Narrative Interviewing:
Process and Benefits in Teaching
About Aging and the Life Course

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ABSTRACT. Narrative interviewing (also termed qualitative interviewing) is a valid and vivid way to apply perspectives and concepts in gerontology to individual lives. As such it is widely used as a research method. However, teachers in many fields also assign interview projects for students, as supplemental assignments in aging-related courses. This article clarifies key assumptions and goals of narrative interviewing, in relation to other approaches to interviewing in the social sciences and humanities; discusses the distinctive relevance of narrative interview projects for teaching about aging; recounts steps in the interview process in connection with both classroom and individual work with students; and addresses practical and ethical issues that teachers should anticipate and address to ensure successful projects. Topics and results of narrative

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INTRODUCTION

This article describes and discusses narrative interview projects as
a teaching strategy that helps students to integrate theory, method, and
experience. Though targeted most directly at readers in the social sci-
ences, the discussion is equally relevant to those in allied health and
clinical fields such as social work and counseling (Krause, 2003; Rog-
ers, 2001), and who teach about aging and the humanities (Shuldiner,
1992). Because interviewing is practiced in such a wide range of fields,
incorporating it in teaching is in keeping with the current trend toward
interdisciplinary education in gerontology (Skinner, 2001). There has
so far been little integration between the extensive literatures that exist
in both areas (interviewing as a research method and teaching, respec-
tively). As a result, teachers are less aware than they should be of how
the practice and results of interviewing help students to assimilate con-
ceptual and empirical knowledge in gerontology. In order to tap this po-
tential, teachers can model and reflect with students on the planning and
process as well the tangible end-products of narrative interviewing. De-
pending on course content and organization, the "end-product" can be
either verbatim interview transcripts or students' reflective interpreta-
tions of data, integrated with other reading and writing assignments.
   The agenda is to integrate conceptual as well as practical issues. A
main goal is to re-conceptualize interviewing as a process that enhances
the teaching of core concepts in the study of aging; another is to illus-
trate in practical terms how one can implement interview projects in a
manageable and successful way (whether in seminars, introductory or
advanced lecture courses). Doing so is in keeping with the need, noted
by Atchley (2001), for teachers to develop sound, feasible, and low-cost
ways of involving students in first-hand research experiences. Descrip-
tions and excerpts of successful interview papers by undergraduate stu-
dents will be presented to summarize practical advantages as well as

challenges of this teaching practice. Underlying the presentation is the finding that narrative (also termed qualitative or in-depth) interviewing provides unique benefits that can be realized both through individual student projects and collective classroom presentations. Moreover, the same benefits can be realized through the presentation and interpretation of *secondary* narrative sources or literary sources (Boyatzis, 1994). Conquergood (1989) and Wellin (1996) advocate for a *performative* approach to interviewing as a social encounter; enacting narratives–and assuming the role of informants–provides insight into diverse social and cultural conditions. This awareness is essential for helping students place knowledge about aging in broader contexts. Collecting and interpreting narratives are thus powerful ways for students to connect biography and history, which for Mills (1959) is central to the imaginative thinking that teachers in the social sciences–and gerontology in particular–seek to develop in students (also see Bidwell & Millar, 1995; Turner, 1988).

Literature on Interviewing: A Lack of Integration Between Method and Teaching

Few published writings on interviewing, including those with didactic/teaching purposes, relate the topic to the classroom or to guiding students. Most describe interviewing techniques prescriptively, as in texts on methodology (e.g., Babbie, 2001; Schutt, 1996). Even sources that offer more detailed coverage (e.g., Babbie, 2001; Denzin, 1989; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; McCracken, 1988; Spradley, 1979; Weiss, 1994), rarely connect interviewing with particular substantive topics or describe how steps in the research process can be integrated to enhance teaching. In turn, influential teaching texts (e.g., Goldsmid & Wilson, 1980; Hooks, 1994; McKeachie, 1986; Shor, 1992) extol the virtues of reflective, inquiry-based teaching, but with few exceptions (e.g., Glazer, 1972) do not recount or illustrate the research process in detail, or its implications for students' learning. In sum, the literatures on interviewing and on teaching suggest myriad inter-connections, which have rarely been made explicit or concrete for classroom teachers.

Exceptions to this rule have, ironically, included the training of survey interviewers. In that case, classroom training and role playing are used to identify and minimize idiosyncracies among interviewers (e.g., their demeanor or wording of questions or probes) in order to achieve greater uniformity in the administration of questionnaires. For an important discussion of these issues see Converse and Schuman (1974).

HOW NARRATIVE INTERVIEWING IS RELEVANT
FOR TEACHING GERONTOLOGY

Over more than a decade of teaching–including a freshman seminar on *Social Inequality: Narratives and Lives*, and in lecture courses on *Self and Society, Introduction to Gerontology, and Sociology of Aging*– the author has sought to help students apply concepts in gerontology to the study of lives. There is a strong affinity between major perspectives and topics in life-course sociology, such as the context and meaning of role transitions (Ferraro, 1990; Settersten, 1999) and narrative approaches (Gubrium, 1993; Kaufman, 1986; Kenyon, Ruth, & Mader, 1999; Riessman, 1993). Understanding the meanings and constraints of social roles and transitions, as they are shaped by class, race, and gender is, for Ferraro (1990), central to making the "micro-macro linkage" in social gerontology. Riley (1987) established the importance of historical cohorts and "cohort flow" in understanding variation in the norms, pressures, and meanings of aging. More recently, George (2006) has argued that the life course perspective requires that we investigate how human agency is perceived and exercised over "real time" within social structural constraints; revealing this intra-subjective process requires the first-person, reflective voice which is nurtured and manifested in the interview process. Furthermore, representing experience is hardly tangential in the process of teaching students about a diverse society: for Ragin (1994), *giving voice* to informants is among the core goals of social research.

In addition, there are developmental and existential reasons why older adults are often drawn to *reminiscence*–opportunities to review and reconcile one's life experiences (Kaminsky, 1984). This is represented well in Myerhoff's book, *Number Our Days*. Myerhoff (1978, p. 33) reports that, like many older adults, her informants "were very fond of reminiscing and storytelling, eager to be heard from, eager to relate parts of their life history. More afraid of oblivion than pain or death, they sought opportunities to become visible. Narrative activity among them was intense and relentless. . . . In their stories and cultural dramas, they witnessed themselves, and thus knew who they were, serving as subject and object at once." Nelson and Harper (2000, p. 6) add that interviewing is a potentially transformative process in which we confront our own, often implicit, assumptions and beliefs and open ourselves up to more humane, contextual understandings both of discrete topics and our conversational partners (also see Smith, 1993).

Gerontology teachers have (following the literature, as noted) typically defined interviewing more narrowly, as a research method. This definition, however, fails to tap the great potential of interviewing as a vehicle for teaching. The process of planning, conducting and interpreting even a single narrative interview offers rewards for teachers and students alike. This technique: (1) requires students to form and articulate their own research questions, (2) helps to de-mystify the social encounters through which knowledge about aging is created, (3) allows students to apply theoretical concepts and perspectives in understanding lives, and (4) yields a written product (e.g., a document of family history) that students see as valuable, beyond the immediate demands and evaluations of course work.

More generally, guiding students through narrative interviews helps teachers to convey and apply concepts more actively and holistically than is possible through lecturing. It exemplifies the approach of teaching as *modeling inquiry*, a vehicle through which students gain experience in the research process (Wellin, 2001). Goldsmid and Wilson (1980, p. 81) contrast this pedagogical approach with the more conventional *expository mode* in which teachers "report and inculcate the truth about reality," while students "memorize and recapitulate" course material.

Efforts to connect classroom teaching with research is fundamental to pedagogy in liberal arts education, especially so in the critical tradition (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Luborsky & Sankar, 1996). Implementing the approach requires teaching practice that ". . . de-centers the primacy of the lecturer as it redefines the conventional role of the student as a passive receiver of information" (Applerouth, 2001, p. 134). Moreover, building on Gardner's earlier writing (e.g., 1991) on multiple kinds of intelligence, Grauerholz (2001, p. 44) argues that holistic teaching aims to deepen students' learning in three major ways: it transcends cognitive understanding, incorporates diverse methods that facilitate connections between course material and students' lives, and "helps students clarify their own values and sense of responsibility to others and to society."

What Distinguishes "Narrative" Interviews from Other Kinds?

A clarification about terminology: The assumptions, methods, and uses of interviewing in social research cover a broad continuum. Narrative research is clearly contained in the broader category of qualitative

interviewing, being exploratory and inductive in spirit (Kaufman, 1994).
Further, narrative interviews do not, as McCracken (1988, p. 7) points
out, "[commit] the investigator to intimate, repeated, and prolonged in-
volvement in the community of the respondent." In narrative interview-
ing, however, the investigator emphasizes not only the content, but also
the form, style, and emotional tenor of the story that is told (Clandinin &
Connely, 2000; Kaufman, 1986; Riessman, 1993). For Becker (1970),
excessive specialization in research approaches undermines the broader
goal of placing narratives into a multi-method "mosaic" of understand-
ing. Narrative interviews, which contain concrete references to histori-
cal and social conditions, help students to construct such a mosaic with
respect to aging.

The Interviewing Process in the Classroom:
Practical and Ethical Considerations

To be feasible, the approach suggested here must fit into teach-
ers' overall course goals and schedules. For most teachers, gerontol-
ogy courses emphasize conceptual and factual knowledge about aging,
rather than the process of research. Moreover, inasmuch as students'
background in research methods varies (according to major field of
study and class standing), teachers cannot assume students to have had
prior exposure to sampling, operationalizing concepts, refining ques-
tions, building rapport with informants or related topics that more ad-
vanced, research-based courses cover in detail. Instead, the approach
suggested here requires only one or two intensive class meetings, sup-
plemented by readings, handouts (examples of which are available upon
request), and office consultations as interview projects progress.

An effective way of stimulating student interest in interviewing is to
require them, early in the term, to consider and discuss the application
of general concepts to their own lives or those of family elders. An ex-
ample of such a concept is the "age-differentiated life course," which
prescribes the age by which particular life events and transitions are ide-
ally supposed to occur (Riley & Riley, 1996, p. 33). For example, ef-
forts to reconcile differences in the normative life course time-table
among different generations within a family requires students to con-
sider the role of broader social forces. Today's students, especially those
expecting to enter graduate or professional school, experience an ex-
tended adolescence–a delay in the arrival of what they regard as fully
adult status. By comparing their own life-course time-table with that of

parents or grandparents, students come to recognize the influence of demography, military conflicts, the economy and labor market on what they have previously regarded as purely personal choices. In turn, greater awareness of how one's biography is shaped by social and historical factors enhances students' appreciation of the personal relevance of gerontological insight.

Guiding Students in Planning and Conducting Narrative Interviews

Interview projects impose demands–in terms of time investment and logistical planning–which must be anticipated and met. There are several steps and choices involved, making it necessary for students to begin planning early–as a rule no later than half-way through the academic term. The steps (typically sequential) include choosing an informant, defining a topical focus, crafting a list of questions, scheduling and then conducting the interview, transcribing the audio-tape recording, reading for and coding themes in the transcript, clarifying core findings, and drafting the paper. Many of these (e.g., focusing topics and crafting questions) lend themselves well to classroom discussion. Exciting class discussions arise in the process of connecting broad patterns and findings in social gerontology to their manifestations in individual lives (as exemplified above, about life-course time-tables). Class discussions, in which students gain confidence in applying concepts to personal relationships and experience, are a prelude and stimulus to refining topics they can later explore through interviews. Other tasks–such as focusing a topic and crafting a list of questions–can be handled either through an office consultation or via e-mail correspondence. Interactive course Web-sites such as *Blackboard* offer an accessible venue for students to post and comment on classmates' topics and questions. Also, Kaufman's *Ageless Self* (1986) is among the sources that include an appendix, containing an interview schedule from which students can select and adapt background and other questions.

Student interview projects are typically exempt from human subjects review. However, it is only responsible for teachers to discuss issues of research ethics and informed consent, which helps prepare students not only for interviewing but also for more extensive research courses and projects in the future.

Important Issues and Choices Facing
Student Interviewers and Teachers

Interview projects pose additional issues. Three recurring and inter-related issues include: (1) trade-offs involved in interviewing close friends or family members versus strangers, (2) whether and how students should explore such relevant but emotionally sensitive issues as widowhood, chronic illness, and death/dying, and (3) how students are to frame and connect narrative data to course concepts and readings. Though no blanket answers can be found for these questions, my experience suggests the following are appropriate in the context of undergraduate teaching.

First, in terms of *choosing informants*, I concede that there are benefits to requiring students to interview people whom they do not know in advance. Student-interviewers bring fewer assumptions to such an encounter, and must be especially conscious and attentive in establishing rapport. However, this is a more risky approach and, as a teacher, one wants students' early efforts to be successful and to build confidence. Perhaps the most important predictor of a successful interview is strong curiosity on the part of the student, either about the informant as a person, or about particular topics to which the informant's life gives *entrée*.' Thus, one should avoid rigid rules regarding the selection of an informant, but meet with students early on to consider the specific issues regarding prospective informants. If it be a family member (often a grandparent, aunt or uncle), we are careful in advance to define the central topic of the interview; doing so ensures the interview is focused and that its purpose is not undermined by excessive familiarity.

For example, a former student interviewed his uncle, who had served in Vietnam before going on to a successful life and career. Despite the closeness of the family–emotionally and geographically–the student and his uncle had never discussed the war or its aftermath. After confirming the uncle's willingness to discuss his war experiences and sharing a tentative list of questions to clarify the goals of the interview, the two collaborated on a sensitive and detailed account. It was especially revealing of how the resources veterans have *prior* to entering military service–such as education, work experience, and family support–shape their ability to re-adjust to civilian life. (His paper also drew on supplementary readings to compare the contentious Vietnam years with the earlier, post WWII period of prosperity for returning veterans courtesy of the G.I. Bill of Rights.) As a teacher, one should not impose inflexible rules about whether students may interview strangers or intimates; it is more important to help them to clarify and explore conceptual and

topical questions, guidance which is beneficial regardless of students' relationship with the informant.

A second recurring issue to resolve with students is *whether and how to broach sensitive interview topics.* Because the goal in narrative interviews is to elicit and to document emotional (as well as cognitive) reactions to life events, they can, if addressing major losses, pose risks for informants (Karner & Warren, 1994). Unfortunately, many students carry distorted and negative myths about aging and older people, for example exaggerating the incidence of chronic disabling conditions or institutional residence (see Longino, 1997). Interview projects are a powerful way of helping students to overcome these myths. But, even for older adults who maintain full independent lives, stresses and losses inevitably arise which students are understandably drawn to explore.

My advice in this regard is two-fold: I insist that students tell informants in advance of interview topics, and (in the spirit of informed consent) make sure that they are comfortable discussing painful issues and know their right *not* to answer troubling questions. Students also are led to balance difficult questions with others that are neutral and/or allow for affirmative recognition of the informant's positive adaptations and achievements. A student who chose to interview her widowed grandmother–who assured the student and her parents that the interview was welcome–constructed a series of questions that began with attention to the grandmother's earlier work and family roles, and only then turned to the topic of widowhood. This strategy allowed expressions of sadness and loss to be balanced by others, of resilience, control, and adaptation. In concluding interviews, all students are urged to pose questions about informants' current sources of fulfillment and overriding themes that have provided continuity and strength despite adversity (also see Gubrium, 1993; Kaufman, 1986). Constructing questions in this way has been found to help shape informants' narratives in ways that are affirmative, even healing for them (Peake, 1998). Mishler (1986) argues, however, that for interviewers to realize this potential empowerment of informants demands recognition of the asymmetrical power dynamic that inheres in much researcher interviewing (in which questions and response categories are imposed rather than negotiated). He concludes that, ideally, "Through their narratives people may be moved beyond the text to the possibility of action" (Mishler, 1986, p. 119).

A third issue facing teachers and interviewers is how to ensure that interview projects (which are inductive in spirit and address diverse topics) are well-integrated with course goals and content. This integration is best achieved by weaving it through each phase of the interview process. The

specific interview topic and narrative data should be linked to concepts and readings in gerontology–from the initial brief proposal through the final written product. The author prepares and distributes an explanatory handout (in an appendix available on request) and students submit for approval a one-page proposal for their interview project. In the proposal they must identify not only a broad topic or informant but also discuss how their project will complement or extend a topic in our course. During the writing stage I require students to incorporate several required readings, in order to foster integration of individual projects with perspectives and findings in gerontology.

The point is illustrated by a student project that focused on a family friend whose biography had been unconventional: leaving college early, he had entered the workforce and later returned to school in his thirties as a "non-traditional" student, eventually launching a political career in his fifties. The student used the interview to portray some of the challenges and also benefits of resisting the conventional age-differentiated life-course. Riley (1987) and others have noted that the normative life course is enforced not only culturally but institutionally (e.g., through funding policies bearing on the availability and quality of continuing education). It was illuminating to depict how the informant perceived and overcame such obstacles, which often impede efforts of older adults to return to school; more, it was reassuring for students, as we discussed the interview in class, to see that diverse life choices and paths can lead to fulfilling outcomes.

INTERVIEWING AND COLLECTIVE
CLASSROOM LEARNING

Having addressed recurring issues that arise in advising students individually, it is equally important to note the potential for integrating particular issues and steps in the interview process in *collective* classroom teaching. Gubrium points out that, "Narrative, after all, is eminently social, conveyed by someone to another, who together collaborate in its production" (1993, p. 9). As a social encounter in which meaning is jointly negotiated, interviewing is also conducive to classroom strategies of rehearsal, performance, and collective discussion (Conquergood, 1989; Wellin, 1996). For models, we can profit by looking beyond conventional academic settings and approaches. An important current example of the performative possibilities of interviewing is the work of teacher/performer Anna Deveare Smith. In her performance

piece, published as *Fires in the Mirror* (1993), she juxtaposes and enacts excerpts of interviews she conducted with residents of a Brooklyn neighborhood, torn by violent conflict between the Orthodox Jewish and African American communities. For Smith, the enactment of informants' words requires a journey, a vicarious projection from self to other, which is very like the sympathetic understanding–termed *Verstehen* by the founding sociologist Max Weber (1921)–that we strive to foster in our students. Student interviews can be re-enacted collectively, allowing the entire group to take part in and discuss the dynamics of the interview process, as well as its product–a transcript–and implications. This exercise allows all concerned to sharpen creative and inductive thinking. As noted, depending on class topics and format, teachers can use primary data (collected by students), or secondary/published material (Bidwell & Millar, 1995). In either case, students gain both empathic understanding of older adults and their lives, and practical exposure to conceptual application and interpretation. A final benefit is helping students to appreciate that, like all research accounts, interview narratives permit multiple interpretations, depending on the theoretical and topical orientations one brings to the data.

What Have Been Successful Topics of Student Interviews?

Given the need for a single interview to have a sharp focus (lest it meander or lack depth) students are urged to concentrate on *careers* in major life-spheres such as family, school, and work; this approach allows topics in aging to be more confined and concrete for students. They can then more readily plan a focused and coherent sequence of questions, and/or address the interplay between careers. The career concept, as Everett Hughes (1984) and Erving Goffman (1961) demonstrate, has the virtue of denoting both an objective series of experiences, and a subjective point of view.

Several interview projects remain memorable and may be useful to recount before presenting a detailed example. In one, a student interviewed her father, a self-employed pharmacist, whose career spanned the period (the 1960s through 1990s) during which independent drug stores were largely driven out of business under the pressure of competition with national franchises. One learned from her interview not only about the struggle to compete against large franchise firms, but also about the nuances of client relations which were an especially distinctive feature (and reward) of earlier entrants into that occupation; the careers of

the occupation and the employee were closely intertwined. Another student interviewed her grandfather who at age seventy was divorced from his wife of 40 years. In her interview and paper the student reflected on how increasing acceptance of divorce among younger people may be diffusing to their elders. Her grandfather was negotiating a new (for him certainly) set of norms about courtship and sexuality among older adults, and the effects of the divorce were rippling through the generations and rituals of the family. Another interviewed her great-grandmother who, in the 1930s, had been the first woman to enter her college's pre-medical program. This account revealed formal and informal barriers to women's entry into medicine at that time.

IDENTIFYING AND LINKING THEMES: ANALYZING NARRATIVE DATA

Guiding students in analyzing narrative data requires a shift in emphasis, from abstract conceptualization to more inductive, interpretive understanding in line with the "grounded theory" tradition (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As noted above, the process of analysis tends not to be prompted by theory, per se, so much as by students' personal reflections on the interview which engage, puzzle, or even trouble them. In line with the model of a research cycle, students ultimately goal is to frame narratives in the context of a broader theoretical issue or argument (see McCracken, 1988). But in the approach described such inferences are typically made during the writing stage and in collaboration in the office or in class. For neophytes, the goal of *applying* a given concept to a narrative response is more reachable than that of *refining* the concept in light of the data (the distinction is analogous to Piaget's, between assimilation and accommodation in cognitive development).

As noted earlier, in this process it is essential for students earlier to have articulated research questions–whether empirical or theoretical–in some detail, and also for teachers to have guided them in constructing a list of questions that is effective in focusing on an age-related concept, career, or transition (Ferraro, 1990; Kaufman, 1994). Having done so, students are better equipped to relate the interview's inevitable surprises and details to a broader gerontological question or topic. In this regard, it is important as well for students to recognize that close reading, identifying themes (through open-ended memos or "codes"), and constructing theoretical linkages are *separable and sequential* steps in a process.

This process can be seen as a simplified and guided version of the open-coding and analytical strategies that have been described else-where in relation to more advanced work in texts on interviewing (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; McCracken, 1988; Weiss, 1994).

Close Reading, Interpretive Memos, and Circling Back to Core Questions

Having transcribed the interview, students have a rich text–generally between 9 and 12 double-spaced pages–which both they and the teacher review with care. Depending on course content and goals, teachers may emphasize the process and rapport of the interview encounter itself–for example if teaching students with clinical interests–or, on the other hand, the outcome/transcript. Here we focus on the latter. Students are urged to read the transcript several times for particular purposes: an initial reading aims to address *factual* issues or discrepancies and to identify language or connotations that are ambiguous. (Such ambiguity is often resolved through a kind of internal validation–in which students mine other statements or references by the informant.) Subsequent read-ings focus on the *emotional tone and style* (Kaufman, 1986) of the inter-view, and students are urged to note (and to mark in the text with italics or bold type) passages they regard as especially interesting or impor-tant. They are then assigned to write, in a reflective first-person voice, *interpretive/analytical memos* in which they articulate why they regard particular statements as salient. These memos, which can be inserted into the transcript in a dialogic fashion, contain the seeds of interpreta-tion. At this stage, students have generally not made explicit reference to course reading or concepts, immersed as they are in the challenge of understanding the internal meaning and implications of the informant's narrative. As DeVault (1990) argues, "analysis" in qualitative work cannot be divorced from close, empathic, and reflective attention to subtle dynamics of talking and listening; in this process, new topics or concepts may be discovered. Such memos allow students to articulate surprising or puzzling questions about the interview, to which more ex-plicit concepts or theoretical perspectives may hold answers. This writ-ing step can then be followed more confidently by another, in which students identify course readings or concepts that are helpful in framing the interview, either in its totality or in connection with specific state-ments or topics. The flexibility of word processing packages–with search

functions and the ability to "cut and paste" text into multiple docu-
ments–liberates students creatively to explore various levels and do-
mains of meaning within the narrative. In turn, interpretive memos are
interspersed within the transcript, a step which advances their ability to
recognize and refine the shape of the emerging paper. It easier, too, at
this stage for student/writers to discern and delete sections of the tran-
script that are tangential or redundant. As a general rule, a 45-minute in-
terview yields roughly a 12 page transcript; of these perhaps half will be
included for illustrative purposes in the final paper, with another few
pages to introduce the topic, the informant, and the core question or
topic. In the author's experience, this process of interpretation and writ-
ing is neither onerous nor especially time-consuming for students; the
time commitment is certainly comparable to conventional assignments
based upon library research.

    As stated, many students have opted to interview family members
or friends. For this reason, the convention of avoiding a first-person,
expository voice often proves to be untenable. Aside from questions
of rapport noted earlier, this prior knowledge becomes important during
later stages of analysis and writing. Though often armed with detailed
knowledge and impressions of informants' lives, students struggle to
combine a first-person voice with the more detached, formal one that
most equate with competence and achievement in scholarly writing
(Becker, 1986). My position is that personal reflection can co-exist
with and propel more abstract, analytical comprehension for students;
and several assigned sources–especially those by Diamond (1992) and
Myerhoff (1985, 1978)–are presented as models of successful and in-
sightful integration. Not a few teachers, in many fields, discourage use
of the first-person among students, seeing it as an impediment to critical
analysis. However, if the goal of narrative interviewing is to enhance un-
derstanding of aging as a life-long social process–shaped by agency as
well as social constraints–teachers need to reconsider writing conven-
tions in light of this goal.

    A final, related point: as with writing in traditions in the humanities,
this process is by necessity creative, intuitive, and amenable to a range
of writing styles and forms of textual organization. In achieving the rec-
ognition and application of gerontological concepts, students may choose
to present lengthy sections of the transcript and to "segregate" analytical
commentary in the introduction and conclusion or, as in the following ex-
ample, intersperse narrative data and commentary throughout (as is typi-
cal in writing fiction).

"Harold's Successful Retirement"

This project in my 300-level Sociology of Aging course was conducted by a senior speech pathology/audiology major. She was completing a three-course sequence in gerontology, and so was conversant with major terms and concepts of social gerontology. Like many students, she chose to interview a person she knew well, a family friend whom she saw as an uncle. She was struck, after course discussion of the social and financial losses that often accompany retirement, at how smoothly "Harold" had recently made this transition. The student thus had a topic (the change from work to retirement) and a puzzle to solve, which involved reflecting on the earlier conditions in Harold's life which had set the stage for his smooth and fulfilling shift to retirement. She found that his work experience, and his views of what is required to succeed in the U.S., reflect an earlier, post-WWII economy, when the "social contract" between workers and employers was more robust (see Rubin, 1997). Introducing her paper the student recounted how, as a teenager in 1948, Harold had taken an entry-level job in a logistics depot as a box repairman. He had, in effect, stumbled into the federal workforce and recalled:

> I got the job, though it was something I knew nothing about . . .
> I progressed over the years. I was in logistics throughout my career, as a supply and distribution officer, a weapons officer, analyst, and finally a manager. It was a marvelous progression, though I never had a career plan as such. The opening of doors continued my entire life. When young people ask me how they can get ahead, my recommendation is simply to do the best you can at whatever you're doing; people will recognize your effort and you will develop a reputation and move forward.

Harold was asked what he had most enjoyed about his work, in a career, after all, to which he'd never aspired. He replied,

> I always enjoyed the fact that I had responsibilities for which I and I alone was accountable. I had great latitude to make decisions, to initiate programs and carry them out. That I was given authority to carry things out gave me a sense of accomplishment and of control over my own destiny. I fared far better than I expected to, and

better than most given the same set of circumstances–since I had
no education or special training in any field.

Discussing his decision to retire, and its aftermath, Harold reports a
sense of fulfillment and gratitude for avoiding the "burnout" he started
to feel at work. He explained,

I'd gone through so many projects and problems over the years, and
it came to seem like the new ones weren't different or challenging.
I'd lost the drive, wasn't as aggressive or effective as I wanted to
be. You want to leave [your work career] when you're at your peak,
rather than on the skids. Of course, I also liked the idea that [by retir-
ing] I could be on my own, deciding about everyday activities.
I never worried–as a grandfather and gardener–what I would do
with my days, and never have in fact been bored.

The student offered a summary interpretation based on course read-
ings regarding historical and demographic influences on prosperity
over the life course, specifically applying the concept of *cumulative ad-
vantage and disadvantage* (Dannefer, 2003).
"Harold entered the workforce during the post World-War II expan-
sion in the U.S. He worked in a stable, growing part of government ser-
vice, and received years of internal training and promotions, with no
formal educational credentials. In our course on the *Sociology of Aging*,
we read of a cohort compositional shift in today's society, with a greater
premium on early career planning and higher education. Still, there are
fewer opportunities for 'good' jobs and benefits today, in a service-ori-
ented, global economy. These trends suggest economic instability in the
future, for current workers as they face retirement. In contrast, Harold
was able to retire early, at age 55, having worked the required number
of years in the federal workforce. He can also depend on a generous
package of health insurance and pension benefits. This is not the case
for many current workers, including many Black Americans who, as
Gibson (1996) shows, have more physical disabilities and sporadic
work opportunities. These disadvantages create an unclear line between
work and retirement status, and make the usual, middle-class model of
retirement less relevant. Indeed, many poorer workers never do 'retire'
in the usual sense of the term. Harold's early advantages were shared by
many in his birth cohort, and were cumulative in allowing him years
later to control the timing and quality of his retirement; those early
advantages set the stage for where he is today."

SUMMING UP:
PRACTICAL ISSUES AND CHALLENGES
OF INCORPORATING NARRATIVE INTERVIEWS

The conclusion summarizes major benefits and also challenges in guiding student interviews. On the plus side, the careful thought and skills developed in conducting and interpreting narrative interviews, and the richness of final papers, are rewarding for all concerned. Many students take pride in their final papers, of a sort that is rare in their college work; more, doing so exposes them in a manageable way to the creative process of research. Another virtue of this practice is that it is ecumenical with respect to disciplines and majors: students majoring in psychology, anthropology, journalism, English, history, pre-law, clinical fields such as medicine, and social work appreciate the value of gaining skill at interviewing, and see the method as part of professional practice in future careers. Another benefit is that the process, as well as the product, of narrative research presents many compelling vehicles for creative discussion and application in the classroom: choosing informants and topics, drafting questions, "rehearsing" and refining questions prior to interviews, sharing transcripts to identify and code themes and connections to course readings–all are do-able and valuable activities. It's also possible, of course, to use secondary narrative sources for the same purposes, for example, to enact a published interview (of a topic relevant to your course) in order to reveal the multiplicity of meanings and lessons residing in a narrative text. A final benefit is that the drama and specificity of interviews allows even students who resist "theory" to gain confidence in applying abstract ideas.

Unlike experiential writing assignments that focus on *students'* lives, which often require reflection on emotionally or ethically difficult issues (Fisher, 1996; Grauerholz & Copenhaver, 1994), narrative analysis shifts the focus to the *informant's* account. Focusing on a personal narrative helps students to clarify and apply gerontological concepts, which are central goals of such an assignment. Further, while such reflective analysis can also be achieved with secondary sources, such as those from literature (Boyatzis, 1994), history (e.g., Rosengarten, 1974), or documentary journalism (e.g., Terkel, 1972), students' investment in the intellectual and moral dimensions of interpretation tends to be deeper when applied to a living informant and to a narrative they have helped to create.

On the other hand, this teaching practice presents both conceptual and practical challenges for teachers. First, as with any methodological

approach, interviewing has its purists. Obviously there are significant differences, for example, in doing and interpreting life histories versus more focused, topical interviews. In published work, the limitations of single interviews (or a very small number) is compensated for by greater depth and completeness of topical coverage. Teachers and students alike, if taking these norms too stringently, may question the value of a single interview and thus undercut the interpretive imagination required to capitalize on this teaching technique. Though it is important for students to have awareness of distinctions and developments among various genres of narrative analysis (and to explore them in other courses), too much purism can intimidate and stifle their effort.

Finally, there are practical considerations that interested teachers should anticipate. Interview projects are somewhat more time and labor intensive than passive teaching approaches. For students, conducting the interview takes a couple of hours outside of class, and transcription roughly 3-4 times the length of the interview itself. I recommend supplementary readings on qualitative interviewing such as that by Kaufman (1994) or McCracken (1988) but require no other readings beyond those assigned in the course. A note about grading: students potentially earn 25 percent of their course credit through the interview paper. The interview/transcript and the final analytical paper are best graded separately, a solution to the problem of papers in which sensitive interviews are not matched by skill in integrating course concepts and readings.

For instructors, too, guiding projects well requires advanced planning and two or three office meetings (or e-mail exchanges) between students and advisors: one to review possible informants and topics, another to review/refine questions, and a third to discuss themes in the transcript and strategies for integrating the narrative material into the final paper. For these reasons teachers can consider offering interview papers as an optional writing assignment, rather than a requirement; having tried both, the author has found ways to balance the depth and length of the assignment and class size.

Though not daunting, there are technical demands to be met: students must have an audio tape recorder and many buy or borrow a remote foot pedal which speeds transcribing. Only in rare cases are students permitted to conduct telephone interviews, but in those exceptions (where there is already sufficient rapport to ensure a strong interview without face-to-face contact) speaker-phones are an accessible solution for recording. In short, narrative interview projects are a powerful and also manageable vehicle for helping students develop, and articulate in

writing, reflective awareness and conceptual application and in gerontology courses. In fostering integration of course content, first-hand discovery and knowledge, and conscious methodological choices, this practice offers rewards that make it more than worth the effort and deserving of consideration among a wide range of teachers involved in gerontology and geriatrics education.

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