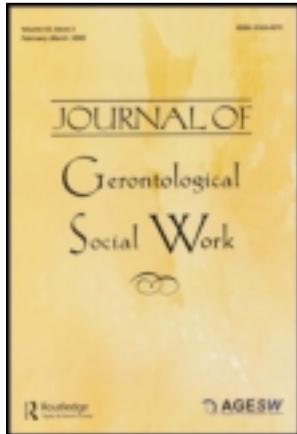


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Editorial

Narrative Gerontology Coming Into Its Own

ANCIENT STORIES IN THE SKY

Twentieth-century literary critic Roland Barthes (as cited in Czarniawska-Joerges, 2004) observed that “narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative” (p. 1). Given movie depictions of Cro-Magnons as linguistically challenged savages, it may be hard to imagine the Stone Age men who walked across the Bering land bridge to populate North America during the last ice age as tellers of stories. But evidence in support of Barthes’ claim might be found in the stars.

Bradley Schaefer’s grandfather taught him to identify the “big bear” constellation, Ursa Major, in the Colorado sky, no doubt setting the stage for his career in astronomy. Now, Schaefer (2006) argues that the history of Ursa Major can only be explained with reference to “a chain of grandfathers stretching from Paleolithic Siberia to the mountains and plains of the New World and eventually to modern Colorado, telling about the Bear in the sky” (p. 97).

The story of constellations, as we have come to understand it, begins in the Fertile Crescent (stretching across Iraq, Syria, and adjoining lands). Thousands of years before humans walked to the New World, our ancestors lived by farming along the banks of great rivers—the Tigris and the Euphrates. From time to time the river would flood, washing away possessions and jeopardizing lives, but also depositing nutrient-rich silt that would support crops. Hardwired to identify patterns, humans eventually noticed that the movements of stars across the sky could be used to predict the coming flood.

As is so often the case with great discoveries, this insight probably did not arrive as a single “aha!” moment, more likely occurring to several people in different locations at different times. Each one developed a method for recognizing the stars and each one developed a story to help identify those stars and describe their movement to younger generations. The easiest way to describe a cluster of stars was to point up and say, “See those stars that look like a big ladle, like a Big Dipper? Now see how these other stars trace the outline of a bear followed by three hunters?”

So it is not surprising that the humans who made their way to the New World took with them their most memorable stories. And it is therefore not surprising that, as Schaefer and others have observed, the stars that make up Ursa Major are described as a bear by Old World traditions of Greek, Basque, Hebrew, and Siberian tribes as well as the New World cultures of the Cherokee, Algonquin, Zuni, Tlingit, and Iroquois. The history of constellations is the history of man's earliest storytelling, and it illustrates the life-giving role that stories play in the transfer of knowledge.

Narrative Inquiry

What does all this have to do with gerontological social work? Roughly 40 years into the movement characterized as a "narrative turn" in the social sciences (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2004), the field of narrative gerontology is coming into its own, with several sessions at the most recent GSA meeting and a burgeoning of books and articles. Thus the essential human activity of storytelling is beginning to permeate gerontological research as well as social work practice.

Narrative inquiry naturally finds its home in the qualitative paradigm and its boundaries are as yet ill-defined. As we saw at GSA, some studies identified as "narrative" look a lot like the simple topical analysis of qualitative data. When I see a study that claims to adopt a narrative approach I expect it to examine stories, less for their objective validity than for what they might reveal about the intellectual and emotional lives of storytellers themselves or, perhaps, their attitudes towards the story's subject. When I conduct a narrative interview, I seek to create a space in which respondents can tell their stories. When I analyze narrative data, I look for meanings, both overt and covert. I then rely on multiple strategies for enhancing rigor (triangulation, peer review, member checking) in an attempt to distinguish what I imagine from what I (and others) perceive.

Narrative is both a subject and a method of inquiry. Some researchers under this umbrella use stories told in a range of contexts—interviews, myths, advertisements, conversations, films, novels, and so on—as data, subjecting them to the analytic methods of other qualitative approaches such as constant comparison or grounded theory. Others use narrative analytic approaches, many of which have roots in the hermeneutic tradition of biblical analysis. Fortunately these methods are described in several excellent books, most notably Catherine Reissman's 2008 work, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*.

Narratives in Practice

Practitioners and therapists were using narratives for healing long before researchers in the social sciences began our narrative inquiries. Much

psychotherapy consists of telling and re-telling the stories of one's life. In gerontology, narrative therapeutic approaches go by a variety of names, including reminiscence therapy, storytelling groups, and life review. Although the effectiveness of these methods has not been clearly established (Arean & Perri, 1993; Shieh & Wang, 2003) they remain popular tools for addressing existential issues of later life (Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, van Beljouw, & Pot, 2010).

In summary, stories have contributed to the well-being of humans for as long as there have been humans. In the form of constellations they helped our ancestors keep track of time and navigate across huge distances. They help us make sense of complex life events and give form and structure to our personal identities. More recently, stories have emerged as the basis for burgeoning research and practice in gerontological social work.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

This first issue of our new volume offers research using diverse methodologies to address a range of questions in gerontological social work. Based on their nationally representative survey, Mercedes Bern-Klug and Bushra Sabri report that most nursing homes provide elder abuse training, and that recent graduates are most likely to report being able to deliver this content. Then Joy Swanson Ernst and Charles A. Smith compare the assessment practices of a lone social worker with those of a nurse-social worker team in adult protective services. Results bring into question the cost-effectiveness of multi-disciplinary teams, and the study provides an example of the use of practice data in research. We turn to the urgent topic of grandparents raising grandchildren, as Holly Baker Shakya and her colleagues at San Diego State University use the social ecological model to describe the concerns of grandparents in this situation—foremost among them, financial considerations. Then Duy Nguyen examines data from the California Health Interview Surveys to identify factors that influence the likelihood of older Asian Americans having a usual source of care. In addition to acculturation, he found that interethnic differences exerted significant effects, highlighting the diversity among Asian American elders. Our final article is part of the Practice Forum. After her passing, Jennifer Partington's colleagues completed a fascinating study which they dedicated to her. In it, the authors demonstrate the value of a strengths-based approach to group work with older adults in a psychiatric ward in Christchurch, New Zealand. Finally, Peggy L. Black offers a glowing review of Paula Span's 2009 book, *When the Time Comes: Families with Aging Parents Share Their Struggles and Solutions*.

Amanda S. Barusch
Editor, JGSW

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