

Roads not taken: A narrative positioning analysis of older adults' stories about missed opportunities

Abstract

The point of departure for this article is narrative gerontology's conceptualization of life as storied and the assumption that identity development and meaning making do not cease at any age, but rather continue throughout life. We suggest that if identity construction is considered to be a lifelong project, narrative gerontology would benefit from applying analytical perspectives focused on the situated activity of narration. In this article, we apply a three-level positioning analysis to segments of interviews with two elderly Sami women concerning missed opportunities or roads not taken and, more specifically, to narrations about missed opportunities for education. We argue that such narrations should not necessarily be considered expressions of regret or processes of reconciliation but rather as pivotal in here-and-now identity constructions. Narrations about missed opportunities demonstrate that what narrators choose to insert into their life stories is chosen for a purpose and for an audience in a specific interpersonal and discursive context. We suggest that narrative gerontology would benefit from a broader focus on the diversity of sites of engagement in which older adults perform identity constructions. This shift implies moving beyond traditional studies of older adults' life stories and biographical narratives as related in the context of qualitative research interviews (of which the present study of Sami older adults' life stories is indeed an example).

Key words: narrative gerontology, narrative positioning, aging, identity, interview

Introduction

In recent decades, the growing field of narrative gerontology (NG) has conceptualized *life as storied* (cf. Kenyon & Randall, 1999) and human beings as *makers of meaning* (Randall, 2013b). The assumption that “life is a biographical as much as a biological phenomenon” is fundamental to NG (Randall, 1999). A core assumption of NG is that identity development and meaning making do not cease at any age, but rather continue throughout life (Bohlmeijer, Westerhof, Randall, Tromp, & Kenyon, 2011; Kenyon, Clark, & deVries, 2001). Hence, narrative development is viewed as a potentially infinite process (Bohlmeijer et al., 2011). Nonetheless, the literature occasionally conceptualizes narratives as reflections of individuals’ identities or internal mental states. For example, McAdams (2005: 125) notes, “I believe that the storied accounts we hear do reflect an inner sense of narrative identity”.

In this article, we suggest that the core assumptions of NG necessitate analytical perspectives that are not limited to a focus on a narrator “who is self-reflecting or searching who s/he (really) is” (Bamberg, 2006: 144). Rather, perspectives focusing on “narrators who are engaging in the activity of narrating [...] for particular situated purposes” (Bamberg, 2006: 144) are required.

This article is based on a narrative study of the life stories of Sami older adults in Norway as related in the context of qualitative interviews. The overall research question of the study was, “How are elderly Sami’s identities and health in old age worked and expressed in the stories they tell about their lives?” (Authors, 2013). During the course of the study, we became aware that several of the narrations concerned events that had never happened, missed opportunities, or roads not taken and that these stories were pivotal in the participants’ here-and-now identity

constructions. The point of departure for this study (life stories as narrated in the context of qualitative research interviews) would apparently situate the study in the field of “big stories” research (Freeman, 2007). However, the analytical perspectives applied in this article were strongly influenced by “small story research” (Bamberg, 2006; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2006), which focuses on “narrating as an activity that takes place between people [...and] the present of ‘the telling moment’” (Bamberg, 2006: 140). Although skepticism has been expressed concerning the application of micro-analytic interpretive procedures in big-story research (cf. Bamberg, 2006), we attempted to apply a positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997) to two segments from two different interviews to demonstrate that older adults’ stories about “roads not taken” should not necessarily be considered expressions of regret. Rather, these stories should be viewed as situated identity constructions. The fact that a person chooses to tell stories about missed opportunities when invited to tell “the story of her or his life” demonstrates that the stories “cannot be considered a self-contained product that mirrors a private psychological reality or something like a mental representation of narrative identity” (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2000: 205). Rather, such stories should be viewed as responses to “the assumed expectations and evaluations of the interviewer” as much as the narrators own “discursive intentions” (cf. Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann, 2000: 205). Furthermore, these stories are framed and shaped by broader discursive contexts.

Background

The Sami

The Sami are an indigenous people living in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. Estimates of the Sami population vary depending on the criteria considered, such as

self-identification, first language, home language, and family history. However, the Sami population is often estimated to range from 50,000 to 80,000 individuals (Sámi Instituhtta Nordic Sami Institute, 2008). The vast majority of Sami reside in Norway, where the Sami population is estimated at 40,000 (Statistics Norway, 2010).

Historically, the Sami were reindeer herders, small-scale farmers, and fishermen. A 2000 report by the Sami Language Council estimated that there were approximately 25,000 Sami-speaking people in Norway (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2001).

National governments have made strong efforts to assimilate the Sami into the majority populations. In Norway, the policy of “Norwegianization” lasted from 1850 to World War II. The school system was a central instrument in this assimilation policy through strict regulations of the use of the Sami language in schools and extensive use of Norwegian teachers from southern Norway. Residential schools were powerful arenas for the Norwegianization of Sami children. The assimilation process was paralleled by individual experiences of stigmatization, discrimination, and “everyday racism” (Minde, 2003).

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the Sami were marginalized politically and in society in general; however, after World War II, a new governmental policy based on the principles of cultural pluralism and indigenous rights began to emerge (Niemi, 1997). During the 1950s, a growing Sami movement began to articulate a Sami identity based on the “self-concept of the Sami as being a distinct people who had lived in the area before the present states came into existence” (Gaski, 2008: 220). The public assimilation policy culminated in 1980 with “the Alta affair”, the Norwegian government’s decision to dam the Alta-Kautokeino

River in the face of massive Sami protests that the dam would threaten grazing areas and calving sites used by Sami reindeer herders. The Alta affair brought national and international attention to the rights of the Sami people, which in turn resulted in the enactment of the Sami Act in 1989 and the establishment of the Sami Parliament the same year.

Narrative identities and life stories

Scholars employ the concept of narrative identity in various ways. Despite these differences, a common point of departure appears to be the acknowledgement of identities as both “multidimensional and connected to social, historical, political and cultural contexts” and “constituted via narratives in and through time” (Smith & Sparkes, 2008: 7). As noted by de Medeiros (2014), we have multiple identities, and narrative is the performance of identity.

Randall notes that we are what we remember ourselves to be (Randall, 2010). Kenyon, Ruth and Mader (1999: 46) argue, “In one sense, the past exists only as it is remembered and created and re-created in the interaction with present and future experiences and with the meaning, interpretations, and metaphors ascribed to those experiences”. However, Bamberg (2011) discusses whether identities encompass *all* experiences ever lived or only the memories that are considered relevant enough to feed into one’s life story. Randall and McKim (2004: 241) note that narrative imagination involves the process of transforming “the stuff of our lives into the stories of our lives”. However, Bamberg raises the question, “What is the stuff that typically is selected as worthy to insert into a life story?” (Bamberg, 2011: 5). His question emphasizes that the story a person tells as her or his life story is a matter of choice, which implies that life stories are not fixed. Life stories are situational constructions

that are told for a purpose and for an audience. Further, Bamberg notes that “narrating enables speakers/writers to disassociate the speaking/writing self, and thereby take a reflective position vis-à-vis the self as character in past or fictitious time-space, make those past (or imagined) events relevant for the act of telling (a bodily activity in the here-and-now), and potentially orient to an imagined ‘human good’” (Bamberg, 2011: 7). This aspect is crucial: the teller makes past events, “real” or “imagined”, relevant in the here-and-now act of telling and, consequently, in her or his situated identity constructions. This act of making events relevant necessitates analytical perspectives that allow not merely a focus on “the talked-about” but also on the “tellership” (Bamberg, 2011).

Methods

This article is based on sequences of two interviews from a study of Sami older adults’ life stories as narrated in the context of qualitative research interviews. The nineteen participants in the study (eleven women and eight men) were between 68 and 96 years old and considered themselves to be Sami. They were living in the two northernmost counties of Norway. The participants were recruited through local nursing homes, home care services, and senior associations.

The interviews were conducted by the first author (XXX) in the homes or nursing homes of the interviewees and were digitally recorded. All of the interviews began with the interviewer inviting the interviewee to speak about her or his life in the manner of her or his choosing. The interviews moved thematically back and forth between stories about the past, reflections on the present, and thoughts about the future. There were substantial variations among the interviewees with respect to form. While some of the interviewees easily “broke into narration”, others did not. At the

end of the interviews, all of the interviewees were invited to elaborate on the experience of being interviewed in this manner. All of the interviewees expressed appreciation for being interviewed. For some of the interviewees, having the opportunity to “talk about themselves” to someone interested in listening was a rare but appreciated experience.

Ethics

The study was approved by the Regional Committee for Medical Research Ethics. Interviewees were limited to persons capable of providing informed consent.

The participants were assured confidentiality. Because an individual’s life story contains names, places, and other information that can be used for identification, the stories were edited to protect the anonymity of the storytellers and others appearing in the stories.

All of the interviews were conducted in the Norwegian language. Although all of the interviewees spoke Norwegian, Sami was the first language of ten of the interviewees. Three of the interviewees voiced concerns about whether they would be able to express themselves satisfactorily in Norwegian. In these cases, the interviewer offered to use an interpreter, but the interviewees chose to conduct the interviews in Norwegian. The interviews were therefore not conducted in the first language of some of the interviewees, and we have considered the possible effects of this factor on the interview situations and the material. This shortcoming may have influenced *how* the interviewees told their stories because one’s first language typically provides richer details and nuances than languages acquired later in life. It may also have influenced what was told in the interviews. A Norwegian-speaking interviewer could have been

perceived as a representative of the majority society. We were concerned that this perception would prevent the interviewees from addressing issues such as assimilation and minority experiences. Although this problem may have occurred, the interview material is rich in narrations concerning these issues, which suggests that it may not have had a significant impact. The interview material indicated a considerable “narrative willingness” among the interviewees.

Positioning analysis

Positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997, 2006; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) offers the possibility of studying identity not as something we *have*, but as something we are continuously constructing. Narrators are continuously constructing (or rather, co-constructing) narrative versions of themselves in interaction with interlocutors and with reference to others, to past or future (“real” or “imagined”) events and to broader discursive contexts. In positioning analysis, the focus is on both the referential world (what and who the story is about) and how this referential world is constructed in the interactive setting (Bamberg, 2011). In other words, this approach allows a focus on both the *told* and the *telling*.

Bamberg suggests a three-level positioning analysis as a suitable approach to the study of “the micro-genesis of identities” (Bamberg, 2004: 336). Positioning level 1 addresses the question, “What is the story about?” It focuses on how *the story characters* are positioned in story time and story place. Positioning level 2 addresses the question, “Why is the story told this particular way, at this particular point in time?” It focuses on the interactive work accomplished between *the participants in the interactive setting* (here, the interviewer and the interviewee in the interview setting). Positioning level 3 focuses on the narrators’ positioning of themselves with

regard to broader discourses. In other words, it addresses how narrations are situated in relation to social and cultural processes beyond the immediate telling situation (cf. De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008).

Two stories about roads not taken

In the following, we present segments of interviews with two Sami women who both lived in a small community in the Sami core area. Sami was both women's mother tongue, and prior to the interviews, they had both expressed concern regarding conducting the interviews in Norwegian.

Berit: Could have been a nurse

Berit was a woman in her mid-80s. She came from a family of reindeer herders, but her parents eventually had to give up reindeer herding. Berit and her husband had subsisted on small-scale farming and fishing in the river.

Throughout the interview, Berit discussed her childhood. She described life prior to school as "Wonderful! It was wonderful. We played, and we helped Mother. [...] And the boys helped Father. That's how it was." However, things changed when she started attending school. She told the interviewer,

"When we came to the residential school, there were only Norwegian-speaking teachers and the headmistress. There were only Norwegian speakers. So, we had to do as they said. [...] I didn't speak Norwegian, so it was difficult. When we read, we read by heart. I didn't know what we were reading. That's how it was. I was slow."

When the interviewer asked Berit what she did after she finished school, she replied,

“Aaaah... There were not many possibilities back then. You see, my Norwegian was so bad. And I didn’t have... My Norwegian was so bad, and I wanted to attend home economics classes or something like that. [Pause] But no, I didn’t start. ‘Cause I didn’t know... I was not brave enough... the teachers and everything.”

Later in the interview, the interviewer (I) asked Berit (B) how she met her husband.

I: How did you meet your husband?

B: How? Yes, we attended school together. At the residential school. Nothing happened then, but... Yes. We met... the distances were not long. So, we became sweethearts. [Laughs]

I: Yes?

B: And then, we traveled to the South. Worked there for a while. Before we got married.

I: Yes?

B: I worked at the... [name of an institution for persons with disabilities]

I: OK.

B: You know. Yes. And his sister was... his sister was a patient there.

I: Yes?

B: Yes. And I was there and he... he had other work. It wasn't... but they [the leaders of the institution] wanted me to start as a nurse there. They wanted to give me an education, but I did not start because I knew I was bad... my Norwegian is bad.

I: Mmm.

B: And the writing and everything...

I: No?

B: Yes. It wasn't easy.

I: No, of course...

B: But they wanted me to... They thought that I was a little good with... with the patients.

I: Yes. Did you want to, yourself?

B: Yes... [Pause] What was the question?

I: Did you want to, yourself, to continue to work with the patients?

B: Yes. I did, but I did not start because... We had made plans to get married. They said that I could go... could take a longer vacation. And when I got back I could... if I wanted to, I could go... to school.

I: Mmm.

B: Hmmm [smiles]. Oh no. I didn't dare.

I: No. So, then you went back north... and got married?

B: Yes. It was his parents who... yes, his parents... [Sighs] They thought that we were living together in the South. They said that we were not allowed to be like that. We had to get married. It is a sin, being like that. [Short laugh] Even though we did not live together. [Smacks her tongue and smiles] Oh my God, the rules were so strict.

I: Yes... Yes. So, then you went back home.

B: Yes. Traveled back with her [the sister]. She also wanted to go home. And she stayed here, ever since. They did not want her to leave, but... but she also wanted to go. She was so homesick.

Inga: Could have been adopted

Inga was a woman in her mid-90s. Sami was Inga's mother tongue, but early in the interview, she stated, "Luckily, I knew some Norwegian when I attended school." She was born into a reindeer herding family, and she had also been a reindeer herder.

During the interview, the interviewer (I) asked Inga (In) what her dreams had been for the future when she was a child.

In: When I was a child, then... Yes, I remember... to grow up, so I could look after the reindeer. We had reindeer.

I: Mmm.

In: I am very fond of the reindeer. But we had cows as well.

I: So your family was both reindeer herders and farmers?

In: Yes.

I: Yes?

In: We needed the cows for milk.

I: Mmm. So you wanted to be a reindeer herder?

In: Yes. But then, when I attended school there, at [place], there was this older teacher. She came all the way from the South. [...] She had no children of her own, and she wasn't married either. She wanted to bring a Sami child to the South, to let the child go to school there, and she would pay for school for this child. [...] If I went with her, I would have my own room and she would buy me clothes and everything. She promised. And I was so happy! I could go there and attend school! But then, I went home and told [my mother] what the teacher said... "She wants to take me there so I can learn. I can go to school there – there are lots of schools there." At first, my mother didn't say anything. Then, she said, "You will learn to sew Sami boots and all [kinds of] Sami clothes. That's enough school for you!" She said that she would teach me to sew Sami clothes and that I would marry a Sami man, a reindeer herder. "No, I don't want to get married. Never!" I said. I told the teacher, "You have to talk to my mother!" But my mother said no: "Inga is not going anywhere! She will learn to sew Sami clothes, and she will marry a Sami man with reindeer." And so it was. I was really angry with my mother. I cried and cried, but it didn't help. The teacher took another girl, from the orphanage. [...] My mother said, "You can live from sewing Sami clothes. Not everybody can do that! But you can learn to do it." [Pause] And so it was.

I: Yes.

In: But I don't think... Nowadays, mothers listen to their children. Maybe they do what they want.

I: Yes? Do you think that is a good thing?

In: [Sighs] Yes, maybe it is good; sometimes it is not. But it is a good thing to get to choose what to do. School... which school to attend. That's good! That they get...

[Pause]

I: When you look back at your life now, do you think that... it turned out as you wished?

In: Mmm. No, it was not like that, but... But I do not regret marrying him.

I: You do *not* regret it?

In: No. Then, things turned out well. And we... we had children and we agreed with them. They went to school. But I spoke nicely to them. I never said that you *must* attend a particular school. They must choose... they chose for themselves. *Which* school to attend.

A three-level positioning analysis

There are obvious similarities, as well as differences, in the two women's narrations. They are narrations about missed opportunities for education and about being the chosen one. Additionally, the two women's narrations are negotiations of broader social positions and discourses in modern Norwegian society and in the traditional Sami culture. In the following, we demonstrate how a three-level positioning analysis can provide insights beyond those resulting from an analysis focusing solely on what

the stories are *about*. We begin by presenting how the characters are positioned in story time and story place (positioning level 1). Furthermore, we include elements of the interactive work that is being accomplished between the interviewer and the interviewees in the interview setting (positioning level 2), and we address the referencing and orientation to broader discourses and social and cultural processes beyond the interview setting (positioning level 3). We demonstrate that who appear as protagonist and antagonist, hero and villain, are modified when the analysis includes the interactive setting and broader social positions and discourses. Furthermore, a three-level positioning analysis addresses the interviewees' positions as active agents or undergoers (cf. Bamberg, 2012). In the current text, we present the three levels of positioning separately; however, in narrations, the three levels are interrelated and occur simultaneously.

Positioning of story characters

At positioning level 1, Berit largely attributed her missed opportunity for education to her (lack of) language skills and courage. She constituted herself as “slow” (in the Norwegian language, “slow” is sometimes used as a synonym for “stupid”). She repeatedly stated that her “Norwegian was bad”. She also repeatedly referred to her lack of courage: “I was not brave enough”; “I didn’t dare”. It is interesting to observe that in Inga’s narration, there were no references to language impediments. As opposed to Berit, Inga knew some Norwegian when she attended school and likely experienced fewer challenges in attending a school system that prohibited the use of her mother tongue.

Both women constituted an antagonism between marriage and education in their narrations. Whereas Inga resisted the idea of marriage (“No, I don’t want to get

married. Never!”), Berit presented marriage as something that she and her boyfriend had planned. Inga’s mother, who insisted that Inga marry a reindeer herder, and Berit’s parents-in-law, whose “rules were so strict”, appeared to be the main driving forces behind marriage. However, when summing up her life, Inga concluded, “I do not regret marrying him [...] things turned out well.” The significance of marriage was also expressed in Inga’s positioning of the teacher from the South as “older”, childless, and “she wasn’t married either”.

At positioning level 1, both of the women’s stories were about being the chosen one. The leaders of the institution in the South wanted to provide Berit with an education and a position as a nurse because they thought that she “was a little good with the patients”. Inga was the child the teacher originally wanted to bring to the South. In their narrations, the women emphasized the extent of each offer. Berit did so by describing how the leaders of the institution maintained their offer when she informed them that she had to travel back north to get married: “They said that I could go... could take a longer vacation” and “when I got back I could... if I wanted to, I could go... to school”. Inga did so by describing how the teacher would not only “pay for school” but also provide her with her “own room” and “clothes and everything”. However, Inga was “chosen” in a double sense. Through the words of her mother, Inga expressed the privilege of being Sami: “You can live from sewing Sami clothes. Not everybody can do that! But *you* can learn to do it.”

At positioning level 1, Berit appeared to be an antagonist. Her “inner demons” told her that her Norwegian was too poor for her to receive further education, and her lack of courage prevented her from accepting the offer of education and a job in the South. Inga, on the contrary, appeared to be a protagonist in her own story. Language and a

lack of courage did not appear as obstacles in her story. In contrast, she constituted herself as adventurous: “I was so happy! I could go there and attend school!” In Berit’s narration, the leaders of the institution and her future parents-in-law appeared to be far more active agents than she was. Even her husband’s sister, who was a minor character in the story, was presented with more agency than Berit (“They did not want her to leave, but... but she also wanted to go. She was so homesick.”). In Inga’s narration, the teacher from the South appeared as a hero who offered Inga opportunities she could not have had if she stayed in the North. Her mother appeared as the antagonist, preventing Inga from obtaining an education and insisting on her marriage to a reindeer herder.

Positioning in the interactive setting

At positioning level 2, an essential question is why a certain story is told at a particular point in time. When the interviewer asked Berit what she did after she finished school, she responded by stating that her Norwegian was poor; when the interviewer asked Berit how she met her husband, she responded by describing the missed opportunity for education due to her lack of courage and poor Norwegian. Berit’s (lack of) skills in the Norwegian language were made significant throughout her narration. In this context, it is interesting to note that both women expressed concern about conducting the interview in Norwegian. Thus, language was rendered relevant to the intersubjective context prior to the interview situation. Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann (2000) note that by the time interviews occur, interviewers and interviewees know details about one another and have made assumptions that have implications for their further interactions. We must acknowledge that the Norwegian-speaking interviewer and, in that sense (regardless of the interviewer’s offer to use an

interpreter), the implicit demand to use the Norwegian language instead of these women's mother tongue may have contributed to Berit's recurring references to her language skills. However, it must be noted that in the interview with Inga, language difficulties were not a recurring issue.

At positioning level 2, the focus is also on to whom the stories are told. As demonstrated by Randall, Prior and Skarborn (2006), listeners' life stories, including their backgrounds, professions, gender, and interests, shape the stories tellers choose to tell. The women's emphasis on missed opportunities for education cannot be observed in isolation from the immediate audience of the stories: a female researcher from the university who is interested in *Sami life stories*. As we explore below, this context must be regarded against the backdrop of broader social positions and discourses. De Fina (2008: 423) demonstrates that "a link between local meaning-making activities and macro social processes can be found in the negotiation, at the local level and within the constraints of local practices, of the position and roles of the ethnic group in the wider social space".

In contemporary Norwegian society, education is generally considered to be a "human good" (cf. Bamberg, 2011), but missed opportunities for education do not exclusively afflict the Sami. Numerous non-Sami women in Berit and Inga's generation could have told similar stories. Nonetheless, in the interviews, Berit and Inga constituted educational opportunities as a Sami issue by actively referring to cultural norms and language difficulties. Lucius-Hoene and Depperman (2000) note that throughout an autobiographical interview, a person appears as the type of person she or he "feel[s] obliged to be". Alternatively, as stated by Bamberg (2006: 140f), "it is the audience-design of the narrative that makes it seize and take possession; it

intends to affect the audience because the worst that can happen to a narrative is that it remains ‘responseless’”. The interviewer’s request for *Sami life stories* likely contributed to the women’s emphasis on their Sami backgrounds. We must acknowledge that another researcher with other research interests, e.g., “women’s stories”, may have elicited different narrations.

Positioning with reference to broader discursive contexts

The women’s stories must also be analyzed against the backdrop of the Sami’s history of assimilation. The process of “Norwegianization” is a significant component of many elderly Sami’s life stories (ref. Authors, 2013). The official assimilation policy was based on the contemporary opinion that the Sami were a primitive people and that the best course of action was to make them Norwegian. As noted above, the school system was a central instrument in the assimilation process. Berit’s repeated references to her “bad Norwegian” cannot be understood in isolation from the assimilation history. While she was in residential school, she was not allowed to use her mother tongue, which was “difficult”. At positioning level 1, rather than questioning the assimilation policy and the contemporary school system (which was a major contributor to the marginalization of generations of Sami), Berit apparently attributed her missed opportunity for education to her own capacities, such as being “slow” and lacking “courage”. This attribution could indicate that at least to some extent, she had internalized the basic premises of the assimilation policies. However, a missed opportunity for education due to “bad Norwegian” is a destiny that Berit shares with numerous other Sami in her (and other) generation(s). At present, the history of Norwegianization and its impact on the lives of individual Sami is acknowledged as a dark chapter in Norwegian history in the broader spheres of

Norwegian society. In that sense, at positioning level 3, Berit's references to "bad Norwegian" positioned her among numerous others and consequently not necessarily as particularly "slow".

While narrating, Berit and Inga negotiated tensions between the norms and standards of traditional Sami culture and the majority society. In both women's narrations, there was a clear before-and-after school separation. Both women initially positioned themselves and their families within the reindeer herding industry, which is an exclusively Sami industry in Norway. (In Inga's narration, this positioning was emphasized by her trivialization of the fact that her family were also farmers: "We needed the cows for milk".) Inga related that prior to school, she wanted to be a reindeer herder. In her story, the turning point was marked clearly with her statement, "But *then*, when I attended school..." In Berit's story, there was a shift from life as "wonderful" to "it was difficult". Prior to school, Berit was competent ("We helped Mother", and "the boys helped Father"), whereas in school, she was not ("I didn't know what we were reading"). Tensions between the prevailing knowledge in the traditional Sami culture and in the majority society were also evident in Inga's narration. Through the words of her mother, she questioned the value of the knowledge she potentially could have gained through education ("You will learn to sew Sami boots and Sami clothes. That's enough school for you!").

Additionally, in the interactive setting, the women negotiated tensions between the norms and standards of the traditional Sami culture and the majority society through the use of non-linguistic actions (cf. Bamberg, 2012). For example, Berit's sighing, tongue smacking and smiling when she stated, "Oh my God, the rules were so strict" and Inga's sigh when she reflected on how modern mothers listen to what their

children want (“Maybe it is good, sometimes it is not”) signaled that they positioned themselves at an analytical distance from the norms and standards to which they were referring.

Within a post-colonial frame of reference, the positions of the teacher from the South and Inga’s mother appear to be different than the positions on positioning level 1. The story about the teacher offering to provide Inga with an education, her “own room” and “clothes and everything” was also a story about an authority figure from the majority society’s attempt to “save” a Sami child from her own culture. Although the teacher’s intentions were apparently noble, they were based on the contemporary opinion that the Sami would be better off as Norwegians. This context positions Inga’s story among the numerous stories about authorities removing indigenous children from their families and communities to make them into “proper” citizens. Given the historical and social circumstances and the power relations between a Sami woman and a teacher from the South, the mother’s statement, “Inga is not going anywhere!” is a strong expression of resistance. From this perspective, Inga’s mother appears as a hero. Furthermore, Inga made her mother’s resistance her own by emphasizing it in her own narration.

According to Frank (2012: 45), “Stories provide an imaginative space in which people can claim identities, reject identities, and experiment with identities.” The lifespans of Inga and Berit unfolded over a lengthy historical period, with shifting and contrasting discourses concerning the Sami and their social position in Norwegian society. The present acknowledgement of the assimilation policies and their impacts on the lives of individual Sami allows for meanings and identities that are different from those that are possible within the previous dominant discourses. This opportunity is particularly

evident in Inga's narration regarding the positioning of the teacher from the South and her mother. Within the current dominant discourse, the teacher's offer and the mother's resistance serve particular purposes in Inga's situated identity construction, which in turn must be viewed as a response to the interviewer's request for "Sami life stories".

Positioning and agency

Bamberg has noted that any claim of identity faces *the agency dilemma* (Bamberg, 2011, 2012): "the apparent contradiction between the speaker as positioning him-/herself as agent, and the societal, socio-cultural constraints seemingly 'always and already' at work positioning 'the subject'" (Bamberg, 2011: 10). According to Bamberg (2012), narrators use either narrative devices that position them as less influential or less responsible (possibly as victims) or narrative devices that position them as agentive self-constructors. In their narrations, Berit and Inga moved along the continuum from a world-to-person to a person-to-world direction of fit. In both women's narrations, socio-cultural constraints were at play in positioning them as less influential on their own destinies. However, in the interactive setting, through the positioning of story characters, the use of non-linguistic actions and references to broader discourses such as the history of assimilation, the women positioned themselves not only at the receiving end of the world-to-person direction of fit but also as self-constructing agents.

Discussion

Older adults' stories about missed opportunities or "roads not taken" could be perceived as expressions of regret or as stories that "call for 'reconciliation' or

‘restorying’ into the overarching narrative by which we understand our lives” (Randall, 2013b: 13). They could be perceived as what Freeman (2010: 4) conceptualizes as hindsight: “the process of looking back over the terrain of the past from the standpoint of the present and either seeing things anew or drawing ‘connections’ [...] that could not possibly be drawn during the course of ongoing moments but only in retrospect”. While we agree, we also believe that narrations about missed opportunities can be pivotal in identity constructions in “sequential, moment-by-moment interactive engagements” (cf. Bamberg, 2011). We believe that an NG that is based on the assumption of identity construction as a lifelong and unfinalized project necessitates data and analytical perspectives that allow a focus on the activity of narrating in here-and-now situations for particular purposes and within the frame of broader discourses. We also believe that such perspectives enrich studies apparently belonging to the field of “big stories research”, such as our own study of the life stories of Sami older adults.

Narrations about missed opportunities or roads not taken are particularly useful for demonstrating situated constructions of identities through the activity of narrating. Such narrations demonstrate not only “the drive of the imagination which impels us to ask ‘if only’ of our pasts, and ‘what if’ of our futures” (Andrews, 2014: 4) but also that “the stuff selected as worthy to insert into a life story” is chosen for a purpose and for an audience in specific interpersonal and discursive contexts (cf. Bamberg, 2011: 5). Randall notes with reference to Casey, “we are what we remember ourselves to be” (Randall, 2010: 151). We take the liberty of rephrasing Randall and state, “We are what we narrate ourselves to be.” Such narrations can also include what or who we could have become because, as Randall states elsewhere, “we might be many stories” (2014: 10). This perspective differs from that demonstrated by King and Hicks, who

discussed lost opportunities using the term “lost possible selves” (King & Hicks, 2007). In their terms, “possible selves” encompass a person’s goals and all the imaginable futures he or she might occupy. Consequently, goals not reached or futures not realized involve the loss of a possible self. In the perspectives applied in this article, missed opportunities are not *lost* selves. Rather, narrations about missed opportunities or roads not taken are considered significant because of the functions they serve in people’s situated identity claims.

Randall (2013a: 165) notes, with reference to Freeman, that “we are forever ‘rewriting’; a text whose meanings are therefore fluid in nature”. Baldwin (2015: 184) notes, “because of the fluid, dynamic nature of narrative, the self is always a self-in-becoming, the current narrative being unable to finalize the self”. To take these statements seriously, we suggest that NG inquiries would benefit from a stronger focus on the process of and contexts for rewriting (narrating). It has been noted that the focus in gerontological research tends to be on the “whats” rather than the “hows” of narrative texts (de Medeiros & Rubinstein, 2015). We agree with Georgakopoulou (2006: 128), who calls for “a decisive shift from ‘what does narrative tell us about construction of self?’ to ‘how do we *do self* (and *other*) in narrative *genres* in a variety of *sites of engagement*?’”. An orientation toward “how identities are emerging and are managed by use of narratives-in-interaction” (Bamberg, 2006: 146) and the joint construction of meaning (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012) is a productive point of departure in the field of identity research, including research on older adults. This orientation implies that NG inquiries could benefit from moving beyond traditional studies of older adults’ life stories or biographical narratives as related in the context of qualitative interviews (of which our own study of Sami older adults’ life stories is indeed an example). De Medeiros (2014: 93) voices concerns regarding narrative

researchers “allowing” older people to tell stories only about the past and that stories about imagined futures are seldom part of the discussions. Furthermore, she notes that traditional individual autobiographical interviews may privilege certain groups and stories and disadvantage other groups (2014: 184). We suggest that NG inquiries should reflect and pay focused attention to the diverse “sites of engagement”, more or less formalized settings and spontaneous everyday talk in which older adults perform their identity constructions (e.g., Örvlöv & Hydén, 2006) because, as noted by Randall and Kenyon (2004), “storying moments” can occur in a variety of contexts and narrative environments. Perhaps more room for stories about both imagined futures and alternative pasts is provided in less formal settings than in traditional life story interviews.

Concluding remarks and implications

We have no right to claim that the two women did not experience or never have experienced regret over their missed opportunities. However, in this article, we have demonstrated how stories about roads not taken are used in situated identity constructions. With reference to Sartre, Landman notes that “the past is neither unchangeable nor irremediable – and anything but dead [...] the personal meaning of the brute facts of the past is changeable” (1993: 17), which is in accordance with Randall’s argument that our perceptions of the past change as our present and our expectations for the future change (Randall, 2011: 23). Narrations about missed opportunities, such as Berit’s and Inga’s narrations, illustrate that older adults are not products or passive victims of their past. Rather, through their narratives about roads not taken, they become the narrators of their own stories without completely becoming the authors of their lives (cf. Ricoeur, 1986).

Journal of Aging Studies recently published a special issue on the topic of “narrative care”; “the applied or the practical aspect of narrative gerontology” (Kenyon & Randall, 2015: 143). Several of the contributors to the issue demonstrate the narrative complexity of older adults’ self-accounts and how listeners shape what tellers tell (de Medeiros & Rubinstein, 2015; Randall, Baldwin, McKenzie-Mohr, McKim, & Furlong, 2015). Analytic perspectives focusing on both the told and the act of telling can sensitize us to how different narrative environments elicit different stories. In the introduction to the special issue, Kenyon and Randall uphold that narrative research and practice involve a never-ending process of becoming better storylisteners (Kenyon & Randall, 2015). Storylistening and narrative care involve closely attending to the stories people tell, to the way they tell them (cf. Singer, 1994), and to the circumstances under which stories are told. We believe that becoming better storylisteners also involves paying close attention to older adults’ stories about missed opportunities because who and what they *could have become* is also a part of who *they are becoming*.

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