

# 8 “Life is Wonderful, There’s No Doubt About That”: (Big and Small) Stories of an Embodied Positive Ageing Identity

CASSANDRA PHOENIX

## Introduction

This chapter forms part of a broader research project exploring narratives of the ageing, sporting body (Phoenix and Sparkes, 2006, 2007; Phoenix, Smith and Sparkes, 2007; Phoenix and Sparkes, 2008). Here, I examine the accomplishment of a positive ageing identity through the stories told by a 71 year old male. In order to examine how identity is narratively accomplished, I have found recent debates within narrative research between a “big story” and “small story” approach especially useful (Bamberg, 2006; Freeman, 2006). Here, the “big story” focuses upon the biographical narrative content of the story such as personal, past experiences. It usually reflects stories in which the participant is asked to retrospect on specific life shaping episodes or on their lives as a whole, and to connect episodes into a life story. Predominantly gathered during interview situations, and therefore elicited *by* someone, Georgakopoulou (2006) notes that the analysis of big stories is often used to present the grand narratives of ones life. The big story approach is closely aligned with exploring the “*whats*” of narrative content.

“Small stories” meanwhile, refer to stories told during interaction, generally within everyday settings, about very mundane things and everyday occurrences. They are usually, but not always, heard outside of the formal interview setting, often as “fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world” (Georgakopoulou, 2006: 123). In this sense, small stories may not seem particularly interesting or tellable (Bamberg, 2006). They may even pop up without necessarily being recognised as stories, and accordingly be quickly forgotten. Because of this, it has been suggested that small stories may run the risk of being overlooked. However, though at the time they are told small stories might not seem permanent or of particular importance, Bamberg proposes that they can be very revealing with regard to how speakers (or writers) convey a sense of self and identity. Thus, sensitivity to small stories

can provide opportunities to further explore the “*hows*” of narrative activity and accordingly aid our understanding of the ways in which narratives might become a performance or strategic model used to accomplish something (Gubrium, 2006).

Focusing upon small stories in particular is an important development within narrative analysis. As Watson (2007) points out, much narrative research to date focuses upon the grander narratives that we tell about ourselves during the interview situation. The analytical interest has predominantly been in ‘big stories’ relating to key events/experiences within people’s lives. Yet if identity construction is conceived as an ongoing performance accomplished locally in and through interactions, then our analytical attention should focus on the narratives that emerge in this context. That is, the small stories that emerge in everyday, mundane contexts and comprise the performance of identities and construction of the self. Thus, recent years have seen scholars making attempts to establish small story research as an integral part of narrative analysis and as crucial sites for self and other forms of identity construction (Georgakopoulou, 2006, 2007; Bamberg, 2006). In doing so, small story research has been offered as a method to bridge the gap between the traditions of narrative analysis and conversational analysis by demonstrating the ways in which a language-focused analysis of narrative, as a way of further understanding socio-cultural processes, can be enhanced by drawing upon the tools of interactional analysis.

Following Freeman (2006), I argue here that big and small stories complement one another and that, when used in combination, they can represent a promising integrative direction for narrative inquiry. Throughout this paper attention is given to Fred’s life history in order to understand how big and small stories operate together to shape two specific identities currently operating within his life. These identities are referred to as ‘being fit and healthy’, and ‘being leisurely’. Fred’s story also sheds light on the ways in which he draws upon these identities, and strategically assembles them, through the use of big and small stories, in certain circumstances to accomplish an ontological narrative in his life; ‘*Life is what you make it*’.

## **Methods**

The methods utilised in this study are informed by what Ellis, Keisinger and Tillmann-Healy (1997) refer to as an interactive interview. This interpretive practice involves the sharing of personal and social experiences of both respondents and researchers, who tell their stories in the context of a developing relationship. For these authors, “Interactive interviewing requires considerable time, multiple interview sessions, and attention to communication and emotions. It may also involve participating in shared activities outside the

formal interview situation” (p.121). Accordingly, I felt that interactive interviewing could be a useful way to facilitate both “big stories” and “small stories”.

Data collection took place over a period of ten months and included four formal semi-structured life history interviews at the participant’s home. Data was also recorded as field notes resulting from a number of informal interactions. For example, regular meetings at a local café for breakfast, short car journeys (usually to/from the cafe), brief telephone conversations (with the aim of arranging meetings). These informal interactions were especially useful for alerting ourselves to the small stories that circulated within his everyday life.

As the interviews and field notes progressed and data were accumulated, connections were sought across narrative segments and themes in an attempt to identify patterns and meaning constructed within and between the big and small stories told by Fred. This process is similar to the categorical-content analysis described by Leiblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) that focuses upon thematic similarities and differences between the narratives generated inside and outside of the interview situation. One theme that emerged regularly throughout our interpretation of Fred’s stories was the notion of life being what you make it. Intricately related this dominant storyline were two other themes that frequently ran through the big and small stories that Fred told. These themes were associated with being fit and healthy, and being leisurely. The ways in which these themes are knitted together through the use of big and small stories, and actively incorporated into Fred’s performance of a positive ageing identity are shown in the following sections.

### **‘Life Is What You Make It’**

‘*Life is what you make it*’ was the big story in Fred’s narrative and involves the plot structure and content of working hard to make the most of life – despite encountering what some might perceive as setbacks or negative experiences. For example though episodes of illness were experienced by Fred, these were not viewed as barriers that *halt* living but *as part of* living. This is illustrated in the following comments.

Interviewer: How are you Fred?

Fred: I’m fine while I’ve got the catheter in but if it’s not in, then it all builds up. Other than that I’m great. But it’s so elaborate, I’ve got to see a specialist on the 27th December which is a long way off but the nurse said ‘you’ll either die or make yourself better by then, and then you won’t have to see the specialist’. I said ‘oh well, I don’t mind that at all, that’s lovely’. But anyway, it just goes on. I don’t know. It’s alright. I played football and I played table tennis last night. I’m

going to go for a little jog this morning before my breakfast, well it will be before my lunch by the time I get there. You've just got to adapt haven't you, that's all you can do. When you think 'oh crikey', you've just got to get on with it.

'Adapting', and 'getting on with it', were central to the big story '*Life is what you make it*'. The comments above indicate how 'adapting' and 'getting on with it' become increasingly pertinent for Fred at times when the contingency of the body shifts to the forefront of his everyday life such as during periods of illness. The notion of 'adapting' is important here because it suggests that Fred does not necessarily attempt to make the most of life through using his involvement in physical activity to *resist* or *fight* the ageing process. Rather, experiencing different forms of embodiment through the context of physical activity over time allows him to feel a sense of challenge and enjoyment as shown in the following quotation:

What people need to realise is that nothing comes easy, and you've got to keep going back and trying, whatever it is. But that means enjoying each day as it comes along.... from my point of view, I do believe that you are what you make yourself and you've got to keep going haven't you for as long as you can....It doesn't matter how difficult times are, life is wonderful, life is wonderful, there's no doubt about that. I'm not doing any grumbling.

The relevance of this ontological narrative is the ways in which it currently shapes the meaning that Fred gives to his ageing process. The analysis indicated that central to this big story is his sense of acceptance, challenge, enjoyment, and individualism in terms of one's ageing body. These themes emerged as the biographical content (the '*what's*') of this particular narrative and subsequently the way in which Fred performs ageing. I was also interested in *how* Fred was able to continually accomplish this story over a period of time. Thus, adopting a small story perspective I was able to gain some purchase on the particular identities that Fred strategically situated himself within, in order to successfully accomplish an ontological narrative of someone who does indeed make the most of life. These identities were: *being fit and healthy*, and *being leisurely*.

### *Being Fit & Healthy*

One method that Fred employed to construct an identity of *being fit and healthy* was through demonstrating his knowledge of health and exercise practices. This is exemplified in the following small story recorded as fieldnotes:

Field notes – 4/1/07

*Fred is driving and we are on our way to the café for a late breakfast. We are talking about Christmas, and Fred tells me that his daughter has renewed his subscription to Men's Health as a Christmas present. "Oh wow!" I reply – conscious that I sound a little too surprised. This is not a magazine I would generally associate with 70 year old men! "It's interesting" he tells me "...although there are lots of articles that are quite rude in there" He laughs, as do I, and from this I assume Fred's referring to the articles devoted to sex and how to please your partner. "I like 'Runners World' too" he continues, "but fortunately the lady down the road gets that and lets me have it when she's finished, so I don't have to buy that one."*

This small story shows Fred's engagement with the popular health and fitness media. Indeed, during our meetings, Fred regularly referred to such publications and described the latest diets and exercise regimes that he had read about. This would seem to reflect the increasing presence of health ideologies within Western society. Specifically, while traditional narratives associated with old age have been linked to notions of legitimate (and expected) ill health, more recently narratives tied to activity, healthism, and individual responsibility have been promoted. These signal the increasing importance of health, bodily being and performance in contemporary Western societies (Jolanki, 2004). In relation to Fred's story, such an emphasis on individual effort in relation to successfully performing the identity of being fit and healthy, sits comfortably with the notion of individualism associated with the ontological narrative currently framing his everyday experiences; *'Life is what you make it'*.

### *Being Leisurely*

The second identity to emerge from the analysis was that of being leisurely. This was characterised as slowing one's pace, and being flexible in terms of commitments throughout the day. It involved having the time to take one's time, and accordingly, feel as though one could live in and enjoy the present rather than race towards a future or dwell extensively on the past. This big story offered by Fred during the formal interview outline his experiences of being leisurely in the present. He said:

When I was young I was always getting on, doing the next thing... When I started with the dry cleaning you used to have to do 8 garments an hour, and by the time I left you had to do 30. So you were always running all of the time, always running, always running... I mean now you just go out there and watch those flowers or see the trees.

Having been retired from work for seventeen years, the reduction in pace along with the option and ability to be leisurely in everyday settings is an identity that Fred makes use of in order to accomplish his ontological narrative; life is what you make it. The analysis also revealed that this identity was also performed through small stories:

Field notes 16/04/07: 23

*As I pack away the ipod at the end of our second interview, I ask Fred when it would be best for us to meet again. "Up to you, up to you my dear" he replies, "whatever suits you, I have all of the time in the world."*

These comments were not made in a wistful or regretful manner, but instead with a tone of satisfaction. Indeed, Fred's identity of being leisurely challenges the common misconceptions of older people's time being empty by illustrating how he is an active player in his time experiences (Tsuji, 2005). Furthermore, though the *pace* of Fred's life is slower, being leisurely does not necessarily equate with doing nothing as shown in the following big story recounted during the interview setting:

By the time I've cycled home [from the café], and then I walk down to the library and in the evenings, well I often go down to the football club. It's just a matter of making the time go by. But it's amazing; because I couldn't find the time to work again, no, no (laughs). I've got so many jobs I could do here [at home] if I wanted to.

For Fred, the identity of being leisurely also involves keeping busy. Thus, though the *pace* of life slows (being leisurely), the *activity* (being busy) remains important in terms of positioning oneself as somebody who is making the most of life.

### **Reflective Comments**

This chapter illustrates the active work involved in accomplishing a positive ageing identity through the use of both big and small stories. It also reinforces the notion that narratives are embodied, lived, and central to the process of meaning-making. They do not lie in the waiting for telling but are an active part of everyday interaction. Fred artfully crafts a coherent narrative of positive self ageing that stands in opposition to prevailing Western notions of negative ageing. As such, his use of the ontological narrative '*Life is what you make it*', provides a point of resistance to the dominant meta-narrative of decline that is currently associated with ageing in Western society. As part of Fred's narrative accomplishment of a positive self ageing, he skilfully combines two inter-related strands within his ontological narrative that situate his identities of

'being fit and healthy', and 'being leisurely'. These are connected in a dynamic fashion by the big and small stories that operate in his life.

Given that the accomplishment of Fred's ontological narrative *does* involve the use of big and small stories about contributing identities, I would suggest that to focus on one at the expense of the other would leave the analysis imbalanced and impoverished. This observation would seem to have some relevance for those (eg. Bamberg, 2006), who remain skeptical about the coexistence of big and small stories. However, my interactions with Fred lends empirical support to the suggestion made by Freeman (2006: 131), that big stories and small stories do indeed complement each other and when "taken together, they represent a promising integrative direction for narrative inquiry".

## References

- Bamberg, M. (2006a) Biographic-narrative research, *Quo Vadis? A critical review of 'big stories' from the perspective of 'small stories*, in K. Milnes, C. Horrocks, N. Kelly, B. Roberts and D. Robinson (eds.) *Narrative, Memory & Knowledge: Representations, Aesthetics & Contexts*, Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield, p.63-80.
- Ellis, C., Kiesinger, C. and Tillmann-Healy, L. (1997) Interactive interviewing, talking about emotional experience, in R. Hertz (ed.), *Reflexivity and Voice*, London: Sage, p.119-149.
- Freeman, M. (2006) Life "on holiday"? In defence of big stories, *Narrative Inquiry* 16, p.131-138.
- Georgakopoulou, A. (2006) Thinking big with small stories in narrative and identity analysis, *Narrative Inquiry*, 16, p.122-130.
- Georgakopoulou, A. (2007) *Small Stories, Interaction and Identities*, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Gubrium, A. (2006) "I was my momma baby. I was my daddy gal" Strategic stories of success, *Narrative Inquiry*, 16, p.231-253.
- Jolanki, O. (2004) Moral argumentation in talk about health and old age, *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine*, 8, p.483-503.
- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R. and Zilber, T. (1998) *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis, and Interpretation*. London: Sage.
- Phoenix, C. and Sparkes, A.C. (2008) Athletic bodies and aging in context: The narrative construction of experienced and anticipated selves in time, *Journal of Aging Studies*, 22, p.211-221.
- Phoenix, C., Smith, B. and Sparkes, A.C. (2007) Experiences and expectations of biographical time among young athletes: A life course perspective, *Time and Society*, 16(2-3), p.231-252.

- Phoenix, C. and Sparkes, A.C. (2007) Sporting bodies, ageing, narrative mapping and young team athletes: An analysis of possible selves, *Sport, Education and Society*, 12(1), p.1-17.
- Phoenix, C. and Sparkes, A.C. (2006) Young athletic bodies and narrative maps of aging, *Journal of Aging Studies*, 20, p.107-121.
- Tsuji, Y. (2005) Time is Not Up: Temporal Complexity of Older American's Lives, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 20, p.3-26.
- Watson, C. (2007) Small stories, positioning analysis, and the doing of professional identities in learning to teach, *Narrative Inquiry*, 17(2) p.371-389.

