

Storied Lives: An Exploration of Life Course Narrative Identities and the Factors Linked to Happiness in Later Life

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the connection between biographical narrative and the construction of eudaimonic happiness in later life. Eudaimonic happiness can be understood to be the pursuit of meaning and purpose for life. I will present ongoing research which is critically examining biographical narratives in order to gain insight into the strategies by which individuals negotiate the experience of ageing as well as possibilities for happiness in later life. To begin I will briefly give an overview of the research design employed for this study. I will then outline the theoretical context for the research focusing on aspects of hermeneutic analysis. In particular I will present understandings of narrative and selfhood with a view to examining the role of these concepts in the construction of eudaimonic happiness. In order to illustrate the connection between life narratives and eudaimonic happiness, the biographical stories obtained from pilot interviews with one participant will be examined.

Method

The research method designed for this study involves a convenience sample of approximately fifteen men and fifteen women aged over seventy and living within a particular, socially disadvantaged, community in Dublin. The participants will be sourced

using 'snowballing' technique. I am currently undertaking the pilot phase of the research which is aimed at testing the research design.

The model of research design employed for this study has been adopted from the work of Tom Wengraf (2001) on biographical narrative interview method (BNIM). The research design incorporates multiple interview methods. This design allows for two depth interviews, consisting of three sub-sessions. The first interview, which incorporates the sub-sessions one and two elicits, an uninterrupted life narrative and is used to address issues relating to the interpretation of life events, changes and disruptions. The second interview (third sub-session) allows for more structured data determined by the agenda of the research and theory questions. The objective of the biographical narrative interview method (BNIM) is to provide the opportunity for the participants to recount a relatively coherent life story or long narration, as well as smaller, recalled narratives. The research design also includes a structured self-complete questionnaire which incorporates psychological measures of life satisfaction and happiness, including The Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985).

Theoretical Context

There are a number of key theoretical concepts which provide the basis for this study. The symbolic interactionist movement, which evolved from the work of American pragmatist philosophy, suggests that the self is empirically grounded in experience while simultaneously being a social construction (Blumer, 1969). This 'social self' is constructed through the meaning assigning discourses of the society and culture in which people are embedded. Individuals respond to the objects and to the events or experiences in their lives on the basis of the meanings that they have constructed for them.

This idea of the social self forms an important element of post-modern and post-structuralist theory which sought to examine the role of the social self in the representation and the production of knowledge (Derrida, 1966; Foucault, 1977, 1981). As a result of the work of theorists such as Derrida and Foucault attention shifted from an enlightenment emphasis on a fixed truth to an examination of how a particular reality or truth becomes constituted and what effects this has in relation to power, knowledge and identity. The concept of multiple contingent identities and truths took precedence over notions of a single self or truth. This highlighted the importance of situation, context and interpretation in identity construction. As a result of the conceptualisation of multiple possible selves, which are constructed according to the demands of particular social or contingent situations, self could be perceived as a performance (Baudrillard, 1994; Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959). Goffman, Butler and Baudrillard argued that if multiple selves are determined by the location of the individual within meaning assigning discourse, then self is not only socially experienced it is also circumstantially realised.

These postmodern and poststructuralist theorists depict offer resistance to the fixedness of prevailing essentialist assumptions of the body and self. By interrogating the ways in which multiple and fluid identities are performed and regulated within dominant social discourses, individual subjective experience is examined in order to better understand the operation of flux in personal identity. However, the extreme relativism of this postmodern position has been criticised for presenting a separate threat to identity which ultimately leads to the denial of self in favour of unending possibilities and multiple representations (Biggs, 2004; Biggs, Lowenstein, & Hendricks, 2003; Greene, 2003).

Simon Biggs was particularly critical of the extremes of identity flux particularly in relation to ageing (2004). In drawing on feminist theory Biggs argued against an over emphasis on the external or surface elements of the self which would deny the personal or internal appraisals of identity. Biggs developed a concept of the masquerade by applying feminist theory to the study of ageing. This concept allows for an understanding of ageing identity which combines the performative elements of a social self with a personal construct of self which can be accessed through autobiography and narrative. Importantly, Biggs understood both these elements of identity to be in flux and subject to the operation of human agency as well as constant reappraisal and interpretation.

Narrative, hermeneutics and the construction of self

According to Biggs, narrative can be located at the centre of self construction whereby there is concern for the spontaneity of performance within particular contexts as well as acknowledgement of the personal resources available for biographical interpretation.

Hermeneutic philosophy argues that there is no meaning prior to interpretation, the meaning of life depends on stories which act as interpretations of events (Bruner, 1991; Martin & Sugarman, 2001; Ochberg, 1994; Rosenthal, 2004; Widdershoven, 1993). In other words, life and story cannot be distinguished from each other, they are internally intertwined.

The meaning of life cannot be determined outside of the stories told about it (Widdershoven, G.A.M., 1995:2)

The significance of events or experiences in life has no inherent meaning until they have been articulated in story. Herein lies the key to hermeneutic understanding and what has become known as the hermeneutic circle. Story consists of its constituent parts, in other

words the stuff of life (experience, events, objects) however these parts in themselves have no meaning without story. Narrative identity is formed through the process of this circle – the unity of a person’s life as it is experienced and articulated in stories.

The significance of narrative lies not in whether biographical coherence or ‘truth’ is obtained but rather the method by which individuals give coherence to their lives. What are the events that people choose to relate? What are the underlying ideologies that form the context of their narration? The point here is to accept the post-modern emphasis on continual identity construction as a dialogic process between the social and the self but also to allow for human experiential agency within this process. For the purposes of this research narrative biography is understood as a social construct which is performed in a particular context but which also draws from personal resources and is subject to individual appraisal and interpretation.

Integrative Narratives and Eudaimonic Happiness

With this understanding of biographical narrative, the next section of this paper is concerned with an exploration of eudaimonic happiness and the relationship between narrative and happiness in later life. The pursuit of happiness and the drive to understand its form and benefits have preoccupied the theory and practice of humanities and philosophy for centuries. Traditional conceptions of hedonism and eudaimonia, as devised and elaborated on by Aristotle, have held centre stage in ongoing debates and conceptualisations of happiness. According to Bauer, McAdams and Pals (2008) hedonic understandings of happiness have tended historically to be the focus of much research on well-being. Eudaimonia, or the pursuit of meaning and purpose for life with the cultivation of personal skills or strengths, has provided the focus for the work of Bauer et al. (2008).

These authors depicted 'the good life' as a combination of hedonic forms of pleasure as well as strong ego development which is necessary for achieving life integration and developing meaning. According to Bauer *et al.* (2008) the exploration of narrative identity holds out the promise of greater understanding of how people internalise life stories in order to integrate interpretations of their past with an imagined future as well as a present. This integration, represented through life narrative, is crucial to the construction of eudaimonic happiness. The connection between well-being and integrative forms of life narrative is also discussed in the work of Wong and Watt (1991) and their development of a taxonomy of reminiscence in later life. Wong and Watt, sought to explore the effects of different types of reminiscence on psychological well-being among older people. In particular, they sought to identify the types of reminiscence which can be linked to successful ageing. In doing so they concluded that the process of life review in itself is not conducive to well-being, but rather it is the output of reminiscence which is important, in particular, the achievement of integrity. Wong and Watt undertook content analysis on reminiscence data yielded by past research in order to develop a taxonomy of six types of reminiscence: Integrative, Instrumental, transmissive, escapist, narrative and obsessive. Wong and Watt concluded that their data provided significant evidence to support the hypothesis that there is a strong tie between integrative reminiscence and successful ageing, with further evidence to support a connection between instrumental reminiscence and well-being.

Results and Discussion

In order to best illustrate these complex concepts I will focus on one pilot participant. For the purposes of this paper, pseudonyms have been used to protect the confidentiality guaranteed to the study participants. The participant, named here as "Jack", was 82 years of

age at the time of the interviews. "Jack" left school at 14 years of age, and started working as a messenger boy in Dublin city centre before working himself up through different jobs to his primary occupation as a lorry driver. He retired at aged 60. He now lives with his wife in a suburb of Dublin, an area characterised by social disadvantage. He has lived here for 52 years, moving out from the inner city tenements to his current house in his early married years. "Jack" scored highly in the life review questionnaire on measures of life satisfaction and happiness; he scored a very high 33 out of a possible 35 on Diener's Life Satisfaction Scale.

In the following extract from the semi-structured pilot interview with "Jack" he looks back over his whole life and acknowledges the good and the bad times, reflecting on his childhood as well as his early married life up to now. This extract demonstrates the integrative process described by Bauer et al. (2008); "Jack" provides an evaluation of his life as a whole and concludes that he has "done alright".

And eh, do you like to reminisce on your life or to look back?

Ah yeah I like to think back on the things that happened... the way things... I like to think back and eh some of them weren't great, you know childhood was pretty... there wasn't great times and then there wasn't bad times you know and em marriage life was very good like eh, we done alright like, we weren't wealthy by any means but we just made it... I know it was tough on Helen there in Mountjoy square and that, and then we got here then we weren't too bad. No I have to say we done ok...

So you enjoy going back in your memories?

I don't really go back to... I don't... don't be thinking of the past, yeah I don't really think of it that much, yeah, I just, I just think the way things are now

Note the final remarks by “Jack” where he says that he does not tend to think that much about the past but he focuses on his present. This is illustrative of the process of integrating an understanding of the past with the present, an important feature of the internalising of life stories and histories. In the next extract “Jack” goes on to emphasise the importance of the present for people in later life. In this extract he argues that it is not a good idea to try to imagine or think about the future but to focus on the present:

When you think of the future what comes to your mind?

Oh, well the future, well you see at this age, I don't think it's a good idea to think of the future, it's the present, you're just living for the present, take every day... you know I don't think of the future. You know what I mean cause em... see well, we've made up our mind that we're going to stay here, so the future is here then... so there's nothing... just hope for good weather and that's it...

This emphasis of the present by “Jack” and particularly his suggestion that for older people the present should be prioritised over both the past and the future provides a fascinating perspective on the concept of integrative life narratives. I intend to explore this concept further in the main study. In particular, I wish to consider the suggestion that ageing may provide the space to live in the present. In a phase of your life where you have more past than you have future, perhaps the concentration on the present provides a means of achieving temporal integration.

During the interviews with “Jack” he revealed that his father died when he was in his early teenage years. He was the eldest of six children and this was a time in which there was very little if anything provided by the Irish state in terms of welfare or social support to families in this situation. In the following extract he speaks about his mother’s alcoholism and remembers incidents of neglect in their home.

So like... I would have been 13, 13 to 14, around that time when he died, I remember, he died in the Union, what they called... up in St. James's it was called the Union then, it wasn't St. James's then... it was for the poorer people, he died then, he was only 37 yeah and eh... that left you know it was a hard life for me mother and that like you know... yeah she eh... yeah she got at one stage, she got a bit fond of the drink and... well only the weekend and that... she'd come in late on a Saturday and...she'd be always giving out... 'ah I was told not to be minding me family, to look after myself' all that type of thing so when I'd come in... everyone worked on a Saturday then, if you had a job, you worked on a Saturday, and I'd come in on the Saturday, say around half one or something, after been driving the lorries, delivering, and when I'd come in they... the rest of them would all be just sitting there saying 'me mother's not in, there's no dinner or anything' so I wouldn't give me wages to me mother until Saturday or after it, you see, because of these things, so I'd say, 'well you go up and get two pound of steak, sirloin steak' and 'you get two stone of potatoes' and 'you get peas' or you know, whatever and I'd get them all... and I'd cook a dinner, you know, the best fry, the best steak and all so when my mother'd come in, I'd give it over, minus whatever I was after spending... 'and why did you get sirloin steak?' 'well that's the best thing to get, that's the only thing I could think of' and there would be murder over that, oh she'd go mad, banging doors and all, and it was terrible, terrible. She apologised then, later, when she got older, and all, but I suppose she was going through a bad time... that's her up there... yeah... but I suppose she went through a bad time, she was only a young woman you see and she had a bad... yeah it's sad, but she didn't have to put us through it as well like...so that's the way, so you had to get over all that...

This narrative extract provides a further example of the integrative reminiscence as well as the instrumental reminiscence described by Wong and Watt (1991). What is significant about this extract is the attempt to understand the behaviour of his mother, to place her actions in the context of her own difficult life. He recognises that she was at fault to have hurt him but there is forgiveness in his interpretation of this difficult past.

Both Bauer *et al.* (2008) as well as Wong and Watt (1991) emphasised the importance of integration and the development of meaning in life review. Bauer *et al.* argued that life narratives assist in the development of meaning and they focused on the growth story as a personal narrative which illustrates development. The authors claimed that growth

narratives are closely correlated with eudaimonic forms of happiness and well-being as they strive to assimilate and make sense of the varied experiences of life. This function of growth life stories is particularly evident in narratives which are dealing with difficult or traumatic life events.

In the following extract “Jack” recalls an incident in his childhood where he was abandoned by his parents on a beach. He was left in charge of 6 younger siblings while his parents spent the day in a nearby pub. He begins his story by discussing his grandparents who he lived with for a time during his childhood he then presents a memory of his own parents. It is clear from the extract that “Jack” is still quite affected by this memory.

They were a nice couple and they eh... I used to love going with them, they'd go to Bray and eh Howth and we'd go in to a... at that time you had kind of cottages and where you'd go in and you'd get a pot of tea and lovely scones... they always done things like that... although now they took a drink but they wouldn't take a drink and leave ye... I remember my mother and father would have taken a drink but they'd leave you outside but they wouldn't do things like that, you know, they had a different... I was very unhappy... there was some unhappy... I always... one time... and getting back to my mother and father... one time, and I'll never forget it, it was a very unhappy, to me it was anyway... there was one time, we were supposed to be going out for the day to the seaside and eh I don't know whether, you know Merrion Gates? I don't know... do you know Merrion? Merrion Gates, you know where the gates go when they go down for the Sandymount Road and you come off Merrion Road... well just there there's a little patch of sand, little small tiny beach, no bigger than the back there... a little... and I was the eldest of six and brought there with the six children and I was left there with the six children with a bottle of water and some bread and they went down to the pub... and there all day and I never forgot it... it was terrible... like that pub... I often... going by on the bus I just look and see the spot... you know... and I felt that me mother... me grandmother and grandfather rescued me from that, like, type of thing

What are particularly poignant and important about this narrative are the contrasting experiences “Jack” had with his grandparents. “Jack” felt that he had been rescued by his grandparents and he talks about their formative and positive influence amid what was an

unhappy childhood. Later in the interview “Jack” provided a fascinating interpretation of happiness in the context of his unhappy childhood. He argues that in order to really appreciate good times it may be necessary to have experienced bad or ‘rough’ times.

I anyway... I was very happy... yeah like eh... like I think like that, you see I think that the roughness in childhood left ye then like with eh... if you got it anyway good at all it was great... you know what I mean? And it was the best thing...to me now anyway it's the best thing that can happen to a child, is to be reared kind of rough em you know... although I lived with my grandmother for a good while but there was still that other thing there so that when things got good for me I appreciated it, I knew I was after doing well when I got Helen...

In this extract the acceptance of upsetting or difficult life events is shown to be an important feature of “Jack’s” present happiness. This is illustrative of the growth stories that are celebrated by Bauer et al. (2008) and indicate an ability to integrate all aspects of the past within the life story and to achieve positive outcomes. Bauer *et al.* (2008) acknowledged that difficult events or circumstances can potentially damage or threaten well-being. The interpretation of events and the enduring meaning that is assigned to these events, through life narrative and growth stories, is crucial in the protection or fostering of global eudaimonic well-being.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper was to illustrate the connection between biographical narrative and the construction of eudaimonic happiness. In particular, the paper focused on integrative narrative which operates to assign meaning to the different events in one’s life. The process by which the past is interpreted through story and integrated into the present has been shown to be crucial to the formation of life meaning and ultimately to the achievement of

eudaimonic happiness. In conclusion I will leave the final word with “Jack” as he provides us with his wisdom and a key to the achievement of happiness:

You see I always thought... I don't know whether it was me grandfather that used this... contentment is the main thing you know, to be contented that's everything isn't it?

Yeah, and what do you mean by contented?

Eh just to strive for contentment just to accept... accept things, sometimes things are not too good they don't seem to be too good and then say it could be worse, you know, things can always be worse, no matter how bad things are they can always be worse and you'll always see somebody really worse off than yourself... I always think of the old Chinese proverb 'I cried because I'd no boots, and then I saw a man with no feet'... and to me that means an awful lot, doesn't it? It sums everything up, doesn't it?

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