Narrative competence and the meaning of life.

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

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Summary

How can we assess the ways in which people construe meaning in life? 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. As the overall study seeks to relate qualitative assessment of narrative competence with quantitative measures of well-being and quality of the caring relationship, we have developed a standardized multidimensional procedure for analyzing interviews and measuring narrative competence. In our experimental design, we will be able to capture development and change in the stories of an individual. This chapter presents the method for the narrative analysis of the quality of life stories, exemplifies it by a case study, and clarifies its implicit theological dimensions.

Introduction

It may seem slightly outlandish to present an empirical theological project on 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 measures? And is it possible to measure in any objective way the competence with which people construe and tell their life stories? Narrative methods, after all, are not particularly known for their sophistication in generating hard empirical evidence. These considerations bring us close to the theme of this volume as we are developing an instrument to move from texts to tables, from narrative material to standardized measures.

The vantage point of this project is the conviction that the narrative construction of meaning is essential in how people experience and live their lives. This reflects the narrative turn in for example social sciences and theology. One

implication is that our research focuses on the particularities of individual autobiographies rather than on generalized aspects of a population. Another implication is that identity is seen as a dynamic process of constructing and reconstructing meaningful and viable life stories. That means that narrative competence becomes an important factor for understanding the ways in which individuals live and understand their lives.

The work presented in this paper is part of a larger project on elderly care, in which we try to capture the development in life stories and their connection to well-being and quality of the caring relationship. The project has an experimental design with a control group, an intervention (writing a Life Story Book) and data collection (measurement immediately before and after the intervention and five months later). At this point we only present the methods we have developed for assessing narrative competence in the brief narrative interviews that are part of the project. We will demonstrate this method in a case study that is part of the larger project and discuss the theological ramifications. The results from the larger project will be presented at a later stage.

The structure of this paper will be as follows: we first introduce and explain the methods we are developing. In a second step we demonstrate the method in a case study. Finally, we discuss the theological dimension of the project and instrument. In the appendix we give some context by outlining the design of the larger project.

Analyzing the narrative autobiographical interviews

Notwithstanding an increasing amount 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, narrative identity and the experience of meaning. The research on reminiscence and life review until now addresses mainly the effects on the quality of life or subjective well-being. Research seeking to explain the effects is still in its infancy (see e.g. Haight & Hendrix 1995; Schroots & Dongen 1995; Bohlmeijer 2007; Nieuwesteeg, Oste et al. 2005). We have some insight in the correlation between types of reminiscence activities in life stories and successful aging. Wong (1995), Fry (1995), and others suggest that reminiscence has impact on the narrative organization of the personal identity. This may help us understand the mechanisms of reminiscence and life review work, but these authors provide only some indications of intra-personal and extra-personal factors that might be conditional for successful reminiscence.

The lack of a satisfactory explanation is a hindrance for the implementation of life history or life review methods. Time and again working with life history methods or doing life review work is discredited by the suggestion that it is just another way of giving attention to elderly people and that the narrative form has no additional value. A clarification of the mechanisms through which narrative methods are helpful may provide insights in the specific

contribution of these methods to the well-being of elderly people. Furthermore, it may support an understanding that life stories of care receivers are integral to health and care and not the exclusive domain of therapeutic or religious conversations.

The central question of the analysis of the life narratives in this project 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. Underlying our approach is a multidimensional model of narrative as a developed by Ganzevoort (1998; Ganzevoort & Visser 2007). In this model six dimensions of narrative are described. Structure describes elements like time, place, causality, and degree of integration. Perspective addresses authorship and subjectivity. Role assignment deals with the roles that others (and the person him/herself) play in the story. Tone refers to emotion and genre. Next to these four dimensions of the story as text, we distinguish two dimensions of the story as a process of telling.) Relational positioning deals with the performative actions through which the narrator seeks to shape the relationship with her/his audience. Justification finally describes how the narrator convinces the audience of the plausibility of the story. In this analysis we focus on the dimension of structure.

We regard the interviews as instances of the construction of meaning by the participant. The constructed meaning is not static, stable, or complete. It is, even in high age, the momentary outcome of an ongoing process. People do not tell their life stories in a fully developed and final form, but they construe meaning at their actual point in life, facing unique and real circumstances. In the case of these interviews the construction of meaning is influenced by the interview context. Furthermore, the momentary construction relates to the life course and its vicissitudes on the one hand, and to the personal life view, values, and/or ideological frames on the other. Our focus on the narrative construction of meaning rests 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'. We are of course aware that objectifying and quantifying narrative data is not very common in practical theology and other social sciences. Some would even state that objectifying narrative data betrays the unique and subjective character of autobiographical stories. This is obviously true in one sense: the personal construction of meaning is not simply an example of a universal pattern. It is, however, not against a subjective hermeneutical approach of life stories if we try to assess the structural aspects of stories. In our view these structural aspects are closely related to the

unique content and the study of narrative quality supports other narrative investigations.

In conducting the brief narrative autobiographical interviews, we used an extremely open interview method. After informing the participants that the interview would last about 30 minutes, the interviewer commenced with one standardized question: 'would you please tell me your life story?' The interviewer only interfered when the narrator came to a full standstill. The interventions were kept as minimal and formal as possible: repeating the last sentence, asking whether there was anything else the person would like to add, or - in case the participant was still unable to continue the narration - a general opening question about a theme already mentioned by the participant. We had 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 him/herself and not a structure imposed on the story by the interviewer. This open starting question creates some tension in the beginning. After some hesitation, however, most participants start telling their life story.

The first analysis of the life stories shows that there is a similar narrative order in most of the stories. The first (and usually longest) part consists of a more or less chronological overview of the person's life. In two thirds of the stories this first part is followed by a thematic section in which the narrator revisits some of the episodes in more detail or gives lively and illuminating anecdotes matching these episodes. In some cases, the narrator adds a new episode in this second part, usually an episode of shame or trauma. Most stories end with descriptions of what life is like in the nursing home.

Criteria for narrative quality

Essential in our analysis is the assessment of changes in the narratives between the three moments we collected the stories and interpret them in terms of quality. For that purpose, we developed formal and material narrative categories that can be operationalized, objectified, and generalized so that they can be used in a larger sample. These categories need to be related to the issues of life review and narrative described earlier. Moreover, the categories should be open to both 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). Especially the criterion of coherence is strongly supported by other life story researchers (Barclay 1996, Brugman 2000, Bruner 1990, Klein 1994; Klein 2003, McAdams 1988; McAdams 1993, Schroots & Dongen 1995, Schütze 1983; Wong 1995; Wong & Watt 1991, and others). Coherence refers to the semantic cohesion and logical ordering of the story. Fragmentation and unintelligibility are the opposites of this criterion.

Differentiation refers to the different themes the narrator includes in the stories. Its opposite is massiveness. Flexibility finally refers to the degree the narrator masters the story and is not blocked by obsessions or the fixation on only one theme. Its opposite is rigidity.

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. Every narrator is faced with the challenge to construct the life story in such a way that it complies with these three fundamental assumptions. Many narrators are at pains to solve the conflicts in their story when they are unable to synthesize these three fundamental assumptions. They 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 any narrative: a phenomenal, an epiphenomenal and a metaphenomenal level. We add a fourth or preliminary level, that indicates the fluency in narrating and rename Barclay's levels as linguistic, thematic, and plot-level. The first level in our analysis then 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. The fourth level is concerned with the overarching plot. Much research devoted to the quality of life stories is restricted to only one of these levels. Some focus on aspects of eloquence, some on grammatical characteristics, some on the quality of episodes or the coherence of storylines and some are confined to the nature of the plot. In our method for analysis we set out to establish changes on all four levels in order to examine the mutual dependency of the story levels.

Regarding to the *narrating process*, we expect to find effects on the narrative competence in the sense that respondents would tell their story more fluently after the experimental intervention with the Life Story Book Method, due to their practicing in telling their stories. We believe that this will be an indication of the narrative mastery of the narrator and the flexibility of the narrative. In terms of

fundamental assumptions, we expect that a low sense of meaningful coherence or 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 mastery.

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 (cf. Schütze 1983; Barclay 1996, Brugman 2000, Klein 2003). Self-worth changes are expected in the frequency of the use of first-person expressions. We further expect that the narrator, for whom the assumption of order is challenged, will use more words to describe an episode (Janoff-Bulman 1991; De Vries, Blando et al. 1995).

On the *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 what function the reminiscence has for the participant, e.g. just informing and entertaining, or evaluating and integrating. 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 valuation. We distinguish between episodes with a redemption or contamination sequence (McAdams and Reynolds et al. 2001). Redemption sequence refers to a bad situation, followed by some kind of relief and a contamination sequence is the reverse. This phenomenon is 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 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 will return to baseline levels after some time, whereas we expect a lasting increase for the experimental group.

On the *plot-level*, we expect no substantial changes. Although McAdams (2006) and Freeman (1991) suggest 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 in which this research project is located, we analyse 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. They can be considered to be the psychological correlates of elementary theodicy notions as we will demonstrate below. On both the psychological and theological level we see how existential themes are addressed. These existential themes allow for an interplay between the two disciplines.

Applying the model: Mr. Samuelson finds communion

It may be helpful to illustrate our analytical approach with the life narratives of one participant from the experimental group. We will present the narrative of mr. Samuelson, 85 years old. Like all participants, he told his life story three times, firstly right before he started to make his life story book (t0), secondly right after he completed the book (t1) and thirdly 5 months after that (t2).

Mr. Samuelson was born in a Jewish family in a German village and grew up facing the threat of the rising Nazi-regime of Hitler. In his youth 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 studies. He started working at a plumbing firm, got his diplomas and later joined a kibbutz in the northern part of Germany. He became an active member of the Zionist movement and considered emigration to Palestine, but was taken captive and held prisoner in Sachsenhausen. With help of the Dutch government he was freed and moved to the Netherlands. He again joined a Zionist youth movement. Soon after that, war broke out in the Netherlands and he had to go into hiding. Despite the fact he didn't have any money his boss arranged a hiding place for him at a farm. There he met the daughter of the farmer and fell in love with her. After the war he tried to move to Palestine but he didn't succeed. He started a search for his parents, but no one from his family had survived. He then decided to return to his fiancé in the Netherlands. He married the farmer's daughter, fathered two daughters, lived a happy family life, and had a successful career as a metal worker. Following the death of his wife, he moved to a home for the elderly.

First level: the narrating process

Regarding the process, we classified t0 as rather fluent, t1 and t2 as very fluent. On all three occasions little or no intervention was required. Mr. Samuelson started and ended the story all three times without external admonition. Silences sounded naturally. This indicates (according to our theoretical framework) a rather high narrative competence for all three interviews and only a small increase of mastery and of experienced benevolence. We may expect form these results that the level of coherence on the linguistic level will not increase highly.

Second: the linguistic level

At the linguistic level we score the density of terms of place (locality-index), time (time-index), causal connections (causality-index) and subject-verb clauses (subject-verb-index), with special attention to the proportion between first person

and third person constructions. In the case of mr. Samuelson both the time and locality-index increase from t0 to t2 (time-index: 0.023 (t0) - 0.027 (t1) - 0.034 (t2); locality-index: 0.041 (t0) - 0.044 (t1) - 0,045 (t2)). The causality-index increases from t0 to t1 and falls back a little on t2 but not under the level of t0 (0.005 (t0) - 0.012 (t1) - 0.009 (t2)). The same holds for the subject-verb-index (0.099 (t0) - 0.115 (t1) - 0.112 (t2)). All this is, as we described above, an indication of increasing coherence, be it in a moderate way.

As for the proportion between first person and third person verb-constructions an increase of the first person subject-verb clause is established (0.034 (t0) - 0.039 (t1) - 0.048 (t2). This can be interpreted as an increasing sense of narrative autonomy and thus of increasing self-worth. He tends to tell his life story more and more from his own perspective rather than from the perspective of other persons. The narrator focuses on his own contribution in his life story. We may expect that this will correlate with an increase of instrumental and integrative reminiscence, for these functions of reminiscence are used when people tell their stories from their own perspective and in an evaluating way.

Third: thematic level

At the thematic level we divide the story in episodes. The episodes are coded with general themes (the content of the episode), e.g., family, war, education etc. In the analysis we attributed 48 (t0), 38 (t1) and 29 (t2) thematic labels to the episodes: 16 different labels at t0, 20 at t1 and 14 at t2. That means that the differentiation of the story is decreasing. Mr. Samuelson is focusing his story on a smaller number of themes, possibly for reasons of selecting only the essential parts of the life story.

We have to keep in mind that the use of general themes does not give an adequate insight into the narrative significance of the contents. To account for this, we developed an additional approach of identifying storylines, closer to the narrative character, to establish the thematic coherence of the story. We summarized every episode in one sentence, a description of the micro-story told at the episode (e.g., 'Thanks to the support of my children and my best friend, I didn't break down when my husband left me'). This summary has to be isomorphic to the content and structure of the topic. That's why we call it a mini-plot. In a next step we order these mini-plots in storylines consisting of episodes with comparable themes. This 'snap shot' provides information about the differentiation and coherence of the story. In the case of mr. Samuelson we discerned 10 storylines at t0, 11 storylines at t1 and again 10 storylines at t2, which leads to the conclusion that 'the thematic backbone' of his story is very stable. But when we look closer at the distribution of the episodes per storyline we discern that mr Samuelson is thickening the story. He tells a similar story using less episodes (mean episodes per storyline: 2,4 (t0), 1,6 (t1), 1,4 (t2)). This means that mr. Samuelson is able to tell his story in fewer words and episodes, without losing essential elements of the content. This is an indication of a rather high and indeed growing narrative competence and a high degree of coherence and flexibility. We

may expect that this correlates with an increasing use of instrumental and integrative reminiscence. It is remarkable that the storylines containing most episodes (at all thee interview moments) are about the war and the persecution of the Jews and about his marriage and the death of his wife. We hypothesize that storylines containing many episodes regard either the essential material of the personal identity (e.g., work or family life) or difficult themes the narrator has to cope with. In the case of mr. Samuelson, we think the latter will be the case, partly because he explicitly says so: 'Actually, I'm thinking about the war and everything all my life.'

The function of reminiscence is changing over the three interviews. The percentage of informative reminiscence (just providing plain biographical information) is decreasing whereas the percentage of instrumental (telling about achieving personal goals) and particularly integrative reminiscence (evaluating and integrating the fruits of life) is increasing (informative: 71% (t0), 67% (t1), 36% (t2); instrumental: 21% (t0), 17% (t1), 29% (t2); integrative 8% (t0), 17% (t1), 36% (t2)). That means that mr. Samuelson tends to look back on his life with a more evaluating view. This correlates, as we expected, with the fact that he tells his story in a more concentrated way and more from his own perspective.

We also analysed the use of sequences in the episodes, using a sequence scoring instrument designed by McAdams and Reynolds et al. (2001). The percentage of contamination sequences (good situations turning to bad) is slightly decreasing and the percentage of redemption sequence (bad situations turning to good) is increasing, but only some months after the Life Story Book intervention (contamination: 21% (t0), 6% (t1), 7% (t2); redemption: 17% (t0), 17% (t1), 29% (t2)). That means that mr. Samuelson more and more stresses the good outcome in the episodes. This allows the interpretation that a relation exists between focussing on essential parts, thickening the storylines, and stressing positive outcomes. Or, in other words: that episodes with positive outcomes facilitate coherency and integrative reminiscence. It could be expected that these findings on the thematic level may correlate with a change in plot, for the use of contamination sequences is related to a tragic or a romantic plot with negative outcome, whereas the use of redemption sequences is related to a comic or romantic plot with a positive outcome.

Fourth: plot-level

In the case of mr. Samuelson the plot of t0 can be identified as romantic with a positive outcome. Mr Samuelson tells how he did overcome the severe struggles he met in life and states solemnly that eventually he was fully integrated in Dutch society. He emphasizes his own contribution to the relatively positive outcome of his life. This story therefore could be characterized as: 'How mr. Samuelson found a home.' The t1 and the t2 stories are similar in two aspects: he tells again about the struggles in life and the relatively possible outcomes. But he does not put emphasis on his own contribution to the positive outcome as he did in t0. Instead he regards his life under a more passive perspective; things did turn out good or

bad. He admits that his life has always been overshadowed by the war. 'My life story is not very sparkling, it is overshadowed by the war.' (t1) and 'In fact, when I look back, my whole life was dominated by the war.' The plot is a combination of a comic plot and a tragic plot. We interpret this as a sign that writing his Life Story Book has helped mr. Samuelson to forego his attempts to escape the tragic components in his life by construing a life story of conquering and finding a home. Instead the tragic aspects of his life are given more space, most importantly the loss of his family and the sense of not really being home.

Resumé

In terms of the fundamental assumptions, we see that mr. Samuelson tells the three stories with an increasing degree of self-worth, evident from the linguistic level, which indicates that he tells his story form his own perspective. Paradoxically, this increase in autonomy on the side of the narrator goes hand in hand with the admission that the protagonist within the story seems less autonomous in determining his own life. It may be that an increase in narrative competence leaves room for the narrator to recognize the lack of autonomy in his life course. Increasing self worth of the narrator provides him with the power to face the dark sides of his life. On benevolence we see that mr. Samuelson does not focus only 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. In the first story he downplays the role of the malicious aspects. In the second and third story he integrates the comic and the tragic line and keeps them in tension, without losing the coherence of the story. The benevolent aspect is the most important factor in his overall plot at t1 and t2. On the aspect of order we see that his stories are very well organized with many parallels and causality. Although he maintains the order at t0 by diminishing the impact of some painful episodes at t0, episodes like the death of his parents, and the separation from his brother, he manages to integrate the negative impact of these episodes and even improves the coherence of the story at t1 and t2. 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 not so much on customary religious material, but 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, and inform 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 existential or ultimately 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 taking 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 people 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.

The project we are involved in should be seen against the background of developments in elderly care in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Western societies. Although there is an increasing stress on medical and economical rationality in the ways our systems of care are organized, we also witness new attention to the 'softer' dimensions of emotional well-being, relational commitment, and existential meaning. In the Dutch context, healthcare professionals experiment with concepts of care structured by the needs, perceptions and wishes of the elderly. These 'new' concepts are labeled client-centered care, relationship-centered care, perception-oriented care, or 'warmhearted' care. All these approaches share an interest in personal meaning and relationship as the essential characteristics of good care. Effective care needs to attune to the meanings a client attributes to health, illness, relationships, everyday activities etcetera. Solitude for example has different meanings for different people. Some people suffer existentially from solitude, or experience it as loneliness; others accept solitude as part of the elderly life or even prefer it from time to time. In order to provide good care, healthcare professionals need to be aware of the meanings clients attach to experiences in their lives. The life story of clients is in this approach commonly seen as the main entrance to this dimension of giving meaning. It is not a surprise then that caregivers use reminiscence techniques to gather relevant information about the individual meaning structures of clients. One of the methods focusing on reminiscence and the life story is the creation of Life Story Books. Clinical experience shows that these methods may have a positive effect on well-being and the caring relationship (see e.g. Hansebo & Hihlgren 2000; Clarke, Hanson et al. 2003; Huizing & Tromp 2006; Kunz 2006). There is also some empirical evidence about the benefit of reminiscence

work (e.g. Bohlmeijer 2007; see for a review Haight, Coleman et al. 1995). We lack, however, more systematic empirical evidence that can inform management and policy of institutional elderly care. Our research project intends to provide that knowledge. Our choice to focus on actual life stories reflects our view of the significance of the individual construction of meaning for care givers.

Appendix: The larger research project

For reasons outlined above, the Dutch governmental funding agency ZonMw decided to launch a project to assess the effects of narrative methods in the context of elderly care. The primary aim of our overall research project is to establish and explain the effects of life review methods on well-being and the quality of care. 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 hypothesis of the project is that narrative approaches will yield positive effects and the explanation for the expected effects of the narrative method will be sought in the narrative nature of the intervention. Our main hypothesis therefore is that the effects of our intervention method on well-being and quality of the caring relationship will be the result of an improved quality of the life narrative or narrative competence. We thus 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 & Heimbrock 1998), implicit religion (Bailey 1997), religious coping (Ganzevoort 2001), and an ethics of care (Tronto 1993; Heijst 2005).

The research design of the larger research project is experimental. We developed a life review method, more precisely a standardized life story book method 'Open Cards' (Huizing & Tromp 2005)[1]. Professional nurses at the assistant level, trained in this method, engage in a series of seven encounters in which they talk with the elderly person about his or her life story. This is supported by a set of cards proposing a set of questions for seven different themes, like social relations, education-work-hobby's, religion-philosophy of life etc). In between the sessions, the client - where possible with a family member - collects photographs and other important documents and objects that deserve a place in the life story book. We used this life review method as the intervention in our experimental group (N=62), whereas we provided equal hours of extra attention for our control group (N=30). This extra attention took the form of taking a walk, shopping, having tea, or something alike, without: any intended or structured reminiscing activity. With three moments of interviewing for every participant (before (t0), immediately after (t1), and five months after the intervention (t2)), we effectively collected 220 brief narratives to be analyzed for narrative competence and quality. Next to these narratives, we collected for each

[1] To be published as *Mijn leven in kaart* (Huizing & Tromp in press).

interview-moment quantitative data about the quality of life and quality of the caring relationship. Furthermore, we asked the nurses and family members to complete questionnaires on motivation and satisfaction. The establishment of the effects of the life review intervention 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 eventually translated into quantifiable categories so that they can be connected with the quantitative data. This paper only focused on the method we developed for the narrative analysis.

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