Alchemists' Visions: Cultural Norms in Eliciting and Analyzing Life History Narratives

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Abstract

Comparative study within a group of systematically elicited life narratives revealed key variations in narrative sequencing and conceptual templates. These dimensions are associated with significant differences in subjective meaning, frames for interpreting experience, and personal adjustment. This paper describes the study methods and results, and proposes that life histories be studied in the context of other similarly collected narratives, instead of one at a time. It outlines limitations of current methods of eliciting, analyzing, and writing up texts which may systematically obscure important dimensions of subjectivity and of cultural norms.

Alchemists believed that certain manipulations could transmute common base substances such as lead into precious substances such as gold. This glittering vision highlights an uneasy tension in the history of Western thought. It is between those who posit, as did Plato in his cave allegory, that ultimate truths consist of shadowy intangible essences that are only opaquely perceived through our senses, and those who posit, as did Bacon, that study of the complex, everyday, conscious, tangible world can produce truths. Others, notably Claude Levi-Strauss, and Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, have engaged us in asking how the order in the world that we study may be the product of the structure of our mind or culture.

Similarly, it is ironic that life histories are touted for depicting the true inside story of a life using an individuals "own words," yet the practice and concepts of these studies often approximates the alchemist's efforts to render a personal vision of hidden gold essences by reorganizing base substances. My purpose here is to suggest how the "raw data" of many life histories is already highly processed according to situational, professional, and cultural norms beyond the control of the person whose life is depicted.

This article discusses findings from a careful study of life narratives that reveals a variety of different subjective frameworks for interpreting and representing personal meanings, relationships, and time. These forms differ from the standard case reporting format that dictates a lineal unfolding of events chronologically by life course stages. The social "life course" and "chronological time" are core cultural symbols for experience and meaning in our society. However, this study of a group of life histories suggests that the public symbols are only loosely articulated with frames for personal meaning and experience. These can be

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discerned by listening to the manner in which people talk about their lives, and then comparing the orderings, and content among many narratives. There is a dire lack of attention to these subjective dimensions in eliciting techniques and in written texts on the life history: nor is there any serious attempt to determine how they relate to other patterns of behavior.

The purpose of this article is threefold: (1) to propose a conceptual approach to subjective dimensions, and a method for discovering them; (2) to described dimensions previously obscured in life narratives revealed by that approach; and (3) describe how narrative dimensions may reveal more general individual and group level perceptions of experiences of the self and behavior patterns. Attention to the natural features of the narrative, and comparisons with other similarly elicited accounts is needed prior to undertaking interpretation. This approach may help us discern the informant's perceived truths from the alchemistry-like reorganization of materials during construction of the text by the ethnographer seeking golden essences. The following somewhat extended description of terms and concepts is needed to orient readers to the different perspective of the present article.

ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE

Propositions inherent in our culture's world view, concerning the "self," and how subjective experience and meanings relate to public life and cultural symbols, directly influence life history studies. Such propositions constitute an analytic "lens" that focuses some features of life histories, and blurs others. Life historians only partially understand or control that lens. It obscures the diversity among personal meanings and frames for interpreting experiences, and the collaborative aspects of constructing personal meanings that occur in life as well as in the interview setting (Geertz 1986; Frank 1980). Concern with these issues is growing in many fields including psychoanalysis, history, literature, and anthropology (Schafer 1981; Ricouer 1977; Cohler 1981; Clifford and Marcus 1986).

What are these lenses of preunderstandings? First, a basic Western presumption is that there is an enduringly consistent, singular, internal construct, the "self," which is the locus of identity and experience. That concept is basic to anthropology, ego psychology, and clinical and social work practice. It disposes us to consider self-centered and lineal representations of experience, and to screen out or rewrite (abnormal) representations of experience which are not lineal or which present aspects of the "self" from exogenous factors or social others. It also leads us to equate the biographical unit of analysis with the biological individual (Plath 1980).

A second lens of preunderstandings focuses on subjectivity and public life. Past work has viewed personal and cultural meanings simply as polar opposites; there is a new interest in the articulations between personal, situational, and collective representations of meanings and systems of values (Obeyesekere 1981; Poole 1987; Urban 1987). Attention to how we conduct life history studies may reveal how the lenses of our prevailing scientific logic and cultural milieu screen out certain "data" during elicitation also later in editing texts according to social norms for narrative consistency and coherent representing of life data.

Why be concerned with these lenses? Conducting life history work without recognizing the social editing of our what we consider "raw data" is equivalent to historians or psychiatrists working from secondary as opposed to primary sources (Schafer 1980). These factors are significant to many disciplines because they influence how we conduct research and devise plans for individual and system change. This study highlights the collaborative making of individual and public representations of life, the editing out of diversity of meanings and experiences, and also the power concerns of researchers and practitioners.

Accurate information from the "insiders view" of the manner of experiencing events and social relationships is a necessary first step to developing effective programs at the individual and systems level. That insiders view is the basis for devising plans to better mesh individual values meanings concerns with those of the family, community or wider society (McGoldrick 1982). The challenge for anthropology and others is that the situations in which life histories are elicited, as well as the motivations, and concepts of the researcher, insidiously enter into what we listen for and later represent to others about the person being studied.

Life history work in anthropology has a long tradition (see Watson and Watson-Francke 1985; Little 1981; Langness and Frank 1981; Crapanzano 1979; Mandlebaum 1974) of use to provide finely detailed accounts of individual lives, to examine the links between culture and personality, or preserve a view of "life as lived" in a disappearing society. The view of life histories taken in the study described here is that they are complex subjective materials presented in a performative context intended in part to initiate an intersubjectivity among participants.

Two issues have been neglected. Life histories are usually treated as pristine works of art from which hidden meanings and knowledge can be leisurely analyzed. Their nature as socially situated interactions is only now being clarified (Agar 1980, Crapanzano 1980, Young, 1983; Smith 1980, Schafer 1979). I propose that we consider them to be "rehearsals" (MacAloon 1984) of the self(s) in social discourse (Gumperz 1982) and as "communicative events" or "cultural performances" (Hymes 1967, 1972; Peacock 1969). Another issue is the absence of systematic comparisons of narrative dimensions. I advocate that the interpretation of individual lives must be contextualized by a multiplicity of other such accounts elicited in standardized performance settings and discourse frames (Luborsky 1987).

The methodological goal is to develop an ethnographic technique for eliciting a brief life testimony when first contacting an informant, viewing it as a representation of an overarching personal symbol construed in a cultural performance, and then analyzing a collection of such testimonies. By following that approach we may illuminate many of the meanings and perceptions obscured in ethnographic and clinical reports and see how the features inform social behavior outside the interview setting.[1]

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[1]Questions about materials added in later interviews and the offering of alternate life stories by informants are the subject of a future paper. Focusing on multiple life stories from one individual (Young 1983, Schafer 1979, Thune 1977) highlights the disparity between the mutual and repeated recontextualizing of experiences and meanings during interviews, and life history texts (Crapanzano 1977; Fine 1985). This is more complex than the issue of informant truthfulness.

I will depart from the customary use of some key terms in order to highlight this article's conceptual and methodological contrasts to other life history work. The life history is labeled a *testimony* so that collaborative and situated nature is clear. I avoid the term "text" since it evokes the tradition of exegetical interpretation (Sperber 1974). The term "conceptual template" is used (Luborsky 1987) to describe an overarching personal meaning or metaphor that is the conceptual framework which integrates informants' testimonies.[2] By this I do not refer to archetypal deep structures or to a fixed psychic trait or artifact. Instead it refers to a willful agent who constitutes meanings from life long experiences in a sociocultural world.

My approach reflects the position that interpretive studies alone cannot offer adequate understandings without an analytically informed approach. It follows the work of Smith (1980; cf. Chatman 1979), and contrasts with Watson and Watson-Franke (1986). Thus, interpretation, following Sperber (1974; Schweder and Le-Vine 1986; Van Valin 1980), will refer only to exegetical and semiologic perspectives whose aim is to make explicit a hidden code of meanings and symbols which informants may not perceive.

Research Methods

The collection of testimonies discussed here are part of a three year study of self, social identity and life reorganization among elderly (aged 65 and older) Irish, Italian, and Jewish men bereaved two to eight years. Informants were screened to include those whose ethnic ancestry is traced through both sides of their family and also label themself as part of that ethnic group.

This article is based on thirty-seven tape recorded life histories conducted at the start of the first of five lengthy interviews in the informant's home. The initial prompt was an elicitation frame which we developed to suggest a minimum of information about how to testify (D'Andrade 1974). For example, we rejected the phrase "important events" in the query "Tell us about your life and what its been like?" because many informants regarded that as a proposition to narrate their life according to public successes at socially normative life stage goals. Second, we prompted them to elaborate by using different arrays of standardized follow up questions each one attuned to respecting variations in formats discovered previously. By using prompts matched to the testimony formats we hoped to preserve the subjectivity salient dimensions when seeking elaboration. Only after completing these steps did we ask about people and places they did not mention. Tape recordings of life histories were reviewed for content by the author, summarized, and then coded.

Coding categories were established by adapting a variety of theme analysis (Agar 1980; McAdams 1985; Kaufman 1981; Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie 1979). The analysis revealed the use of key ordering concepts here labeled conceptual templates (see Luborsky 1987) similar to the concept of "guiding metaphors" in secular ritual (Moore 1972). In the absence of sacred symbols "guiding metaphors" give a basic orientation to participants. They "cross reference domains of meaning to supply information from one well known realm in

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[2]The notion of conceptual templates also draws from "personal symbol" (Obeyesekere 1981), "personal representation" (Sperber 1974), and "metaphors of the self" (Young 1983).

understanding another lesser known realm. Operating by analogy, they serve to bind the domains" (1972). Referring to a guiding metaphor clarifies who and where actors are and what they are doing. These conceptual template may express a "behavioral environment of the self" following Hallowell's usage. A view of the whole group of testimonies indicates that each kind of template described below conveys differing subjective worlds. Such realms of subjectivity are neglected in current life history studies.

NARRATIVE DIMENSIONS IN TESTIMONIES

Examination of the narratives reveals three dimensions pertaining to (1) sequencing; (2) conceptual templates; and (3) elaboration. Other aspects, tense, or "narrative voice" (e.g. agentive or passive, first person) have not been analyzed. Patterns within the whole corpus of testimonies are now described and summarized. I chose to elaborate on ethnicity solely to illustrate other kinds of differences among a group of life histories. For example, testimonies of people placed in fosterage as children are somewhat similar; they be markers of other differences.

1. *Narrative Sequencing* refers to the order of telling not the event or period's location in the lifetime. Many testimonies are ordered by means of a cyclic, or nontemporal plan instead of lineal chronology.

    Three narrative sequence formats were identified. (A) *Unilineal* formats depict the life in one uninterrupted sequence from youth to the present. (B) *Recursive* sequences are those which string together a series of shorter life histories on different topics, each one running from early life to present day The recursive format maps out either: (B.1) *cultural* life course categories such as education, family, work, religion; or, (B.2) *personal* categories of experience. (C) *Aggregate* accounts have no readily identifiable sequential dimension linking the telling of experiences and ideas.

    The lineal and the recursive formats were the most prevalent in this corpus (see Table 1). The personal recursive format predominated over the cultural recursive format. Each ethnic group presents a different profile. Among the Irish 71% favored the lineal format, whereas 50% of the Italians used the personal recursive format. The Jewish widowers showed no preference, but none presented in the aggregate style. Two-thirds of the aggregate style were Irish.

2. *Conceptual templates* are explicit metaphors or more implicit images which encompass the whole person's life or the account. Four kinds were discerned. Anthropologists view the notion of a life course as cultural unit and a powerful collective symbol. Yet, I suggest it is not the only guiding metaphor (cf. Nisbet, 1965, on the irrelevance of the metaphors of cycle and development) used to make a meaningful image of the self and the myriad lifetime experiences. It is akin to Fernandez's "imaginative trope" (1986).

    (A.1) *Thematic templates* are an overt metaphor, or concept. The life is represented by episodes that illustrate the theme. Life is presented through episodes that illustrate the image. For example, "I was always a

pusher," or "family is the main thing." Other themes are those of lifelong negotiations between self and social identities or growing sense of autonomy, or personhood. (A.2) *Signal event* are a special type where one event, such as an accident or the Depression objectify a seminal personal meaning encompassing the whole life.

(B)   *Cultural* templates delineate each phase or transition in the socially normative life course. Material about personal feelings are infrequent. The tersest narratives used this format.

(C)   *Consociate* templates integrate an "other" into the life.[3] For the *cobiography* the boundaries of the biographical unit include the experiences and values of an important other. The other person may or may not be positively evaluated, alive, or living nearby. A common other in the cobiographical unit are siblings. *Quanta* formats, in contrast, represent experience as a series of nonoverlapping universes of interlinked realms of people, place, and sentiment. The life is discontinuous in this scheme. One example is: "First, school days, family and our tight little gang. Then high school, different faces and duties. Next college, a whole new place, and a new circle of chums; graduation, and now the job world, coworkers and family life."

(D)   *Chronology* templates appear to fuse together succeeding years and dates in historical time with experiences in the informant's life. For example: "I was born in 1910, at age 7 we moved to Oklahoma. We lived there until I was 12. In 1921 …"

A summary of these conceptual templates is presented in Table Two. Jewish and Irish widowers favored sociocultural templates, whereas the Italians favored thematic ones. But note that 71% of the Italian widowers presented thematic accounts, and less than 20% followed a sociocultural outline.

3. *Degree of elaboration* refers to the amount of detail in the narrative or particular segments in the account. The testimonies show a broad distribution (see Table 3). However, the ethnic groups present different profiles. Globally detailed accounts predominated among the Jewish widowers (50%). The Irish men went into detail only in specific areas (62%). In contrast, the Italians presented a bimodal distribution of globally sparse or context specific elaborations (40% for each).

To summarize, major variations were revealed in terms of the proposed categories of *conceptual templates, sequencing,* and degree of *elaboration*. The data here illustrates a variety of indigenous formats for representing subjective meanings, and concepts of the self. Patterns related to ethnicity are apparent.

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[3]The term consociate is taken from the work of Plath (1980; also Kahn and Antonucci 1980, Elder 1978) who suggests conceptualizing a life as integrated with other family members and cobiographical "consociates," and, respectively, historically situated "multiple interdependent career pathways."

The Italian widowers' life history testimonies are highly thematic in organizational format, recursively distributed (non-linear) in terms of sequencing of narrative topics, and either globally sparse or detailed only in specific areas.

The Irish widowers' accounts followed the scheme of the sociocultural life course, are highly linear in presenting their life from start to present day, and speak in great detail about some areas of their experience, describing other areas sparingly.

Jewish widowers' life stories followed their development according to socio-cultural categories of experience, use either lineal or recursive forms of narrative sequencing, and elaborate about all areas of their life.

NARRATIVE DIMENSIONS AND WIDER SOCIAL LIFE

How significant are these dimensions to informants? In the remainder of this article I will offer information that suggests ways to further validate these findings, and some broader relevances for the findings. I argue that particular narrative dimension are salient to individuals and groups, and these findings may be valid for populations whose situations and traits differ from those shared these elderly widowers.

The distribution of narrative templates matches those reported for a study of the retirement passage (Luborsky 1987) despite major contrasts between the samples. In each study fifty percent of the informants used thematic templates; cultural templates were used by 34% of retirees and 44% of widowers. The widowers median age was 74, they were first and second generation immigrants and lived on the East coast. In contrast the retirees were men and women with a median age of 60, they were middle class, Protestant, long time residents of the West coast.

A measure of the personal affinity or salience informant's have for a particular dimension can be inferred from responses to another question. At the end of the interview we asked them think of their life as a book and to tell us what would be the chapters if they wrote an autobiography. About 30% percent would not present a chapter-like account. All those informants, except for one, used thematic templates. They are resistant to the chronological or sociocultural representations embodied in the chapter schemata. Some expressed irritation to us for asking them to think in that fashion, intimating that we seriously misunderstood or were inattentive to their previous statements. "I just don't see my life broken up that way it has been a smooth progression for me," or, "it doesn't fit into neat categories like that."

The corpus perspective illustrates that thematic templates are not the only indigenous format for representing personal meaning systems. Yet, organizing lifetimes according to themes is also an analytic technique of life historians. Life history work is typified by lengthy involvement with informants. During this collaborative work a subtle masking of the ethnographers original object of study may occur while the quest for meanings takes place, and also, later in text making from the life testimony. Similar dynamics need to be considered (regarding parallel and collaborative projects of informant and researcher) when life reviews by informants were taking place prior to, or instigated by, the interviewers entrance.

Are the proposed narrative dimensions salient within the corpus at some group level? The features presented here may be associated with intriguing ethnic differences in definitions of the "self," disturbances cause by bereavement, and the normative course and outcome of reorganization for these widowers (discussed more fully in Luborsky and Rubinstein 1987; 1989).

Two to eight years after the wife's death the informants depicted the bereavement experience in terms of an "inner" and "outer" self. They described the self (the experiential, reflective component of the individual) as unbalanced by the loss, but differed about the features affected. They shared a concept of the desired condition as one of calm or "okay" and "craziness" or turmoil as undesired. Yet the nuances of this shared system of affective self-appraisal differs ethnically.

Irish widowers spoke of bereavement creating an inner "craziness." They acted out angry, wild, inner emotions and described experiencing a crumbling of inner emotional balance and of social life. Today, the inner and outer life are back to the expected ideal of calm "okay again. " The Italians, too, described the wife's death as creating "nerves," or a fear of "losing my mind" and "craziness inside." Yet, they believed they should struggle to keep a calm exterior and adhere to their usual routines, in contrast to the Irish. The Italian widowers indicated that today they still expect to feel disrupted inside, and work to present a smooth exterior. The Jewish men did not describe or act out an inner or outer "craziness." They grieved at their loss and were desolate at being alone, but did not label the feelings of suffering as inner craziness. Jewish men describe their goal as trying to accept the pain and to present a calm inner and outer self, neither "lamenting" inside nor acting irresponsibly to family or community.

In brief, as a group the Italian and the Irish widowers reported inner distress at the time of bereavement. They described discord between their inner experience and the perceived demands of social life, and also the lack of a collective symbol to express their experience. Whereas the Irish and Jewish informants generally reestablish the desired balance, the Italian widowers described an enduring sense of inner "craziness" as the normative outcome of bereavement.

Comparing the testimonies as a group we see that almost three-quarters of the Italians represented their lives with personal thematic images and sequence formats of the personally recursive type. Thus, ethnic differences are associated with distinct ways of testifying about their lifetimes, styles or ways of locating the distress and of reorganization according to notions of a proper state of "self." These differing affective and subjective frameworks inform the widower's reorganization actions. Understanding these provides culturally appropriate basis for evaluating "adjustment" relative to indigenous conceptions of self, identity, and social life.

Perhaps, then, life histories framed in personal thematic templates in contrast to public collective representations (such as the cultural life course), may mark out individuals who perceive inner experiences and meanings as remaining inchoate in social life, and are at risk of social or psychological dysfunction.

The introduction to this article noted that Western society posits a monadic, thematic, and lineal representation of the self as normative. Yet the data here suggests that it may not be the predominant subjective template, nor a reliable marker of "adjustment". The development of personalized identity themes and subjective frames for ordering sequences of experience may be associated with the occurrences of personal distress, social marginality, or transitions, or even psychopathology (Schafer 1980). The development of additional concepts for analyzing life histories may be in order since there questions about some dimension of the prevailing social anthropological and ego-psychological paradigm. Perhaps, we need to view a range of exogenous factors (described for other cultures, MacAloon 1986; Marriott 1978) by which a "self(s)" emerges from a collaboration between personal, local, and collective frames of meanings.

How does this perspective apply at the individual level? We found that Jewish and Irish widowers (i.e., not in the Italian group) who used a thematic template evidenced significant distress in seven out of the ten cases. Generally that was related to a continuing disruption or grief as assessed by psychological measures including affect, somatization, and well-being, and by review of the in-depth interview materials.

What should we expect will be the narratives of widowers who report little lasting inner disruptions in personal meaning but who face numerous objective challenges and major disruptions in life and daily distress? They differed from those reporting distress.

The narratives of stressed but not distressed informants used a unilineal format built upon the sociocultural life course categories and identities. Tales of individual quests and experiences were fit into telling of childhood, education, work and marriage, retirement and his wife's death. Such men appear to find the cultural representations suitable raw materials for the personal challenge of making meaning in life, grief, and the reorganizations. They appear satisfactorily enmeshed in several modes of expression which articulated subjective meanings, local (e.g. family and community roles), and collective representations (e.g. religious or political activity).

CONCLUSION

In the present article I have endeavored to suggest some theoretically based empirical approaches to the problems of devising analytic units for the study of a "life," discerning subjective dimensions in life histories, and a method for discovering the dimensions. Data from a corpus of testimonies illustrated presumptions about biographical units being equivalent to biological individuals must be viewed suspiciously. The constituting of selves (Bruner 1986) invokes collaboration with seen and unseen others. Concretely, I have described diversity among three previously obscured dimensions in life narratives revealed by the proposed method, and described how narrative dimensions may reveal group and individual contrasts in perceptions and experiences of the self in social performances arenas outside the testimony setting.

Life historians as well as other professionals who are concerned with the "misunderstanding" of others, may benefit from carefully eliciting life stories, examining the

natural features of testimonies, and comparing them with other similarly elicited accounts before undertaking interpretation.

The approach proposed here may also clarify the influence of the alchemistethnographer's own cultural, personal, and professional worlds, upon the renderings of the copious "base raw data" of field materials and partial truths when working to transmute them into a text which reveals some envisioned golden essences.

Acknowledgments

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TABLE 1

Narrative Sequence Format

	Lineal		Recursive					
			Social		Personal		Aggregate	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Total	[16]	42	[8]	21	[11]	29	[3]	8
Jewish	[14]	29	[5]	36	[5]	36	[–]	–
Irish	[10]	71	[1]	7	[1]	7	[2]	14
Italian	[2]	20	[2]	20	[5]	50	[1]	10

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TABLE 2

Conceptual Templates

	Cultural	*Theme*[*]	*Signal Event*
Total Percent	**44**	**50**	**7**
Jewish	53	41	7
Irish	53	41	6
Italian	23	71	7

[*] Includes the category "consociates"

TABLE 3

Narrative Elaboration

	Global Sparse		Global Detailed		Context Specific	
	[N]	%	[N]	%	[N]	%
Total	**[12]**	**32**	**[11]**	**30**	**[14]**	**38**
Jewish	[5]	36	[7]	50	[2]	14
Irish	[3]	2	[2]	15	[8]	62
Italian	[4]	40	[2]	20	[4]	40