

Bridging the gap: the creation of continuity by men on the verge of retirement

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine the means by which men on the verge of retirement create continuity or bridges between their past and present in their autobiographical narratives. Based on Whitbourne's 'lifespan construct model of adaptation', 56 Israeli men on the verge of retirement were asked to relate their 'life stories' and 'life scenarios' (their vision of the future). Their bridging strategies were examined using qualitative structural analyses, focusing on the 'crossovers' to the future in the 'life stories', and those to the past in their 'life scenarios'. The findings show three main bridging patterns in the life stories and three in the life scenarios. Each was associated with differences in the ways that the men were coping emotionally with the transition to retirement, and pointed to the different ways by which they used continuity to cope with the anxieties aroused by their impending retirement. After trying to account for the greater frequency of bridging attempts in the 'scenarios' than the 'life stories', the discussion elaborates on the different bridging strategies and their associated features. The findings suggest that the identification of crossover patterns in life stories and life scenarios may be a useful tool for assessing a person's coping abilities and adjustment to difficult transitions.

KEY WORDS – retirement, continuity theory, narrative, structural analyses, life story, life scenario.

Introduction

The inspiration for this paper was Paul Baltes's observation that 'we need to keep in mind that the future is not something we simply enter, the future is also something we help create' (Baltes 1997: 378). Retirement constitutes a clear departure not only from a job, but from a long adulthood of employment (Savishinsky 2000). It brings radical and near immediate changes in the individual's daily routine and social life, which for many signal the beginning of ageing or old age (Viney 1993). The rapidity of the act of retirement, as opposed to the process of preparing for and adjusting

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to it, emphasises the difference between ‘before’ and ‘after’ and makes retirement a potentially upsetting and disruptive event (Atchley 1976, 1999; Carp 1972; Gall, Evans and Howard 1997; Maddox 1987; Theriault 1994). Nonetheless, empirical research has shown that most retirees soon adjust to their new situation.

According to ‘continuity theory’, as propounded by Atchley (1989, 1999), the most prevalent and robust strategy that people use to adapt to retirement and old age, as to other changes in adulthood, is continuity. By ‘using continuity’, Atchley meant that a person attempts to maintain internal and external consistency over time and to assimilate changes within those consistencies. Internal consistency involves such things as self-concept, goals, worldview, attitudes, beliefs and knowledge, and external consistency refers to social behaviour, relationships, activities and lifestyles. Continuity is maintained when a person can assimilate the change into their existing intra-psychic and social patterns. Thus defined, continuity is at one and the same time a goal in itself and a dynamic adaptive strategy that includes changes in the self and one’s world. According to Atchley, a person attains continuity by, among other things, linking current changes with his or her perceived past and subjectively ‘fitting’ the new in with the old. The ‘fitting in’ is achieved through constant reinterpretation of the past, which endows it with meaning in terms of the person’s present and links the two in a construct that serves his or her needs. As Kaufman put it, ‘continuous restructuring allows individuals to maintain a feeling of unity about themselves and a sense of connection with the parts of their pasts that they consider relevant to who they are at the present’ (Kaufman 1986: 150).

In terms of retirement, continuity theory implies that a person tries to adapt by ‘bridging the gap’ between before and after, or past and future. Various scholars have suggested that among the means to this end are the autobiographical narratives – variously referred to as ‘life stories’, ‘life reviews’, ‘life narratives’ and ‘reminiscences’ – that people construct to reinterpret or restructure their pasts. Scholars contend that the creation of such narratives is normal in old age (Haight and Webster 1995; Grob, Krings and Bangerter 2001; Mader 1996; Ruth and Coleman 1996; Savishinsky 2000). Several have analysed them as a means of learning about how people cope with retirement and ageing (*e.g.* Kaufman 1986; Viney 1993). They have not, however, looked closely at the ways and means of bridging that appear in such narratives. Research has shown the positive impact of retirement planning on post-retirement adaptation. In most cases, such planning programmes and the associated life goals are very concrete and have little to do with the retiree’s self-concept (Nuttman-Shwartz 2001; Payne, Robbins and Dougherty 1991; Reitzes

and Mutran 2004). Some who have studied how pre-retirees deal with their inner identities have emphasised, however, the importance of continuity. In their most recent study, Reitzes and Mutran (2006) claimed that the 'worker identity' had the greatest influence on post-retirement self-esteem, but they did not sufficiently elaborate the inner process.

The present study drew on Whitbourne's (1985) 'life span construct theory of adaptation' to identify and interpret the bridging strategies that are used on the verge of retirement. According to Whitbourne, adaptation in adulthood is strongly affected by the 'life-span construct' that people create and recreate for themselves throughout their lives. In keeping with continuity theory, she defined this construct as the 'unified sense of past, present, and future events linked by their common occurrence in the individual' (1985: 595), and contended that it changes along with its creator. She modified the theory, however, by proposing that the construct has two parts: a 'life story', which represents a person's subjective perceptions of their past, and a 'life scenario', which is a hypothetical account of their expectations and plans of the future. She argued that adults prepare for expected changes by constructing a 'life scenario' and, when this is underway, by going on to create a 'life story' that is consistent with the 'life scenario' and 'incorporates past events into an organised sequence giving them a personal meaning and a sense of continuity' (1985: 595). This study asked men on the verge of retirement to relate their life stories and life scenarios, and examined their efforts at bridging through a qualitative analysis of their narratives. The study is part of a larger longitudinal research project on adjustment to retirement.

Retirement in Israel for the study cohort

Before presenting the method and the findings, it will be helpful to describe the conditions of retirement in Israel for the cohort of men in this study. Retirement is regulated in Israel by collective labour arrangements, which apply to some two-thirds of the workforce and have the power of law. At the time of the study, the arrangements mandated retirement at 65 years-of-age for men and 60 years-of-age for women (Centre for Planned Retirement, personal communication). Although no comprehensive study of retirement patterns in Israel has been carried out, it is estimated that participation in the workforce declines with age among both men and women. It is also estimated that some 15 per cent of Israelis continue to work beyond the mandatory retirement age (Central Bureau of Statistics 2002). All the study participants were employed within this collective labour-force framework and were thus compelled to retire at age 65 years whether they wanted to or not.

The men investigated in this study were born between 1932 and 1934, adolescents when Israel was established as a state in 1948, and adults during the formative nation-building years. Virtually all participated in one way or other in transforming the barren backwater that was Israel in their youth into a modern industrial state. As a group, they shared in the ethos of their generation that elevated working and action to a core value, and which defined one's identity and gave meaning to life. Like the rest of the cohort, most had had hard young lives. Most had immigrated to Israel after the Holocaust in Europe or had fled persecution in Middle Eastern and African countries. Many of the latter were housed for extended periods in transit camps of tents or shacks. Many had arrived penniless and had rapidly thrown themselves into work to support themselves and their families. Most had participated in Israel's numerous wars and military operations. One might think these life events uniquely affected how these individuals viewed retirement. Yet their inner responses to stressor and dramatic events resemble the responses of those who lived in Europe and the United States (Grob, Krings and Bangerter 2001). Moreover, studies have found that old age among Israelis is similar in essence to universal and global processes if uniquely informed by culture and place (Spector-Marsel 2006). Grob and colleagues (2001) compared three cohorts in Europe, found that each viewed the past and future differently, and suggested that the reasons were both post-modern changes in social myths and the confused identities of men who lacked clear cultural guidelines for old age. More broadly, it is generally accepted that work and retirement are constructed differently in different cultures, so any transition is in certain respects specific not only to the individual but also to the time, place and society (Neugarten 1965, 1979).

Design and methods

The sample comprised 56 Jewish men from 14 workplaces, evenly divided between the service and production sectors. In each workplace, most (86%) of the employees about to retire were interviewed (those with identified psychological disorders were excluded). Almost two-fifths (39%) held managerial positions, and three-fifths (61%) worked on assembly lines. The participants were identified with the help of welfare workers. Most participants had immigrated to Israel, 39 per cent from America or Europe, and 43 per cent from Asia or Africa. Fewer than one-fifth (18%) were Israeli-born, and the majority had arrived as teenagers or young adults. The vast majority (79%) had at least some high-school education. Almost all (93%) were married at the time of the interview and had

two or more children (97%). About one-half (49%) rated themselves as healthy, and the others as unhealthy. Most identified themselves as either traditionally observant (59%) or religious (32%). This study found no significant correlation between retirement adjustment and either health or job status. In an earlier analysis of adjustment expectations, the author found that health and employment characteristics had little influence (Nuttman-Shwartz 2001, 2007).

Instruments and procedures

A 'Personal Data Questionnaire' with closed questions in Hebrew collected the participants' socio-demographic attributes (Sagy 1989), and semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain each participant's life story and life scenario. The respondents were first asked to 'tell your life story', and after that were told that 'we will now look ahead' and were asked to 'describe how you see your future'. When they began their life story, they did not know that they would be asked how they saw their future (Nuttman-Shwartz 2001). To help a participant who stalled or had difficulties, the interviewers asked leading questions and, at the end of each interview, sought to obtain missing information (*e.g.* on family, friends, work) necessary to interpret and compare the interviews. The interviews were at the workplace and took between one and three hours. All were conducted by the author, using Kaufman's (1986) procedure and guidelines to ensure consistency. All were tape-recorded and transcribed. The participants gave written informed consent to take part in the study, and also waived their anonymity so that they could be recalled at the second stage of the study.

Data analyses

In keeping with customary methods (*e.g.* Lieblich, Tuval Mashichah and Zilber 1998), the narratives were analysed for structure and content by the author and an occupational social worker. Various methods of structural analysis have been applied to narratives (*e.g.* Gergen 1994), but all focus on a single narrative, usually to examine its coherence. For the purpose of this study, the author developed a form of structural analysis suited to the dual narratives that Whitbourne (1985) identified, the 'life story' of the narrator's past, and the 'life scenario' that distils the narrator's expectations of the future. Each rater independently noted the type of crossover between the life story and the life scenario. Three patterns of incidence of the temporal crossovers were manifest in the life stories: during the story, after the story, and instead of the story (when the participant jumped immediately to talk about the future and thereafter hardly mentioned the past).

The incidence of crossovers in the scenarios had three similar patterns: at the beginning, during, and at the end. The two raters then compared their categorisations of the crossovers and their patterns. The raters agreed in 95 per cent of the cases, and the differences were discussed and resolved.

This analysis focuses on the crossovers or time-bridges in the speakers' accounts, that is the references to the future in their life stories, and accounts of the past in their life scenarios. The contents, location and frequency of the crossovers in each narrative were established, with particular attention to the concerns or statements that triggered them. The analyses also noted the emotional state of the speakers, as manifested by both their body language and their words.

Findings

Bridge statements appeared in just over one-quarter of the life stories (15 or 27%) and in over three-quarters (44 or 79%) of the life scenarios. In both, they had three structural or positional forms. Some interviewees crossed over a few times *during* the narrative, and others at the *end*, and some scenarios involved crossovers *frequently throughout*. The most common pattern in both narratives was one or two crossovers in the course of the telling. One exceptional life story began by jumping to the future. The analysis also revealed bi-directional crossovers that referred to two motifs, comparisons of the past and present, and the narrator's involvement in intergenerational transmission. By definition, both these motifs simultaneously encompass past and future. They arose in both the life stories and the life scenarios.

The life stories

Most (73%) of the life stories contained one or two references to the future in the midst of the story. In most cases, the narrators jumped to the future when something they were saying posed a dilemma about how they were to continue their roles of father, worker or breadwinner. The issue of continuing the father role arose as they talked about their children. In jumping to the future, most of the 11 narrators talked about their need to continue their paternal role given their grown children's financial, family or health problems. Three extracts represent these views:

Do you know what it's like to raise eight children? To see them off to the army ... some of them still have to get married. I don't know how I'll help them, or how they'll manage.

I take care of my elderly parents. It's not easy. I hope my kids will succeed, that they'll be able to earn a decent living, and that we'll be healthy [and] that they won't have to take care of us, and that we'll continue to help them.

A father has to give to his children, not take from them. From today on, there's a problem ... today, I'm ageing. I see the decline in my health and physical capacities, and it frightens me a bit. I hope I won't become a burden on my family and children. On the contrary, I want to continue giving to them.

As these extracts make clear, the respondents worried that on the eve of retirement they would not manage to continue their roles. The deepest concerns were when they referred to the difficulties they had taking care of their children in the past and of their elderly parents now. The issue of continuing the role of worker arose as the men spoke of their work. Some even made explicit reference to their wish for continuity and to the means by which they would continue working:

My work is the centre of my life. I don't see myself retiring. My employer wants me to stay on, and I don't see myself cutting off either. I have what [it needs] to contribute, and I'll continue to do so, in a new way.

I want to be part of the system even after I retire, and keep on working. I feel the need for continuity, as well as the need to leave [something] after I go. I don't want to be erased.

In three life stories, the crossovers occurred towards the end when the narrators reached their current situation. All three narrators presented strikingly chronological and ordered accounts, were exceptionally articulate and told their coherent stories fluently. They also tended to be more attuned than the others to the needs of the interviewer (offering refreshments and asking whether I was comfortable) and to follow the study instructions most closely. In these three life stories, the crossover into the future immediately followed a retrospective self-assessment of themselves, their families or work. All three assessments focused on a failure or disappointment, and ended with a hope or wish for rectification. One interviewee hoped for a last-minute promotion to make up for his years of failure at work. One who related a sad history of dismissals and unemployment expressed the hope that retirement would bring greater happiness. The third, whose assessment focused on a series of separations and losses, told of having begun to build a new home and relationship, and of hoping to continue both after his retirement.

In one narrative the crossover occurred right at the beginning of the life story, which continued with talk only about the future. This man, who had reached a senior position at his workplace, refused to talk about his past and insisted that his life was beginning anew. He said, 'I don't like talking about my past. My parents were no big deal ... uneducated, uncultured. I couldn't wait to get out of the house, not to live with them. ... I don't like looking back'. His insistence on talking only about the future may be understood as a desire to eradicate his past.

The life scenarios

As in the life stories, the most prevalent (in 24 or 54 %) type of crossover in the life scenarios was one or two mentions or anecdotes of the past in the middle of the narrative. In four of these narratives, however, the speakers began the scenario, their vision of their future, with a statement about the past. The second most prevalent form (in 13) had recurrent reminiscences throughout the scenario, and the third set consisted of seven that ended with the narrator's commentary on his past. The crossovers in these three groups shared two features. Firstly, most crossovers occurred when the speaker found it difficult to envisage their future. They found that to recount the known past was easier than to speak about the unknown future, as two narrators made explicit. One said, 'the past is obvious ... the future is not. It is difficult to imagine what will happen'. The other remarked, 'I know what has been, and I think of what I want. Every time I run into a snag, I go back to the past'. Generally, after sentences of this sort, there would follow a story from the distant past, often the speaker's childhood, frequently with an associative biographical reference, as in this example. 'There were days, you know, it was a different country ... lots of space and freedom, everything was green. I lived in a small house surrounded by orchards'. In other words, they mentioned good times, but as the next extract illustrates, they also acknowledged the difficulties:

Look, I immigrated to Israel with nothing but I knew it was my place ... there was a goal, there was hope, but it was hard ... There was no money, no car ... I worked, I worked hard, but there was hope.

The second shared feature was in the content of the reminiscences. For the most part, the recollections were of distressful or traumatic events. They covered family conflicts, job loss and unintended separations from their parents; the untimely or unnatural death of a parent, the difficulties of their immigration to Israel, or their experiences in the Nazi Holocaust. Such comments included 'it reminds me of my mother's suicide ... I can't get rid of it', 'it reminds me of the transit camp ... it was difficult there too', and 'look, it was the most powerful experience of my life ... I remember every minute of that day [cries]. I felt my life was over; I didn't believe I'd make it'. One of the more graphic statements was:

I don't know if I need to describe what a concentration camp is, what it means ... children standing in line for potato peelings ... shivering with cold, terrified ... even now as I remember it, it's hard for me to talk about it.

Seventy per cent of the participants described work and employment in their life scenarios and considered continued employment an important condition for adjustment (Nuttman-Shwartz 2007). In these instances, as in

others, the men talked about how hard they worked and how much of themselves they had invested in their work at the expense of their families. Their 'plans' were to enjoy the family life they had neglected through their absorption in their work. Men in this group were the most prone to relate hopes, plans or expectations of their future. As a substitute for work, the participants pointed to the family as a provider of social stimulation, meaning and activity. As one said, 'my dream is to be with my wife all the time, to sit at home with her, to watch television together'. Another remarked, 'when I retire, I plan to devote myself to my family, my grandchildren and volunteer work'. A third elaborated:

There don't have to be big plans. The main thing is that we'll be together. I'm planning my retirement together with my wife ... together we'll construct a plan of action ... and know what to do.

The different ways in which the three groups switched to the past seem to reflect differences in their ways of coping with the anxieties aroused by the future. The narrators in the first group, who referred to the past once or twice in the middle of their accounts, projected a sense of equanimity and control about the future. Although their narratives varied greatly in length, from the terse to the expansive, they tended to keep to the point, the narrators were relatively task-oriented and there were few overt expressions of distress. Their narratives also used rhetorical questions and epigrams to express concern, such as: 'Is there life after retirement?', 'A person shouldn't be pessimistic, but can I tell you what will be?', 'I never imagined I'd be without work and I'd have to cope with that ... retirement came as if by surprise', 'Life is like a river that flows into the sea, which is death', and 'I know the end is death ... before that it's unclear ... it seems that most people manage ... I look around, the pensioners survive'. Such statements make one wonder whether the equanimity that these men projected may have been their way of coping with whatever difficulties they felt. Some in this group seemed eager to end the interview.

The four who began their scenarios with a statement about their past all related a traumatic experience. For example, one spoke of his mother's suicide, another of his fight for survival in the difficult conditions of Israel's immigrant transit camps and the hard physical labour of a longshoreman (*i.e.* dock-worker). For these men, the past was, in the words of one, 'my launching pad into the future'. Another reasoned that, 'I have to begin my story of the future by comparing my difficult past to my retirement'. For these men, the past reinforced the continuity of the self, since the pain they related was and would remain an unchanging, integral part of who they were.

In the scenarios of the 13 men who reminisced throughout their narratives, the frequent jumps to the past had a strong associative character and

many were accompanied by expressions of emotion, including tears. Most of these men fidgeted in their chairs and cried at one or more points as they gave their account. Their scenarios were particularly long, largely because of the many jumps to the past. The length seemed to reflect both the men's verbal ability and emotional overload when contemplating the future. Ventilating their emotions seems to have been part of their way of coping. In nine of the 13 cases, the references to the past were triggered by some anxiety about retirement, such as a fear of boredom, of not having enough money, or of not being able to help their children. In the face of these concerns, the past seemed to provide a respite from the frightening unknown future, even though most of their recollections, like those of the men in the other groups, were of distressing or traumatic events. For the most part, the recollections served to assuage their anxiety and to provide reassurance that they would survive their retirement, just as they had survived much more distressing events. Two extracts convey this fortitude:

In my opinion retirement, in contrast to the ghetto and the immigration to Israel, doesn't have to be an obstacle, because it's part of life.... The ghetto and my immigration probably made me stronger.

Just as I survived the firing, I'll survive retirement. When I was fired, I thought my life had ended. I sat outside with the old people, did nothing [for] two months. In the end, a friend got me the job here. It was hard, very hard. I overcame. I'll survive now too.

The men in this group also seemed particularly regretful of 'rectifying' distressing past events but hopeful of rectification. A recurrent regret was having left their parents in the Diaspora when they migrated to Israel, which they planned to rectify by maintaining close ties with their children. Two statements were explicit about making amends:

I didn't understand my parents and [regret] the fact that they got old and sick and I left them.... It hurts me.... Now I have decided to go and live near my kids ... maybe I'm atoning for abandoning my parents. Now that I'm retiring, I can make amends.

It's a pity ... he didn't live to see his grandchildren's achievements because I ... [pause] migrated to Israel.... I won't do that to my children. Living near my children, seeing my grandchildren, that's what matters most to me. After retirement, I intend to move abroad to live near my children.

Some of the men in both this and the one-or-two-crossovers groups recalled their upbringing as something that would help them deal with the future. One said, 'they [my parents] brought us up to cope with all situations: going to Israel, in the transit camp, at work, and now in retirement'. These excerpts show that the past, which was generally difficult, served as a reference point by which to grapple with the future.

The seven participants who ended the life scenarios by commenting on their past seem to have been particularly sad or troubled. Along with the fears of boredom, not having enough money, and not being able to help their children, as expressed by the previous group, most of the seven also related fears of loneliness, of being old, and of losing their place in society. Although most of the recollections on which they ended their scenarios tended to be of painful events, the return to the past seems to have provided them with a way of dealing with the despair they felt when contemplating the future. One narrator said that he felt 'hopeless', wished that 'my life would end already', and closed his scenario with a lengthy reprise (told in his life story) of how he had established and then liquidated a factory some 15 years earlier. Another declared that 'there's no life without work', and closed the scenario by repeating an account of his migration to Israel and his failure to realise his occupational potential.

The bi-directional crossovers

Bi-directional crossovers were particularly salient in the life-story and life-scenario narratives that made only a few temporal crossovers. The contrasts between past and present reflected both the narrators' recognition that they and the world had changed, and their anxiety about the future. One said, 'In the past I supported my family; today I don't know how I'll do it'. Another reflected that, 'Once I thought going in the army and being a soldier was wonderful. Now that my grandchildren are in the army, I'm scared to death'. A third was more expansive:

The world has changed. Once, if I worked and put bread on the table, it was enough. Today it's not anymore. You have to learn, to make an effort, to get ahead. It looks harder to me. It's good I'm retiring.

Evidently, like changes in societal norms, age shapes the comparisons made on the threshold of retirement about a person's previous and current conduct, perceptions and beliefs. A recurrent motif in the contrasts was the longing for an all-encompassing and supportive parental figure, or for the parental home and the traditions that were no more. As one put it, 'If my father were alive today, I'd consult him. I miss him, I miss a father figure who knows and helps'. Another associated a family reminiscence with the founding of the state of Israel. In the following extract, the narrator gives a concrete, domestic form for the societal change that has taken place, one that many in his cohort would recognise, and which evokes the anxieties and isolation that are felt on the eve of retirement:

I remember every Friday night my father would always tell me how much the Jewish people needed a State, that without a State no one would defend them. I remember the Sabbath candles, the *hallah* on the table, and the white tablecloth,

and how my mother would prepare everything.... It's embedded in my soul. I miss it.

Turning to the expressions of intergenerational transmission, most related the men's efforts to transmit family values, ways, rituals and occupations to their children, and some expressed gratification with their achievement. One used a skilful metaphor: 'My mother's house was always open. I also leave the door open – in a different way. I give all my kids a key. I hope they'll do the same'. Others were more direct, 'my son's in the army ... at my recommendation. With all the years I worked in the army, I set an example'. Other expressions of intergenerational generativity had respectively a religious and a professional dimension:

All our family were very religiously observant ... I'm not. But on our holidays, I'm at the centre of things in the synagogue. It's important to me that this gets passed on from generation to generation. I take my sons with me to synagogue, so they'll continue the tradition.

Father was a physician there [in Europe]. ... I couldn't study here [in Israel]. I had nothing and had no choice.... Now my eldest son is about to finish medical school, and I'm so proud. He did what I couldn't. He continues my father's profession, and his father's – the family profession.

The references to the past and to parental figures reflect and articulate the changes in self, family and the environment. Indeed, the expressions provide a window on the 'internal negotiations' that the participants were conducting on the eve of their retirement, as they reviewed personal and societal values and assumptions, and tested them against their understanding of various areas of life. The expressions reveal variously the widespread aspirations for preservation and continuity, but in some cases the concern with intergenerational transmission showed a preference for change. Some of these welcomed improved opportunities: 'I wasn't able to get an education. We didn't have anything. But my son is finishing up medical school, and I'm very proud of him'. Others lamented economic and political changes, and wanted their children and grandchildren to have different occupations from themselves, in order to lead more comfortable or self-actualised lives:

I once thought it would be great if my sons worked where I do ... like father, like son. The factory was the pride of the region. Today, God help us! Let them run from here and save themselves ... anything but textiles, anything but working with their hands. I'll see to it.

When I came to Israel, it was clear to me that I'd enlist in the Army. That's how I brought up my children too, but when I see the situation [today], I don't want my grandson to go in to the army. I don't agree with the occupation or current policy. You don't have to accept everything. A person has to listen to himself.

Discussion

The findings provide empirical support for the claims of continuity theorists that people facing major life changes try to create continuity between their past and future. More specifically, they show that the transition to retirement is not a trivial matter. As they contemplated their anticipated retirement in their life scenarios, three-quarters of the narrators brought up things from the past, and about one-quarter referred to their future in their life stories. In both cases, the men expected retirement to be different from their lives till then and, consistent with continuity theory, sought to connect the upcoming stage with their past and present. The tendency to connect their future with their past and present was also evident in the motifs of the bi-directional crossovers – the comparisons between past and present, and descriptions of inter-generational transmission – that appear in both the life stories and the life scenarios.

The crossovers, the evidence of the men's efforts or tendencies to bridge the two life stages, were three times more prevalent in the life scenarios than in the life stories, even though the latter were generally shorter. There may be several non-exclusive sources for this imbalance. It may reflect the tendency to look back as one ages (Haight and Webster 1995; Viney 1993); it may reflect the greater ease of talking about a known past than an unknown future. Many of the men found envisioning their futures quite difficult. Some enunciated the difficulty; others demonstrated it in their body language or with verbal cues, such as asking for a break or repeatedly requesting clarification. Previous studies have documented similar difficulties that older people have in envisaging and talking about their futures (Fisher 1995; Payne, Robbins and Dougherty 1991; Powers, Wisocki and Whitbourne 1992; Viney 1993). One-half of the participants took part in a retirement-planning programme but their responses were no different from the others, perhaps because retirement in Israel is usually associated with old age, decline, a lack of role models and, most importantly, the loss of the popular male identity of an 'Israeli *sabra* [fighter]' (Spector-Marsel 2006).

Finally, the differential frequency of temporal crossovers may suggest that bridging attempts are focused mainly on the contemplation of the future rather than on the reconstruction of the past. This explanation is consistent with Whitbourne's (1985: 611) claim that the life scenario 'provides a framework for anticipatory coping'. The analyses revealed distinctive crossover patterns in both the life stories and life scenarios. In the life stories, the most prevalent pattern was one or two crossovers in the middle; the next most prevalent was a single crossover at the end; and the least prevalent (in only one story) a jump to the future right at the beginning. In the life scenarios, the most prevalent pattern was, again,

one or two crossovers in the middle. This was followed by recurrent reminiscences of the past throughout, and thirdly by a return to the past at the end. Closer examination of the crossovers suggested that the different patterns are associated with the different ways in which the men were coping emotionally with the transition to retirement and in which they used continuity to cope with their anxieties.

With respect to the life stories, the men who switched to the future once or twice in the course of their narratives seem to have been trying to find ways of either maintaining or continuing their current roles as parent and worker or of redirecting their energies from work to family. Most (about 70%) of their crossovers were triggered by trepidation about how they would continue to meet the financial needs of their grown children and how they would find meaning (*e.g.* continue to contribute, leave something behind) once they were no longer working. These crossovers reflect the men's worries about the future and their difficulty in accepting the expected changes in their life situation. They also reflect, however, their desire to retain the essence of who they are in the next phase of their lives. Approximately 30 per cent of the crossovers in this group were triggered by regret about having devoted all their energy to their work and not having spent enough time with their loved ones. The men who crossed over following this trigger spoke of using their retirement to spend time with their families. Their crossovers were more hopeful, as the men looked forward to being free to do in the future what they had neglected in the past.

The three crossovers that came at the end of the life stories were triggered by a sense of failure, in work or family life, and ended with a hope or wish for rectification. The fact that all three came at a natural juncture – at the end of coherent accounts of the past – and followed a retrospective assessment or summation of the past conveyed the sense that these men had come to terms with their failures and disappointments and were ready to move on. This group exemplified Whitbourne's (1985) generalisation that retirees look towards their future after summing up and coming to terms with their past. The single interviewee who insisted on speaking of his future right at the beginning of his life story was, it seemed, attempting to eradicate a past with which he could not come to terms. The premature jump to the future was a means of escape from an unhappy past that the interviewee claimed to have put behind him but that was certainly in his consciousness. It did not permit the speaker to assess his past and may be viewed as a flight from continuity, not a means of ensuring it.

Turning to the life scenarios, crossovers into the past tended to occur wherever the narrators had difficulty envisaging or talking about their futures. In these cases, the contents of the recollections were uniformly

distressful (conflicts, separations, losses) or traumatic (the Holocaust, a mother's suicide). The reversion to these events as the narrators contemplated their futures indicates that even highly negative experiences can be a basis for self-continuity and coping. In addition, it could be that for some men retirement is an 'unknown', so discussing it is likely to trigger negative or threatening memories. Both forms help the individual cope with the transition. Notwithstanding the similarities, the men in each of the scenario's three crossover groups tended to display a distinctive emotional valence and to adopt a distinctive way of using the past to cope with the anxieties aroused by impending retirement. The men who brought up the past once or twice in the middle third of their scenarios tended to display the greatest emotional equanimity. They seemed to have their anxiety under control and to use the past as a resource in a selective and measured fashion. After relatively few mentions, they seemed to leave the past behind and to train their sights on what lay ahead. On the whole, they envisaged the future without ignoring or suppressing the fact that it is uncertain and unknown. The four who opened their accounts with recollections of a past trauma projected much the same equanimity as the others, while drawing attention to the need for the past to build the future. Their opening statements about the past served almost literally as a launching pad into the future.

The men who repeatedly brought up past events throughout their scenarios were visibly distressed. Their frequent references to the past were largely associative and involuntary, and seem to have served the men as a means of ventilating their anxieties. To them, the past was a source of both refuge and respite from a frightening unknown and of self-reassurance and self-empowerment. The men in this group tended to say that they would 'survive' retirement just as they had survived the traumas of their youth, and they also spoke frequently and explicitly of their hopes of being able to 'correct' past actions that they regretted. Seeking refuge in the past may be understood as their means of not being overwhelmed by their anxieties. They preferred not to dwell on them until they could be better handled.

The men who brought up the past only at the end of their scenarios seem to have been particularly troubled about their futures. It was in their scenarios that concerns about loneliness, old age and the dislocation of retirement were most prominent, and moreover a sense of despair was voiced. We cannot know from the interviews whether these men were more distressed than the others by the frightening aspects of old age, or less inclined to ignore or suppress them, or both. The fact that they did not crossover to the future until the end of their scenarios suggests either a readiness to face the future, or a particularly pessimistic disposition and outlook. Whichever, the reversion to their painful and troubled past at the

end of the scenarios seems to have provided a way of assuaging despair about the future.

The relatively high prevalence in the life stories and the life scenarios of one or two crossovers in the middle of the narrative is of note. As stated above, this was the most common pattern in both sets of narratives, and in both cases the narratives were the best organised. These were also the narratives in which bi-directional motifs – that is, explicit comparison of past and present and intergenerational transmission – were most salient. Both motifs allow the past and future to be brought together in a conscious, controlled way. Their presence in the narratives is a direct manifestation of the narrators' inner negotiations of the two time frames and of their conscious efforts to bridge them. There was considerable variance in individuals' acceptance of imminent retirement. The prominent use of the bi-directional motifs may indicate congruence between the narratives' structural coherence and the narrators' explicit efforts to create continuity.

Limitations of the study

The analysis was an exploratory study and has several limitations. The sample was restricted to men partly because of their preponderance in the Israeli workforce and partly because, as previous research has shown, the phenomenology of retirement is different for each gender, with men tending to define themselves more often by their work and women by their family relations (Price 2000; Savishinsky 2000). In addition, the study was carried out among a particular cohort of Israeli men. It is quite likely that their frequent references to family and to past traumas reflect the particular culture and cohort-specific experiences. It is less likely, however, that their personal background would affect the structural findings. Undoubtedly, this group of respondents was influenced by cohort and period effects (Schaie and Willis 2002). Conventional wisdom has it that they retain an identity of belonging to the generation that established the State of Israel and experienced the wars and dramas of the period (Spector-Marsel 2006).

In addition, the sample size, while good for an interview-based, qualitative study, was too small to permit either adequate comparison of sub-groups or examination of the relationship between bridging strategies and adjustment to retirement. Nonetheless, the sample size was large enough to identify different bridging strategies and to enable interpretation. Two limitations concern the method of analysis. One is that the stories and scenarios were each analysed separately, which may have obscured similarities in the crossover structures in the two sets. The other is that there is no way of specifying or controlling for the impact of narrative features

that might bear on the study's findings, especially narrative length and narrators' verbal ability.

Conclusions and recommendations

The study's most important contribution is methodological. Structural analysis is rarely used in qualitative research, and the structural analysis of dual narratives is a variant developed by the author. The fact that the analyses in this study yielded distinct patterns and meaningful variations means that this method may prove useful for analyses of other types of narratives. Another contribution is that the study adds to our knowledge of the different bridging strategies used by men on the verge of retirement. As noted in the Introduction, there has been little empirical examination of the bridging narratives that people create as they face major life changes. A third contribution is practical. The findings suggest that the identification of crossover patterns in life stories and life scenarios may help in assessing coping with and adjustment to difficult transitions. Further study of different populations and larger samples is called for to determine the generalisability of the study's findings.

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