

## Narrative Works



# Narrative Gerontology Countering the Master Narratives of Aging

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### Résumé de l'article

Narrative approaches to understanding later life are increasingly being used within gerontology, albeit in limited ways. These limits include the number and types of narratives that “count” as knowledge or data as well as narrowly applied methods for analysis and interpretation. Within the gerontology field, the overriding assumption is still one that presumes that the stories we *tell* are the stories we *are*. Still missing are critical questions of whether dominant narrative approaches in the field truly give voice to the experience or instead perpetuate master narratives of later life. If so, what counter narratives are available? For example, in oral interviews, there is often little consideration given to the context in which the narratives unfold. In written narratives, the almost exclusive use of the first-person memoir format shapes what stories are voiced and which are silenced. In this paper, I draw from my own research within narrative gerontology to illustrate some of the challenges with how narratives are elicited, analyzed, and interpreted within the field in both oral and written approaches and suggest directions for future narrative work.

**SPECIAL INVITED ISSUE:  
NARRATIVE ACROSS DISCIPLINES**

**Narrative Gerontology:  
Countering the Master Narratives of Aging**

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Narrative approaches to understanding later life are increasingly being used within gerontology, albeit in limited ways. These limits include the number and types of narratives that “count” as knowledge or data as well as narrowly applied methods for analysis and interpretation. Within the gerontology field, the overriding assumption is still one that presumes that the stories we *tell* are the stories we *are*. Still missing are critical questions of whether dominant narrative approaches in the field truly give voice to the experience or instead perpetuate master narratives of later life. If so, what counter narratives are available? For example, in oral interviews, there is often little consideration given to the context in which the narratives unfold. In written narratives, the almost exclusive use of the first-person memoir format shapes what stories are voiced and which are silenced. In this paper, I draw from my own research within narrative gerontology to illustrate some of the challenges with how narratives are elicited, analyzed, and interpreted within the field in both oral and written approaches and suggest directions for future narrative work.

Interest in narrative methods in gerontology, the social sciences, medicine, and other fields has increased dramatically over the past several years. As with so many concepts that are used in multiple disciplines (e.g., self, autonomy, identity), how narratives are defined, elicited, analyzed, and interpreted often differs by discipline. My focus is on the role of narrative within the discipline of gerontology. I will, therefore, first consider what gerontology is, what narrative is within gerontology, how narratives have been used in gerontological research, and what possibilities might lie ahead for the future. I will also consider the role of master cultural narratives that frame age-related narrative research and

the use counter stories. To illustrate narrative work in gerontology, I will present examples from oral interviews and from a writing workshop.

### **Gerontology and Narrative Gerontology**

Gerontology has been described as an emerging discipline which has its roots in several key core disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, and biology. Its early beginnings as a field of study and eventually a discipline were rooted in biology and medicine in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when scientists not only began to identify old age as a problem, but as a problem they could potentially “treat” and ultimately “cure” (Achenbaum, 1995).

Later, after World War II, demographers began to notice shifts in the age distributions of populations in many developed countries. Public health initiatives (e.g., clean water, improved sanitation), immunizations, the discovery of penicillin, and other measures led to reductions in childhood mortality, enabling more people to survive into older age. In reaction to these changes, gerontological organizations were formally established in the US and the UK. The intention was to bring together scholars and researchers from many perspectives to address perceived societal challenges with aging, such as funding for pensions and housing, providing adequate health care, and addressing social needs of older people (Achenbaum, 1995; Thane, 2010).

The body of gerontological research continued to grow over the decades, eventually leading to the creation of undergraduate and graduate programs which confer degrees in gerontology as well as multiple programs with gerontology subspecialties. However, it should be noted that perspectives from the humanities were virtually absent in gerontology until the 1970s, when scholars began asking deeper questions about the meaning of age (Cole, Ray, & Kastenbaum, 2010)—the “whys” rather than the “hows.” More specifically, David Van Tassel (1979) convened a conference in 1975 on “Human Values and Aging: New Challenges to Research on the Humanities” to “mine the vast and rich vein of human experience recorded in centuries of history, literature, myth, folklore and art” (p. ix). This event helped to cultivate the interest of other scholars from disciplinary humanities (e.g., history, philosophy, literature) and interdisciplinary humanities (social sciences or other perspectives that “conduct creative, critical, and interpretive scholarship in the humanistic vein” [Cole, Ray, & Kastenbaum, 2010, p. 7]). The shift

to meaning-based inquiry in gerontology in many ways laid important groundwork for narrative gerontology.

The beginnings of narrative gerontology are credited to James Birren, Hans Schroots, Gary Kenyon, and Jan Eric Ruth (Kenyon, 1996). Ruth (1994) coined the term in 1994. Kenyon and Randall (1999) describe narrative gerontology as “a heuristic for the study of aging. Its purpose, as we see it, is to emphasize and coordinate a particular set of insights about both aging process itself and how we investigate it” (p.1). This harkens back to Van Tassel’s (1979) earlier writings about how few of the studies in gerontology were “informed by a humanistic perspective drawn from the materials of the experience of mankind [sic], which could and should be located, brought to life, and refined” (p. ix). Certainly narrative work accomplishes that.

### **What is a Narrative in Narrative Gerontology?**

As in other disciplines, definitions of what counts as a narrative differ in narrative gerontology. In many ways, this is due to the many perspectives represented within gerontology (e.g., psychology, anthropology). A psychologist, for example, might use narratives to link stories within a person’s life to some sort of behavioral outcome. An anthropologist who studies aging may be interested not just in the story but the cultural backdrops and meanings that frame where and how the story unfolds.

Definitions of narratives range from William Labov and Joshua Waletzky’s (1967/2003) description of a narrative as “having any sequence of clauses containing one or more temporal junctures” (de Medeiros, 2013, p. 4) to Donald Polkinghorne’s (1988) description of narrative as referring to “the process of making a story to the cognitive scheme of the story, or to the result of the process—also called ‘stories,’ ‘tales,’ or ‘histories’” (p. 13). In trying to reconcile the multiple perspectives represented within narrative gerontology, I have argued that “narrative at its most basic level is a telling of some aspect of self through ordered symbols” (de Medeiros, 2013, p. 2). The phrase “ordered symbols” is meant to describe the wide variety of ways in which meaning can be conveyed such as language (oral and written), gestures, images, movements, and so forth. I note that in this paper, only examples of language-based narratives are included.

This broad definition of narrative allows several types of narratives to be included. For example, small stories, or stories that lack

the sense of being well-rehearsed, temporally ordered, or fully developed can often be overlooked in favor of the grand, retellable or “big” story (Bamberg, 2006; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Watson, 2007). The classic Labov and Waletzky (1967) concept of narrative requires retellability and a logical progression of details. Stories told through poems or through seemingly unconnected events or details would likely be overlooked or not considered to be narratives at all. However, one must ask whether limiting the definition of narrative to include only certain types of expression may actually lead to a story that is in response to an expectation of the interviewer and not necessarily a joint construction of meaning. It implies that there is a “correct” form of narrative, that in order to “count” as a story, certain features must be present in the speech. I will more closely examine this idea later in the paper, through examples of two types of narrative research that challenge this notion.

### **Master Cultural Narratives and Counter Stories**

A main concern I have with narratives in gerontology is that the potential (and actual) presence of master cultural narratives is not discussed. There are numerous master narratives of later life that can damage not only the identity of older adults, but also how older age is understood by others. For example, late life is often portrayed by the metaphor of the journey. The significance of the life-as-journey narrative is that importance is placed solely on the past, not the present or future. This implies that from the standpoint of later life, everything worth doing has passed as a pilgrim-like progression through time, followed by a period of wisdom, reflection, and acceptance in older age. Related to this notion is loneliness—the idea that, since social networks have become smaller over time, new relationships are not likely. Although the research literature does not support the idea that older people are lonelier than other age groups (Victor et al., 2002), the stereotype still persists.

Margaret Gullette (1996, 2003, 2004) describes another master cultural narrative of old age—the narrative of decline. Events that in younger ages may be attributed to carelessness, busyness, or other benign reasons become suddenly, in later life, attributed to aging. Gullette introduced the idea of the progress narrative in resistance to scripts of decline in older age, arguing that interpreting the events in one’s life as part of a continuum rather than as having peaked in middle age, or middle age as a point of the start of decline, can be a source of strength and

continued growth. Narratives of progress and decline can be found in the larger concept of age autobiographies.

### **Narrative Frames and Counter Stories**

One of the difficulties in narrating counter stories to master narratives of aging can be found in the limits of the frames available through which to narrate experience. For example, in interview settings, the interviewer can reinforce master narratives through his or her responses to the interviewee. Elliott Mishler (1986) addresses the importance of creating a situation where a joint construction of meaning can be built. This involves time (e.g., multiple interview sessions with the interviewee to build rapport) and careful responses by the interviewer that encourage elaboration, convey the sense that there is no “right” or “wrong” answer, and validate that what the interviewee says is important and worth hearing. Oftentimes, researchers within gerontology underestimate the need for multiple sessions, relying too much on what was said rather than the great context of how the narrative was elicited (e.g., place, time, interviewee, familiarity). An example in the following section illustrates the potential of such narratives once the interviewer is able to establish a rapport with the interviewee.

In autobiographical writing, narrative form can limit what is told (de Medeiros, 2007). The traditional memoir or autobiographical format is one that is commonly used with older adults. In this way, the literary form of traditional autobiography then becomes a template for the master narrative of aging (de Medeiros, 2011). To build an effective counter story then, one must be given opportunity either through careful listening and response (with regard to an oral interview), or through the use of different literary forms (in the case of autobiographical writing).

In written narratives, challenges can exist depending on what literary genres are presented to the narrator. In considering the relationship between form, power, and narratability with regard to illness, Thomas Couser (1997) asks: “What genres, conventions, points of view and formulas do stories of illness use? How do they draw on, revise, or expand the existing repertoire of life-writing conventions in order to represent a previously unrepresented condition?” (p. 14). The same argument can be applied to life story work with older adults. If there are only limited genres, conventions, and points of view that are made available, how, then, are counter stories possible? This idea is further explored later in the paper.

### Narratives from Oral Interviews

To examine potential counter stories of aging in oral interviews, I include three case examples. These were drawn from a larger study of 200 women who enrolled in a qualitative study about the meaning of generativity for childless older women. In the larger sample, participants were asked to describe their marital status, age, and race or ethnicity. Participants in the study were interviewed three times. Although there were multiple trained interviewers in the study (all of whom were women), one interviewer conducted all three interviews for a given participant. Interviews generally lasted between one and two hours and occurred a minimum of one week apart to give the participant time to think about her response as well as the interviewer opportunity to reflect on the previous interview. Therefore, for each participant, three to nine hours of interview data were collected. Questions were semi-structured and covered background health information, a life story interview, questions about social networks, various forms of generativity, and women's views about the future. Following is a description of each case.

#### Ms. Adams

Ms. Adams was a 71-year-old European American woman who lived in a retirement community. She had initially started her career as an Episcopal nun. Later, after herself participating in the fight for women's ordination in the 1970s, she became a priest. Regarding marriage and older age, she described being single as being a lot easier when you get older as opposed to being younger. She said:

Actually being single is a lot easier as you get older. You come to a stage when the vast majority of the women you know are alone. They may be widowed or divorced. Yes, there are couples here and some very, very nice couples. But a large enough proportion of the population is women who are alone. That sitting at dinner with three other women, five other women does not strike anybody as particularly strange. But there is still a Noah's Ark mentality [for younger women]. And I think there is a pressure—I don't know, I don't know what the pressure is like for men. I've talked with some about it, but there is a pressure with younger women, if you're not caught up in the cost of day care, if you're not—my sister refers to her friends as the aging soccer moms.

They got to know each other when the kids did play soccer. The kids now all grown, but anyway the aging soccer moms, still get together regularly. There is a culture which you're not part of.

Ms. Adams' comments challenge some of the cultural narratives of loneliness in later life, where to be single and to be without children is assumed to be the cause of unfulfillment and regret. She pointed out that, in reality, aging is a time when being a single woman is the norm, and that therefore, one's social identity as a single woman in later life is not as concerned with partner status as in younger ages. Ms. Adams' comments raise some interesting questions in terms of the decline. She used the example of her sister as "the aging soccer mom" who knows she is aging by looking at her own age in relation to her children and her friend's children. If decline is experienced and expressed relationally—in comparison to someone else—then Ms. Adams progressed rather than declined. Her status as a single woman moved from what is, perhaps, a disadvantage in some ways in her younger days to an advantage in later life.

In talking about her age, Ms. Adams said:

I am very aware that I am obviously aging and anybody is [aging] that is alive. When do you start to get old? The moment after you're born. But it still is true that I'm one of the youngest here [in her retirement community]. I'm one of the healthiest here. So sometimes others will reject me on the basis that I don't really understand what it's like [to be old], and it's true that I don't. But how that works through, I think particularly in the last, hmm, more than five years but increasingly, I've become much more interior. Partly it's just that I'm having more time to reflect. When you're busy trying to get through the day you don't have the time to sit down and think about it. But I think there is a reflective role.

The interviewer followed up and asked, "In the last five years have you ever felt that you really had no one to love?" "No," Ms. Adams said. "I've wished often that I were central in someone else's life. But that's very different from people to love, people to care about. People even who love me. But I'm not the center of anybody's life. And sometimes I get jealous about that. On the other hand I can also see that it's an extremely dangerous place to be." Interviewer: "How so?" Ms. Adams replied, "It



encourages you to be very, very dependent, to hold on to the other person, not give them the freedom to develop. Very vulnerable emotionally—what if you lose them? But there are times when—I wish there was somebody who thought I was the most important person in the world.”

Finally, Ms. Adams talked about the freedom in not having children, especially with regards to her own future. She said:

I think that’s one of the freedoms of not having children. I don’t have the desire to say, “My daughter is living out my dream which I couldn’t live out” or “My son is dominated by me.” I think that there’s a real freedom—just from the whole ego investment in it. You see a parent really dominating even an adult child or you see an adult child who is so busy trying to establish identity separate from the parent and I’m glad not to be part of that ... Being single and having no children has freed me to make decisions about my finances, about where I live without being aware of being responsible for somebody else. The only one I have to support beyond my death is that cat. And somebody will take care of her. But I watch people, I listen to people who really are struggling over, “Can I spend the money on how I live now, or should I be saving for my grandchild’s education?” Being free to be selfish, I guess, is one way to look at it.

In all of these excerpts, Ms. Adams didn’t tell a story *per se*. There was a temporality in her shift from past to present to future, but not in a linear or predictable way. She was able to express some of her thoughts and concerns about growing older, and could counter some of the stereotypes associated with status as a parent in later life. It is uncertain whether such views would be present in a “traditional” narrative that has a beginning, middle, and end.

### **Ms. Parker**

Ms. Parker was a 77-year-old African American who, like Ms. Adams, was never married and said that not having children was an advantage. The following is an exchange between Ms. Parker and the interviewer:

*Ms. Parker:* I could pretty much handle my own situations. Let’s put it that way. I could pretty much handle my own situations.

*Interviewer:* So maybe that's an advantage?

*Ms. Parker:* I think so. I think so because that way you're not dependent. And if you're dependent to that point where, "Lord, I can't do this" and "I need this done" and "I can't go here" and "I can't go there." I was never that way. I was always pretty much independent because I'm small. I'm a short person, and when you're small, people kind of overlook you and you have to have a little more get up and go. And so I always had that little get up and go. You play and you don't pick me? That's OK. I'll play with somebody else, you know? I don't have to play with you, and I always managed to. I didn't care.

In this exchange, Ms. Parker changed the subject from one about whether having children is an advantage or disadvantage to one of her own abilities and resilience. In other words, although she took up the initial thread offered by the interviewer, she told a story about herself that she wanted to tell.

Ms. Parker described herself as someone who liked being in control of her life. She said, "I pretty much do my own thing ... I don't need anybody to be with me. I mean, I can do pretty good. I do pretty good. I have no complaints, I really don't. I really don't." She added that she never regretted not having any children. In fact, being childless enabled her to care for her own parents. She said, "My parents were getting older. They were becoming now more dependent but I enjoyed doing for them. So this [not having children] allowed me to do what I wanted to do ... So, without saying, well, without a husband saying, 'Well you gotta go over there' and 'You gotta do this' and 'You gotta do that. I need you to do that.' I didn't have that." Not only did not having children free her to provide care, not having a husband also enabled her to make her own choices without worrying about the reactions or needs of another.

### **Ms. Clark**

Ms. Clark was a 79-year-old African American woman who also was never married. When asked about age, she responded, "See, I don't go by chronological age. I say chronological age has nothing to do with how old you are. It's what you do and how you think of yourself ... I

guess we're all set in our ways, but thank God my ways are keeping me, keeping me moving and their [her sister and other people she knows] ways are not, you know, so I try to tell them." Ms. Clark talked about how in her retirement, she was able to devote herself to writing poetry, something that she treasured. In response to a question asking her to react to the idea that people with children think that people without children are unhappy, she said:

I pity them because they don't know. Mr. T. [an American actor from the 1970s and 1980s] said, "*I pity the fool*" (laughter). Because they don't know what's going on. You see, they're looking at it from their perspective, from their point of view, and their life. Like [her friend Mary] trying to get me married. She felt that I wasn't going to be happy unless I was married and I look at her, I think she's not happy, because she's got to keep having disagreements because now she was up there doing all, she loves to be in the center and talk and everything, so her husband said, "I see Mary's taken over."

Ms. Clark did recognize feeling some sense of decline or of "slowing down" following a recent surgery. She said:

You know, when I came down here, I was super energetic because I used to do all my leaf raking and all, everything, but as the years go by, after I had that hematoma, I think, um, I think maybe mentally I'm not as strong as I used to be. Because I think something happens to you mentally when you have surgery. I think you realize, it made me realize my age, because I've never, I never thought of myself as being, um, old. I still don't think of myself as being old, but I think of myself as being of an age where I need to slow down.

However, despite saying that she felt somehow mentally changed because of her surgery, she also spoke in terms of progress, at least in relation to how men viewed her. She said:

Oh, yeah. Even guys are after me now, guys are always after me now. I let them fantasize or whatever they're doing and, you know, I'm really nice to them, I hug them and they think, I guess they're taking that very wrong because men do think things

differently than, you know, because if I go over and kiss them on the cheek, they probably think, ‘Call me, take my number.’ I have numbers now that they’ll never get a call from me.

When asked what advice she’d give to younger generations, she said, “I’d try to have them hang with, if they could, I’d say if you can hang with me, I can show you better than I can tell you, because I still volunteer.” In relation to the younger generation, she viewed herself as in control and in a position of progress. She also valued her poetry. She described her poems as:

not just cute words, they come from, that type of what I just gave you that nurturing thing, you always try to keep a person, leave a person with something to, to remember you. You try, I try to write short poems, most of my poems are not short, but some of them are pretty short and they should be memorable because if you’re looking for something, and most people who read poetry is looking for something out of poetry, so.

Poems were a way of interacting with others, of passing along some type of permanence. In a way, her poetry kept her in the future, since the poems always had the potential of being read by someone else. Once written, they didn’t simply end but had the possibility of new life.

### **Narratives from a Writing Workshop**

In the context of written narratives and writing groups, people like Anne Ruggles Gere (1987) argue that the benefits of writing within a group include immediacy (people get an immediate response to their work), physical proximity of writer to reader, and social connectedness. Gere, of course, is not referring to writing groups for older adults but writing groups in general. I note this because in the context of writing groups for older adults, some similar and differing assumptions are made. The strongest point for older writing groups is social connectedness, which has deep roots in the medical and psychological literature as being beneficial for health and well-being (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001; Westerhof & Barrett, 2005). The other two benefits, however—immediacy and physical proximity of writer to reader—while certainly present in any group, are not usually acknowledged in the literature on writing groups for older people. Ageist assumptions dominate, such as

older people like to hear and write stories about the past, and that older people want to write down their stories for their children—despite the fact that as many as 20% of people over age 65 do not have children (Dykstra, 2009; Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007).

In naming the workshop I created “Self Stories,” I made a conscious decision to move away from traditional memoir or autobiography workshops or classes which tend to privilege certain types of master narratives (e.g., overcoming challenges, success). Instead, I wanted to help people capture the small moments or the small stories (Watson, 2007) that have been important in their lives but which may not have fit into the life story format they were familiar with. I therefore introduced participants to new ways to write about their lives using various literary forms. I have a detailed rationale of this approach elsewhere (de Medeiros, 2007, 2013), so will only briefly summarize it here. In short, on the most basic level, each person, when presented with a literary form such as poetry, makes assumptions about what that form is, how it is used, and what types of stories are told through it. In amateur writing groups, the assumptions participants have about a given literary form influences the story they choose to write. People select different events to tell when using poems, letters, or memoirs. Literary forms that I include in the Self Stories workshop are first person memoirs, letters, poems, and third-person stories, because participants have encountered them before in some way and they each provide a different narrative stance based on the position of the narrator in relation to the events being described.

In considering my role in this workshop, I imagined myself to be somewhere in between a teacher, who provides formal instruction, and a facilitator, who keeps the group moving. With these assumptions in mind, I framed formal instruction around several common foci in the literature on writing instruction: use of models, grammar/mechanics, scales and criteria, and inquiry, but made choices regarding use of these concepts that perhaps differ from those typically found in classroom instruction (Hillocks, Jr., 1987).

The workshop met 90 minutes per week for eight weeks. Each week, participants were introduced to one of four literary forms: memoir, letters, poetry, and third-person stories, and were given weekly assignments to write about something from their past using a particular form. Each meeting included a brief overview (15 minutes) of key narrative concepts and examples of writing by other older adults who also completed the workshop. Fifty to sixty minutes of each workshop

meeting was spent having participants read their pieces aloud with the class providing comments and feedback.

The particular group I am describing in this paper had the unique distinction of having members who were not necessarily interested in writing life stories. I mention this because it is important to acknowledge motive and expectation within a writing group. Instead, the members were selected from a volunteer pool for a larger randomized controlled trial to test the effects of autobiographical writing and oral reminiscence on memory, self-concept, and well-being. All volunteers completed a two-hour battery of tests before being randomly assigned to one of three groups: the Self Stories writing workshop (nine people), an oral reminiscence group (eight people), or a wait-list (no intervention) control group (seven people).

During the first meeting of Self Stories, I introduced a sample piece written by a participant from an earlier workshop. It described a woman's experience in the military during World War II. The author describes a humorous incident when, in an effort to be helpful, she wiped a spot of dirt off the wall, which in turn created an even more noticeable clean spot on an otherwise dirty wall. The woman must then wash all the walls. The women were also told by their commanding officer there would be an inspection by a Miss Keithly and that they should greet Miss Keithly by name when she arrived. Unbeknownst to them, Miss Keithly was ill and Miss Harris took her place. The story ends with Miss Harris chastising the women for calling her by the incorrect name. When the group was asked what they thought of the story, Donald (a participant) asked why this story was worthy of telling, or whether it was even a story at all. Following is an excerpt from the exchange:

*Donald:* Well, then the whole thing is, it's not a story when it's all based on the fact that that the wrong person, this Miss Harris, should have known she was going to be a substitute and she was going to be accosted with Miss Keithly. It's a non-event for me.

*Facilitator :* I guess the difference is that she's writing about something personal ... I mean, it's capturing an event that's happened to her.

*Donald:* That's just my reaction to the story.

Donald struggled with the significance of the story. He did not see the event as worthy of writing about. I use Donald as a case example since even though he was initially focused on the story as object, he eventually rethought the possibilities of stories over the course of the workshop.

As part of the workshop, participants were given an assignment at the end of each meeting to prepare for the next class. Donald's first assignment was to write a first-person account of some event from the past. Participants could define "the past" in any way they wanted, from yesterday to 60 years ago. Donald wrote about hiking the Appalachian Trail in summer camp as a child. The son of an American father and French mother, he was called "Frenchie" by the camp counsellors, which he said he hated. In describing the last few miles of the trail, he wrote:

Yes, I was the youngest in the group and I was the furthest behind. As I trudged these final miles, the assistant director of the camp came along in a pick-up truck. He stopped and called out, "Hop aboard, Frenchie." I replied, "Thank you but I want to walk the whole way." He seemed a bit taken aback and then said, "We'll throw your pack in the back." With tears streaming down my face, I countered, "No sir. I want to carry it the whole way." The assistant director pulled away, but he never called me Frenchie again.

It is a familiar American story plot whereby the narrator confronts and then overcomes a hardship.

As with the "Miss Keithly" piece, I asked the group: "Can you point to something that you think is particularly well written or particularly stands out?" Carol responded, "I think the tears of his face, it showed the heavy emotion. I thought that was beautiful." After more discussion, all of which centred on how much the other participants liked the piece, I asked Donald, "Was this a story that you immediately thought, 'I think I'm going to write about the Appalachian Trail' or was it something you had to give some thought to as far as what you wanted to write about?" Donald, referring to the instructions I had given the group for the assignment, said, "Well, as I've said earlier, you had encouraged for these to have a beginning, middle, and an end and I was trying to find something that fit that pattern. I've never tried to write this particular thing up before."

Overall, throughout the group, many struggled with the mechanics of writing, especially the idea of having a beginning, middle, and end, as

Donald mentioned. Susan, for example, mentioned during the third week (a week after Donald read his piece) that the assignment was difficult. I asked what she found difficult, especially since it was identical to the week before—a short, first-person story. She said, “Oh, the memories were easy. It’s just getting the memories down on paper in proper sentences and the punctuation is terrible ... I think the second time I realized you really wanted a beginning, middle, and an end and that was something I had to give more thought about ... That was one of the problems I had in choosing, for that reason. I don’t think mine still has a beginning and an end.”

As the group moved forward throughout the weeks, Donald still struggled with what was meant by “story” in this group format. In the letter assignment during week three, in which the group was supposed to write about a story or incident from their past in the form of a letter to someone, living or dead, Donald rewrote a letter to the editor of a local newspaper in reaction to a journalist’s story that had appeared ten years earlier on science and healthcare funding. Before reading his letter, Donald told the group:

I must admit that this was my second go. My first letter, I was going to try and have a letter to my executor and then I realized I was getting into awfully personal touchy details. I didn’t necessarily want to fake all those details and assumed that they were not relevant since they had to do with this retirement community. And I said, “no, no, no, this isn’t going to work.” So I had to go another route.

After reading his letter, the group was receptive. They directed their comments at making a bridge between the scientific topic of Donald’s letter, and their own interest—for example, having a grandchild who was pursuing some sort of science degree. Donald’s actual letter was not necessarily a story in the technical sense, but it did allow for storying to occur around the letter, through his explanation of why he wrote it and to the stories it invited others to tell about the topic.

As with the letter, Donald did not always do the weekly assignments in the way I had envisioned them. For poetry, Donald used the convention I had suggested of starting each sentence with a repetitive phrase like “I remember.” He missed the workshop the day we discussed poetry, but turned in a copy later, not be read to the group. At first glance, the memories described in his “poem” chronicled his wife and his



education and professional careers, but with some additional detail. For example, he wrote:

I remember our being house parents for a [university] dormitory for graduate women. This was another example of the team work. [My wife] provided interior services while I stoked the furnace and took care of household chores relating to storm window maintenance and trash collection.

The events are not told in chronological order but are presented more as a list of what he felt were important turning points in his wife and his life. As with the letter, this list of sorts does tell a story, although not one with a beginning, middle, or end.

For the third-person story, Donald did not write a story, but rather, brought in his wife's curriculum vitae, and talked a lot about how difficult it had been for her to make a career in academia as a woman. His voice cracked and he became emotional as he read publications, awards, and other key milestones in her career. If his writing didn't change much, the meaning he attributed to it did. Again, the real narrative seemed to have been created outside of the convention of story often used in gerontology. Context, audience, form, and subject all came together in unique ways not often reported in the literature.

### **Conclusion**

There are limitless possibilities for narrative work in gerontology, although often only a few are applied. The experiences of later life are framed around dominant cultural master narratives of journey, of family, and of decline. As I have argued here and elsewhere, limits in the ways that stories are told and received help to enforce master cultural narratives rather than to liberate people from them through counter stories. Use of alternative forms and providing opportunities for a true co-creation of meaning may be ways to challenge master narratives.

In the examples from the oral interviews, the time over which the interviews were conducted was one way in which the narrator herself was able to gain control of her stories. Having a week between interviews to reflect on what she might want to say as well as building a rapport with the interviewer allowed the participants to go beyond the question that was asked and instead to tell a story of her own. Although the women presented told stories about self-reliance (which I mention in the writing

workshop section is a common American trope), they did so in the context of not having children, which is certainly counter to the gender norms for women of that generation. The expected narrative for older women without children is often one of regret, pity, sadness, loneliness and so on. As these women (and the other women in the study) demonstrate, this is a narrative that does not reflect their experiences.

In the writing workshop, Donald was concerned about what counted as a story, which again goes back to the idea that some stories “count” and others do not. Over the course of the workshop, however, he began to tell his stories through non-traditional ways, using lists of events or even his wife’s curriculum vitae as a frame through which he narrated his experience.

Both groups of examples point to the future of narrative gerontology. First, more research is needed on the small stories that people tell. Small stories may provide the means for people to express important thoughts, reactions, and other experiences of aging that are outside of the grand master narratives of age. Small stories may operate as the ultimate counter story to the grand narrative. Second, more consideration is needed regarding what counts as a story. Gerontology would gain much through critical attention to what comprises a narrative and why. Finally, older people themselves should have a much bigger voice in how their narratives are told and received. Although not specially addressed earlier in the paper, the mere fact that I have selected what to present and omit puts me in the position of power in using others’ stories. The ethics of storying, as Thomas Couser (2004) points out, should be at the heart of all narrative work.

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