Narrative competence and the meaning of life

Measuring the quality of life stories in a project on care for the elderly

R.Ruard Ganzevoort & Thijs Tromp

ABSTRACT

As part of a research project aimed at establishing and explaining the effects of narrative autobiographical life review methods, we are conducting brief narrative autobiographical interviews from elderly participants (age 80+) for both an experimental and a control group. Quantitative measures and narrative interviews are collected before, immediately after, and five months after intervention with a life review method. The main hypothesis is that the effects of this method on well-being and quality of the caring relationship will occur because of an increased narrative competence. To establish that, we need to measure the degree of narrative competence as objectively as possible. When we analyze the interviews with this measurement, we will be able to establish developments and change in the stories that can be related to changes in well-being and quality of the caring relationship. In this paper we will present a multidimensional method for the narrative analysis of the quality of life stories and clarify its implicit theological dimensions.

INTRODUCTION

It may seem almost preposterous to present a paper at a conference for empirical theology, which deals with the topics of narrative competence and the meaning of life. Isn't the meaning of life an almost metaphysical concept, well addressed by catechisms and Monty Python, but too large and elusive for empirical measuring? And is it possible to measure the competence with which people construe and tell their life stories? After all, narrative methods are not particularly known for their sophistication in generating hard empirical evidence.

This is our challenge: we are convinced that the narrative construction of meaning is an essential factor in how people act and experience their lives. More specifically, we are working on a research project in the context of elderly care, in which the effect of a narrative intervention on well-being and the quality of the

caring relationship is measured and explained. To do so, we need an approach to measuring the quality of life stories and changes in theses stories, so that we can correlate narrative changes to measures of well-being and the quality of life. In our presentation today we will focus on the method for analyzing the brief narrative interviews we conduct in our project. We will start with a little bit of background.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT 'EFFECTS OF LIFE REVIEW METHODS IN THE CONTEXT OF ELDERLY CARE'

Context

The project relates to developments in elderly care in the Netherlands and elsewhere. Although the medical and economical rationality are still dominant in how care is understood and organized, there is new attention to the 'softer' dimensions of existential meaning, emotional well-being, and relational connectedness. In many places, caregivers experiment with care structured by the needs or wishes of the elderly, and with one out of many methods focusing on reminiscence and the life story. Clinical experience tells that these methods have a positive effect on well-being and the caring relationship. We lack, however, empirical evidence that can inform management and policy. For that reason, the governmental funding agency ZonMw decided to launch a project to assess the effects of narrative methods in the context of elderly care.

Aims

The primary aim of the research project is to establish the effects of life review methods on the quality of care and the quality of well-being, to offer an explanation for these effects, and to describe the conditions and criteria for successful implementation in elderly care institutions. The scientific aim is the validation of claims by narrative theorists and practitioners that narrative structures of meaning are crucial to well-being. This will contribute to theories of narrative in the contexts of health care and practical theology. The explanation for the expected effects of the narrative method therefore will be sought in the narrative nature of the intervention. We assume that this working principle is akin to the kind of our intervention, using autobiographical reminiscence. Our main hypothesis therefore is that the effects of our method on well-being and quality of the caring relationship will occur because of an improved quality of the life narrative. We regard the quality of the life narrative as the mediating factor explaining the effects on well being and relationships. The theological aim, finally, is to elucidate personal meaning and life view in connection to existential anthropological, ethical, and theological categories of meaning. This way, we contribute to theories of lived religion (Failing and Heimbrock 1998), religious coping (Ganzevoort 2001), and an ethics of care (Tronto xxx). Our investigation can be read as study into implicit religion (Bailey 1997).

Research design

The research design is experimental. We developed a standardized Life Story Book Method that we used as the intervention in our experimental group (N=70), whereas we provided equal hours of extra attention for our control group (N=30). With three moments of interviewing for every participant (before, immediately after, and five months after the intervention), we collect close to three hundred brief narratives that we can analyze for narrative competence and quality. Apart from these narratives and the Life Story Books created, for each interview-moment we measure quality of life and quality of the caring relationship, and have a nurse and volunteer caregiver complete questionnaires on motivation and satisfaction. Finally, we monitor implementation processes to find important conditions and side-effects of narrative methods for the organization. The establishment of the effects will be based on statistical analysis, the interviews and Life Story Books will be analyzed qualitatively. In order to test the explanatory hypothesis, however, this analysis of the narratives needs to be standardized and in the end translated into quantified categories. In this paper we focus on the narrative analysis.

Problem definition and criteria for analyzing the narrative autobiographical interviews

Despite lots of research on developmental processes and the thematic contents of reminiscence among older adults there is still no satisfactory understanding of why and how the contents of life review or recollections of past events contribute to the quality of the life story, the narrative identity and the experience of meaning.

The reason for this lack of understanding must be sought in the fact that the research on reminiscence and life review until now mainly focused on the effects on the quality of life. We do know something about the type of reminiscence activities that correlates with successful aging (Wong & Watt (1995)) and there are also indications which intra-personal and extra-personal factors are conditional for successful reminiscence (Fry 1995). There is also a lot of research about the effects on the quality of ego-integrity, although not with promising results (see Haight 1995). Fry (1995) and others already suggested that the impact of reminiscence on the narrative organization of the personal identity may provide an understanding of the working principles of reminiscence and life review. But precisely on this last topic no systematic investigation has yet been executed.

The lack of a satisfactory explanation is an obstacle for implementation of life history of life review methods. Time and again working with life history methods or doing life review work is discredited by the suggestion that it's just another way of giving attention to elderly people. An indication of the working principle of narrative oriented methods may provide arguments about the specific contribution of these methods to the well-being of elderly people and may also explain why specific attention to the dimension of meaning in care settings is not an extra for religious people but an integral part of healthy functioning.

Based on theories of reminiscence and life review, we set out to establish and understand the effects of life review methods on the construction of meaning in

life stories. The central question of this part of our inquiry is: what are the effects of working with the life story book method on the construction of meaning in life stories of old adults? We understand the construction of meaning in life stories as the way people order events and significances in telling about their life course. The way they give meaning to life can be understood in a narrative framework as the construction of a life story from a life course. Central dimensions of this narrative model are structure, perspective, role assignment, experience, (performative) relational positioning, and justification of the story (Ganzevoort 1998).

The narrative autobiographical interviews

To establish the effects on the construction of meaning in life stories we are collecting brief narrative interviews form elderly participants, for both an experimental and a control group, before, immediately after and five months after intervention with our life review method. We use extremely open interviews. After the participants are informed that the interview will last about half an hour the interviews commences with one standardized question: 'can you tell me your life story?' The interviewer will only interfere when the narrator gets stuck. The interventions are minimal and formal: repeating the last sentence, asking if there is anything else the person would like to add, or if the participant is still unable to continue the narration, a general opening question about a theme already mentioned by the participant. We have instructed our interviewers to use this last intervention only as a last resort. The reason to refrain from helping the participant telling his/her life story is that we want to establish the competence and the structure of the participant and therefore try to avoid imposing the structure of the interviewer on the interview.

We discovered that this unspecified starting question creates some stress in the beginning. Participants don't know exactly where to start. Most of them recover very soon after that and start telling their life story. Our impression from the first 30 interviews is that they tell their story with a natural flow with little artificial composition. We also found that most of the life stories show a similar narrative order. The narrators start by giving a chronological overview of their live which may take between 2 and 12 minutes. After that, they return to certain episodes and expand the details or give lively and illustrative anecdotes related to these episodes. In some cases, a new and yet untold story is added in the second part, usually an episode of shame or trauma.

The construction of meaning in narrative

The interviews are instances of the construction of meaning of the participant. We regard the construction of meaning as an ongoing process. The life story people tell us, is not their fully developed and final life vision, but a construction meaning at the specific moment of the interview context. This momentary construction relates to the life course and its vicissitudes on the one hand, and to the personal life view, values, or ideological frames on the other. Our focus on this level of the narrative construction of meaning lies in our assumption that the

construction of personal meaning takes place mainly on an intuitive non-discursive level. Talking about life vision and values is an abstraction that is not necessarily or directly connected to the actual life and self image of the person. By analyzing biographical narratives we hope to catch the construction of meaning by surprise.

Criteria for narrative quality

In our analysis of the narratives, an essential question is how we can evaluate narrative differences and measure them in terms of quality. For that purpose, we are developing formal narrative categories that can be operationalized, generalized, and objectified as much as possible, and that can be used in a large sample. The categories we are looking for need to be related to the issues of life review and narrative described earlier. Likewise, the categories need to facilitate anthropological and theological reflections.

A first set of formal criteria is found in the work of personality psychologist Hubert Hermans. He states that three qualities of self-narratives account for well-being and psychological health: coherence, differentiation and flexibility (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen 1995). Hermans applies these criteria on sets of valuation types, i.e., valuations that participants attribute to main events of their lives. Although they do not give an instrument to analyze stories without attributed valuations we maintained their criteria as leading for our investigation, because these criteria are supported by other researchers on life history (Barclay 1996, Brugman, Bruner 1990, Klein 1994, McAdams 1988, Schroots & Van Dongen 1995, Wong & Watt 1995).

A second set of material criteria is found in the work of psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman (1992). Based on her work with victims of trauma, she identified three fundamental assumptions that govern the self-narratives. It is the challenge of every narrator to construct the life story in such a way that these three fundamental assumptions are honored. Many narrators are at pains to solve the conflicts in their story when they are unable to synthesize these three fundamental assumptions, and are tempted to save two of the assumptions at the expense of the third. A healthy and adequate life story then covers all three fundamental assumptions. The first fundamental assumption is the meaningful coherence of the world. This is the assumption of order and significance that is threatened by chaos and coincidence. Narrators have to tell their story in such a way that their life and world make sense as a whole and that the world they live in is just. The second fundamental assumption is the benevolence of the world. This is the assumption of care and positive intentions in the social and natural context, countered by experiences of evil and neglect. Narrators have to tell their story in such a way that they can put trust in the people and structures they meet. The third fundamental assumption is self-worth. The narrator must tell the story in such a way that the individual existence is affirmed and valued positively. It is the challenge for narrators to create a meaningful story that fits the criteria of these three fundamental assumptions.

A multidimensional method for analysis

For our analyses, we build on Barclay's (1996) distinction of three levels in a narrative: a phenomenal, an epiphenomenal and a metaphenomenal level. We add a fourth or preliminary level, that indicates the fluency in narrating and rename his levels as linguistic, thematic, and plot-level. The first level concerns the process of narrating. On the second level we look at linguistic characteristics of the narrative. On the third level we determine themes and storylines in the topics. And the fourth level is concerned with the overarching plot.

Regarding the narrating process, we expect to find effects on the narrating competence in the sense that respondents would tell their story more fluently and more complete after the intervention with the Life Story Book Method, due to the practicing. We believe that this will be an indication of the flexibility of the narrative. In terms of fundamental assumptions, we expect that low self-worth can be inferred from specific types of resistance to narrating. An increase in trust and benevolence following the intervention is expected, resulting in a more fluent narration. That is, we expect an increase in narrative authorship.

On the linguistic level we expect that we will measure an increase in the frequency of terms of time, place, causality, evaluations and subject-verb clauses. We regard this as a manifestation of increasing coherence. Self-worth changes are expected in the use of first-person expressions. We further expect that more words are used to describe an episode by participants for whom the assumption of order is challenged (Janoff-Bulman 1991).

On thematic level we expect to find effects on the number of topics, the diversity and the density of the storylines. This can be an indication of differentiation and coherence, that is of order. On this level we also expect effects on the type of reminiscence the participant makes use in the narrative. We believe this is an indication of the degree of integration, a formal characteristic of the material quality of the narrative. We further think that on the fundamental assumption of order something will occur according to the sequences of events, acts and experiences with positive or negative emotional valuation. This phenomenon, related to the plot-analysis. We expect an overall increase on benevolence, order, and self-worth following the intervention, that is, of narrative quality. Similar but smaller changes are expected in the control group on T=1 because of attention offered to people, but given the specific narrative aspects of the intervention and the fact that the life story book remains available as a physical object, we expect that the values observed in the control group at T=2 will be at the T=0 level, whereas we expect a lasting increase for the experimental group.

On the plot-level, we expect that there will be no changes in the plot(s). Contrary to McAdams (2005), who suggests that some change in the basic patterns of the personality structure is within the bounds of possibility, we don't expect our relatively light non-therapeutic intervention at high age to result in such changes on a level that is so close to personality structure. For the purpose of hypothesis testing, however, we formulate our hypothesis in the positive: the experimental

group will show changes in plot after the intervention with the Life Story Book Method.

Finally for reasons of the theological context this research project is located we analyze the way ideological and religious language functions in the narratives. This will provide information about the contribution ideological language and religion make to the coherence and maybe also to the differentiation of the narrative. Here the material criteria based on Janoff-Bulman will provide the backbone of the analysis.

APPLYING THE MODEL: MR SAMUELSON FINDS COMMUNION

It may be helpful to illustrate our instrument with a life narrative. I will present the narrative of mr. Samuelson, 85 years old. He was born as a Jewish boy in a German village. He grew up under the threat of the upcoming nazi-regime of Hitler. In his child time his parents moved to a larger town because they wanted to live closer to a Jewish community. At the age of fourteen he had to leave school because the nazi regime did not allow him to continue his study. He started working at a plumbing firm, became his diploma's and joined a kibbutz in the North of Germany. He became an active member of the Zionist movement and considered emigration to Palestine. But he was taken captive and held as a prisoner in Sachsenhausen. With help of the Dutch government he was freed and could move to the Netherlands. He again joined a Zionist youth movement. Soon after that, war broke out in the Netherlands and he had to hide. Despite the fact he didn't have any money his boss arranged a hiding place for him. There he met the woman that would become his later wife. He fell in love and then engaged. After liberation he tries to emigrate to Palestine but it didn't succeed. He decided to go and look for his parents, but they appeared to be killed. He then wanted to return to his fiancé in the Netherlands. He married, fathered two daughters, lived a happy family life, and had a successful career as a metal worker. 'I was totally integrated in the little village I lived in,' he confirms solemnly. After his wife died he moved to an elderly home.

What does this mean to the four levels of analysis?

Regarding the process we classified the story as fluent. The interviewer didn't have to intervene once. Mr. Samuelson started and ended the story himself. Silences sound naturally. This indicates a relatively high degree of mastery and experienced benevolence.

At the linguistic level we score the terms of place, time, causality and subject-verb clauses, with special attention to the relation between first person and third person constructions. In the case of mr. Samuelson the time and place index is average. The causal terms are above average. The use of subject-verb clause is average, but his use of the first person is relatively high. All this is an indication of an above average degree of coherence and a high degree of self-worth.

At the thematic level we divide the story in topics. The topics are labelled with formal themes and so called mini-plots. In the analysis we found 16 different themes, (which is a normal score of differentiation) with a mean score of 2,44 (the thematic coherence is above average).

Because using formal themes is rather formal, we developed a second approach of the storylines, closer to the narrative character. We summarized every topic in one sentence, focussing on the role the narrator plays in the topic (e.g. son, brother, husband, professional, traveller, grandfather, volunteer etc.) and a description of the little story told in the topic (e.g. despite my husband left me I didn't collapse thanks to the support of my children and my best friend). This summary has to be isomorphic to the content and structure of the topic. That's why we call it a mini-plot. If one topic contains more than one of these mini-plots because the narrator switches to another role (something that's rarely the case) or because two different stories are told within the bounds of one topic (something that more often occurs) we attribute two mini-plots, as a maximum.

In a next step we order these mini-plots in a matrix with the roles as columns and structural analogies in the rows. On the next page you see a reduced picture of the micro-plots. Vertical we discerned as roles brother, son, professional worker, Zionist, Jew, (becoming a) husband. Horizontal we discern: attending Zionist associations, considering emigration, looking for much loved elements form the past (where they used to live, his parents, his fiancé). This matrix provides information about the differentiation and coherence of the story.

On the plot-level we discern in the first place sequences mainly of the form that negative events are followed by a positive outcome, called redemption sequence. The redemption sequence is closely related to a comic or romantic plot. We also found a thematic unity in the various episodes that is characterized in the title: mr. Samuelson finds communion.

In terms of the fundamental assumptions, we see that mr. Samuelson tells a story with a high degree of self-worth, evident not only from the linguistic level but also from the fact that the protagonist in this story is actively determining his own life. On benevolence we see that mr. Samuelson does not focus on the dark and malicious aspects of life, although he would have had reasons to do so. Instead he succeeds to tell his story as a benevolent one based on the positive experiences that he also encountered. This benevolent interpretation servers his overall plot. On the aspect of order we see that his story is well organized with many parallels and causality. He maintains the order by excluding some painful episodes, like the death of his parents, the separation from his brother. The three aspects of order benevolence and self-worth are intimately related.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Earlier, we stated that this investigation can be read as a study into lived religion (Failing & Heimbrock 1998) or implicit religion (Bailey 1997). Our focus is on the structures of meaning subjects construct to develop a meaningful and adequate

life story with which they can live their life. Obviously this need not be articulated in explicit, let alone traditionally calibrated, religious language. The life views, narrative constructions, evaluations, and metaphors that we encounter in the material are diverse and partly idiosyncratic, but they are dealing with the precise subject matter of religion and theology: the construction of significance and the meaning of life. The life stories collected therefore are expressions of the individual first order theologies of our participants (Ganzevoort 2004). They are a much needed source for understanding human needs and longings, that informs our theories of aging, care, and human attribution of meaning.

This is not only an ideological justification of the project, it is part and parcel of the analysis itself. The categories derived from the work of Janoff-Bulman should be interpreted as eventually theological categories. The challenge for the narrator to create a meaningful narrative that complies with the three fundamental assumptions shows a perfect parallel to the classic dilemma of theodicy. The assumption of the meaningful order of the world and therefore of the meaning of events, is an implicit articulation of the notion of creation and divine providence. It states that things happen for a reason, which offers the foundation for our trust in a safe and just world. Without this belief in the order of things, the world would be unacceptably threatening. A religious expression of this challenge is the question whether God has the power to rule and change the world, and whether the events of one's own life are willed by God. The assumption of the benevolence of the world is an implicit articulation of the notion of divine love and care. It states that we need not live in constant fear and paranoia, but can entrust ourselves at least partially to others and to the world. Without this belief, the material and social world would be evil. A religious expression of this is the surrender to God's care and to the mercy that people express to one another, for example in elderly care. The assumption of self-worth is an implicit articulation of the notion of imago Dei, humans created after the image of God, which identifies them as invaluable in God's eyes. They are even interpreted as co-creators and name-givers, which stresses autonomy. This notion is specified in the individual value of the person, a notion that is fundamental in religious soteriologies that focus on personal redemption and not only on the continuation of human history. Finally, this assumption is essential for the merciful care of the sick, the old, and the needy, because receivers of care are seen as individuals, fellow humans that deserve our attention.

It is not our intention to exhaust the theodicy-discussion here, but to clarify how the fundamental assumptions identified by Janoff-Bulman are the quintessence of religious meaning (Ganzevoort 2005). The problematic constellation of the three in a life under stress triggers the stories that are intended to set things straight, but an adequate or successful life story is adequate precisely because it succeeds in accomplishing the interpretation of life as complying with the three fundamental assumptions. The solutions found for the theodicy-dilemma are therefore only extrapolations of the structures of meaning constructed in every life story.

The narrative challenge that is addressed in this model of fundamental assumptions is further reflected in the context of elderly care and the appreciation of the narratives of the elderly. One approach to the elderly and their narratives is to see this life stage as an epilogue that reiterates some of the central themes but adds little of value to it. In this approach, life stories are seen as only anecdotal, and accordingly elderly care is increasingly organized in a technical medical institutional way. Critics from an ethics of care perspective would see this approach as dehumanising. In light of the fundamental assumptions identified here, we should say that this approach devalues human individuality and worth, and expresses little benevolence, but it may offer a lot of order. A second approach to elderly and their narratives is to see old age as a finale, in which the life story culminates in possibly new and integrating meanings. This leads to the expectation that individuals will always have a new and richer story to tell. Life stories then are seen as essential, and elderly care needs to be organized in a reciprocal way. The health care institutions that espouse such a view, try to offer an environment that is safe, well-ordered, just, and benevolent, and that affirms the individual worth and wishes of the elderly. That is, the identity of the institution is expressed in an intentional validation of the fundamental assumptions. The primary rationality in elderly care should be ethical or narrative, not technical, medical, or economic. It is not enough then, to allow for Life Story Book methods within the organization, the organization itself will need to express these fundamental values. This includes organizational structures on the assumption of order, the benevolent attitude of caregivers on every level, and priority of the individual over the limitations of the institution. It is in examples like these that the moral implications and motivations of our research project come to the fore, but it may be clear by now that these are not detached from the empirical content.

REFERENCES

Bailey, E. I. (1997). Implicit religion in contemporary society. Kampen, Kok Pharos.

Barclay, Craig R. (1996), "Autobiographical remembering. Narrative constraints on objectified selves", in, Rubin, David C. (Ed.), Remembering our past. Studies in autobiographical memory., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1996, 94-127

Bruner, J. S. (1990). Acts of meaning. Cambridge (Ms), Harvard University Press.

Failing, W.-E. and H.-G. Heimbrock (1998). Gelebte Religion Wahrnehmen. Lebenswelt - Alltagskultur - Religionspraxis. Stuttgart, Kohlhammer.

Fry, P.S. (1995), "A Conceptual Model of Socialization and Agentic Trait Factors That Mediate the Development of Reminiscence Styles and Their Health Outcomes.", in, Haight, Barbara K., Jeffrey D. Webster (Edd.), The Art and Science of Reminiscing. Theory, methods and applications., Washington, Taylor & Francis 1995, 49-60

Ganzevoort, R. R. (2001). Reconstructies. Praktisch-theologisch onderzoek naar de verhalen van mannen over seksueel misbruik en geloof. Kampen, Kok.

Ganzevoort, R. R. (2004). What you see is what you get. Social construction and normativity in practical theology. Hermeneutics and empirical research in practical theology. The contribution of empirical theology by Johannes A. van der Ven. C. A. M. Hermans and M. M.E. Leiden, Brill, 53-74.

Ganzevoort, R. R. (2005). "Als de grondslagen vernield zijn. Religie, trauma en pastoraat." Praktische Theologie 32(3), 344-361.

Ganzevoort, R. R., Ed. (1998). De praxis als verhaal. Narrativiteit en Praktische Theologie

Haight, Barbara K., Shirley Hendrix (1995), "An integrated review of reminiscence.", in, ders., Jeffrey D. Webster (Edd.), The Art and Science of Reminiscing. Theory, methods and applications., Washington, Taylor & Francis 1995, 3-21

Hermans, H. J. M. and E. Hermans-Jansen (1995). Self-narratives. The construction of meaning in psychotherapy. New York, Guilford.

Janoff-Bulman, R. (1991), Understanding people in terms of their assumptive worlds. In Ozer, D., Healy, J.M, Stewart, A.J. (edd.), Self and Emotion. (Perspectives in personality 3), London: Jessica Kingsley.

Janoff-Bulman, R. (1992). Shattered assumptions. Towards a new psychology of trauma. Kampen, Kok.

Klein, Stephanie (1994), Theologie und empirische Biographieforschung. Methodische Zug‰nge zur Lebens- und Glaubensgeschichte und ihnre Bedeutung fˌr eine erfahrungsbezogene Theologie., Stuttgart, Kohlhammer

McAdams, Dan P. (1988), Power, Intimacy and the Life Story. Personological Inquiries into Identity., New York, The Guilford Press

McAdams, Dan P. (2005), The redemptive self. Stories Americans live by., Oxford University Press, USA

McAdams, Dan P., J. Reynolds, M. Lewis, A.H. Patten & P.J. Bowman (2001), "When bad things turn good and good things turn bad, Sequences of redemption and contamination in life narrative and their relation to psychosocial adaptation in midlife adults and in students.", in, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 27-4, 474-485 New York, Free Press.

Schroots, Johannes J.F., Lea van Dongen (1995), Birren's ABC. Autobiografiecursus., Assen, Van Gorcum

Tronto, J. (1993). Moral boundaries. A political argument for an ethic of care. London, Routledge.

Wong, Paul T.P. (1995), "The Processes of Adaptive Reminiscence.", in, Haight, Barbara K., Jeffrey D. Webster (Edd.), The Art and Science of Reminiscing. Theory, methods and applications., Washington, Taylor & Francis 1995, 23-35