The Self
We Live By

Narrative Identity in
a Postmodern World

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New York • Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
2000
The everyday technology of self construction stands at the junction of discursive practice and discourses-in-practice. Speaking figuratively, it’s an intersection where Garfinkel and Foucault might have crossed analytic paths, even though they worked with different empirical materials. One source of convergence would surely be the recognition of the artful yet locally structured stories that comprise the contemporary self in practice.

Social commentary and research are increasingly pointing to the narrativity of lives, showing how the storying of the self is actively rendered and locally conditioned. The personal story, especially, is being resuscitated as an important source of experiential data. Early texts are being revisited for their heuristic value (Allport 1942; Dollard 1935; Murray 1938; Shaw 1930, 1931; Thomas and Znaniecki 1927[1918–1920]), while narrative analysis has ascended as a significant procedural genre (see Alasuutari 1997; Cortazzi 1993; Dégh 1995; Denzin 1988; Hinchman and Hinchman 1997; Linde 1993; Richardson 1990, 1991; Riessman 1990, 1993). Over and over, we are relearning that selves are constructed through storytelling (Ezzy 1998, Randall 1995).

The collection and analysis of personal stories are becoming more methodologically self-conscious than ever (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992, Shotter and Gent 1989). Leading work in the area rarely takes stories simply to more-or-less represent individual experience through time. Narrative analysts no longer view storytellers and their accomplices as having unmediated access to experience, nor do they hold that experience can be conveyed in some pristine or authentic form separate from the institutions and events of the day (see Atkinson 1997, Scott 1995). On the contrary, stories—especially those of the self—are now analyzed as much for the ways in which storytellers and the conditions of storytelling shape what is conveyed, as for what their contents tell us about the selves in question.

This is a broad and complex landscape, to be sure. The self’s stories are definitive at work, not on holiday. Narrators artfully pick and choose from what is experientially available to articulate their lives and experiences. Yet, as they actively craft their narratives, they also draw from what is culturally available, storying their lives in recognizable ways. Narratives of the self don’t simply re-internalize us to motivate and guide our actions, nor do they lurk behind our backs as social templates to stamp us into selves according to the leading stories of the day. The narrative landscape of self construction is clearly also a busy one.

What discursive practices effect the process by which available images and understandings are assembled into accountable identities? Our answer will show that storytellers are not the mere narrative puppets of their actions. Personal a
counts are built up from experience, differentially combined, and actively cast in preferred vocabularies, even while this is sensitive to the circumstances. If Foucault (1975, 1977, 1978a, 1978b, 1980) has shown that the discourses of particular sites and institutions establish conceptual limits for storytelling, the local and the particular continually insinuate themselves to construct diversity and difference in the stories that emerge. In practice, the technology of self construction extends beyond the institutional apparatuses that designate subjectivities into the integral everyday interpretive work done to locally construct who and what we are (see Garfinkel 1967).

**Investigating Narrative Practice**

Narrative practice lies at the heart of self construction. It is a form of interpretive practice, a term we use to simultaneously characterize the activities of storytelling, the resources used to tell stories, and the auspices under which stories are told (Gubrium and Holstein 1998). Considering the self in terms of narrative practice allows us to analyze the relation between the hows and what's of storytelling; analysis centers on storytellers engaged in the work of constructing identities and on the circumstances of narration, respectively. We can view the storytelling process as both actively constructive and locally constrained. Put differently, our approach is concerned with the activeness and spontaneity of performativity (Bauman 1986), on the one hand, and attending to the narrative resources and auspices implicated in storytelling (Mills 1940[1963]), on the other.

Resources are broadly construed. They might include any and all experiences that can be accountably incorporated into personal stories, ranging from brief recollections of an event to blow-by-blow renderings of a virtual lifetime of experience. “Coherence structures” (Linde 1993) provide another kind of resource. They work like language games that are locally available for casting selves in preferred ways, with particular themes and plot lines. Professional or institutional models of treatment, such as behavior modification systems or twelve-step programs, are prime examples. Institutional settings of all sorts provide the narrative auspices in particular relationships for which the categories are practically consequential. Institutions, among other expanding sites for storying experience, provide occasions for conveying selves—for what is taken to be relevant in our lives, and why the lives or experiences in question developed the way they did. In some sense, these settings incite participants to construct the stories they need to do their work. But they don’t do so completely on their own terms. Our aim is to make visible the way the narrative activities of such going concerns play out in everyday practice to both produce coherent selves and construct diversity and difference.

While we tend to focus on the formal organizational or professional auspices of storytelling (for example, Gubrium and Holstein 1993, 1997), self construction also orients broadly to the interpretive mandates, controls, and constraints of group membership more generally. For example, in the right circumstances, membership in racial, ethnic, or gendered groups carries with it distinctive auspices that some call “standpoints,” which significantly shape storytelling (see Andersen and Collins 1998; Anzaldua 1987; Collins 1990; Denzin 1997a, 1997b; Quiroz and Ragland 1998; Seidman 1996; Smith 1974; Trinh 1991). Along with membership in such social categories come the identity implications of being embedded in particular relationships for which the categories are practically consequential. Rephrasing what Denzin (1991) and others suggested in Chapter 4, race, class, and gender are deep reservoirs of self-construction resources comprising influential conditions for self-narration.

As significant as these “standpoints” are for the storying of selves, however, it is still important, analytically, to allow for the standpoints’ contextual realization and not to essentialize the narratives that result from them. As penetrating as racial or gendered identity might be, it still shares experiential space with myriad other sources of the self; self construction isn’t one-dimensional. As Judith Butler (1990) points out in relation to gendered identity, for example, it is problematic to discuss women in general because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (p. 3)

To this we should add the myriad going concerns of everyday life which also shape women’s selves, from their intimate relationships, marriages, and families to their professional, occupational, and recreational affiliations. As Trinh Minnha (1992) suggests, the question of identity is moving away from traditional queries into who am I to progressively become questions of when, where, and how am I. Noting that “There is no real me to return to, no whole self that synthesizes the woman, the woman of color, and the writer” (p. 157), she underscores the need to view the various incarnations of a gendered or racial self in relation to an individual’s full round of everyday going concerns.

While the various standpoint theories have certainly enriched our understanding of sources of the self, their propensity to essentialize and homogenize the realities of race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality has both oversimplified and overly specified the more general technology of self construction. Writing about this penchant for totalizing identity in relation to race or ethnicity, Pablo Vila (1997, p. 148) suggests that people articulate the self "in any number of social relations whose meaning—however fragmented, contradictory, or partial—is
narratively constructed” and “mediated” by myriad possible “anchors” of the identity construction process. Taking issue with some standpoint theorists, Vila argues against the homogenization of racially grounded experiences and identities, suggesting instead that the experiential “borderlands” that implicate race are also the complex intersections of myriad other related concerns. Calling upon the later work of Renato Rosaldo (1994), Vila argues for a sensitivity to the differentiation of racially grounded experiences, and, by implication, for an awareness of variegated racial identities within racial communities. Race, class, and gender, like other going concerns, always compete for their roles in the self's stories; they never exclusively determine their plots.

Stories thus reflect their sources and circumstances, but they also take shape through their active narration. Years ago, Dell Hymes (Cazden and Hymes 1978) underscored the importance of not setting the internal organization of stories against the study of storytelling. Commenting on the then “current movement to go beyond [the] collection and analysis of text, to [the] observation and analysis of performance,” Hymes argued for a “[third moment] continuous with the other, this third [being] the process in which performance and text live.” He referred to this as practice, viewed it as grounded in everyday life, and considered it to be ethnographically accessible. Our approach derives in part from Hymes' third moment, which neither dissolves stories into a self-referential performance, nor overshadows the artfulness of storytelling with the structure and themes of stories in their own right.

Norman Denzin (1989) and Matti Hyvärinen (1996) have recently reiterated this sentiment. Criticizing Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) diatribe against biographical coherence, Denzin writes:

> The point to make is not whether biographical coherence is an illusion or reality. Rather, what must be established is how individuals give coherence to their lives when they write or talk self-autobiographies. The sources of this coherence, the narratives that lie behind them, and the larger ideologies that structure them must be uncovered. Bourdieu's general position glosses [over] the complexities of this process. (P. 62)

Dispelling the polarities of coherence and diversity, which relate respectively to modern and postmodern sensibilities, Hyvärinen succinctly poses the pertinent question: “How do individuals give both coherence and diversity to their lives when they write or talk self-autobiographies?” (p. 3).

As texts of experience, personal stories are not complete before their telling, but are assembled in relation to interpretive needs. There are discernible circumstances for narratively conveying our identities. There are audiences with stories of their own who listen to what we communicate, and these audiences may have quite definite preferences for particular plots and themes (see Gubrium and Buckholdt 1982). In other words, narratives are occasioned, put together in the context of particular times and places; these circumstances influence how the self might be storied by presenting local relevancies. Storytelling thus wends its way between the substantive task at hand, which is the composition of a story, and these interpretive considerations within the circumstances of storytelling.

The coherence of a personal story is not a simple matter of internal consistency. A life or self described and heard as coherently relating who or what we are on one occasion may not come off in the same way on a different occasion. How a story is put together is sensitive to local understandings about how a story is composed. What may be a humorous tale about a “bad boy” in one situation and heard as one of those “boys will be boys” stories, might better be narrated more diagnostically in a different situation under the auspices of a more clinical concern, for example. Such occasioned differences suggest that anyone's personal story may have multiple coherences, linked to the circumstances of its telling. As a result, the diverse circumstances and shifting narrative auspices of contemporary life present remarkable diversity in who and what we are taken to be.

Still, the occasioned nature of stories and the selves they convey are not separate and distinct from the process of storytelling. Storytelling itself contributes to the circumstances of its own narration; the active storyteller shapes the occasion in the process of conveying his or her account. For example, on the occasion of a medical review, clinical staff may earnestly elaborate a patient's identity in keeping with their appraisals of a sick body or disturbed mind. But a clinician may also sarcastically signal, with a prefatory remark such as “I ran into another one of those nut cases today,” that subsequent discussion of the condition and the identity of the patient in question should be taken with levity. This could very well be expanded into joking narratives of, say, the “[psychiatric] gems you run across in this kind of work.” In practice, circumstances are always the circumstance-at-hand. It's important to remember that narrative practice does not simply unfold within the interpretive boundaries of going concerns, but contributes to the definition of those boundaries in its own right.

**Narrative Composition**

If experience provides an endless supply of potentially reportable, storyable items, it is the incorporation of particular items into a coherent account that gives them meaning. Individuals compose their accounts; these do not come fully formed or organized on their own. While local and broader narrative formats offer familiar or conventional guidelines for how stories might unfold, they do not determine individual storylines. Who and what we are is not frozen in available discourses of subjectivity, even while the technical resources of those discourses—such as the use of police profiles of the so-called criminal mind—can have an established narrative momentum of their own in certain settings. Rather, the integral work of putting discourses into narrative play stretches the boundaries of the self on its own, supplying substance and organization.

There's a persistent interplay between what is available for conveying a story and how a particular narrative unfolds in practice; it's from this interplay that both self coherence and diversity develop. Telling one's story in the context, say, of a group that shares a relatively fixed repertoire of storylines presents one with a set of discernible plots, offering distinct ways of giving shape and substance to
who we are. But even in this context, individual stories become differentiated as biographical particulars enter into what is told.

**Narrative Linkage**

The meaning and coherence of a story, and of the self it conveys, are drawn from the linkages built between what is available to construct personal accounts, the biographical particulars at hand, and the related work of contextualizing who and what we are. (Recall our discussion of MCD analysis in Chapter 5.) Susan Chase’s (1995) book *Ambiguous Empowerment*—a study of career narratives—provides an interesting case in point. The study highlights the variable linkages and narrative slippages that exist between received cultural categories like race and gender and the way those categories are referenced (or ignored) to convey identity. Looking at contrasting stories, Chase captures the indeterminate yet skillfully organized interaction between race, culture, biography, and storytelling. There is considerable narrative play at work in the way shared understandings about power, success, and discrimination are brought to bear on matters of self-definition. It’s evident that cultural categories—which might be used as membership categorization devices—are not invoked in any automatic fashion, but, instead, provide narrative resources for constructing each story, so it’s distinguishable from the stories told by others in similar circumstances.

Analyzing in-depth interviews with women from various racial and ethnic backgrounds who work as superintendents in rural and urban school systems, Chase documents the diverse ways a successful professional career can be narratively assembled by those located in what for them amounts to an occupational borderland. The women all speak of professional power and success, on the one hand, and discrimination in a white and male-dominated occupation, on the other. Their stories, however, wind up being quite different. Chase asks how is it that a common standpoint in relation to work experience results in such diverse accounts? How do the women produce difference out of a shared institutional reality?

Chase presents four case studies and we briefly compare two of them for the way the respondents assemble their stories and, in turn, communicate their identities as career women of color. Anna Martinez, a Hispanic woman, excludes talk of discrimination and highlights competence in her narrative. She is asked about both the successes and the elements of inequality that shaped her career, topics which Martinez acknowledges as relevant to the lives of women superintendents, but she doesn’t talk in terms of discrimination. Chase notes that, like the other women, Martinez has trouble combining the contradictory themes of success, inequality, and discrimination into the same story.

Chase wonders, “How can she [Martinez] connect this story about subjection [to discriminatory practices] to her broader story about professional competence and commitment?” For Martinez, the solution is to construct an account whose success is built on a clear narrative separation of applicable themes. According to Chase, Martinez’s way of resolving the narrative tension is to exclude themes of discrimination from her account. Tellingly, in response to a question about whether ethnicity figured in her career, Martinez offers a “metastatement” or comment about what she is communicating: “Uh because [pause] although I recognize the inequities that exist I don’t dwell on them. [Chase: hm hmm] I don’t talk a lot about them” (p. 82). The ensuing story articulates the discourse of achievement.

Another respondent, Margaret Parker, an African-American woman, combines elements of various themes, putting her own artful gloss on the woman superintendent’s story. Parker doesn’t suppress themes of inequality and discrimination, but rather links them together with success into the story of a strong and resilient self. Her narrative uncovers layers of vulnerability and strength. As a woman and an African American seeking success in what is largely a white male world, Parker is admittedly vulnerable to discrimination throughout her career. She tells the story of job discrimination several times. But she also relates sources of inner strength. While Parker speaks of being discriminated against, her ability to work through the consequences adds to a tale of fortitude in the face of a variety, which narratively enhances both her career achievements and her self. The following comments refer to her way of handling her relations with a man who was hired for a job that should have been hers. Note how Parker uses the particular linkages to story her identity in the context of a particular career, as she concludes with the self-defining point, “That’s just who I am.” The following story articulates the discourse of fortitude.

And my people who were working with me were saying [whispering], “Boy how is she doing this? How is she taking this?” [Return to normal voice] Especially when the guy came on board [pause] and he was introduced to the cabinet as the assistant superintendent and everybody’s eyes sort of propped on me and I’m sitting there holding back all my feelings ‘cause I’m very pained, no question about that. [Chase: hm hmm] Um [pause], but I went right ahead doing my job and people’d see him and me standing talking together. They’d see us eating lunch together you know [Chase: hm hmm] and uh that’s just who I am. [Chase: hm hmm]

That’s just who I am. (Pp. 136–37)

**Narrative Slippage**

Both Martinez and Parker tell good stories, if that means displaying sequen
ty and making a point (see Gergen and Gergen 1986; Labov 1972, 1982; Polar 1979; van Dijk 1993). The stories are narrated in terms of how the women superintendents succeeded over time, despite the odds, to become leaders in their respective school systems. Their points are made in the context of the competitive themes of success and discrimination. But, while competently made, the points are quite different, due to the discourses they invoke, the categorization devices they deploy, and the ways they establish narrative linkages. Martinez builds her sense of self from and success that skirt issues of race and discrimination, while Parker links encounters with racial discrimination to her acquisition and demonstration of strength and character.

The differences between these stories highlight considerable narrative slippage. Recognizable cultural images of race and discrimination, as well as st
that's not the whole story. There's more to it. Celeste is Kim up to a point, just like you said Barb, but then the story changes. ([Discusses Celeste's own treatment program for temper control.]) I don't know. When Celeste starts in on her brother, it's just not the same story.

As Connie elaborates Celeste's story, she weaves elements of Barb's account of Kim's progress into her own narrative, assembling the story both in relation to the linkages Barb admirably constructed, and in terms of what "there is to it." Later in her account, Connie arranges her story to expressly reveal both similar and contrasting sets of linkages, highlighting behavioral programmin; and progress, on the one hand, and elaborating on what "more [there is to it], on the other. At one point, as if to inform us that her daughter Celeste's identity draws from more than one language game, Connie explains, "Here's another one of those places the story changes." As she continues, it's evident that she constrains her story explicitly with Barb's narrative in mind, as indeed Connie signaled she might do at the start of the preceding extract. Yet, like Chase's women superintendents, Connie also weaves common themes into a distinguishing stor; of her own, creating alternative identities for her daughter out of both shared and distinctly individualized linkages. At times, Celeste's subjectivity is linked to Kim's; at other times, it is constructed in contrasting terms.

From start to finish, Connie's narrative works both for and against a particular self for Celeste. Narrative options await Connie's and others' active in volvement to sort biographical particulars in relation to the self in question into a coherent account. The institutional context within which Connie's and others' stories are conveyed privileges narratives of attention deficits, emotional turmoil, lack of behavioral control, and the like. Institutional assessment transforms these themes into kinds and degrees of learning dysfunction, affective self control, and accumulated points in a token economy. Behaviors such as eye contact, temper control, and being on- or off-task are locally significant. Yet as Connie states in the extract and several other times in the meeting, there are other "things you don't really think about [in behavioral programming]." Sh accordingly hints at difference, giving notice that what is forthcoming will not be a simple matter of reproducing a shared story, but articulating related options for storyline.3

Optional linkages can be explicitly indicated in the prefatory specifications of perspective, where storytellers articulate possible points of view or the position from which they can construct their accounts. This also provides listeners a sense of the kinds of stories that could be told and various themes that might be emphasized. The following extract from another parent-effectiveness class is illustrative. Child-rearing practices are the topic of discussion and Tanya, a mother of three, has been asked whether she models herself after her parents in disciplining her own children, leading to the following response:

It depends. When my kids are really bad, I mean really bad, that's when I think how my mother used to do with us. You know, don't spare the rod or something like that in those days? But, usually, I feel that Mother was too harsh with us and I think that that kind of punishment isn't good for kids today. Better to talk about

**Narrative Options**

Options for composing an account can be evident within the storytelling process. References to potential linkages may be used reflexively to signal possible plots and themes. In the process, the possible stories adumbrate alternative selves, serving to present the potential subject in question in distinctive ways. For example, in parent effectiveness classes observed as part of the study of a residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed children, it wasn't uncommon for mothers and fathers to frame comments about their children as a set of alternative stories. Some stood in considerable contrast to the center's therapeutic philosophy, which privileged narratives of rational, behaviorally oriented parenting (Buckholdt and Gubrium 1979).

At one class meeting, for instance, a mother, Connie, responded in the following way to another mother, Barb, who had just told a brief story about how much progress her daughter, Kim, had made recently in controlling her temper. Connie commented on the way Barb's story was put together, contrasting it with how she, in turn, might have to assemble the story of her own daughter, Celeste.

> I like the way you said that, Barb. You know, the kinds of things you don't really think about [in behavioral programming]. It made me think about what I'd say if someone asked me how Celeste was doing. I guess if I tried hard enough Celeste would come out smelling like a rose, just like Kim maybe? But, sad to say,
it and iron things out that way. Still, like I say, it depends on how you want to think about it, doesn’t it?

By the end of the extract, we learn that the prefatory statement “it depends” marks two possible sets of linkages, both forming potentially good stories, but representing contrasting disciplinary identities, with different plots and morals. We can interpret Tanya’s account as initially pointing her listener to a story about her parenting concerns “when [her] kids are really bad.” In this story, Tanya comments that she thinks about discipline in terms of how her own mother acted, paraphrasing the maxim “spar[e] the rod and spoil the child” to highlight related sentiments, which are contrary to center policy. If she had continued with that story—developing its plots, themes, and identities—she might have reasonably made linkages with, say, the rampant breakdown of discipline in today’s younger generation. In that narrative context, her own mother would have served as a positive model for parenting, pointing to the need to be strict, lest children go out of control, as they now do. In that account, Tanya and her children’s identities reproduce those in her mother’s family.

Mid-response, however, Tanya begins to reveal another option for composing her narrative and its identities. While her initial, inchoate story foregrounded the excessive misbehavior of children, mid-course the account becomes a tale focused on the impropriety of corporal punishment, a familiar theme to the group. The prefatory phrase, “but, usually” sets off a shift to a different set of linkages, in which punishment rather than misbehavior is narratively highlighted. These linkages present a language game that orients more to consequences than causes. The story still relates to her mother’s disciplinary practices but produces a model of someone prone to exacting excess punishment, this time presenting the mother’s negative identity. Tanya states that, currently, “ironing things out” is more effective, now narratively reproducing one of the residential treatment center’s guiding principles, along with an institutionally preferred disciplinary identity.

Taken as a whole, the extract indicates that Tanya is aware she has two options for composing the story, extending the possibilities for defining who she and her mother are as parents and how her children will turn out as a result. At the end of the extract, it isn’t clear which set of linkages will form her story, which MCDs will predominate, or, indeed, whether she won’t combine them in some distinctive way, as Chase’s respondents did. Repeating “it depends,” Tanya offers a kind of metanarrative, in effect broaching a story about narrative options in its own right. She explains that what one makes of her own and her mother’s child-rearing experiences depends upon “how you want to think about it.” This not only signals the equally compelling narrative force of two quite different stories, with distinct implications for plot development and contrasting points about domestic discipline, but also evokes the narrative reflexivity that always lurks about the storytelling process to complicate narrative identity. Tanya effectively instructs her listeners that she is not just a narrator propelled by the stories she is prepared to tell, but that she also is aware that she is actively involved in deciding which story—which self—to convey, and how to formulate it.\(^5\)

Other things being equal, we find that storytellers like Tanya are not locked into particular narrative positions, but regularly and openly decide what direction to take in telling a story. They needn’t reproduce particular coherences, even if there are local imperatives suggesting that they do so, although storytellers are accountable for veering off locally preferred courses. They display their reflexive agency when, for example, they state that they have to think things over before answering, or that they recognize diverse contexts for interpretation, or need to take certain matters into account in deciding how to put something, what to say, or what point to make. They also tell their listeners how they can or should be heard, thus shaping others’ narrative identities in the process.

The storyteller, in effect, is an editor who constantly monitors, modifies, and revises themes and storylines. Invoking shifts in perspective, such as referring to the position from which a storyteller offers an account, is one prominent type of narrative editing. As Catherine Riessman (1990) puts it, storytellers “step out of their stories” to attend to perspective and to the ways they expect their accounts to be heard. The selves that stories convey, as well as the identities of storytellers and listeners, are thus shaped and edited as storytelling proceeds.

Consider the progressive editing done by Betty, the elderly caregiving wife of an Alzheimer’s disease sufferer, as she recounts home care experiences at a caregiver support group meeting. The following extended extract from the proceedings is reconstructed from ethnographic fieldnotes, with the paragraphs numbered for easy reference.

[1] I’d say that as a wife of fifty years, it’s been up and down, mostly up, probably, like most “happily” [signals quotation marks] married couples. Actually, as far as husbands go, George’s been a pretty good husband. [Other participants recount episodes from their own “good” marriages, which encourages Betty to elaborate on George’s “good” qualities and, as a result, what she “owes” him.] He’s the kinda guy who’d give you the shirt off his back and joke about it. [Describes George’s generosity and relates to participants’ “stories” that wind up like hers, “after all those years.”] We had good times and he was always right there when I needed him. [Mentions how good it makes her feel to be able to take care of him “after all those years.”] Like they say, you can’t forget that, can ya? I guess what I’m saying is that I owe the big lump in a real big way. Gotta keep him with me [in home care] as long as possible. [Betty stare[s out the window.]

[2] But, you know, I have to ask myself, even after all those years, what’s he now? You know, like they say we need to ask ourselves at Chapter [local chapter meetings of the Alzheimer’s Association]. Who is this big lug I’m living with? Who am I supposed to be? A saint? Most of the time, he doesn’t know me. He’s like a shell. You all know how terrible that is. Lord, he weighs over 200 pounds and you know what a burden that is. [Elaborates and recounts her relations with George from that viewpoint, this time drawing from the familiar stories of local caregiver exemplars, including the so-called caring martyrs she’s known.] When I think back over the years, maybe I was just “dreaming,” like Sally [a former participant] said one time. Remember that? Geez, what an eye-opener that was! I ask myself that sometimes, now that he can’t patch things up all the time. [Others describe similar feelings.] Did
I spend all those years living for George, to make him happy? I don’t know. He was pretty darned cross and demanding sometimes, that I have to say. [Another participant details life with her “demanding,” “vegetative” husband, which Betty then partially integrates into her own narrative.]

[3] Now don’t get me wrong, but what about that? What about me? You know what I mean. What about this here “maturer” [again signals quotation marks] woman? [Laughter.] You know, this here woman with her own needs? [Recounts details of her current “lonely” married life.] I’ve got my own life to live. We all have, at least that’s what we keep hearing and telling each other. Sometimes I ask myself if I ever did [have my own life]. Betty’s emotional recollections develop into a story of unnecessary sacrifice, self-effacement, and the need to be more realistic.

[4] I wish I had the words to tell you all how I feel sometimes, like I just wanna bust free and be who I am, Betty, not just George’s wife. But not really, I guess. [Chuckling, another participant suggests that Betty is sounding “like one of those feminists.”] Well maybe I am! [Laughter.] It was my life, too, you know.

[5] I’m just blabbing away here. I have to admit, though, that we were a pretty happy couple. Lots of close years. [Recounts aspects of that story.] Fifty years of being a wife. That’s a lotta years. [Embellishes her “happy” years of marriage story.]

Beginning with the prefatory remark, “as a wife of fifty years,” Betty informs her listeners of how they should hear her forthcoming story. Responding to several shared recollections of married life, Betty tells others she feels obligated to engage with the other participants about just who her story might have been about, with the other participants “thinking of this from a woman’s point of view” and going on to recount the story of what she felt the first time her husband failed to recognize her as his wife. As Betty tells that story, she again steps out of the account and marks comments with reminders to her listeners that she is assuming they are hearing what is being conveyed as women. She asks rhetorically, “You know what I mean: Woman to woman?” She then proceeds to communicate what she feels, a woman, not just as a spouse, and seeks confirmation with “You know the feeling.” At yet another juncture, she expressly positions herself as a woman “putting her woman’s hat on,” which she admonishes two listeners to likewise do, continuing with that story. She tells her listeners to put themselves in her place and try to understand from that point of view, among other familiar ways of viewing storylines and their associated selves.

Throughout, Betty adroitly builds contexts for her identity. She not only tively constructs perspective, but manages her listeners’ viewpoints in the process simultaneously editing the contents of her story as it might relate to her listeners’ responses. Not wanting to sound too harsh in speaking as a “woman with own life to live,” she prefaces her various comments with “now don’t get wrong,” as in extracted paragraph 3 above, and later in the meeting with “don’t take this personally, but . . . .” Following that comment, Betty relates what n goes through her mind when George doesn’t recognize her or fails to show appreciation for what she’s doing for him. Adding “you have to admit you’d exactly the same,” she suggests that what she has said is not gratuitously but part of the shared sentiments of a particular account of the caregiving experience, conveying who they are in common. Several listeners confirm the editorial remarks. When she subsequently accounts for her descriptive “indiscretion and seemingly "exaggerated claims" with the ostensible need to put harsh realities "in plain English" and "not gussy them up" because, among other things "it's not a pretty picture," she further shapes the intended storyline and the self in question.

As proceedings unfold in meeting after meeting like the one Betty attend varied discourses of the caregiving experience come into play, drawn from wide shared stories proffered by the public culture of the Alzheimer’s disease experience (see Gubrium 1986a). At one extreme, these stories center on the care as martyr, expressed in narratives of the “extent some people will go” to care for a family member who is cognitively impaired. At the other extreme, we hear
counts linking together the experiences of “realistic” caregivers, who realize “be-
fore it is too late” or “for their own good” that they have their own lives to live
and, in any event, “owe something” to other family members, if not to themselves.
These further divide according to gender and intergenerational expectations (see
Abel and Nelson 1990). Storytellers are more or less aware of these alternative
subjectivities, formulating personal accounts in relation to what they know, or are
apprised of, as the case might be. Who and what they are for all practical pur-
poses wends its way through related narrative activity, which undergoes constant
editing along the way.

**Narrative Elasticity**

Some storytellers and listeners show a keen awareness of what is locally applic-
able, sometimes offering reminders to that effect by informing errant storytellers
that a particular account is, say, “not the way this [or that] happens,” that a story
is “strange,” or “not the way we normally think about” an aspect of experience,
among other ways of signaling the local accountability of narrative. Other story-
tellers seem to be continually learning what to say about, and how to story, them-
selves. Circumstances themselves vary in the extent to which the use of diverse
resources is acceptable. Some provide working templates for the iteration of par-
ticular narratives, while others tolerate considerable exploration and experimen-
tation. Overall, the narrative interplay between discursive practice and discourse-
in-practice makes for considerable elasticity in what is accountable in the course
of social interaction. What is or is not properly tellable in a particular locale is
never completely distinct from the ongoing construction of narratives. New nar-
rative resources develop and are reflexively employed both to story selves and to
revise expectations about the acceptability of accounts. All of this serves to di-
versify the resources available for constructing identity.

The stories we can be don’t stand over and above narrative practice, even
while we can, to a limited degree, discern possibilities by temporarily bracketing
attention to everyday usage. Stories take shape on the occasions of their use, as
parts of the very identity projects for which they serve as resources. The recogni-
zable stories of one going concern, such as those commonly told in a parent ef-
ficience class, are not necessarily the recognizable stories of another, such as
a twelve-step group focused on recovery from drug addiction. These varied
resources is acceptable. Some provide working templates for the iteration of par-
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tation. Overall, the narrative interplay between discursive practice and discourse-
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versify the resources available for constructing identity.

The Mirror Dance (1983), a study of a lesbian community, is intriguing in this re-
gard. Author Susan Krieger’s empirical material shows just how diversely con-
structed a narrative resource “the community” can be, for example. As we
show, a community with a strong collective identity becomes, in narrative pr-
tice, a varied set of language games for articulating the self.

While working at a Midwestern university, Krieger became involved in the cal
lesbian community. She actively participated in its social life and eventu-
ally chose to conduct sociological research on issues of lesbian identity. A year
participation—observation combined with two months of intensive interviewing w
seventy-eight women produced rich narrative material on the construction of id-
entity. The research shows that even if self narratives derive from a shared stock
resource, individual accounts of what “we’re all about” can be the sou-
of considerable difference, indeed differentiating what is ostensibly shared.

What began as a project focused on the theme of privacy seemed to put-
care rather than the horse, according to Krieger. The theme presumed that the is-
the identity in question was settled. But were these women simply lesbian
from whom answers to questions about privacy could be elicited, coded, and
analyzed? Was community identity itself in need of examination? (Pp. xi-xii)

In time . . . I came to understand that my inquiries into privacy required me to
explore dilemmas of identity. I moved from thinking of privacy as an ability to
close the door of a house in order to protect oneself from view, to thinking that
more accurately, it was an ability to both open and close the door to affect how
one might be known. I came, in other words, to be concerned with control over
definition of the self. I also came to realize that my study was destined to be about
something even more compelling to me: the problem of loss of self—how it oc-
curs and how it may be dealt with in a social setting. (Pp. xi-xii)

“The” lesbian community became the key to understanding the issue in qu-
tion. Viewed in the context of self construction, Krieger interprets the stories the
women told about themselves and the resulting meanings of privacy in compi-
relationship to the stories they conveyed about the community as a whole. Th
broader story of the community as collectively representative of each of their or
identities was continuously mediated by a related narrative of personal engro-
ment and isolation, according to Krieger. The community could be so engrossi-
as to leave the women feeling bereft of identities of their own. Narratively spe-
ing, they risked having few or no individual stories to tell about themselves. C
the other hand, guarding against this form of engrossment risked narrative i-
lusion; it could mean the loss of a story that mirrored a valued self and a use-
resource for dealing with confrontations outside the community. A shared d
course of identity, it seemed, could work as much to threaten the self as to po-
tively define it. Krieger explains:

This, I came to feel, was true in large part because the community was a com-
munity of likeness, one in which individuals were encouraged to value a com-
mon identity as women. It was also a community of intimacy in which members were given support for experiences of closeness and union, including those which might reach their peak in shared sexuality. It was a community of ideology and, in particular, of an ideology that stressed the oneness of women working together for a better life, an ideology that dealt minimally, if at all, with possibilities for conflict latent in the differences between members. It was a stigmatized or deviant community, a condition that also emphasized the need for oneness and solidarity. It was a relatively new community and so lacked many predetermined rules and roles that might give its members established ways of exercising their differences. Finally, and not of the least consequence, it was a community of women: individuals with life experiences that tended to encourage, indeed to view as virtuous, the giving up of the self to others. (P. xii)

According to Krieger, the lesbian community, for better or worse, both defines and secures members' identities. Through their own interpersonal relations, their search for a sense of self-worth among women like themselves, and the stories they repeatedly relate to each other, these women collectively represent who and what they are, and in the process variably construct themselves. They form a virtual society of surveillance whose collective narrative ostensibly disciplines and defines them as individuals, which, for those aware of the subjective risks involved, can be distressful.

Yet the women's accounts leave us wondering about the constancy of "the community" as a narrative resource, despite its varied individual engagements. Attempting to avoid the distant third-person voice of the dispassionate sociologist, Krieger formulates each woman's own story. One after another, each of them is given to talk about herself in relation to what we initially figure to be "the community." Story after story specifies who and what they are collectively, which ostensibly constructs their individual identities as lesbian women, consuming or isolating them in the process. The community is clearly being addressed, but it is far from interpretively fixed. While a socially shared and recognizable entity referred to as "the community" is present in the women's narratives, it is constructed in relation to the individual identity in question. We are gradually apprised of the varied linkages each woman makes to assemble the entity that serves as the source of her identity. The first speaker, Ruth, talks forthrightly about the community of which she and the other women are a part, but notice how she constructs it. Ruth differentiates it from other lesbian communities by thematizing it as "definitely the most out" and the most important to members because in it "they found a sense of being, belonging, fellowship, and sharing." For Ruth, "the community" marks what brings members together into a coherent whole.

RUTH

She saw several different lesbian communities in town, said Ruth, though she understood what people meant when they said "the community." It was definitely the most out, the most woman-identified. It was a group of women who were almost exclusively lesbians, who had been out or around for just about as long as she had been here, which was about five years, or longer than that. These were women who were the lesbian community almost because it was important to them and because they found a sense of being, belonging, fellowship, and sharing that way. . . . As a claim to being "the community" they probably had it, she thought, because they named themselves in such a way and wanted it. (P. 7)

Compare this with other narratives, which make different linkages to designate the community. Irene, for example, discerns the community in terms similar to how one might define a formal organization, highlighting membership qualifications and organizational missions. Membership especially rests on the criterion of sexual involvement with other women. "The community" is exclusive, because Irene's narrative restricts it to women who are sexually involved with women. While Irene doesn't say it, the implication is that heterosexual women need not apply.

IRENE

They were basically a social network, felt Irene. The common denominator was people who defined themselves as lesbians. The community was a social entity that had its own rules, its own membership, its own qualifications. It was primarily devoted to itself rather than a proselytizing organization (like a church or Rape Crisis). It had functions: it gave its members a group identity; it gave them support for their life style and a sense of security and affirmation; for some people who didn't have a strong identity other than the fact of their lesbianism, it was crucial. It was also exclusive. The membership qualifications were pretty narrowly defined: a woman had to be either sexually involved with another woman, or planned to be, or had a good strong history of having been. (P. 8)

From Madeleine, we learn that sexuality is a code word for other facets of a tachment. Madeleine constructs the community by way of its social and emotion bonds, differentiating collective identity in terms above and beyond sexualit centered on the "shared vision" that make the women who they are as sexual whole beings.

MADELEINE

It was basically women who chose to relate to other women sexually, felt Madeleine, who generally were in relationships with other women, although some were not. But it was the idea of community as opposed to single women relating sexually. There was a whole culture, a camaraderie, a support system, a network, shared understanding, shared vision. Then within that there were strong friendships and people who met each other in cluster arrangements. (P. 9)

For Hollis, "the community" was something altogether less sanguine. She constructs the community in terms of her social network, which she differentiates from what a proper community should be. We might presume that a proper community stands for the opposite of what Hollis states her "social network" repr
sents; a proper community should not be hedonistic, self-interested, or inward-looking.

HOLLIS
They were an anti-intellectual group, said Hollis, very hedonistic, self-interested in that sense of being self-maintained, very inward-looking. If she wasn’t one of them, she didn’t think she would find their community admirable. If she didn’t need these people socially, she would not have had anything to do with them. What was the community exactly? It was everybody in town she knew, the ones she saw regularly, whose faces were on it. It rested on face-to-face knowledge of another. She didn’t see it as a community really. It was mainly a social network. She thought it was much more a reference group than a community.

Even something as concrete as “the community” is fluid. Compare four representations in these terms, illustrating the folk demography of collective identity.

PAT
There were fifteen to twenty women in it, said Pat. These were the most active, the core. They represented no cross section of anything really, which was a problem she had with the whole thing.

STEPHANIE
There were thirty to forty, she would guess, said Stephanie, an estimate which came from the fact that you usually didn’t see more than thirty to forty of the women in one place at one time.

ELLEN
There were a hundred or more, thought Ellen, a number which came from the number of names on the newsletter mailing list. The list had about 140 names on it the last time she mailed it and about a third of them didn’t have local addresses.

MARIA
The number varied, said Maria, depending on how you defined it. (P. 12)

From these accounts, we can see that the discourse of “the community” is anything but stable and uniform. While the women all have a sense of being part of a collective identity, in practice they construct its meaning and significance in relation to biographical particulars. The community, in other words, isn’t strictly defined, nor does it strictly define who and what these women are as lesbians. As we so clearly hear in these accounts, discursive practice complicates discourse-in-practice.

The Narrative Elasticity of “Hitting Bottom”

Formally organized settings present similarly pliant resources for storying selves, even while the storylines they promote are often quite formulaic. Consider, for example, recovery groups sponsored by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). As a going concern, AA virtually disperses minipanopticons throughout the identity landscape, with techniques of self construction including the ubiquitous personal testaments of one’s sobriety before a group (sometimes called “drunkalogues”). AA, a formula for recovery but never being fully recovered (the Twelve Steps) and sponsors who help to support and manage sobriety. Carole Cain (1991) explains that AA is a cultural system “that no one is born into,” but whose technology of self construction is part of a widely recognized discourse for centering identity, depicting alcoholism and other substance abuses as addiction diseases over which the afflicted are powerless (see Denzin 1987b).

Drunkalogues are self-stories. AA relies heavily on these round-robin accounts of sobriety that follow the recitation of the so-called serenity prayer at the start of each group meeting. Accounts typically begin with declarations of how long it’s been since one had the last drink, often down to the exact hours and minutes, followed by applause. There are recollections of progress through the Twelve Steps, especially when and how people finally “surrendered” to the fact that they were alcoholics, admitted they were “powerless over alcohol—that [their] life had become unmanageable,” and “came to believe that a Power greater than themselves could restore [them] to sanity.”

There’s no doubt that in the context of AA, the self becomes alcoholic. Dezin (1987a) portrays the process as a series of dramatic realizations, with discernible acts and scenes. His observational study of the presentation of the alcoholic self in AA meetings provides diverse narratives of related experience whose repeated and widespread communication makes it clear that AA is definitely in the identity business. The drama’s accounts tell two kinds of story, with the overall script of a redemption narrative. These stories overlap considerably and are endlessly reiterated and reassembled. One kind is the before-story, conveying what it was like before one realized and “surrendered” to the fact that one was alcoholic. This is a diverse and multifaceted collection, including colorful but depressing stories of the various ways one “hits bottom,” becoming emotionally distraught and physically and cognitively degraded that there nowhere to go but up. Old-timers recount tales of woe and despair, publicly revealing to newcomers who they were at their worst. Time and again, they remind their audience how to frame and communicate their own experiences of surrender to the Twelve Steps of the recovering alcoholic.

The other kind of account is the after-story—a narrative of recovery experiences following one’s surrender to being powerless over the disease. While the are usually less embellished than before-stories, they are more hopeful, even when there are tales of returning to drinking following a period of sobriety. Or after-stories are humbly heroic, prefaced by exact counts of the large number of days that have passed since the last drink. Sober old-timers take center stage conveying these narratives; their alcoholic selves play a starring role in their own tales.8

The key event dividing these stories is hitting bottom, said to be the ential impetus for taking AA’s so-called first step. An early AA publication (19) portrays the significance of the event in this way:

Why all this insistence that every AA must hit bottom first? The answer is that few people will sincerely try to practice the AA program unless they have hit bot-
tom. For practicing AA's remaining Eleven Steps means the adoption of attitudes that almost no alcoholic who is still drinking can dream of taking. Who wishes to be rigorously honest and tolerant? Who wants to confess his faults to another and make restitution for harm done? Who cares anything about a Higher Power, let alone meditation and prayer? Who wants to sacrifice time and energy in trying to carry AA's message to the next sufferer? No, the average alcoholic, self-centered in the extreme, doesn't care for this prospect—unless he has to do these things in order to stay alive himself. (P. 24)

Despite its formulaic pattern, there can be considerable narrative play in the discourse of the alcoholic experience. The "AA template," as Melvin Pollner and Jill Stein (1996) describe it, is made to stretch in many directions as it is applied in practice. For example, "hitting bottom" and "surrendering" to one's alcoholism are widely shared and recognized as key experiences, but what it means to hit bottom or surrender is far from uniform. Like Krieger's women's representations of "the community," hitting bottom is as much a part of the unfolding stories of the drunk experience as it is a central and discernible feature of the discourse that formulates selves in AA. Group members construct and reconstruct "bottom" according to their narrative needs. Each experiential location of bottom is part of a living language game that develops and takes shape within, not separate from, storytelling. Members, in other words, work at specifying bottom as a narrative resource. This accomplished, hitting bottom provides a basis for recognizably conveying one's present identity.

The narrative elasticity of hitting bottom is conveyed in the following account, where we can see how "bottom" comes in multiples (Denzin 1987a, p. 158).

In order for the alcoholic to surrender he or she must "hit bottom." Two "bottoms" are distinguished by AA: "high bottom" and "low bottom." In AA's early days its cofounder Bill Wilson stated:

Those of us who sobered up in AA had been grim and utterly hopeless cases. But then we began to have some success with milder alcoholics. Younger folks appeared. Lots of people turned up who still had jobs, homes, health, and even good social standing. Of course, it was necessary for these newcomers to hit bottom emotionally. But they did not have to hit every possible bottom in order to admit that they were licked.

[AA 1967, p. 209]

Denzin's observations at AA meetings show how "bottom" is a continuously adaptable narrative resource, as much constructed in the process of storytelling an alcoholic self as it is the actual bottom of the self represented in the voice of experience. An AA member with fifteen years of experience and a veteran of the Twelve Steps, describes bottom in fluid, even cosmic terms, as he explains that hitting bottom can't be predicted in advance and, indeed, knowing it may be an incommensurable "gift."

You never know when it will happen. I've taken one man to detox 14 times. He's still drinking. Someday he'll get it. You never know. It's a gift. You never give up on anybody. (P. 158)