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The construction of multiple identities in elderly narrators' stories

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ABSTRACT
Elderly storytellers are often at pains to represent multiple past identities even within the scope of a single account. Some of these identities may be incompatible, as when the teenage hell-raiser straightens out to become the perfect homemaker, and then after her husband dies becomes a successful business woman. Retrospective reassessment follows from long and varied experience, and hence becomes a natural resource for storytellers old enough to have had the time to re-evaluate events. Further, comments about people and places from the past automatically force a shift between the telling frame and the narrative frame; they create the impression that the teller's present identity is not representative of all aspects of the narrator's projected identity. In addition, elderly narrators insert others' perspectives into their stories, as when a widow explicitly introduces the perspective of her deceased husband into a story in progress. Elderly tellers convey multiple identities beyond what they project, and their listeners form opinions of them based both on what they reveal about their pasts and how they reflect on them from their current perspectives, and this also results in the construction of multiple and on occasion conflicting identities. This article reports an analysis of such discourse practices in stories told about themselves by people aged 80 or more years living in Indiana.

KEY WORDS – conversation, identity, memory, perspective, storytelling.

Introduction

The impetus for this article was the author's recurrent realisation during interviews with people aged 80 or more years that many elderly storytellers take great pains to represent multiple past identities even within the scope of a single story, and indeed some say that they would prefer *not* to be identified with their current 'frail state'. This echoes the observation by Coupland, Coupland and Giles (1991: 95) that older people's self-association with the past 'sometimes involves overt self-*dis*sociation from the present'. As Taylor (1992: 512) wrote, 'much of elderly discourse is

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historical'. Elderly tellers construct their current identity partly through recalling their past lives, which often involves telling stories from the past, especially those that construct their younger identities. In Linde's (1993) terms, they relate salient experiences and 'landmarks' through life stories. Some of these identities may be incompatible, in the sense that we are likely to express surprise that someone has made such a complete about-face, as when the teenage hell-raiser straightens out to become the perfect little home-maker, and after her husband dies becomes a successful business woman. Moreover, Boden and Bielby (1986) demonstrated a tendency for older narrators to move between the past and the present in a single storytelling, and to draw attention to parallels and distinctions. Frailty provides a format for 'the narration of accumulated, elderly life experience' (Taylor 1992: 510), as elderly storytellers alternate between present activities and memories of the past.

In telling a story, multiple identities can be presented: the 'now' me and the 'then' me. This practice highlights the multiple perspectives that elderly storytellers can bring to bear on a single narrative. In reminiscing about places she had lived in earlier years, one narrator in my own study said: 'I wish I had my big house in Pennsylvania Street now – course I wouldn't be able to get up and down the stairs, so it's probably just as well'. This sort of association with a past life stage and location juxtaposed with a rational recognition of present physical limitations is characteristic of many elderly storytellers. As in the quoted excerpt, tellers might break off in the middle of a story to the theme of their current lack of mobility. Another excerpt from the interviews that this paper examines, 'we visited Europe about five times – when we were still able to travel', exemplifies another common juxtaposition of dual times and identities. Shifting attention between their various past life stages and their current concerns with health and living conditions, elderly tellers force their listeners to recognise two or more of the speaker's competing identities.

This article investigates how elderly narrators construct multiple identities simultaneously through storytelling. As Young (1987) argued, any narrative performance constitutes two types of self presentation: of self as storyteller, and of the narrator's character. Young developed the distinction between the 'tale world' and the 'story realm'; that is, between the events in the story and the presentation of those events in the form of a story (1987: 21). In first person narrative, the pronouns I and me act as a pivot between these provinces, referring both to the teller in the story realm and to a character in the tale world. For a young teller talking about a recent experience, there may be little difference between the teller-*me* and the character-*me*, but for an elderly teller who is describing personal

experiences in a tale world long ago, the teller-*me* often differs greatly from the character-*me*. As Young (1987: 199–200) put it:

> One virtue of reconstituting past realms is the lodgement they offer past selves. Such an alternative lodgement may be especially attractive to old people whose presentations of self in everyday life may come to seem to them circumscribed. Stories about the past reconstitute for them a realm of events in which they were livelier than they are now. And one over which they exercise a far more delicate and absolute control than they ever did when they inhabited it.

When a female teenager tells a story, according to Bamberg (2004), she is probably only concerned with her current identity as, say, an oriental, heterosexual high-school girl (*cf.* Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992 on constructing identity in a 'community of practice'). When an elderly woman tells a story, however, she may focus on any of the multiple identities she has had across the life span, for instance, as a girl who had to work to help her family through the 1930s depression, an army nurse during the Second World War, a post-war bride and mother, a career woman who returned to the workforce when her kids were grown, or a grandmother, widow and an active member of a senior community.

Peterson and McCabe (1983), Bamberg (1997), Berman (2001) and others have traced the development of narrative abilities from childhood to early adulthood. Only adults explicitly extract general principles and cognitive insights from their own personal narratives. Not surprisingly, given their years of experience and the time they have had to reconsider past events and their consequences, elderly narrators tend to offer multiple perspectives on the past, providing both initial and retrospective evaluation. As Bielby and Kully (1989) showed, narrators generally reinterpret the past in ways that establish meaningful continuity with their present construction of identity. Ewing (1990) argued that people of all ages project multiple, incompatible identities depending on the context, and I have found that very often these are communicated through a single storytelling performance. Retrospective reassessment follows from long and varied experience and provides a natural resource for storytellers old enough to have had the time to re-evaluate events. Another strategy involves inserting a later perspective into a report of an experience: indeed, realisation or coming-to-know sometimes constitutes the primary theme in a narrative. In addition, elderly narrators often introduce the attitudes or perspectives of others directly into their own stories, as when a widow explicitly introduces into her story the perspective of her deceased husband.

Further, comments about long-dead family members and friends and about buildings and parts of town long-gone automatically force a shift of attention between the here-and-now story realm and the tale world of

the past; they also constitute 'own-age-references' and thereby become potential moves in rather ritualised exchanges about age (Coupland and Coupland 1995: 90). Elderly people may not define themselves as old, as Kaufman (1981) argued, but recurrent references to long-gone people and places certainly give the impression that the present self is not truly representative of the full identity a narrator seeks to construct. Not so much a narrative strategy, as a fortuitous by-product of storytelling, is the way that retelling can sometimes segue or elide into reliving a past event. Elderly storytellers sometimes seem to fall into a reverie with the tale world and the story realm temporarily merging (Young 1987), directly suggesting a separate identity from that of the present storyteller, as if the teller were back in touch directly with the person they were long ago. As we shall see, the process of remembering in and through storytelling serves to authenticate past identities and to make connections with them. Even a faulty memory for details accrues to an overall impression of a direct link to a past identity (as I previously showed, *see* Norrick 2003, 2005). Of course, these moves within a storytelling performance are also available for deployment in strategic ways in the presentation of a remembering and narrating personality.

An elderly identity can be made salient by a storyteller in several ways, and this orientation can draw a younger listener's attention to the narrator's diverse and distinctive experiences and perspectives. Coupland *et al.* (1991) identified various such rhetorical devices, including three labelled *age-categorisation processes*: (i) disclosure of chronological age, (ii) age-related category or role references, and (iii) age-identity in relation to health; and three named *temporal framing processes*: (iv) adding past perspectives to current or recent topics, (v) expressing self-associations with the past, and (vi) recognising historical, cultural or social change. When elderly tellers locate themselves as of a particular age or in relation to past societal roles, they create the potential for recognising separate perspectives and conflicting identities; and when they orient to and associate themselves with the past or focus on change, to some degree they dissociate themselves from their current identity. One contributor to the *Indianapolis Interviews* interrupted her own story to report with sadness that, in her high school graduation class of 800, there had been 'only three African-Americans', but that the current population at the same school was 'over three-quarters African-American, because of the way people have moved'. The sadness of the observation not only associated her with the past, but also with out-of-date attitudes about race and concerns about the growing non-white population and social change – typical of older people in the United States. The accumulative effect of repeated manifestations of self-association with the past and dissociation from the present, and of the

described concerns, is to convey the identity of an elderly person (*cf.* Coupland, Coupland and Giles 1991: 64).

Elderly storytellers convey multiple identities beyond what they project of themselves, and the listeners form opinions about them based both on what the tellers reveal about their pasts and their reflections on those experiences from their current perspectives; another way in which multiple and at times conflicting identities are constructed. The teller is only partially in control of the identity conveyed, and younger listeners can derive unwanted or unwarranted conclusions. This is in line with Goffman's (1959) distinction between 'giving' (willing, intentional) and 'giving off' (inadvertent, unintentional) impressions. In maintaining elderly ways of speaking, the tellers may convey stereotypes and prejudices that they no longer hold – but they are nevertheless conveyed and they demonstrate 'inter-group divergence' (according to Coupland *et al.* 1988, based on Ryan *et al.* 1986).

Elderly narrators have much more history to remember and many more identities to convey than young ones. In their lifetimes they have gone through enormous changes in customs and ways of speaking, and many identify with their past lives, to the point of stressing that their present condition is not truly representative of who they feel themselves to be, and that the world around them is not a place they feel at home in any more. The 'production of frailty' (Taylor 1992), an orientation to past experiences by contrast with cognitive and bodily decli ne in the present, often plays a part in their discursive presentation of an elderly identity. This strong identification with the past and repudiation of the significance of their present condition renders identity construction an intricate process for elderly narrators in intergenerational contexts.

The data sources

The data for this investigation has been drawn from two main sources. One is the *Indianapolis Interviews*, which comprise both many hours of conversations recorded in family homes and transcribed by my students, and conversational interviews that I recorded with residents of American Village, a retirement community in Indianapolis, Indiana, during 2002 and 2003. The *Indianapolis Interviews* were in principle unrestricted in time and topic, though I was particularly interested in narratives about experiences during the Great Depression and the Second World War. All the interviewees were aged 80 or more years – a convenient, uniform cut-off age. Without exception the participants insisted that I use their real names in any publication, although I offered to make them anonymous.

I lived in the retirement community while recording, knew some of the narrators casually from earlier visits, and met them all at least once before recording the interview. Some 2002 interviewees agreed to a second interview eight months later in 2003. The narrators were interviewed in their own cottages or apartments in the central 'lodge' of the community. The interviews ranged from 15 minutes to well over one hour, were recorded on a digital mini-disk recorder and transcribed. They are available on line as part of the *Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English* (SCoSE) that is at http://www.uni-saarland.de/fak4/norrick/sbccn.htm. An increasing number of audio files and transcriptions from the SCoSE are also available from *TalkBank* at http://www.talkbank.org/media/conversation/SCoSE/.

The second data source consists of the extensive transcribed archives of the *Center for the Study of History and Memory* (earlier the *Oral History Research Center*) at Indiana University in Bloomington, in particular interviews from the *Whiting Project* and *Dubois County Project*. These interviews were generally recorded and transcribed by students who were themselves from the same area as the interviewees; they loosely followed a prescribed set of interview questions, but the sessions often digressed and extended into lengthy conversations and storytelling sessions. The interviewees in these projects were not all aged 80 or more years, but I oriented myself toward the older subjects (ages at interview are noted). The interviewees' names in this data set were not anonymised, in keeping with the methodology of oral history research. Some of the original transcriptions have been slightly edited to improve readability, to remove obvious errors and inconsistencies, and to match the adopted transcription conventions.

The transcription conventions

Each line of transcription represents spoken language as segmented into *intonation units*, which in English typically have about four or five words and express a new idea. An intonation unit is likely to begin with a brief pause and to end in a 'clause-final intonation contour'. Many match grammatical clauses, but they do not necessarily do so. Each unit typically contains a subject, or given information, and a predicate, or new information; this flow from given to new information is characteristic of spoken language (Chafe 1994). Arranging each intonation unit on a separate line highlights the rhythm and logic of speech, and displays the frequency of intonation units beginning with *and*, which emphasises the great fragmentation of spoken language (Chafe 1982). The transcriptions conventions use standard and modified punctuation marks to indicate the intonation contours and are detailed in Table 1.

TABLE 1. *The transcription punctuation conventions*

Capitalisation is reduced to the personal pronoun *I* and proper names.	
Diacritics (marked accents) are used to mark features of prosody rather than grammatical units.	
Non-lexical items, *e.g.* pause fillers like *uh* and *um*, back-channel tokens like *m-hm* and *uh-huh*, and markers of a shift in cognitive attention or affect like *oh* and *wow*, are transcribed. Other specific transcription conventions are:	
she's out.	A period (full-stop) shows falling tone in the preceding element.
oh yeah?	A question mark shows rising tone in the preceding element.
nine, ten.	A comma indicates a level, continuing intonation.
DAMN	Capitals show heavy stress, that speech is louder than surrounding discourse.
says 'Oh'	Single quote marks indicate speech set off by a shift in the speaker's voice.
(2.0)	Numbers in parentheses indicate timed pauses in seconds. If the duration of the pauses is less than one second:
..	A truncated ellipsis is used to indicate pauses of 0.5 seconds or less.
...	An ellipsis is used to indicate a pause of more than 0.5 to 1.0 second.
ha:rd	A colon indicates the prolonging of the prior sound or syllable.
bu- but	A single dash indicates a cut-off with a glottal stop.
[and so-]	See next line
[why] her?	Square brackets on successive lines mark beginning and end of overlapping talk.
and=	See next line
=then	Equals signs on successive lines show latching between turns.
H	Clearly audible breath sounds are indicated with a capital H.
((sigh))	Double quotes enclose editorial comments.
((laughing))	laughter during speech by the teller.
((laughter))	indicates listener' laughter.

Remembering in storytelling

Before proceeding, it will be instructive to reflect on the inter-relationship between remembering and storytelling. First, memory is the link to the past for all of us, and hence the link to the most salient life events; that is, for many elderly storytellers, to those events that determine the identity they hope to project. Secondly, justifiably or not, elderly speakers are assumed during storytelling to have many difficulties remembering names, places and other details from the past. In any case, some elderly tellers are potentially embarrassed about and concerned with memory problems. Furthermore, storytelling puts elderly people back in touch with their past identities: they live in and through these remembrances. Moreover, storytelling can prime memory for special moments of reverie and clarity of recall, evoking bygone identities for both storytellers and their audiences.

In telling a story for a particular audience, we do not reconstruct the past in a vacuum. Edwards (1997), Edwards and Middleton (1986*a*), Middleton and Edwards (1990) and Middleton (1997) demonstrated that remembering is an organised social activity contingent on the direction and purpose of talk in context. From their perspective of discursive

psychology, they recognised the social-discursive basis of memory. They stressed the importance of the interactional context and the joint nature of remembering, in claiming that we interactively construct versions of past events as the basis for shared understanding. Furthermore, we select salient events from the past to project a particular identity for a particular audience. Storytellers often reflect aloud on their process of recall, both when they experience difficulty remembering names, places and dates, and when their recall for such details is particularly clear. As in previous work (Norrick 2003), the passages in the transcribed narratives were scanned for expressions of the speaker's exceptional clarity of recall. One example is in the following excerpt from a CSHM *Whiting Project* interview (Jancose I).

Broken Arm, told by John Jancose

so Doc Timm,
who used to be the family doctor.
in the whole, in, around Whiting,
and so he took me,
I always remember,
he took me to St. Bernard's Hospital in Chicago,
and I always remember putting that ether on me.
and having me count.
I to this day I can still taste the ether.
they put me under for breaking,
I broke my arm.

At Lines 5 and 7, the 71-year-old storyteller, John Jancose, stressed, 'I always remember', and then at Line 9 reported re-experiencing the taste of ether from his childhood. Such explicit comments on the clarity of memory often centre on specific sensory experiences such as tastes, smells and visual perceptions. Although John Jancose had presumably had occasion to smell ether at various junctures later in life, and it might have been misleading of him to claim that he still tasted the ether from the original experience, such claims are routine and go unchallenged in everyday storytelling. More important is the effect of such statements about memory on the telling of the story and its reception by listeners. The sensory details intensify the identification of the teller with a past event, and authenticate both the reported past and the identity for listeners.

In order to construct a story scene, the teller must recall a set of interrelated facts and/or images from memory. These complex mental constructs find expression in the schemas of Bartlett (1932), the scripts of Minsky (1975) and Schank and Abelson (1977), the frames of Goffman (1974) and Tannen (1978; 1979), and the cognitive models of Lakoff (1987)

and other cognitive linguists. All these approaches to remembering conceive the continuum of experience not as a string of enumerated features, but rather compare the sensory recall with information stored in complete *gestalts* or cognitive models. These cognitive models contain prototypes for objects, sequences of events and causal relationships, and they facilitate the recognition, categorisation and memory of stories. When storytellers retrieve missing details or names, alongside the detail they sometimes report experiencing a special fullness or clarity of memory, particularly of the sensory content like colour, form, texture, facial features and voice quality. The images and details may be so lucid that they feel compelled to remark on them, even if it means interrupting the conversation or narrative. Storytellers report this experience of certainty and lucid memory with phrases like, 'I can see it as if it were yesterday', and 'I can still picture this'.

Performing a story requires the teller to reconstruct and relive remembered events in the tale world; it often revives memories of particular places, sensations, names and details. In the excerpt below from the CSHM (*Whiting Project*: Boyle), the 81-year old teller, Austin Boyle, talked about his experiences during the Second World War. He reported clear memories of the drill field and the drive to it in the morning, even the fact that the fellow he knew had a father who was a Texas 'oil man', but at Lines 6 and 7 he confessed doubts about the exact kind of car they rode in with the phrases 'I guess' and 'I forget'.

A Nash Convertible, told by Austin Boyle

1 we'd just all straggle out to the drill field in the morning.
2 one fellow I knew,
3 whose father was an oil man in Texas,
4 had a car on the base
5 and we'd drive out in his little,
6 I guess,
7 I forget,
8 maybe it was a Nash convertible.
9 we'd drive from the barracks to the drill field in the morning.

Nevertheless, the precision at Line 8 of the formulation, 'maybe it was a Nash convertible', has the convincing ring of Lakoff's (1987) sense of a cognitive model reconstructed from recalled details, rather than a statement of uncertain memory or a detail invented for the sake of verisimilitude. One can repeatedly observe this disarming candour among storytellers, who seem almost eager to admit to faulty memory and uncertainty, even when nothing in the story hinges on the missing names or detail.

In many contexts, like apologising and declining an invitation, displays of uncertainty and forgetfulness raise doubts about the veracity of the speaker. In public testimony, as at a hearing or in a law court, repeated recourse to forgetfulness can thoroughly discredit a witness or defendant. One might expect that recurrent problems with accessing names, details and dates would also vitiate the teller's credibility when relating first-person stories. In fact, however, listeners may interpret signs of limited forgetfulness in personal stories as proof of authenticity. By contrast, a polished story performance with a smooth delivery and no display of uncertainty or hesitation may come across as a practiced performance learned by rote. This leads to what I have called the 'paradox of forgetfulness' in personal narratives:

> In a personal narrative, teller displays of forgetfulness and uncertainty about names, details and chronology tend to authenticate the story as a valid report of actual events from memory, rather than to raise doubts about its truth, while a flawless performance gives an impression of a practiced, more superficial, less personal and, finally, less 'factual' account (Norrick 2003: 68; *cf.* Norrick 2005).

A description of remembering built around cognitive models, like that above, accounts for the observed behaviours and explains this paradox in natural ways.

Having fairly complete cognitive models with gaps allows storytellers to reconstruct scenes from memory even when lacking specific details. According to Mangan (2001), when tellers feel they know a name or detail without being able to produce it, they sometimes report experiencing a feeling of a knowing state, as in the cited *Nash convertible* story. They have an image or scene in mind, but there are gaps in the cognitive model to be filled. As Mangan (2001) described the sequence, when they recover the missing name or detail, it not only fills the active gap and completes the scene, but also brings a flood of associations from the schematic structure of the retrieved information. This impels tellers to comment on a sudden richness of recollected detail or a clarity of memory. The substantial completeness of the model, except for the missing detail, confirms the validity of the teller's memory for the listeners and constitutes the paradox of forgetfulness.

In the next story excerpt from the *Indianapolis Interviews*, 92-year-old Babe Burton, the teller, seems to display an exceptionally clear memory of the details of a particular childhood experience. She was talking about her then favourite uncle, Stuart Dean, who enjoyed a large reputation at the time in Indianapolis. By way of illustrating her uncle's influence on her thinking, Babe told of being invited on to the stage during a performance by Thurston, a famous magician. During the story, she digressed to

describe how she wore her hair, 'long hair parted in the middle, two long braids', a detail that becomes relevant later in the story when Thurston asks her if she is an Indian. As she related her story, Babe seemed to slip into reverie: her speaking tempo slowed and her voice changed. The overall effect was to convey a rather different identity than that of the present storyteller, as if she were for the moment back in touch with that little girl 70 years before.

The Famous Thurston, told by Babe Burton

1 so I got up and wanted to go
2 and my dad said "nonono sit down"
3 and my mother said "oh Charles, let him do it- let her go."
4 so I went up and watched.
5 and this was summer
6 and I was ten
7 and I had long hair parted in the middle,
8 two long braids. ((stroking hair with both hands))
9 and after Thurston did his tricks
10 and we were to go off the stage
11 and he shook hands with each of us
12 and he said to me,
13 "little girl, are you an Indian?" ((laughter))
14 and I said "no, but my uncle is Stuart Dean."

Starting in Line 5 with the phrase 'and this was summer', and continuing until 'two long braids' at Line 8, Babe seemed more immersed in her own memories than in the progress of the story. She created a direct link to a past identity for herself and her listener. In such cases, narrative can truly carry the teller and the audience into the past. In Line 13, Thurston asked Babe if she is an Indian because of her braided hair. The question left her at a loss, so she simply announced that her uncle was Stuart Dean, apparently hoping that this would establish her identify in some way. When storytellers access memories, they can experience a rare clarity, a knowing state, by which they report the details of a past experience that are flooding into their awareness. Such clarity of memory can produce a kind of reverie, putting the teller back in touch with events and identities long neglected. While such a state persists, the storyteller offers the listener a kind of direct connection with the tale world of the storyteller. This sort of interlude in the storytelling performance authenticates past experiences and identities for listeners, even as it solidifies a particular reconstruction of a past event for the teller.

Memory is central to identity in old age as the link to the past. It is the key to the pivotal historical dimension of elderly people's discourse, connecting the teller-*me* in the story realm with some character-*me* in a tale

world. At the same time, we have seen how remembering can be a problem for older storytellers. Difficulties with remembering names, places and dates are interpreted as signs of age and cognitive decline; in this way, too, they contribute to the construction of a frail, elderly identity. Even though people of all ages sometimes have difficulty remembering details of place and time in their storytelling, this difficulty assumes a special resonance with older people.

Ways of constructing multiple narrative identities

In some ways, when anyone tells stories about the relatively distant past, there are always multiple identities in play. There is a teller working to remember how she was, how things were back then. Rather than constructing a single coherent self, as Goffman (1959) suggested, elderly tellers orient toward multiple and sometimes incompatible past identities and away from their current state. In a typical passage from one of the *Indianapolis Interviews*, Babe Burton was simultaneously concerned with memories of the past and with her ability to remember. Babe was married to the singer with the Abe Lyman Band, which was relatively successful during the big-band era.

The Abe Lyman Band, told by Babe Burton

1 the whole band- this was the Abe Lyman Band.
2 we went to Ames Iowa,
3 and the dance band,
4 they played for a dance at Ames Iowa.
5 and then we went-
6 I can't remember just exactly … to Lubbock Texas,
7 and someplace else in New Mexico or something.
8 no, that would-
9 I haven't thought about that for a long time.

Babe apparently had clear memories of the band performing in Ames, Iowa, but from Line 5 the remainder of the tour and the story onward was cloudy, and finally she abandoned the story altogether. Babe could not assemble enough details to reconstruct the events she was trying to describe, so she broke off by saying, 'I haven't thought about that for a long time'. This is an account for her failure to remember, an expression that constructs frailty in the sense of Taylor (1992). A more adept interviewer would have capitalised on what Babe *did* remember, for instance by asking what made the Ames performance special or what a typical evening with the band was like. Although I did not register it during the interview, while transcribing the interview, Babe clearly sounded to me confused and

frustrated. In the terminology introduced above, Babe could construct a general cognitive model of the concerts the band played, and enunciate details of a particular concert, but she could not elaborate on the subsequent itinerary. Elderly narrators are keenly aware of the significance of memory lapses – some that I interviewed joked about having a 'senior moment' when they could not remember a date or fact – they worry about forgetfulness as a sign of senility or Alzheimer's disease.

Here and elsewhere in the interviews, two distinct identities are evident in the mere act of talking about the past, meaning within the story realm itself: a teller-*me* formed by and caught up in a moment from the past, and a teller-*me* experiencing difficulty accessing precisely this important part of her identity. Young (1987) argued that stories about the past reconstitute for elderly tellers a realm 'over which they exercise a far more delicate and absolute control than they ever did when they inhabited it', but difficulty remembering details can vitiate this control and damage the impression tellers hope to convey of their character-*me*, as well as calling into question the competence of the teller-*me*. Still, telling stories from different past times is an obvious resource for reconstituting and conveying multiple identities, whether as a widow, a grandmother, a real-estate agent, a non-combat pilot in the Second World War or a farm girl. Further, an elderly narrator may perform stories about her deceased husband, about her children and grandchildren, or about people she knew in the past. Comments about long-dead family members and friends and about long-gone buildings and parts of town automatically shift attention between the story realm (or telling frame) and the tale world (or narrative frame), as in this next excerpt from the *Indianapolis Interviews*. Muriel Ganser, aged 92 years, was talking about her fond memories of childhood, in particular about her dancing lessons. I listened along with Rose, another octogenarian resident of the retirement community.

Exhibition Waltz, told by Muriel Ganser

Toward the end of the spring
there was a program planned,
with parents and friends being invited,
and my brother's favourite partner
was a little girl named Arlene.
and they were to do the EXhibition waltz ((breathlessly)).
((Rose and Neal laugh, Muriel laughs))
the day-
oh- and Arlene's mother was- was creating a beautiful dress,
but on the DAY and the HOUR,
the dress wasn't finished,
and Arlene's mother said-
absolutely refused to let Arlene dance.

14 and the teacher came to my mother ((laughing))
15 and said
16 "DO you supPOSE William would do it with his SISter?" ((laughing))
17 apparently he didn't object,
18 because he came
19 and spoke to me:
20 and I took his hand
21 and we went out-
22 now:
23 picture us,
24 I was still a- at least a head taller than him
25 I just had on a dress that I would wear perhaps to Sunday school, y'know?
26 uh-huh,
27 no party uh dress at all
28 and he was in short pants-
29 boys still wore short pants in those days,
30 a white- either a blouse or a shirt or some kind
31 and a floppy silk bowtie:,
32 and we DID the exhibition waltz
33 ((laughing and laughter for four seconds))
34 poor dear, he died at age 60,
35 and here I am ((laughing))

Muriel was an extremely engaging storyteller. She slowed down the action rhetorically, in Lines 18–21 with a series of simple subject-verb constructions: 'he came, and spoke to me, and I took his hand, and we went out'. She then created a kind of slow motion effect, saying in Lines 22–23: 'now, picture us'. For the next eight lines (24–31), Muriel delivered details of how she and her brother must have looked to the audience at the time. This constitutes not so much a reverie, as in the case of Babe in *The Famous Thurston*, but a dramatic remembering of details that were drawn out for the benefit of the listener and led to the climax in Line 32: 'and we DID the exhibition waltz'.

After the laughter and enjoyment of the painted scene had died down, Muriel expressed an afterthought. This coda, to use Labov's (1972) term, belongs within the telling frame itself, rather than referring to the tale world just described. Muriel first announced the death of the brother: 'poor dear, he died at age 60', and then finished with the formulaic closure, 'and here I am'. All of this not only brought Rose and me back to the present, but focused the passage on time and life changes, especially when we realised from Muriel's age that the brother had been dead for around 30 years. The formulaic closing 'and here I am' here has the force of a rhetorical trope like 'only I am left to tell'. This device puts a special perspective on stories by elderly tellers, and creates an identity as a survivor and a valuable link to the past.

Self-discovery narratives

Another strategy involves inserting a later perspective on an experience reported, *e.g.* 'as a girl I didn't understand, but later as a librarian I figured it out'. In such cases, the teller-*me* describes a development between an earlier and a later character-*me* inhabiting two separate tale worlds. In addition, a realisation or coming to know may constitute the primary message of a single narrative, often the result of a set of actions or observations. Stories may report a discovery about the world outside or an epiphany of self-awareness as the result or resolution of events – and this epiphany gives us the sense of dual perspectives and identities within a single story realm. Moreover, narrative realisation may mark a turning point in the teller's life. Since we often fail to realise the importance of an experience at the time but come to understand it later, we might expect this sort of narrative to be frequently told by older narrators. In the next story excerpt from the *Indianapolis Interviews*, 91-year-old Charles Belt tells the story of how he came to realise that being 'one of the best athletes' around his small rural town of Cave-in-Rock did not count for much in the larger world.

Best athlete, as told to Neal Norrick by Charles Belt I

1	Charles:	I attended ah (2.0) CMTC
2		did you ever hear of Citizens Military Training Camp?
3	Neal:	ahah, NO:.
4	Charles:	well ah the- back-
5		this was back- this was back in the ah (2.0) twenties.
6		ah … over Jefferson Barracks Missouri they brought in .. young fellows
7		from seven different states around
8		and housed them in TENTS for 30 days,
9		gave them military training.
10	Neal:	yeah.
11	Charles:	it was the forerunner of the ROTC. ((Reserve Officer Training Corps))
12	Neal:	yeah.
13	Charles:	and ah yeah-
14		and I was over there four different years.
15		and ah … had s-s-some very interesting experiences. ((laughing))
16		first year I went over there-
17		around Cave in Rock I was considered to be uh ..
18		one of the better athletes that they had, y'know.
19		played all kinds of games
20	Neal:	[yeah.]
21	Charles:	[and was] pretty good at them

22		s- did a lot of swimming.
23		and I thought, well, y'know, I was pretty good around Cave in Rock,
24		I must be pretty good anywhere I go. ((laughs))
25		so when I went over there
26		they had a program
27		which you went down
28		you signed up for all the athletics which you wanted to participate in.
29		so I signed up for just about everything there was, of course. ((laughing))
30		on the way back to the tent I stopped by the uh .. swimming pool
31		where they were practising diving-
32		and I watched those fellows diving
33		well I haven't got any business here with these fellows ((laughter))
34		so I go back
35		and marked my name off of that one. ((laughter))
36		well next thing,
37		well- I'd- I'd signed up for BOXing.
38		I had sparred around with the fellows around Cave in Rock-
39	Neal:	yeah.
40	Charles:	-and I went by where they were … practising.
41		I soon found out I didn't have any business there. ((laughter))
42		went back to the tent. ((laughing))
43		and there was a little Jewish fellow that- that- the-
44		there's five to a tent.
45		and he said "I see you signed up for wrestling."
46		I said "yeah, I did."
47		he said "well, why don't we go out on the playground
48		and practise a little bit?" ((laughter))
49		and I said "well, I guess that's fine with me."
50		boy, I tell you- ((laughter))
51		by the time a got away from him- ((laughter))
52		I decided I didn't want to wrestle anymore. ((laughter + laughing))
53		well it ended up.. that I finished playing ONE solitary game-
54	baseball. ((laughter + laughing))	
55	Neal:	yeah. ((laughing))
56	Charles:	yeah- I could play baseball with them,
57		that was about it.

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Charles's story is one of self-revelation and a lesson in humility. In Line 18 he said that when growing up he was 'one of the better athletes that they had' in the area, and in Lines 19 and 21 that he 'played all kinds of games' and he was 'pretty good at them'. From that point forward, Charles related how he slowly realised that he 'didn't have any business there' with athletes in the larger world. He gave his listener an understanding of two distinct past identities: the confident but naïve country boy, and the young man beginning to get a grip on standards beyond his rural background, and he provided evaluations of his athletic prowess from both perspectives. His step-by-step description of the process of realisation provided a basis for humour and was a self-aware account of maturation. Such revelations and the dual perspective construct the multiple identities of elderly storytellers.

Finally, elderly narrators may introduce the attitudes or perspectives of others directly into their own stories through the teller-*me*, saying, for instance, 'my children didn't understand my career change at the time', or my husband 'told that for years, he thought it was hysterical', as in the next story excerpt from the *Indianapolis Interviews*. As we shall see, this expropriation of perspectives from others not present may also take the form of constructed dialogue. In the excerpt below, 80-year-old Ida Morris talked about how she and her husband met and courted.

Apple Pie, as told by Ida Morris

1 so we made a date for the next night
2 and he took me out.
3 and he took me to a little bar
4 thinking "oh boy, this is gonna be fun."
5 and he said what would I want to drink.
6 and I said "I really don't drink,
7 but could I get a piece of apple pie?" ((laughter))
8 well he told people that for YEARS
9 he thought this was hysterical. ((laughter))
10 he said "I'm trying to impress this gal.
11 and what does she want-
12 a piece of apple PIE" ((laughing))

Ida ended her story with a repeat-coda that provided an additional evaluation by another participant in the action, not present at the telling, as if she was speaking for her deceased partner as well as for herself. Up to Line 7, she told the story from her own perspective, but in Line 8 the shift came with, 'well, he told people that for YEARS', at which point she not only described his attitude toward the story: 'he thought this was hysterical' (Line 9), but in Lines 10–12 also recalled dialogue from or

constructed dialogue in the spirit of her late husband. Such dual telling allows the narrator to establish multiple identities within the story realm. As when evaluations from separate perspectives are used, this strategy substantially enhances the 'tellability' and flexibility of the story for presentations in different contexts.

Listener inferences about storyteller identity in intergenerational storytelling

Up to this point, we have focused on linguistic strategies for conveying multiple and perhaps incompatible identities through narration. Storytellers have recourse to various means of expressing a current identity and to several past identities, some of which are at odds with one another. But the identity or identities ultimately conveyed are only partially under the conscious control of the storyteller. Listeners draw inferences from the storytelling performance based on their own background knowledge, which may differ substantially from that of the teller, especially in intergenerational and intercultural contexts. We turn now to the matter of the negative identities that are conveyed through differences in the assumptions and ways of speaking found in intergenerational storytelling.

An elderly storyteller may try to accommodate a younger listener, with a view to proper uptake and intergenerational understanding, but because the teller and listener do not have the same background knowledge, the storyteller may draw attention to the distance that separates the two. When elderly storytellers insufficiently accommodate their listeners, the result is 'inter-group divergence'; that is, a potential for misunderstanding and inferences about undesirable identity traits (Coupland *et al.* 1988). Sometimes there may be a failure to use acceptable or current vocabulary or to transfer important background information. The point or humour of the story may be lost, because the central incongruity is not recognised, perhaps as a result of changes in society, or because it is told in a way that reflects negatively on the teller. As we have seen above, the teller is only partially in control of the identity conveyed. Thus, in *Best Athlete*, when Charles Belt specified that that he wrestled a 'little Jewish fellow', he made the Jewishness of his antagonist salient in the encounter and suggested his disbelief that 'a little Jewish fellow' could be a good wrestler (or athlete of any kind). Later in the story, an unquoted passage showed that he had disabused himself of this prejudice.

Similarly, in the excerpt below from the CSHM *Whiting Project* (Dvorscak I), 85-year-old John Dvorscak conveys to the listener an identity

with certain prejudices. The notion that an adult could be frightened of a 'coloured porter' is an unlikely basis for humour today, and the narrator's use of the term 'coloured' is a failure to employ the current 'politically-correct' lexicon.

Coloured Porter, as told to interviewer Bill by John Dvorscak

1	John:	and then we boarded a train to come to Whiting,
2		you understand?
3		and as we were walking towards the train,
4		the coloured porter-
5		mom and I, mom wouldn't move.
6		she got scared.
7		we never saw a coloured guy in our life, you get it?
8		so the main conductor had to come and board,
9		take us, put us on the train.
10	Bill:	your mother was afraid?
11	John:	((laughing)) yes, mom was scared.
12		we never saw a coloured guy in our life.
13		so every time he went through the train
14		he smiled at us,
15		and we're all huddled together, you know,
16		scared to death.

The interviewer's question, 'your mother was afraid?' (Line 10), shows he did not get the point. John apparently wanted to make it clear that not only were the children 'scared to death' but so was their mother. Ironically, though John's story seems constructed to display prejudice on the part of his mother and his earlier self, his words suggest that he still held these prejudices. In any case, Bill did not laugh, though the teller did to show that he found the story funny (Line 11). John's repeated tags ('you understand?' in Line 1, 'you get it?' in Line 7 and 'you know?' in Line 15) may indicate that he thought Bill failed to understand his gist, rather than the use of conventional understanding checks. The utterance of the no longer customary term 'coloured' may help explain why the listener displayed no positive reaction to the attempted humour of the story. Tellers of funny stories about 'coloured porters' are simply not in touch with younger listeners' current ways of speaking about minorities, and their stories can create an identity difficult for listeners to accept. We see here that elderly storytellers can fail to render their performances acceptable for younger listeners at both the word and story levels.

In maintaining older ways of speaking, elderly tellers may articulate prejudices that they no longer necessarily hold – but that are nevertheless conveyed as extant. Listeners form opinions of tellers based on both what

tellers describe in their pasts and how they reflect upon the past from the present. This may also result in the construction of multiple and perhaps conflicting identities. Listeners may perceive elderly storytellers' practices and lexical choices as a refusal to accept the new world order and mores, as assertions that the old ways were fine, and as expressions of the speaker's anger that younger people make everything so complicated. Indeed, 'tellability' can be lost altogether when a stereotype is no longer shared by current listeners. An example was found during the second interview with Charles Belt. Then aged 92 years, he told a series of stories about running Ohio River barges with his father (they were interrupted by a telephone call).

Ohio River barge, as told to Neal Norrick by Charles Belt

1	Charles:	my dad in the fall of the year
2		would pick up corn.
3		farmers w-
4		what you call a river bottom lands
5		raised big crops of corn.
6	Neal:	yeah.
7	Charles:	and they'd put 'em in lo:ng sacks
8		and stack them up on the river bank.
9		and my father had a small barge
10		and he had a bunch of darkies
11		that carried this corn
12		u:h so many pennies a bag.
13	Neal:	yeah.
14	Charles:	and uh they'd come in on one end of the barge
15		and go off the other end carrying this …
16		((five and a half minute interruption, telephone call))
17		unloading this corn.
18		these black fellows were doing it.
19		well they decided that the:y
20		they wanted uh tsk
21		that they wanted their pay
22		every time they took off a bag
23		they wanted somebody standing there
24		with two pennies [I believe it was]
25	Neal:	[((laughs))]
26	Charles:	to drop in their hand.
27	Neal:	yeah.
28	Charles:	so my dad went uptown
29		and he got all the durned pennies
30		((laughing)) he could get a hold of you know
31		and down there I was on one end
32		and he was on the other
33		and they were s uh

34		take this corn up
35		>and then come around well on the<
36		where they come back on-
37		they had a big crap game going ((laughs))
38	Neal:	o:::h
39	Charles:	((laughing)) they wouldn't carry no more corn
40		until they lost the sp uh
41		they lost the money.
42		they ended up you know
43		at the end of the day
44		one one fellow
45		had all the money
46		and the rest of them had none.
47	Neal:	huh
48	Charles:	((laughs))

Charles was highly amused by his own story. Note the interspersed laughter at Lines 30 and 39, and at Line 37 the laughter after identifying the problem as a crap game. But the more Charles laughed, the more uncomfortable I became, as my minimal responses indicate (at Lines 27, 37 and 46). If the story were simply about silly behaviour around getting paid and immediately losing all the money, it would be generally tellable and potentially funny, but the racial stereotype, that 'black fellows' work only enough so they can gamble, makes this story untellable and unfunny in most circles today, especially when the black guys are introduced as 'darkies' (in Line 10). Tellers of funny stories about 'coloured porters' and gambling 'darkies' are simply not in touch with current ways of referring to racial or ethnic minorities among younger listeners, and their failure to accommodate to current attitudes can ruin the story performance and convey an insensitive identity.

To summarise the argument, verbal accommodation is a natural consequence of the desire to communicate across linguistic, cultural and generational boundaries. Particularly in narratives, the teller must provide a clear set-up and relevant background information to ensure understanding and appreciation. Stylistic adjustments in the direction of the recipient are part of a good storytelling technique and have a positive effect on the recipient. Failures to accommodate can have a negative effect on the recipient, who as a result cannot appreciate the point of the story and must draw unfavourable conclusions about the teller. Intergenerational divergence usually occurs when a narrator is unfamiliar with or perhaps unwilling to accommodate to the linguistic standards and stereotypes of listeners from a different age group. It can lead to misunderstandings or discomfort on both the linguistic and interpersonal

levels, and convey an identity as an elderly person who is inflexible and out of touch.

Conclusions

Regarding the study of identity among older people, we must entertain the possibility that elderly storytellers are not necessarily concerned with presenting a single coherent identity. Older people sometimes explicitly distance themselves from the present or at least mix present and past perspectives, not just from one discourse context to the next, but even in a single narrative performance. Simultaneous self-association with certain past identities and day-to-day concerns with health and coping may force elderly storytellers to adopt multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives in a single narrative. Difficulties with remembering dates and places from the past confront elderly storytellers with their present frail condition, even as they self-associate with past behaviours and identities, such as dancing, boxing, going on dates, or touring with a band. All in all, identity construction is a much more complicated process for elderly tellers than younger people, as they weigh and balance self-association with the past and present, along with past identities and present concerns, while they fashion narratives understandable to and of interest to listeners from younger generations.

Memory is crucial for a sense of continuity in the construction of an elderly identity. It links the teller-*me* in the story realm with a character-*me* in some tale world. Remembering constitutes the historical dimension of elderly discourse. When storytellers access memories, they sometimes report an exceptional clarity of recall, a knowing state, in which details of a past experience flood into their awareness. Clarity of memory can induce a kind of reverie, putting the teller back in touch with events and identities in some tale world long neglected. Such interludes in the storytelling performance authenticate past experiences and identities for listeners, even as they solidify a particular reconstruction of a past event for the teller. At the same time, difficulties with remembering names, places and dates are interpreted as signs of old age and cognitive decline. An orientation to memory problems contributes to the construction of a frail, elderly identity and sometimes leads to breakdowns in intergenerational communication.

As to the study of narrative, we have observed that several strategies are used by elderly tellers to construct multiple identities simultaneously. First, the concurrent concern with memories of the past and the ability to remember dates and places can create a dual perspective in the story realm itself. Comments about long-dead family members and friends and about

buildings and parts of town long-gone shift attention between the story realm and the tale world. Formulaic closings, like 'and here I am' and 'so I'm the last sibling alive', add a special force and dual perspective to stories by elderly tellers, create an identity as a survivor, and provide valuable links to the past for the teller. Another strategy involves inserting a later perspective into a retrospective report, effectively connecting an earlier and a later character-*me*.

Moreover, realisation or coming-to-know may constitute the primary action in a single tale world. Further, narrators may introduce the attitudes or perspectives of others directly into their stories in the story realm: this dual-telling strategy also allows elderly storytellers to establish multiple identities in a single storytelling, speaking for characters who can no longer speak for themselves. Like evaluations from separate perspectives in a story, this strategy substantially enhances the tellability and the flexibility of the story. Moreover, retelling can sometimes segue into reliving a past event, as when a narrator slips into a reverie. Finally, storytellers sometimes convey identities they do not intend, which is a problem for elderly storytellers who fail to accommodate to younger listeners, and creates inter-group divergence. On these occasions, their ways of speaking and references to outdated societal norms convey an identity they would otherwise choose not to project. 'Tellability' of the story in progress may be lost, and empathy and understanding of the entire interaction may evaporate.

In conclusion, on a practical level we must try not to judge too quickly when elderly storytellers convey prejudices that are no longer found appropriate. They have lived through immense changes in customs and ways of speaking, and cannot be expected to accommodate in every conversation, especially when telling stories. Elderly narrators have much more history to remember and many more identities to convey than young narrators – we must try to listen and appreciate what they have to say. The individuals I interviewed were often eager to show me old photographs and newspaper clippings along with the stories they told. They identified with their past lives to the point of stressing that their present condition did not truly represent who they felt themselves to be. As 90-year-old Raiford said, 'Please don't judge me by my present frail state'. This strong identification with the past and repudiation of the significance of their present condition renders identity construction an intricate process for elderly narrators. At the same time, they frequently oscillate between anecdotes from their past lives and current concerns with health and living conditions, forcing listeners to recognise two or more competing identities. In a story of how she had come to live in the retirement community, 85-year-old Peg Kimball said, 'I thought at one time I couldn't manage to

be around the people who have canes and walkers, and now I'm completely used to it'. Although Peg was able to move about only with the help of a walker, she registered her difficulty with identifying herself as one of 'the people who have canes and walkers'. There is a lot to be learned from exploring multiple identity construction in narratives by elderly tellers – about remembering and narrative techniques as well as about the invocation of multiple identities and perspectives. I hope that this paper has made a small beginning.

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