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19 “Genres” of Life-Stories

IVO ČERMÁK

Abstract

Based on a life story telling, this paper explores a subjective sense of a passing life. A life line technique was used to elicit the life story telling. A subject was asked to draw a line of his/her life and mark the point of the present moment. Then he/she was encouraged to label subjectively important events of his/her life and reconstruct the life story. Fifty-two adult respondents (20 men and 32 women aged from 38 to 42 years) were involved in the research. A narrative holistic formal analysis of life line shapes (or life trajectories) was carried out. The life events and the life story content detected by the life line technique were also taken into account. The following categories were identified: life crisis - small loss and early recovery; life crisis - fall and dash; slow ascent; planned gain with an appreciated risk; moratorium; permanent descent; spiral; permanently shattering life line; and metanoia. Further, these categories were submitted to a general narrative thematic analysis to reach a more profound understanding of the “genres” of the life stories.

Life Story as a Genre

Genres are considered (ie. Frye, 1957 or White, 1973) throughout whole literary tradition as referring to essentially different kinds of literary forms. Originally they served as a tool for a better articulation and understanding of literary texts. But they have also a deeper sense. In psychology, Frye’s four categories - tragedy, romance, satire, and comedy - are used for grasping a basic narrative tuning of human life or a basic personal narrativity - as for example Dan P. McAdams (1988, 1993) or Kevin Murray (1989) suggest in their psychological characterization of the four genres. Michal Adler (2003) used some of literal genre’s categories for brilliant analyses in the psychotherapeutic context.

From the psychological point of view you can conceive of genres as mental models (Feldman, 1992), or specific archetypes, which can represent something important in one’s life. By exploring a literary story through the prism of these general categories, you evaluate its quality, usually by the three criteria or principles of a good story - continuity, coherence and universality.

However, it seems that people telling their life stories tend intuitively to use rules similar to those which are reflected and applied by writers or scientists. But if you explore individual stories, you won’t make do with such

an objective measure and thus you are forced to dispute or rather deconstruct the ideal quality of these categories. At least, you have to become aware that for example coherence - a sign of a good life story - can appear in the story of an individual whose life isn't coherent at all. If you are asked to narrate your life story you try to make it coherent without considering its correspondence with the reality of the lived life. For many people, this is the first reflexion of their life in its holistic perspective (as a unit). This very situation challenges more than ever the perception of life in its linear time development (continuity); the logical or rather pseudo-logical organization of truly disparate sequences of events (coherence); and the feeling of solidarity with other people's stories as a certain genre of archetypal proximity (universality). You do not reveal this coherence any better in a dialogue, a conversation, or in your own interpretation. Coherence is thus the ideal goal, but not necessarily the reality, and you have to be aware of this difference.

Individuals tell us how their identities (parental, professional, marital, etc.) function in their life stories and also how these identities conflict or fit with each other. Elliot G. Mishler (1999) raises the question whether it is useful to consider story lines as an attempt to create coherence strategies, or as ways of achieving a unitary sense of self in face of life changes. Can the notion of coherence be used to understand how individuals resolve tensions and reconfigure their identities? Mishler argues that coherence is a shibboleth in a narrative field of inquiry, forming a fundamental triad of assumptions alongside universality and continuity.

Although Mishler's heretic mission is dear to me, I believe that coherence as a criterion of the good story should not be fully rejected. One should take into account that human lives are full of incoherencies and discontinuities and the archetypal categories which are so useful in the literary science of the modernistic era may appear too ideal or even simplifying if they are intended to help us understand a human life. Should I rephrase Erich Kris (1952), I would say that coherence serves the feeling of the individual's identity or, if you like, the feeling of identity in relation to one's own life. A discourse on ethics would probably replace the term "coherence" with the term "the meaning of life". And from this perspective, even problematic terms such as coherence, continuity and universality are psychologically legitimate.

Life Story and Personal Narrativities

The telling of life stories brings along a specific kind of text, which can be called personal narrativity. This is autobiographic material. However, if it's gained through a dialogue between a participant-researcher and a participant-narrator, that is, if it is not adapted subsequently by the narrator, edited, elaborated or structured, it still is not autobiography, but a sort of a pre-

autobiography. This is a special kind of story, which is constructed by each of us to put together different parts of our own self into a meaningful and persuasive unit through dialogue or conversational discourse. The purpose of personal narratives is not to discover one's own self in the narrative, but rather to create oneself through the narrative. Personal narratives represent only one of all the ways by which the life is structured and configured. It is an act of imagination - an integrated model of remembering one's past, perceived present and anticipated future. From the standpoint of form and content, personal narratives may be regarded as the individual's identities. In accordance with this, the stories imitate life and present an internal reality to an external world. At the same time they shape and construct the narrator's reality and personality. The story is the identity of a man, it is the story created, narrated, revised and retold through one's life. You get to know who you are and find and reveal yourself to other people through your life stories.

The Methodology of Research on Life Stories

Life stories may serve a researcher as a key to an understanding of identity-both in its "real" or "historical" core, but also as a narrative construct. To rephrase Spence, they contain "narrative truth" (Spence, 1982), which may be strongly connected, either freely resembling or far from "historical truth". The stories are usually constructed around some core of life events and open up a wide space for replenishments and changes in emphases, ie. for an interpretation of "remembered facts".

A life story, which a participant offers in an interview, is not stable. It develops and changes throughout time. If the partial story is recorded and rewritten, the resulting text is frozen and you could say that it resembles a picture of a dynamically changing identity. You read the story as text and interpret it as a static product. As if you interpreted inner, ie. existing, reality, which is really constantly in flux (see Mishler, 1999).

Moreover, each story is influenced by the context in which it is narrated: by the goal of the interview; by the character of the audience and one's relationship with it, which are formed during the research between a narrator and a listener; by the resemblance of their cultural backgrounds; by the actual mood of the narrator, and so on. That's why the partial story represents only one (or more) of all the possible forms of an individual life story and identity. The life story told by a participant is thus a partial representation of polyphonic concert of life (Bachtin, 1981, 1988; Mishler, 1999).

The most complex approach to an analysis of life story telling is in my opinion "the model for classification and organisation of narrative analyses types" by Amia Lieblich, Rivka-Tuval Mashiach and Tamara Zilber (1998). Their model is based on a combination of two dimensions - holistic-categorical

and content-formal. From these two dimensions, four modes of narrativity reading can be abstracted: holistic-content, holistic-form, categorical-content and categorical-form. I used a combination of a holistic-content and a holistic-form mode for an analysis of personal narratives of probands.

Holistic-Content Mode

The story is considered as whole, which means that the researcher focuses on the entire story, especially on the content of the story. When a separate part of a story is interpreted, then this part is analysed in light of the content emerging from the rest of the narrativity or is read in the context of the whole story. In holistic content reading I was inspired by McAdams' interview format (McAdams, 1988, 1993) but I have not used it as dogma. After the spontaneous life-story telling I encouraged talking about key life-events, significant others and family, the future and projects, stresses and problems, personal "philosophy", feeling of coherence and change.

Holistic-Form Mode

The focus is on formal aspects of story rather than on its content. Every story can be characterized by its plot, structure of life events, narrative tuning in sense of comedy, tragedy, romance, satire, novel, and so on. The story moves on towards the present moment in the teller's life or on the contrary diverges from it. The narrator can search for a climax or turning point in the life-story, which could be important for the understanding of the entire life course. Gergen and Gergen (1988) conclude that every story is characterised by its plot, which is discerned by so called plot analysis. They found three basic life-course patterns - progression, regression and steady. According to them the three formats can be combined into a more complex plot, which Amia Lieblich, Rivka Tuval-Mashiach and Tamara Zilber (1998) found in their narrative interviews. They interpreted them as a moratorium, trial and error, slowly ascending, risk and gain, and descent and gain. In my own analysis I have been inspired by both these findings and also by the original projective method of the Czech psychologist J. Tyl (1985, quoted also in Řičan and Ženatý, 1988). This method was called the life-line.

The Life-Line Method

Participants were instructed to draw the line which represents their life-course. I asked them also to mark the spot where they feel they are now (present moment) and after that they were asked to enter their events which they consider to be significant in their life. The life-line method is widely used in psychotherapy in order to stimulate therapist-client dialogue on client's life troubles. Knobloch and Knobloch (1979) or Adler and Rungta (2002) used the idea of the life-line technique in a different way.

Findings

I interviewed 52 adult non-patient subjects (aged from 38 to 42, 20 men, 32 women). In the narrative material I found the following genres:

Life-crisis - small loss and fast recovery

Graphic expression of genre	Example
	

Life is seen as full of distresses, which are quickly coped with; it is not useful for the subject to have too many positive expectations concerning his life-course. The positive form of this life-story genre would be the use of efficient coping strategies, a quick disappearance of negative emotions or a fast return to previous level of emotional tuning. At the opposite end of this genre continuum we can find repression of emotion, avoidance of feelings, marginalization of personally significant events and the experience of tension and guilt feeling.

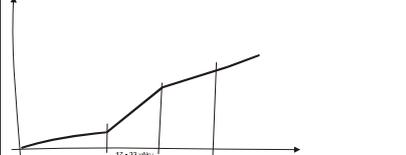
Slowly ascending

Graphic expression of genre	Example
	

Life is conceived as a natural drift upward, as enrichment by foreseeable life-experiences.

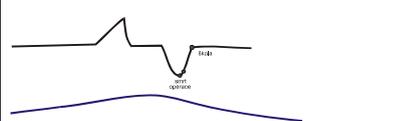
At the positive pole we have certain and slow progress and growth, stability, self-confidence and belief in others, while at the negative pole we see a tendency to anticipate that unexpected or unpredicted events will cause an emotional disaster.

Planned gain with appreciated risk

Graphic expression of genre	Example
	

Life is seen as a chain of perpetual deciding, where gain is being prepared and risk of loss is not being excluded. The positive form of this consists of resilience against disappointments, while the negative form shows expediency, instrumental relations to people, egoism, and a lack of spontaneity.

Life-crisis - fall and dash

Graphic expression of genre	Example
	

Life crises are deep and capability for not giving up is considerable. The positive form of this genre includes emotional engagement, capability for stamina restoration, vitality, and resilience. On the opposite side you can find emotional vulnerability or/and strong signs of depression.

Moratorium

Graphic expression of genre	Example
	

Life is seen as something that is given inherently and that one cannot influence. Both positive and negative experience is accepted without any strong emotions. The positive form of this takes a stable adaptation, optimal arousal, good self-control, while the negative form consists of shallow emotions, feelings of

boredom and emptiness, the burn-out syndrome, loss of life-meaning, extreme self-control and conformity, blindness to life challenges, a non-creative life.

Metanoia

Graphic expression of genre	Example
	

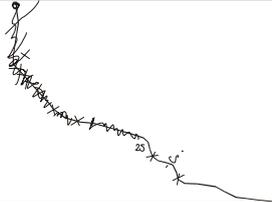
Metanoia means a shift in one's values, in one's self-evaluation, or a spiritual transformation, the sensing of new dimensions of human lives. Such a vision separates the individual for some time from his/her community and connects him/her with some other. It also refers to penitence in the religious sense of the word, a moral dictation to stop what you are doing so as to find the path toward something in front of you but out of sight (see in Frye, 1983/2000; Clarkson, 1992). This genre was detected in the life story of a woman from the sample. In this concrete case, metanoia meant a fundamental shift in the value content of her life, a period in which a transformation took place and was accompanied by confusion, meditation, intensive searching and balancing. The mind is characteristically massively flooded with existential questions, an individual searches again and again for the sense of life. It is a turning point, or an aligning moment in life, accompanied sometimes by regressive tendencies. Continuity is not interrupted if a way out is found and one's identity continues and one's previous life is not denied, but is evaluated positively overall.

Metanoia Genre of Life-Story - Narrative Research Example (Woman, 38 years old):

Well, this is a return to middle school, where it all began, then I studied at university, then I was in Brno ... something like four years, when I was employed, and this was the point where I decided to join the Fellowship (she became a nun) ... this was a certain maturity, but it's not really a question of maturity, but rather a major transformation, a return home ... In fact I wanted terribly to return home. I did return home and there it was totally different from when I left, in part because I had changed myself, but of course at first it was a terrible disappointment, and that accounts for my confusion ... I forgot something else ... I did not experience maturing as a tragedy, but this is such a rupture ... in fact I was looking for a direction, what next ... and then, when I had been employed for those four years, I kind of decided to change, to change my spiritual life ... those are two things, one a personal search, the other a deeper encounter with God, in short a great, fundamental decision. It had two components. It was 1990 that I

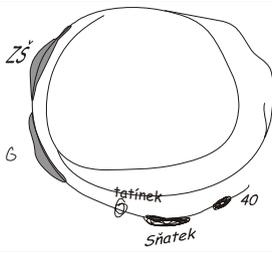
made the decision, it's interesting that that was also decisive for our society, even though I would not have connected it, but it may have had some connection, because even the fact that I could get to know the Fellowship a learn that this way even exists, was probably given by the fact that things began to loosen up a bit in society in '89. So the possibility of meeting this opportunity was greater than before. Before, it was all hidden and it all depended on the individual ... and I was not looking for it at the time.

Permanent descending

Graphic expression of genre	Example
	

Life is seen as a gradual decline from its very beginning. This entails regression, avoidance of problem solving, hopelessness, powerlessness, and a subtle or hardly noticeable suicidal tendency.

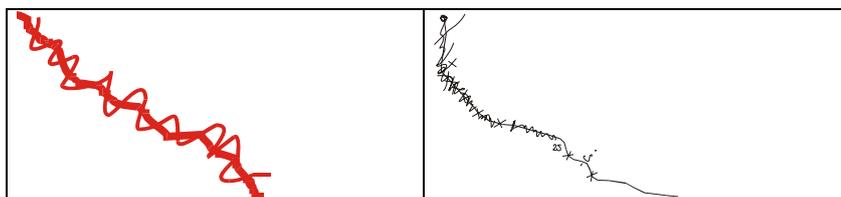
Spiral

Graphic expression of genre	Example
	

Life is seen as a gradual enlarging of connected circles, one's "me" is the locus of life. This includes the qualities of self-centredness, extravagancy, exhibition-ism, hysterical tendency, and narcissism.

Permanently shattering life line

Graphic expression of genre	Example



The prevailing shape of the life course is permanently shattered; the subject is not able to hold onto a coherent life-line. Here we see impulsivity, lack of self-control, disintegration, the borderline condition, psychopathy, and asocial tendency.

Discontinuity

We can expect that more genres of life story could be identified when we explore individuals with a different life experience. Based on the interview with one Czech emigrant, I found a genre which I called discontinuity. He did not draw his life-line but we can describe some important characteristics of this genre from his recounting. The life-course is interrupted by a crushingly strong experience. The experiences may be of different kinds, but are of great intensity; examples are trauma, a peak-experience, a nadir-experience, emigration, etc.

Brief Concluding Commentary

The life story telling through a life-line evokes very complex kind of memories unfolded on a time continuum. A narrator reflects the time course of his or her own life, which includes the past, the present and the future. I based my research on a formal-holistic concept of life as it is presented by the shape of the life-line. Before I started to question a narrator to understand some of life events from his/her point of view, I would let the participant spontaneously tell his/her life story. This spontaneous narration served as a basis for holistic-content analysis, with the help of which I tried to identify the content of the core personal narrativity. The combination of both analyses led me to classify the narrators' life story genres. An analysis of spontaneous narration revealed two basic psychologically relevant content modes in a life story - coping with burdens (behavioural level) and emotional tuning (experience level). It is possible to identify both positive and negative aspects of these two dimensions in each genre category. The genres, which I identified, don't strictly correspond with those represented in literature - a romance, a comedy, a satire, or a tragedy. But if I had used another type of analysis, I could have discovered narration similar to these categories. I looked through the participant's life-

stories and it seems to me that these classical genres emerged within each of the life-stories “genres”. However, I did not include an analysis of classical Frye’s categories into this paper.

It is clear that in one life-course combinations of several life-line categories are often found. It is appropriate to expect some differences between male and female concept of story-line but the focus of this paper has not been on that issues.

From the methodological point of view, a holistic-formal analysis should be followed by separate analysis of life-time-parts. Moreover, a narrative or thematic analysis of the interview about the life-line and a detailed inquiry should be also added. Psychological credibility of a life line is always the result of elaborate questioning and a narrative or thematic analysis of the interview.

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