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The Narrated Self: Life Stories in Process

JAMES L. PEACOCK AND DOROTHY C. HOLLAND

Since Paul Radin's pioneering work early in this century, life histories have become standbys in American ethnography. Ethnographers collect them, *Crashing Thunder* (Radin 1983) and other informant biographies are classics in the discipline, and students are still exhorted to collect life histories as part of fieldwork. Yet, despite their great promise, life-history studies have been of controversial value from the start. Boas, Radin's teacher, distrusted life history as a research technique because he felt informants were wont to lie and to exaggerate and researchers could scarcely help but bias the informant's story (Fogelson 1979). Radin meanwhile saw a strength not revealed by Boas's scientific perspective. For him, history and culture were grounded in the lives of specific individuals. Life histories revealed history and culture as lived (Diamond 1981). Today, decades later, life-history studies are still subject to perspectives as wildly different as those of Boas and Radin. They encompass a confusing welter of different approaches and, even worse, are poorly integrated with the larger endeavor of sociocultural and psychocultural description, analysis, and theory. The objective of this article is to both catalogue the variety of approaches and to place them in an encompassing framework. We

do this through situating life histories in social and psychological processes.

The complexity and variation in approaches to life stories and self-definition reflect a growing sense, especially during the last half-century, that the individual self is fragmented rather than unitary and fixed; accordingly, one's narration of self varies with circumstance, with discourse form and context, so that one's self is seen less as an anchor and source of narration than a product of it; self becomes discourse. Such a view can be traced through many fields, from the cultural-historical school of psychology and related approaches (Volosinov 1986; Vygotsky 1987) to literary criticism (Bakhtin 1981; Lukács 1914) to psychiatry (Lifton's "protean man" [Lifton 1970], and Lacan's tack that the deeper self is merely language [Lacan 1968]), to anthropological debates about the real versus constructed emphasis in self and, correlatively, the question of whether "self" is relative to culture (perhaps particularly a product of Western middle class) or a universal phenomenon. In this survey, we do not presume that the subject has totally disappeared into discourse, nor that narratives narrate themselves. In fact, we draw from rather than dismiss consideration of studies that presume a somewhat unified self as an anchor of narration. The complexity of approaches to self and narration of self may itself signal the complexity of the phenomenon and the likelihood that no monolithic position will suffice.

Rather than "life-history," we prefer the term "life story." By "life story" is meant simply the story of someone's life. For our purposes, "story" is preferable to "history" because it does not connote that the narration is true, that the events narrated necessarily happened, or that it matters whether they did or not.

Anthropology and the social and psychological sciences have developed two major views of the life story. As we will argue, both are myopic in the significance they accord their subject matter. One emphasizes the "life," the other the "story." The first approach is concerned less with the story as such than with some reality external to the story but which the story is presumed to mirror; analysis of the story is a means toward grasping that reality—the "life" narrated. We shall term this approach the "life-focused" approach, for the life history is regarded as a trace of some external reality that is more important than the story itself.

THE LIFE-FOCUSED APPROACH

This approach divides into two subtypes. One treats the life narrated as a window on the objective facts of historical and ethnographic events, the other as a view of the subjective experience of the narrator. In the first, the "factual" approach, the one embraced by Boas, the life story is regarded as a datum for history or ethnography—a source for reconstructing a veridical record of events. In this approach, one is concerned to check the validity of the narrated account against other data about the events narrated; the narration is only one datum among others to reconstruct events. There is also concern that the narration be elicited and recorded as impartially as possible on the assumption that the interviewer's impartiality will enhance the objectivity and accuracy of the narrator, so that the narrated account accurately describes events. This first approach is illustrated by Kluckhohn's classic prescription for use of what he termed "personal documents" in anthropology (1945; see, for example, Kroeber 1961; Simmons 1942).

In the subjectivist approach, the life history is treated as an expression or projection of the subject's psychological dispositions and dynamics. The story is a window on the psyche. As in the factual approach, concern is not so much with the text as with some presumed reality that the text reflects; but here that reality is not so much external events as the psychological forces internal to the narrator. The narration is a datum, usually only one of several, to diagnose these psychological forces. This approach is illustrated by many life-history analyses in psychology, psychoanalysis, and psychological anthropology of the culture and personality school (see, for example, Aberle 1967; Langness and Frank 1981:64–68).

We may summarize the life-focused approach as a concern with learning the ethnographic and historical or psychic events that are described or represented by life stories. Whether conceived as objective events or subjective experience, a presumed reality external to the narration is paramount. The narration is only one datum relevant to learning about that reality, and whatever significance the narration itself may have is secondary to this external reality. Hence, relatively little attention is given to the narrative itself.

We should pause here to qualify our stark characterization. Studies of life stories as means of uncovering ethnographic, his-

toric, and psychic facts are not, of course, entirely unconcerned with narration or the narrator, nor are they intent on just getting the facts. Many such studies, like those more emphatically preoccupied with narrativity, reflect a humanistic concern with presenting, through narrations, the struggles of real people with their situation and selves; and life histories serve to personalize dry histories and psychological measurements. The narratives breathe life into the facts. Still, in the life-focused approach, it is the facts that make the story significant and worth recording. The narratives are means to the end of discovering and presenting those facts (see, for example, Crane and Angrosino 1992).

THE STORY-FOCUSED APPROACH

If the "life-focused" approach emphasizes the "life," the logical alternative is to emphasize the "story" side of life stories. This latter approach, which we term "story-focused," tends to take a formalist perspective that gives primacy to the form of the narrative itself. Such an approach also might be associated with "new criticism" (stressing the self-sufficient world of the text) or termed structuralist. By structuralism, we refer here to analyses that give primacy to the structure of the story, not to Lévi-Straussian structuralism, which treats narrative structures as epiphenomena of a posited "deep structure," the classification system rooted in the mind (Lévi-Strauss 1966). Carrying the formalist narrative emphasis to the extreme, some have argued that there is no reality represented by the narrative, that there is only the narrative that creates this reality (H. White 1978). While these formalist approaches have been developed primarily with materials other than life stories, some studies exemplify the emphasis with regard to life stories. Stahl (1977) traces formal narrative conventions drawn from folk tradition that are manifest in life stories. Peacock (1984) lays bare forms of life-story narration for varying religious groups. Linde (1987, in press) provides a well-developed approach to analyzing the formal structure of life-story narration. Spence (1982; see also, Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992; Schafer 1981; Wyatt 1986) pushes toward arguing that the only significant datum in psychoanalysis is the narration; that the narration defines and, indeed, constructs the life or self (which the life-focused approach sees in opposite fashion to be the source and object of the narration).

THE PROCESS APPROACH: SELF-NARRATIONS AND NARRATED SELVES

Obviously, the life-focused and formalist story-focused approaches tap different poles of experience and emphasize different ontologies: at one extreme, the narration is only a mirror of reality; at the other, narration is the reality. Some analysts have veered first in one direction and then the other, as when Freud first attributed his patients' narrations of childhood seductions as representing actual events, then treated these experiences as creations of the narrative process entailed in psychoanalysis (LaCapra 1989:38–41). We shall explore possibilities for a dialectical or synthetic approach that encompasses both extremes. In this approach, which we term “processual,” the self-narration is considered a primary datum, but the self and other experiences narrated are also accorded ontological status. The *telling* of life stories, whether to others or self alone, is treated as an important, shaping event in social and psychological processes, yet the life stories themselves are considered to be developed in, and the outcomes of, the course of these and other life events.

Admittedly, this processual approach is underdeveloped in studies of life history. Important beginnings have been made but independently of each other. In the following sketch we refer to several different emphases, such as the hermeneutical, psychosocial, and cultural. We argue that these emphases highlight different aspects of the process by which the telling of life stories are events in psychological and sociocultural life. We shall indicate some of these emphases, classify them, and suggest ways they fit together.

The *psychocultural* emphasizes the place of culturally constructed narrative in psychological processes, especially self-formation. Classic works include Erik Erikson's study of Hitler's narration of his life in *Mein Kampf* as distilling and to a degree contributing to both his own self-formation and that of a collective German self (1963). More recent studies have drawn more on literary theory. For example Crapanzano's analysis of the autobiography of an hermaphrodite treats the life story as a narrative process leading toward construction and ultimately destruction of a self (1988). Taking a developmental or genetic view, Holland et al. (n.d.) trace the life story as one among many symbolic devices that go into the construction of identity. Self-understandings can be culturally me-

diated through a range of tools of identity from personal names, to mirrors, to songs (Hannerz 1983; Skinner 1989; see also, Holland and Valsiner 1988), but life stories are a particularly powerful means as illustrated in Cain's (1991) study of life stories told in Alcoholics Anonymous and their role in the formation of members' identities as nondrinking alcoholics. Lachicotte (1986) provides another example in his application of Bakhtin to the autobiography of Bernadette Devlin.

Studies of self-narrative as events in social as opposed to psychological process treat narrative as instrumental in the formation and maintenance of social relationships and collective identity. These we term *psychosocial*. In Peacock's study of life-story narrations of medieval monks, for example, the narrations are seen to maintain a symbiotic psychosocial exchange with merchants (1969). White's research also falls into this category. In the case of the Santa Isabel Islanders and their experiences during the Japanese occupation, personal narratives of encounters with the Japanese invaders are seen by White as creating a new post-World War II collective identity (G. White 1989). Peacock's study of the Muslim reform movement describes the use of biographies in reformist training camps both as a means of socializing neophytes and of legitimizing the religious movement (1979, 1975, 1978). In addition to an emphasis on self-formation, Cain's study of Alcoholics Anonymous is also psychosocial in that it sees the role of life stories as emblematic and socializing (see also, Farquhar 1986). Sensitive to the pragmatics of life story telling, Linde provides another example of life stories as creating social relationships when she points out that in contemporary American life these narrations promote intimacy (1987, in press).

Whereas the psychosocial approach emphasizes that the narration of life events figures in and shapes social interaction, *hermeneutics* takes up a reasonable corollary: that tellers and listeners are sensitive to these social currents. Taken to extreme, life stories are envisioned as a product of the interaction and desire for understanding between teller and listener. The hermeneutical approach emphasizes confrontation with the alien other (including the other in oneself) and formulates life stories as a co-constructed by-product of the encounter. Examples include Crapanzano's *Tuhami*, where Tuhami's self-narration is depicted as emerging from the encounter between Tuhami and Crapanzano (1980) and

Watson's (1970) interpretive study of narrations of a Guajiro woman. A pioneer study bearing on this approach is Jung's (1963) autobiographical account of his discovering the other (in his case, the anima) in himself and thus the collective archetypes in which everyone shares. In Crapanzano's study, the self is discovered through participation in the narrations of the other (Tuhami) and in Jung's the other through narrations of the self, but in both the narration is seen in the main as a co-creation of self and other.

The *cultural approach* also views the story as outcome, but focuses on more purely cultural or collective dynamics and on narrative as a gripping formulation of beliefs, values, and ideas basic to a cultural tradition. A good example is Victor Turner's study of the many tellings and dramatizations of the life of Thomas Beckett (1974). Beckett's life fascinates, according to Turner, because it expresses what Turner terms a "root paradigm"—an essentially narrative and dramatic view of the ideal life turning, in Beckett's case, around the concept of in martyrdom—in a historical event, the killing of Beckett. Other studies that emphasize the role of life stories as shaped by cultural paradigms include Taylor's study of Eva Peron (1978) and Peacock's comparison of the Islamic, Christian, and Buddhist paradigms expressed in the life stories of three religious leaders (1984).

LIFE STORIES IN PROCESS

These different processual approaches—the cultural, the hermeneutic, the psychosocial, and the psychocultural—all situate the life story in processes crucial to human life: collective meaning systems and their dynamics, self-other communication and discovery, social relations and the formation of sociality, or self-formation. They go beyond the more static nonprocessual life-focused and story-focused views to give a fuller account of life stories. They open the way to a multidimensional appreciation of the power of these stories as cultural, social, and psychological constructions.

Although far from fully developed, these processual views can be positioned in relation to one another and in relation to what we have called nonprocessual views.

It will be noted that some of the studies cited as processual are older ones, already well-known in psychology and ethnography. A processual approach would adopt some of the holistic emphases of

these—attention to broader psychological and sociocultural contexts—while also zeroing in on the narrative text itself and the microsocial exchange and negotiation between narrator and interlocutor as emphasized in newer studies (some of which are referred to as the “new ethnography,” others, as “postmodern”).

DISCUSSION

Should the nonprocessual approaches be totally discarded in favor of the processual approaches? And, if so, which of the latter disparate though interrelated views should prevail? Our answer comes from placing these perspectives in juxtaposition.

From the myriad cases in the anthropological, psychological, and sociological literature, we conclude that life stories are likely important in self-formation and self-expression, though not perhaps in all cultures. At another level, they do figure in the creation and construction of social relations and collective identities, though perhaps to a greater or lesser extent depending upon the society. And, as they form, they are formed. Thus, considered as content, they do indeed offer a window—though not a perfectly transparent one—on historical periods, cultural practices, and psychic events. And their content and telling no doubt do vary by audience. The communicative purposes, the effort to promote understanding yet sometimes to defend and hide, played out in the production of a life story, do result in narration tuned to, but not totally dominated by, immediate social conditions and communicative intent. Life stories have not a single but a multifaceted significance in a variety of social and psychological processes.

Our survey suggests as well that all of the existing approaches are partial, although they could all be said to tap some aspect of the process of self-narration. Thinking of self-narration as multifaceted, as participating in a set of intersecting processes, reminds us of the limited character of our present approaches and illuminates the dissatisfactions of life-story researchers with one another's analyses. The unappreciated complexity of life stories and the failure to recognize their place as simultaneous creators and creatures of social, cultural, and psychological dynamics leads the devotees of any one perspective to wonder at the blindness of any other.

A psychological, life-focused interpretation of self-narration is never fully adequate because self-narration is part of a process involving many aspects other than the psychological; the danger is that other aspects, such as the cultural, are omitted or else mistakenly reduced to psychological phenomena. Psychologists may fail to recognize the special cultural patterning of narrations and instead treat these culturally constituted means of interpreting life events as psychologically grounded and universal within the species or a given gender. "Mid-life crises" may be evident in some life stories of urban northern males in the United States (Levinson 1978), for example, yet it is surely dubious to treat them as common to all cultures. "Manstories" (Gergen 1992) are similarly unlikely to be characteristic of men everywhere, when, in fact, the data for these came from a narrow sample in the United States. Or to pursue another field, "multiculturalism" is sometimes vogueishly treated as sufficient explanation for life story; despite the allusion to culture in the rubric, life-story narrations are explained without much depth of analysis of the specific cultural forces operating.

One can see how the analyst would be tempted to exclude broader social and cultural contexts from analysis when the data are confined to narration in an isolated setting such as psychoanalysis or formal interviews or to contemplation of texts in one's study. Rich narratives really do seem to create their own world, as when the psychoanalyst, encountering his client/patient only in his office, learns of the narrator's world only from the narration itself. But in ethnographic fieldwork, as in much clinical work, the data about this world come from sources additional to the subject's or informant's narration, hence the need to confront the dialectical interplay between this contextual world and the narrated world.

For anthropologists of American life, reductionistic tendencies in some psychological approaches have been particularly disturbing. They point to the strong influence of psychology—in both its academic and pop varieties—on life in this country—whether through individual therapies or self-help books that are grounded in culture-bound models of life story and other guides to living that are widely influential. But it is not enough to "correct" psychological models through injection of cultural sensitivity and systematics; a thorough re-thinking of the entire model of life-story analysis, whether in psychology, anthropology, or literary and linguistic analyses, is necessary.

Historical-ethnographic interpretations are likewise never adequate in themselves because self-narration is only partially responsive to historical events and culturally specific institutions. Life stories have a place in social events external to the interview that is only partially geared to recording events and cultural institutions objectively and accurately. The story itself partakes of a cultural genre that differs from place to place. Methodological concern with “objectivity” and the nonbiasing of the subject by the researcher totally misses the point that life stories have an existence and meaning in and of themselves outside the interview context. The researcher, no matter what he or she does, cannot fail but to elicit a story that conforms not to the scientist’s account of truth but to cultural and social conventions for the genre itself.

While—correctly, in our eyes—attacking the assumptions that motivate the positivist’s quest for objectivity, the partiality of some of the hermeneutical approaches are, at least superficially, similar to those exhibited by the positivist who would use life stories as a window on historical, ethnographic, or psychological reality. Both tend to focus on the importance of researcher effects. While the positivist tries to eradicate the significance of the relationship between the researcher and the researched for the research, the hermeneuticist embraces the relationship as the primary medium or focus of the research. Both approaches are partial and inadequate. Both overemphasize the influence of ethnographer of the self-narrator and discount the extent to which the narrator and the narrator’s life stories are part of myriad processes involving numerous relationships and aspects in addition to that of the relationship to the ethnographer. While keener attention to the narrative and the immediate relationship of which the narrative is a piece is essential, it makes little theoretical sense to delimit the narration context to the point of excluding broader social and cultural dynamics surrounding the narration.

Likewise, a totally cultural approach is limited insofar as it ignores traumatic, or other personal experiences of the narrator that are active forces in the narration, and reads the narration simply as a culturally defined script or as an expression of some code, such as a system of belief or other cultural model. Other story-focused approaches slight psychodynamic and larger social processes as well. They treat as nonsignificant childhood memories, emotions, and tensions that are bound up in the narrative and

released through its re-telling in successful therapy. The cultural analyst may dismiss this support for the story as a creature of psychodynamic process by simply classifying the therapeutic discourse as one of many scripted or codified discourses in our special culture, thus failing to credit the power that the psychoanalyst sees such experiences manifest in the clinical analytical process.

Similar comments could be made about the other partial approaches. Virtually any partial approach can be reinterpreted and criticized by another. Instead we choose to take a broader view: to laud the turn to analysis of life stories as pivotal in social and psychological processes but, at the same time, to call for a realization that life stories are involved in many social and psychological events at any one time.

Life stories seem such promising material because they are important to so many processes; in such stories there is something for everyone—the positivist, the hermeneuticist, the folklorist, and so forth. But this strength is also a weakness. Life-stories studies have failed to achieve their potential contribution because the sheer variety of approaches yield results that are confusing and unarticulated. Lots of work has been done, but most of it is limited, yet unrecognized as limited, to some part of the whole process. A more holistic and comprehensive approach to self-narration as part of a multifaceted process should yield better narrative analysis on the one hand and, on the other, a fuller sense of the place of life story telling in processes central to the human existence; in this way life stories will be rescued from their anomalous isolation within the human sciences.

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APPENDIX:
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