



## “Shadow stories” in oral interviews: Narrative care through careful listening



Kate de Medeiros<sup>a,\*</sup>, Robert L. Rubinstein<sup>b,c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Sociology and Gerontology, 375 Upham Hall, Miami University, Oxford, OH 45056, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC), 1000 Hilltop Circle, Baltimore, MD 21250, United States

<sup>c</sup> Center for Aging Studies, University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC), 1000 Hilltop Circle, Baltimore, MD 21250, United States

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 15 October 2014

Accepted 21 February 2015

Available online 14 March 2015

#### Keywords:

Narrative

Interview

Qualitative

Childless

Older adults

Women

### ABSTRACT

In most narrative approaches to understanding old age, the primary object of interest is the told story. However, what is often overlooked in narrative research are the untold stories – the silences, gaps, and omissions that form a type of shadow story or a story that lies just below the surface of what is said or written. This paper presents an illustrative case example of Constance to demonstrate how careful listening can help uncover hidden stories in an interview. In this case, Constance mentions two people (her brother and husband) as being important in her life yet omits them from the majority of her interview. The interviewer is able to uncover a hidden story with regard to her brother, learning important details about their relationship that would have otherwise gone unspoken. Overall, findings point to the importance of untold stories both in terms of content and as a way to empower the speaker to address topics that he or she may have otherwise thought were not of interest to the interviewer.

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In most narrative approaches to understanding old age, the primary object of interest is the told story. Understanding what Phoenix, Smith, and Sparkes (2010) call the “whats” and the “hows,” or the ways in which the story tellers and story analysts/interviewers narrate and make sense of stories, is the focus of narrative analysis. What are often overlooked in narrative research, however, are the untold stories—the silences, gaps, and omissions that form a type of “shadow story” that can stay hidden behind the spoken narrative (Rogers, 2007). In these shadow stories or stories of omission, missing people, places, events, and other details form possible stories through their absence. Recognizing such gaps through careful listening and subsequent probing for more information can bring these shadow stories to the surface. Uncovering shadow stories can in turn be an important act of narrative care. Such careful listening enables the interviewer to engage the teller in talk about missing elements, creating a jointly

constructed narrative that goes beyond surface events and instead reflects a deeper level of understanding between the teller and interviewer (Bruner, 1990; Mishler, 1986). As such, listening and responding to shadow stories become a type of narrative care.

In fiction, telling stories through omission is a well-known literary device used by writers such as Melville, Faulkner, Hemmingway, Joyce, and others. With respect to Joyce, Balakier (2010) describes how ellipses, dashes, and other breaks in the text tell a shadow story in his short story, “The Sisters.” Through hints and subsequent silences in the story, Joyce creates a space within the written text for unspoken narratives about the central character, Father Flynn. For example, when talking about the start of Father Flynn’s decline before his ultimate death, the narrator’s aunt says, “It was that chalice he broke....<sup>1</sup>That was the beginning of it. Of course they say it was all right, that it contained nothing, I mean. But still....They say it was the boy’s fault” (p. 9). As Balakier argues, the gaps

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [demedekb@miamioh.edu](mailto:demedekb@miamioh.edu) (K. de Medeiros), [rRubinst@umbc.edu](mailto:rRubinst@umbc.edu) (R.L. Rubinstein).

<sup>1</sup> Ellipses are used in the original story.

become “associated with dark truths and possibly unanswerable questions” until ultimately “What is not said has more significance than what is indeed said” (pp. 239–240). Although no direct accusations are made regarding the priest’s relationship with the narrator (a boy), it is strongly suggested through changes in topics of conversation, unfinished sentences, and other devices, that many were suspicious of the priest’s motives and actions. In this example, an important story being told is the story that is never voiced but is instead alluded to through missing talk.

While fiction differs from everyday talk, there are many ways that a convention such as telling through omission in fiction can inform how we understand oral interviews. In the writing process, the author can carefully select and sequence events and plots, thereby purposefully embedding hidden stories. In the interview process, joint meaning is built in the moment through a series of questions and responses, assumptions and confirmations, and rapport building that occurs as interviews unfold (Kvale, 2008; Mishler, 1986). Interviewers actively shape what the tellers reveal through their reactions to the tellers’ stories. Elliott (2005), for example, argues that in pushing tellers to be succinct or “on topic” in their responses, interviewers may suppress the tellers’ stories. People, events, or other details that are introduced by the teller but not subsequently recognized or affirmed by the interviewer may be dropped from the teller’s unfolding story. 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 teller could potentially have revealed (de Medeiros, 2005, 2013; Mishler, 1986). Careful listening for missing talk or events, much like carefully reading a story for clues regarding its full meaning, can therefore help the interviewer to draw out more potentially untold stories.

Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis’s (1991) work is an excellent example of the importance of omission in oral interviews. In studying the narratives of older African American women in reference to experiences of racism and sexism, Etter-Lewis found that what her tellers didn’t say told a story that was as important, if not more so, than what they did say (West, Lazar, & Kramarae, 1997). Specifically, Etter-Lewis used brackets to mark missing nouns and pronouns in the interviews, which she later interpreted as representing oppressors whom the women had encountered but would not name. For example, some women she interviewed began their sentences with a verb, rather than a noun (e.g., “Told me to sit in the back”). The nouns and pronouns of the oppressors—a bus driver, a shop keeper—were omitted as if to distance the proximity of their actions in the past from the person telling the story in the present. In other interviews, women did not use the first-person pronoun “I” to describe themselves and actually omitted reference to themselves entirely, as if to separate themselves from their racist experience.

In practice, the majority of narrative texts in gerontological research do come from oral interviews. In analyzing transcripts from such interviews, the focus tends to be on the “whats,” or the story itself, rather than on careful consideration of the “hows” (Phoenix et al., 2010). In this paper, the “hows” extend beyond what is commonly included in the description of the methods, such as the interview guide, length and frequency of the interviews, place where the interview occurred, and the general use of probing questions for clarification. Instead the

hows include the interviewer’s observations of place: e.g., where did the interview take place? Are there personal items, such as photos or other symbols of significance, that can provide insight into the story? (de Medeiros, Rubinstein, & Doyle, 2013; Rubinstein, 1987).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the “hows” in reference to finding and revealing shadow stories in oral interviews. It will therefore consider the structures and practices that influence oral interviews: the joint construction of meaning, the importance of listening, and how power structures influence a narrative. An illustrative example will be presented to highlight how some shadow stories are revealed while opportunities to explore others are lost. Overall, the paper will contribute a missing aspect in narrative gerontology that overlooks process when considering content.

### Structures and practices that influence oral interviews

In considering how omission functions within an oral interview, there are three key ideas: the joint construction of meaning as talk unfolds (Holquist, 2002; Holstein & Gubrium, 2011; Mishler, 1986), power structures that shape what is told and in what way (Etter-Lewis, 1991; Rubinstein, 2001), and the importance of listening.

#### *Joint construction of meaning*

One way that the joint construction of meaning has been explored in oral interviews is through a dialogic perspective, whereby “at any one time and place, there are conditions that give a word a meaning at exactly that time and place that would be different if it were uttered at any other time and place” (de Medeiros, 2013, p. 54). Both the interviewer and the teller bring their own worlds of meanings to the interview, to include the meanings and understandings they apply to words, to the topic of the interview, to each other, and so on in an attempt to establish a better understanding of the other’s perspective. Reynolds and Taylor (2005) describe narratives as being “produced anew on each telling and shaped to the purposes and context of that telling, including the context of the research interview” (p. 200). Through exchanges in talk, each “tests” the other in a way that Bamberg (1997) describes as a tension between narrative as a representation of the meaning that some personal experience has had, and narrative as a performance that falls between story and the actual experience. Events may be omitted to move the story along in one particular direction instead of another so that as one portion of an event is told, another is omitted. Given this joint construction of meaning that occurs during the interview process, one is left with questions concerning how much of the told story really speaks to the teller’s experience versus the interviewer’s interest (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; de Medeiros, 2005).

#### *Listening*

A key component in the co-construction of meaning during an interview is the interviewer’s ability to listen carefully and with purpose. Listening is also an important component of narrative care, which will be discussed later in the paper. Talmage (2012), in reference to research interviews, writes

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