (2006) has argued that narrative agency can be reconfigured to include those who cannot tell verbal, coherent stories by narrativizing other symbolic means of expression. Movement and dance and aesthetic representations, such as images and paintings, do indeed tell stories. Photographs, performance art, and other media could be representations of experience. However, to my knowledge, there has been very little research in narrative gerontology based on visual representations.

Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that the richer a person's vocabulary, the more she or he can render tellable. In my previous research on older Sami adults' life stories (Blix, 2013), I did have concerns regarding my lack of competency in the Sami languages. Sami was the mother tongue of several of the participants in the study, although all of them had acquired the Norwegian language later in life. Although I did offer to use an interpreter, all of the participants chose to conduct the interviews in Norwegian. I am convinced that my not being able to conduct the interviews in the participants' first language influenced *how* the interviewees told their stories, because one's first language typically provides richer details and nuances than languages acquired later in life. I am also convinced that it influenced *what* the interviewees told. Being a Norwegian-speaking interviewer, I might have been perceived as a representative of the majority society, which might have created some distance between the interviewees and me. This said, listeners always shape what tellers tell (Randall, Prior, & Skarborn, 2006).

On the other hand, people can have good access to vocabulary but still lack a voice. We know that the stories of minorities and diverse marginalized groups may be silenced by oppressive policies. Oppression mutes voices on several levels and by different degrees: "Silence is not always the absence of voice, but rather a muting of voice" (Etter-Lewis, 1991, p. 434). The women who were reluctant to participate in my PhD study were members of several marginalized groups. As elderly Sami women, they may have had experiences that led them to believe that their

lives and stories were less significant and less interesting than the stories of their younger male Norwegian counterparts. However, I am also concerned that we may deprive people of voice precisely by characterizing them as "vulnerable groups." As much as I acknowledge the efforts of research ethics committees to protect so-called vulnerable groups from researchers, I strongly believe that we may contribute to further marginalization if we do not include those groups in our research. We need to listen to the stories of people with dementia and mental health service users. If we do not, we deprive them of their voices.

Lack of Plot Lines

Another reason that stories remain untold, according to Randall (2014), is the lack of plot lines. Culture makes available an immense body of stories, framing and shaping individual stories. If your story is difficult to fit into an available plot line, it is difficult to tell. For example, Marks (2011) has demonstrated how societal stories about Germany's Nazi past have contributed to the silencing of German older adults' individual stories. Several of the participants in my study of older Sami adults' life stories had difficulty fitting their stories into the plot lines available for Sami life stories (Blix, Hamran, & Normann, 2013). As they told their stories in the context of research interviews, they struggled with contrasting plot lines. With reference to Derrida's "Law of Genre," Smith (1993) has noted that "the white, male, bourgeois, heterosexual human being [has become] representative man, the universal human subject. 'His' life story becomes recognizable, legitimate, and culturally real" (p. 393). Consequently, the stories of those whose lives and stories differ from "the universal human subject," which might have been the case for the women who were reluctant to participate in my PhD study, could remain untold.

Baldwin and Estey (2015) have noted that dominant master narratives about aging and older adults can contribute to narrative loss. Master narratives, which portray aging as undesirable and older adults as burdens to society, limit the stories that older people can tell about themselves and others. Furthermore, as researchers, we offer the participants in our research a set of available plotlines by asking a particular type of questions. De Medeiros (2014) has noted that ageism "can predispose people who are doing narrative work with older adults to allow only certain types of stories to be told" (p. 93). She voices concerns that narrative researchers "allow" older adults to tell stories only about

the past and that stories about imagined futures are seldom part of the discussions. Consequently, our research could contribute to the form of narrative foreclosure conceptualized by Freeman (2011) as dead ends, "the failure to recognize the indeterminacy of the future" (Baldwin & Estey, 2015, p. 210). In retrospect, I realize that my own previous research is no exception. During my interviews with the older Sami adults, I asked few questions that invited the participants to tell stories about imagined futures. Rather, I was preoccupied with eliciting and listening to stories about their pasts.

The plot lines made available by our culture also shape listeners' comprehension of what *counts* as a story or what counts as a *significant* story. Frank (2010) writes: "Stories not readily locatable in the listener's inner library will be off the radar of comprehension, disregarded as noise" (p. 55). In such cases, the problem is not that stories remain untold. They are simply not noticed, heard, paid attention to, or considered significant.

Stories Left Unheard

In an article reflecting on the research he conducted for his PhD thesis, Synnes (2015) writes about narratives of nostalgia. Among all the stories of older adults and palliative care patients that he analyzed, there were quite a few nostalgic stories. In the article, Synnes admits that he "tended to overlook these lighter stories of the past" (p. 169) and that he "downplayed the significance of the lighter stories" (p. 172). He even writes: "When presenting these short stories of nostalgia in a scientific article, they almost feel too simple. They are stories of apparently insignificant moments that *offer no insight* into the narrator's development; they are not events that changed his or her life" (p. 174; emphasis added). Throughout the article, he demonstrates that these "lighter stories" are significant in the narrators' ongoing identity constructions. However, he almost missed out on them because they initially did not fit his criteria for significant stories; they were not about events that changed the narrators' lives.

Listeners not only have ideas about what significant stories should be *about* (e.g., "events that changed his or her life"), we also have ideas about how stories should be *composed*. The editors of *Beyond Narrative Coherence* (Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010), in their introduction to the volume, problematize "the coherence paradigm": the idea that coherence is a norm for good and healthy life stories. They suggest that the coherence paradigm is rooted in an understanding of

narrative identity that from the very beginning was thematized from a perspective of unity and coherence rather than one of complexities, contradictions, and undecided elements (p. 4). Furthermore, they suggest that the coherence paradigm may give rise to four kinds of problems (pp. 10–11). First, scholars may privilege coherent stories and consequently neglect more challenging stories. Second, the coherence paradigm may lead scholars to try to find the "deepest" coherent meaning in narratives. Third, the emphasis on coherence may reduce narratives to representations of past life, experiences, or thoughts. And fourth, the ideal of coherence may further marginalize individuals who have difficulty telling coherent stories because of political or other trauma. All four concerns are relevant to narrative gerontology, a field of research that should include people who for some reason have difficulty telling coherent stories, such as people with dementia and people with aphasia. By consciously or unconsciously excluding these people's stories from our field of inquiry, we may miss out on important insights and contribute further to their narrative losses (see Baldwin & Estey, 2015).

The Conceptualization of Identity and Meaning in Narrative Gerontology

A core assumption in narrative gerontology is that identity development and meaning-making do not cease at any age, but continue throughout life (Bohlmeijer, Westerhof, Randall, Tromp, & Kenyon, 2011; Kenyon et al., 2001). In my opinion, this necessitates a perspective on meaning not as something that is *inherent* in stories, as the coherence paradigm and Synnes' (2015) statement that nostalgic stories offer "no insight into the narrator's development" suggest. Rather, we need perspectives on meaning as something created in the interaction between a teller and her or his audience. Furthermore, identities are not reflected by people's stories; rather, they are created and negotiated through the act of narrating in specific contexts. As noted by Phoenix, Smith, and Sparkes (2010), "Narratives are not understood as a transparent window into people's lives as they age, but rather as an on-going and constitutive part of reality" (p. 2). People can project multiple and even incompatible identities, depending on context (Norrick, 2009). This necessitates analytical perspectives that allow a focus on the act of narration in the here-and-now, for particular purposes, within the frames of broader discourses.

I would like to mention one article that demonstrates this point quite clearly. In “Confabulation: Sense-making, Self-making and World-making in Dementia,” Örulv and Hydén (2006) demonstrate the productive aspects of confabulation as it occurs spontaneously in dementia care. Martha and Catherine, both diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, have just had their afternoon coffee in the living room of a dementia care unit. The living room is a common space in the dementia unit, but Martha has another understanding of the situation. She claims that although the TV and the radio in the living room belong to her, she and Catherine are in fact visiting a lady called Violet. Throughout the conversation between her and Catherine, Martha struggles to make sense of the fact that they are sitting in Violet’s living room surrounded by Martha’s possessions. Martha is obviously confabulating. Throughout the article, the authors contextualize Martha’s story and thereby demonstrate that her “confabulation” is an active and creative meaning-making or sense-making process. Furthermore, they demonstrate that Martha’s confabulation is an active self-making process. It gives her an opportunity to establish and maintain a preferred identity during her interaction with Catherine. Additionally, the confabulation is not merely a way of representing the world as it appears to Martha; it is also an active world-making process in the way it organizes joint actions and legitimizes the speaker’s conduct. The authors not only demonstrate the significance of seemingly meaningless or incoherent stories; they also demonstrate the importance of contextualizing stories, both in the here-and-now and in broader contexts.

The Need for a Shift from the “Whats” to the “Hows” of Storytelling in Narrative Gerontology

Analyses in narrative gerontological research tend to focus more on what people’s stories are about than on how and under which circumstances people are telling their stories (de Medeiros & Rubinstein, 2015; Phoenix et al., 2010). This tendency keeps narrative gerontology trapped in its fundamental dependency on the narrative willingness of those about whom we want to learn more. Furthermore, it marginalizes those who for some reason have difficulty telling meaningful or coherent stories. The example of Martha and Catherine demonstrates the insufficiency of merely searching for meaning *in* people’s stories. Rather, meaning is created *between* interlocutors, in specific contexts, through the act of storytelling.

De Medeiros (2014) has noted that traditional autobiographical interviews may privilege certain groups and stories and disadvantage other groups. Furthermore, Baldwin (2006) has noted that an insistence on consistency, coherency, and emplotment in people's narratives may serve to dispossess people, for example people living with dementia, from their potential narratives.

Several scholars, such as Bamberg (2006), Baldwin (2006), and Georgakopoulou (2006), have argued in favour of devoting greater attention to "small" stories in narrative research. According to Bamberg, the point of departure for many "traditional narrative researchers" is what the narratives are about. In contrast, narrative analyses of "small" stories focus on "narrating as an activity that takes place between people… [and] the present of 'the telling moment'" (p. 140). Freeman (2007), however, justified the interest in "big" stories in narrative inquiry. According to him, "big" stories "entail a significant measure of reflection on either an event or experience, a significant portion of a life, or the whole of it" (p. 156). Specifically, he noted that the reflection inherent in "big" stories "entails a *going-beyond* the specific discursive contexts in which 'real life' talk occurs" because it is "a *meaning-making*, an act of *poiesis*, in which one attempts to *make sense* of some significant dimension of one's life" (p. 157). Freeman dismissed the claim that "big" stories represent "life on holiday," a distance from everyday reality, by contending that reflection is indeed an aspect of life itself. He argued for the importance of focusing on both "small" and "big" stories in narrative inquiry. Neither type of story has privileged access to "the truth"; rather, they represent different aspects of life.

Other scholars, such as Coupland (2009) and Norrick (2009), have argued that studies of the discursive constitution of aging necessitate an interest "*both* in the detail of local acts of meaning making *and* in how symbolic exchange through words and actions cumulatively contributes to social positions, norms and understandings about age" (Coupland, 2009, p. 850). Nikander (2009) demonstrated how perspectives from discursive psychology can contribute to gerontology by giving central stage to the rigorous analysis of people's situated discursive actions. "Instead of assuming *a priori* that age categories are salient, the researcher's task is to look for the ways in which the participants use identity as a discursive resource, and for how various contradictory versions and meanings of age are constructed in talk and text" (p. 867).

As de Medeiros and Rubinstein (2015) suggest, stories contain silences, gaps, and omissions—the untold stories, which they call

"shadow stories." They claim that shadow stories can be brought "to the surface" (p. 162) through careful listening and subsequent probing during research interviews. Their point of departure is the acknowledgement that interviewers always shape what tellers tell. Details that are introduced by the teller but not recognized or affirmed by the interviewer may be dropped from the teller's unfolding story. In the article, they present an illustrative case study based on three interviews with Constance, a woman in her 70s enrolled in a qualitative study about generativity in the lives of women over age 65 years who did not have children. The authors demonstrate how they could have missed out on important insights if they had stopped after Constance's initial story; however, by following up on the gaps, omissions, and contradictions in the first interview, the interviewer managed throughout the two subsequent interviews to obtain more complex and multi-layered stories about Constance's choice not to have children. The authors conclude that by being satisfied with a surface plot, interviewers miss the opportunity to uncover shadow stories and other omissions (p. 168).

There might be good reasons to encourage interviewees to dig deeper into their stories or to help them tell more complex and multi-layered stories about their lives, as de Medeiros and Rubinstein suggest. However, I do have some concerns. While I agree that narrative gerontology would benefit from a stronger focus on the "hows" of storytelling, I do not agree if the main reason for paying attention to the "hows" is to get people to tell stories that we, as researchers, find somehow "thicker" or "stronger." It might not have been de Medeiros' and Rubinstein's intention to suggest that there is *a story* "under the surface" that could be brought "to the surface" with the right tools. However, statements in the article could give the reader this impression—for example, "The risk in an interview is that what is left may be the story that the interviewer wants to hear, which in turn may be only a small part of *the larger story* that the teller could potentially have *revealed"* (p. 163, emphasis added). The use of the singular ("the larger story") and the verb *revealed*, which could indicate that the story exists prior to and independent of the narrative context, may contribute to this conception. In my opinion, narrative research never could or should be about finding the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Rather, I believe that the story a person tells about her or his life is a matter of choice, which implies that life stories are not fixed. Life stories are situational constructions that are told for an audience and for a purpose. The teller makes past events, "real" or "imagined," relevant in the here-and-now act

of telling and thereby in her or his situated constructions of meaning and identity (see Bamberg, 2011).

During the course of my PhD study, I became aware that several of the older Sami adults' stories were about missed opportunities or roads not taken. I did not do anything in particular with these stories back then, but awhile ago I started to examine these stories with renewed curiosity. I was intrigued by the fact that several interviewees chose to tell stories about missed opportunities, things that did *not* happen, when invited to tell "the stories of their lives." As Randall (2014) notes, "Of the countless stories we could tell of ourselves, there are comparatively few we do" (p. 281). This implies that "the stuff selected as worthy to insert into a life story" (Bamberg, 2011, p. 3) is chosen for a purpose, for an audience, in specific contexts. Consequently, narrative gerontology needs methods and analytical perspectives that offer the possibility of studying meaning, not as something that is inherent *in* stories, and identities, not as something people *have*, but things that are continuously constructed through the act of narration. We need to move beyond the idea that stories "offer insight" (see Synnes, 2015) and instead consider insight as something created through the act of telling and listening. We need perspectives that allow a focus on both the referential world (what the stories are about) and how this referential world is constructed in the interactive setting.

While working with the stories about roads not taken—specifically, two women's stories about missed opportunities for education—a three-level narrative positioning analysis, as suggested by Bamberg (2004), turned out to be a fruitful approach (Blix, Hamran, & Normann, 2015). On the first level, the analysis focused on what the stories were about: how the story's characters were positioned in story time and story place. On the next level, the analysis focused on the interactive work accomplished between the participants in the interactive setting (that is, between the interviewees and me). On the third level, the analysis focused on the narrators' positioning of themselves with regard to broader discourses: social and cultural processes beyond the immediate telling situation. Questions about agency, who were the protagonists and who were the antagonists, who were the heroes and who were the villains in the two women's stories were modified and nuanced as the analysis proceeded at the three different levels. For example, one of the women, Inga, told the story of how she, as a young child, was almost adopted by a teacher from the South who wanted to bring her to the South and give her the opportunity to go to school there. Inga's mother, however, refused to let her go. At level one (positioning of the story's characters), the teacher

appeared as a hero and the mother as a villain, while Inga herself appeared as both adventurous and as a passive object to others' decisions. At level two (positioning in the interactive setting), Inga positions herself as a person who could have had an opportunity for education. At level three (positioning with reference to broader discursive contexts), the positioning of Inga's mother and the teacher appear to be different than on level one. Within a post-colonial frame of reference, the story about the teacher from the South offering to provide Inga with an education was also a story about the attempt of an authority figure from the majority society to "save" a Sami child from her own culture. Within this context, Inga's story is positioned among numerous stories of authorities removing indigenous children from their families and communities to make them into "proper" citizens. Given the historical and social circumstances and the power relationships between a Sami woman and a teacher from the South, the mother's refusal to let Inga go to the South could be perceived as an act of resistance. From this perspective, Inga's mother appears as a hero. The three-level analysis demonstrates that stories about missed opportunities are not necessarily about regret or about lost possible selves. Rather, I consider narrations about missed opportunities significant because of the functions they serve in people's situated identity claims.

Introducing to narrative gerontology perspectives that focus on identities as "claims"—that is, as "'acts' through which people create new definitions of who they are" (De Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg, 2006, p. 3)—necessitates reflexive accounts of the narrative gerontologists' effects on narrative environments, such as interview situations. Phoenix (2013) has noted that "narrators actively set up their entitlement to talk by warranting themselves through particular types of experience and positioning themselves in specific ways, which include anticipation of what they assume the interviewer wants to hear or will approve" (p. 82) In my study (Blix, Hamran, & Normann, 2015), the women's emphasis on missed opportunities for education and their active referencing of language difficulties and cultural norms could not be observed in isolation from the immediate audience of the stories: me, a unilingual, Norwegian-speaking, female Sami researcher from the university. If I had restricted the analysis of the women's stories to what the stories were about (positioning level 1), I would have missed the opportunity to give a reflexive account of my own impact on the women's narrations (positioning level 2) and how both the women and I were positioned with reference to broader discursive contexts (positioning level 3). Ray (1999)

has encouraged scholars in feminist gerontology to intervene critically in their own lives as well as the lives of others and to use personal experience as "a standpoint on which to base analysis, formulate theory, and motivate action" (p. 174), thereby challenging "the scientific paradigm by being personally 'involved' and critical (as opposed to distanced and objective)" (p. 173). Rather than conceptualizing the fact that we, as narrative gerontologists, shape what people tell as a methodological problem to overcome, we should consider it an opportunity to create new insights. To do so, we must offer reflexive accounts of how we and the participants in our research affect one another and the stories being told.

Randall (2010) notes, quoting Casey, "We are what we remember ourselves to be" (p. 151). I have taken the liberty of rephrasing this as "We are what we narrate ourselves to be" (Blix, Hamran, & Normann, 2015). This perspective is at odds with Synnes (2015), who relates older adults' nostalgic stories to the term "*smaller* narrative identity" (p. 171; emphasis added), with reference to de Lange's (2011) "narrative identity, version light." By focusing on the act and context of telling rather than merely on what is told, all stories, big or small, nostalgic or not, are considered relevant in people's ongoing constructions of meaning and identity claims. Consequently, no identity is considered "smaller" or "lighter" than others.

At the outset of this essay, I shared my concerns that narrative gerontology might favour certain types of stories, people, data, and analyses. I agree with Baldwin (2006) who has noted that our conceptualizations of narrative and narrativity could contribute to the narrative dispossession of people whom we want to learn more about. Our fundamental dependence on people's narrative agency and willingness is inevitable. There are, however, other aspects of our field of inquiry that are open for negotiation, such as: What types of research questions do we typically ask? Who do we include in our research? How do we construct and analyze our data? I believe that narrative gerontology could benefit from moving beyond traditional studies of older adults' life stories or biographical narratives related within the context of qualitative interviews. There is a tendency in narrative gerontology to ask questions that allow older adults to tell stories only about the past. Although older adults are likely to have fewer years ahead than behind, there is no reason not to include research questions that could elicit stories about imagined futures. Stories about imagined futures could, like stories about possible

pasts, serve important functions in older adults' situated identity claims. Furthermore, data construction could take place in less formalized settings than traditional life story interviews. Narrative gerontology should pay more attention to the diverse sites of engagement, more or less formalized settings, and spontaneous everyday talk in which older adults tell stories. In that respect, the study by Örulv and Hydén (2006) of the conversation between Martha and Catherine in the dementia care unit's living room provides an inspiring example. That study also illustrates that we can gain important insights from studying seemingly incoherent narratives. By directing our attention towards diverse sites of engagement, we may be able to include those who for some reason are reluctant to participate in traditional life story interviews in our research. Finally, narrative gerontology needs to focus not just on what older adults' stories are about but also on how, to whom, and under which circumstances they tell their stories. If narrative gerontology moves in such a direction, I believe I will grow quite old in this intriguing field of inquiry.

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