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## **Being Fred:**

### **Big stories, small stories and the accomplishment of a positive ageing identity**

**By**

**Cassandra Phoenix & Andrew C. Sparkes**

#### **Abstract**

This article is informed by recent trends in narrative research that focus on the meaning-making actions of those involved in describing the life course. Drawing upon data generated during a series of interactive interviews with a 70-year-old physically active man named Fred, his story is presented to illustrate a strategic model of narrative activity. In particular, using the concepts of 'big stories' and 'small stories' as an analytical framework, we trace Fred's use of two specific identities; *being fit and healthy*, and *being leisurely* to analyse the ways that he accomplishes an ontological narrative where the plot line reads; *'Life is what you make it'*. The ways in which this narrative enables Fred to perform a narrative of positive self-ageing in his everyday life is illustrated. Finally, the analytical possibilities of being attentive to both big and small stories in narrative analysis are discussed.

Keywords : *ageing, big stories, identity construction, small stories*

#### *Introduction*

In recent years, narrative researchers have described *storytelling* as an ontological condition of human life. From this perspective, the stories we are told, and the stories we learn to tell about ourselves and our bodies, are important in terms of how we come to impose order on our experiences and make sense of actions in our lives. This would seem to indicate that stories are narratively lived and do not simply lie in waiting for the telling. In being lived by the teller, however, is not to suggest that narratives are 'private', nor that the teller exists within a social vacuum. Rather, while drawn upon and utilised in what may seem a personal manner, narratives are distinctly social. Indeed, as Atkinson et al. (2003: 117) remind us, the narratives people use to construct their own lives and the lives of others do not yield accounts of unmediated personal experience. For them:

If we collect spoken (and indeed written) accounts of 'events' or 'experiences', then we need to analyze them in terms of the cultural resources people use to

construct them, the kinds of interpersonal or organizational functions they fulfill, and the socially distributed forms that they take.

More recently, Elliot (2005: 127) has also argued that narratives should not be understood as 'free fictions' but instead viewed as the product of an interaction between the broader cultural discourses and the material circumstances and experiences of the individual. These broader cultural discourses function as discursive resources which frame and structure the individual's personal story, or *ontological narrative* (Somers, 1994). For Somers, ontological narratives are the 'stories that social actors use to make sense of – indeed to act in – their lives. Ontological narratives are used to define who we are; this in turn is a precondition for knowing what to *do*' (p. 618). These narratives shape and derive from intersubjective webs of relationality that Somers calls *public narratives*, 'those narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks of institutions, however local or grand' (p. 619). In this sense, the ways in which a narrative is told will depend strongly on the cultural discourses that are available.

In addition to being socially shaped, narratives are also embodied. According to Becker (1997: 93), 'Bodily experience and bodily concerns are deeply embedded in various elements of narrative.' This position is also supported by Frank (1991) who draws attention to the corporeal character of bodies as an obdurate fact, providing people with the means of acting, and also placing constraints on their actions. For him, in making sense of our experiences, we not only tell stories *about* our bodies, but we tell stories *out of* and *through* our bodies. Therefore, the body is simultaneously cause, topic, and instrument of whatever story is told. In this sense, the kind of body that one *has* and *is* becomes crucial to the kind of story told.

According to Cortazzi (2001: 388), 'Through life stories individuals and groups make sense of themselves; they tell what they are or what they wish to be, as they tell so they come, they *are* their stories.' Also making links between storytelling and identity, Georgakopoulou (2002) proposes that through storytelling, storytellers can produce 'edited' descriptions and evaluations of themselves and others, promoting certain identity aspects over others at particular points in the story. Similarly, Benwell and Stoke (2006: 138) have recently noted, 'the practice of narration involves the "doing" of identity, and because we can tell different stories we can construct different versions of self.' Thus, telling stories about ourselves to others is one way in which our identity may be accomplished or performed. Importantly, this interactional and performative element of identity construction through the use of narrative, as various scholars have noted (e.g. Butler, 1990, 1993; Connell, 1995; Holstein and Gubrium, 2004; Laz, 2003; Phoenix and Sparkes, 2008) is intricately connected to the social contexts within which it occurs. This would suggest that while shaped by broader social narratives, the cultural resources that people draw upon and utilise when describing their lives, and 'doing identity', is done so with some degree of reflexivity. Such issues relating to the social, embodied and performative aspects of storytelling have been explored by Laz (2003) in relation to the ageing process.

Adopting a sociological perspective that seeks to integrate materialist-corporeal and constructivist-discursive-representational views of the body, Laz argues that age can be understood as something that is accomplished or performed. It is something that we *do*. For her, age is a phenomenon we (individually and collectively) work at making

meaningful (in general and particular) through various interactions that are framed in the context of institutions and social structures. Certainly, age may not always be equally salient or meaningful in the same way in all situations. However, it persists as part of the landscape of self, interaction, and institutions. Age therefore, is constituted in interaction and gains its meaning via interaction in the context of larger social forces. Laz (2003: 506–7) explains:

We accomplish age; we perform our own age constantly, but we also give meaning to other ages and to age in general in our actions and interactions, our beliefs and words and feelings, and our social policies ... If the accomplishment of age is social and collective, then we need to attend to the social settings and contexts in which people 'act their age' and to the variety of resources that individuals draw on, use, and/or transform in the process of accomplishment. Some of these resources are widely available – for example, the law, media, and medical knowledge and practices. ... Others are narrower in scope – community standards and beliefs, local culture, and kinship networks. Yet, another cluster of resources is highly personal and potentially idiosyncratic – interpersonal relationships, physical bodies, and biographies. As we 'do age', we draw on this array of resources and make use of them in complex ways that are neither entirely random nor completely patterned or predictable.

Importantly, Laz (2003: 508) then proceeds to highlight the intimate connection between age and embodiment in terms of how they are accomplished and performed. For her, how one 'does age' has implications for corporeal existence and embodiment has implications for how one can accomplish age: 'As we accomplish age, we draw on the physical resources of the body, but our actions and choices simultaneously shape the corporeal resources available'.

Set against the conceptual backdrop we have provided, the purpose of this article is to explore the narrative construction of an ageing identity by a 70-year-old individual called Fred. The use of big and small stories in this process is shown using Fred's story of positive ageing. Particular attention is given to Fred's story because it illustrates how storytellers might draw upon a number of specific ageing identities in order to accomplish an ontological narrative of someone who is ageing well, and making the most of life in their later years.

### *Analytical framework*

In order to examine how identity is narratively accomplished, we have found recent debates within narrative research between a 'big story' and 'small story' approach especially useful (Bamberg, 2006a; Freeman, 2006). Here, the 'big story' focuses upon the biographical narrative content of the story such as personal, past experiences. Thus, the 'big story' usually reflects stories in which the participant is asked to retrospect on specific life shaping episodes or on their lives as a whole, in order to connect events into episodes, and to connect episodes into a life story. For Bamberg (2006a), this process enables something like a life to come to existence. Predominantly gathered during interview situations, and therefore elicited *by* someone, Georgakopoulou (2006) notes that the analysis of big stories is often used to present the grand narratives of one's life. In other words, the big story approach is closely aligned with exploring the '*whats*' of narrative content.

'Small stories' meanwhile, refer to stories told during interaction, generally within everyday settings, about very mundane things and everyday occurrences. They are usually, but not always, heard outside of the formal interview setting, often as 'fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world' (Georgakopoulou, 2006: 123). In this sense, small stories may not seem particularly interesting or tellable (Bamberg, 2006a). They may even pop up without necessarily being recognized as stories, and accordingly be quickly forgotten. Because of this, it has been suggested that small stories may run the risk of being overlooked, as signaled by the neglect of these kinds of stories and storytelling activities within narrative research. However, though at the time they are told small stories might not seem permanent or of particular importance, Bamberg proposes that they can be very revealing with regard to how speakers (or writers) convey a sense of self and identity. Thus, sensitivity to small stories can provide opportunities to further explore the 'hows' of narrative activity and accordingly aid our understanding of the ways in which narratives might become a performance or strategic model used to accomplish something (Gubrium, 2006).

Focusing upon small stories in particular is an important development within narrative analysis. This approach to understanding meaning-making emerges from the growing methodological influence that narrative research has had across the social sciences over the last 20 years (commonly referred to as the 'narrative turn'). Central to this turn has been an interest in how identities are constructed by and through narrative. However, as Watson (2007) points out, much of this research focuses upon the grander narratives that we tell about ourselves during the interview situation. As such, the analytical interest has predominantly been in 'big stories' relating to key events/experiences within people's lives. Highlighting the potential limitations of this approach, Watson contends that if identity construction is conceived as an ongoing performance accomplished locally in and through interactions, then our analytical attention should focus on the narratives that emerge in this context. That is, the small stories that emerge in everyday, mundane contexts and comprise the performance of identities and construction of the self. Indeed, the dominance of 'big stories' have also been problematic for Georgakopoulou (2007: 147), who argues that big stories, in the form of life stories or stories of landmark events, have 'monopolized the inquiry into tellers' representations of past events and of themselves in light of these events'. Thus, recent years have seen scholars making attempts to establish small story research as an integral part of narrative analysis and as crucial sites for self and other forms of identity construction (Bamberg, 2006a, 2006b; Georgakopoulou, 2006, 2007). In doing so, small story research has been offered as a method to bridge the gap between the traditions of narrative analysis and conversational analysis by demonstrating the ways in which a language-focused analysis of narrative, as a way of further understanding socio-cultural processes, can be enhanced by drawing upon the tools of interactional analysis. Elaborating upon this further, Georgakopoulou (2007: viii) remarks:

It is fair to say that if small stories have not been firmly put on the map of linguistic approaches to narrative, within narrative research that is associated with interviews (often called 'narrative inquiry'), the lack on an inclusive and coherent paradigm for the analysis of non-canonical storytelling is particularly acute.

Such aspirations to foreground small story research have not passed without criticism. For example, in defence of big stories, Freeman (2006) asserts that rather than being a

liability, the distance that is built-in to big story narrative reflection creates possibilities for understanding that are largely unreachable when focusing only upon the immediacy of the moment. For Freeman, 'we are not only the selves that issue from small stories. Whether we like it or not, we are also – at this moment in history, in the context of contemporary Western culture – big story selves' (p. 135). For us, big nor small stories are any better or 'truer', rather they each tell about different but interconnected regions of experience. They are, therefore, both equally salient in terms of narrative inquiry.

Following Freeman (2006), we also believe that big and small stories complement one another and that, when used in combination, they can represent a promising integrative direction for narrative inquiry. Thus, throughout this article attention is given to Fred's life history in order to understand how big and small stories operate together to shape two specific identities currently operating within his life. These identities are referred to as 'being fit and healthy', and 'being leisurely'. Fred's story also sheds light on the ways in which he draws upon these identities, and strategically assembles them, through the use of big and small stories, in certain circumstances to accomplish an ontological narrative of his life; *'Life is what you make it'*.

### *Methods*

Initial contact was made with Fred after Cassandra Phoenix read an article in the local paper detailing a football match that he had organized, and played in, to celebrate his 70th birthday. A brief letter introducing ourselves and explaining the project, along with a short questionnaire seeking demographic details was sent to his address (which had been published in the newspaper article). The questionnaire ended by asking him to indicate if he would agree to being interviewed about his experiences and, if so, to return the consent form in the self-addressed envelope that was also included. Upon receiving this, Cassandra Phoenix contacted Fred via telephone and made arrangements to meet.

The methods utilised in this study are informed by what Ellis et al. (1997) refer to as an interactive interview. This interpretive practice involves the sharing of personal and social experiences of both respondents and researchers, who tell their stories in the context of a developing relationship. For these authors, 'Interactive interviewing requires considerable time, multiple interview sessions, and attention to communication and emotions. It may also involve participating in shared activities outside the formal interview situation' (p. 121).

Interactive interviewing is useful for a number of reasons. First, Ellis et al. (1997) argue that this approach offers a means for gathering in-depth and intimate understandings of people's experiences. For them, this method is flexible and continually guided by the ongoing interaction within the interview context. Accordingly, it can reflect the way relationships develop in real life.

Furthermore, according to Mishler (1986), interactive interviewing can promote dialogue as opposed to interrogation through providing a contextual basis for a level of understanding and interpretation that may be absent in traditional hierarchical interview situations. Finally, with an emphasis on interaction both in and out of the formal interview setting, we felt that interactive interviewing could be a useful way to facilitate both 'big stories' and 'small stories'.

Data collection took place over a period of 10 months and included four formal semi-structured life history interviews at the participant's home. In addition to the interview, data was also recorded in the form of field notes resulting from a number of informal interactions. These included, for example, regular meetings at a local café for breakfast, short car journeys (usually to/from the cafe), brief telephone conversations (with the aim of arranging meetings), and being a spectator at local veteran football matches when Fred was competing. These informal interactions were especially useful for alerting ourselves to the small stories that circulated within his everyday life.

As the interviews and field notes progressed and data were accumulated, connections were sought across narrative segments and themes in an attempt to identify patterns and meaning constructed within and between the big and small stories told by Fred. This process is similar to the categorical-content analysis described by Leiblich et al. (1998) that focuses upon thematic similarities and differences between the narratives generated inside and outside of the interview situation. Interpretation, Wolcott (1994: 36) suggests, is when the researcher 'transcends factual data and cautious analysis and begins to probe into what is being made of them'. Here, as Cresswell (1998) notes, the researcher constructs the individual's biography and identifies factors that have shaped the life.

Following this, an analytical abstraction of the case is produced that highlights the processes in the individual's life, the different theories that relate to these life experiences, and the unique and general features of the life. One theme that emerged regularly throughout our interpretation of Fred's stories was the notion of life being what you make it. In fact, this precise phrase was drawn upon many times by Fred as he described and engaged in his everyday life. Furthermore, intricately related to this dominant storyline were two other themes that frequently ran through the big and small stories that Fred told. These themes were associated with being fit and healthy, and being leisurely. The ways in which these themes are knitted together through the use of big and small stories, and actively incorporated into his performance of a positive ageing identity are shown in the following sections.

### *Life is what you make it*

The analysis of our data suggested that Fred's life is currently framed by an ontological narrative that we have termed '*Life is what you make it*'. This is the big story in Fred's narrative and involves the plot structure and content of working hard to make the most of life – despite encountering what some might perceive as setbacks or negative experiences. For example, though episodes of illness were experienced by Fred, these were not viewed as barriers that *halt* living but *as part of* living. Furthermore, the process of ageing itself was storied in the same manner. This bears some resemblance to what Williams (2000) terms 'normalization'. Describing this concept in relation to chronic illness, Williams explains that normalization 'involves a process of bracketing off the impact of illness, so that its effects on the person's self-identity remain relatively slight, or of treating the illness or treatment regimen as 'normal' in order to incorporate it more fully into the person's identity and public self' (p. 44). Thus, for Fred, encountering change (physical and health related) did not seem to be considered as a disruption to his biography, but simply a part of embodied ageing. This is illustrated in the following comments.

*Cassandra*: How are you Fred?

*Fred:* Well I'm fine while I've got the catheter in but if it's not in, then it all builds up. Other than that I'm great. But it's so elaborate, I've got to see a specialist on the 27th December which is a long way off but the nurse said 'you'll either die or make yourself better by then, and then you won't have to see the specialist.' I said 'oh well, I don't mind that at all, that's lovely'. But anyway, it just goes on. I don't know. It's alright. I played football and I played table tennis last night. I'm going to go for a little jog this morning before my breakfast, well it will be before my lunch by the time I get there. Yeah, you've just got to adapt haven't you, that's all you can do. When you think 'oh crikey', you've just got to get on with it.

'Adapting', and 'getting on with it', were central to the big story '*Life is what you make it*'. Indeed, the comments above indicate how 'adapting' and 'getting on with it' become increasingly pertinent for Fred at times when the contingency of the body shifts to the forefront of his everyday life such as during periods of illness. That said, the notion of 'adapting' is important here because it suggests that Fred does not necessarily attempt to make the most of life through using his involvement in physical activity to *resist* or *fight* the ageing process. Rather, experiencing different forms of embodiment through the context of physical activity over time allows him to feel a sense of challenge and enjoyment, as shown in the following quotation:

I think it's like everything, what people need to realise is that nothing comes easy, and you've got to keep going back and trying, whatever it is. But that means enjoying each day as it comes along ... from my point of view, I do believe that you are what you make yourself and you've got to keep going haven't you for as long as you can .... It doesn't matter how difficult times are, life is wonderful, life is wonderful, there's no doubt about that. I'm not doing any grumbling. I told you about the man who fell down the well and died. When they found him his fingers were worn down to the bone from clawing to climb out. Whenever I get a bit upset, I think about him. Crikey. He was hanging on for life, he didn't want to die.

These comments draw attention to the significance of challenge and enjoyment for the 'big story' (*Life is what you make it*) currently framing Fred's life. Furthermore, in addition to notions of challenge and enjoyment the comments illustrate how this big story infuses, and is infused by notions of individualism. By thinking that your life is what you make it, and that you are what you make yourself, the belief that one can potentially forge their destiny in life is strengthened. However, in this scenario the onus to age successfully seemingly rests with the individual – life is what *you* make it. As illuminated in the above comments, Fred adopts this individualistic attitude when describing his points of view about life, and in particular, growing older. Specifically, in creating and sustaining the big story '*Life is what you make it*', his remarks reinforce the notion that the responsibility for making the most of life rests largely with the individual, and the individual alone.

Also embedded within Fred's use of this big story was a sense of appreciation for life. In other words, feeling gratitude for what you *do* have, as opposed to *don't* have. Thus, beliefs that 'life is what you make it' are seemingly structured and maintained through the use of downward social comparison. This can involve not only the awareness that there is always someone who is worse off than yourself, but also the understanding that given the chance that person might appreciate and make the most of (your?) life to a



greater extent. For Fred, the person with whom he downwardly compared was a man he'd heard about on the news who fell down a well and died before he was discovered.

The relevance of this ontological narrative is the ways in which it currently shapes and frames the meaning that Fred gives to his ageing process. Specifically, our analysis indicated that central to this big story is his sense of acceptance, challenge, enjoyment, individualism, and appreciation in terms of one's ageing body. These themes emerged as the biographical content (the '*what's*') of this particular narrative and subsequently the way in which Fred performs ageing. That noted, we were also interested in *how* Fred was able to continually accomplish this story over a period of time. Thus, adopting a small story perspective and being attentive to data generated within, but importantly also outside of the formal interview setting, we were able to gain some purchase on the particular identities that Fred strategically situated himself within, in order to successfully accomplish an ontological narrative of someone who does indeed make the most of life. These identities were: *being fit and healthy*, and *being leisurely*, and will be explored in detail throughout the following sections. While presented separately, this is a heuristic device only. The two identities can be more accurately understood as intricately related to each other, and continually shifting between the foreground and background of Fred's storytelling.

### *Being fit and healthy*

Our prior knowledge of Fred (i.e. that he was a veteran football player) shaped our initial perception of him as an active older adult. That said, over time, and through the numerous meetings in various contexts the extent to which Fred embodies the identity of being fit and healthy became increasingly apparent. This identity was drawn upon as a resource to partly accomplish the ontological narrative that currently dominated his life story: '*Life is what you make it*'. Furthermore, our analysis of the big and small stories generated during our interactions shed light on the different strategies that Fred utilised in order to embody this identity. For example, one method that Fred employed to construct an identity of *being fit and healthy* was through demonstrating his knowledge of health and exercise practices. This is exemplified in the following small story recorded in Cassandra's field notes:

### *Field notes – 15/01/07*

Each time I meet with Fred, we seem to spend longer chatting than working through the interview questions – I have such a long list of things I want to ask, but it's usual to only get through a couple! Today, before we started the 'formal' questions from my interview guide, he showed me a book that he'd picked up from the local library last week. It was called '28 Day Yoga Plan', and looked as though it was published in the '80's; All of the pictures are in black and white, and the lady demonstrating the exercises has set, wavy hair and is wearing a white lycra catsuit, with elastic stirrups under her feet. We talk for a while about yoga and I am able to share my own experiences of participating in yoga classes. With my background in fitness instruction, I worry that a number of exercises shown in Fred's book might not be deemed safe practice any longer, but sensing his excitement I decide against saying anything about this right now. Fred is enthusiastic as he turns through the pages looking for the exercise he has reached. Flicking back and forth, he says to me: 'Yoga is excellent once you get into it. I only like looking at the ladies though really (we laugh). I'm up to "Day 7" and I haven't missed a day yet. It's a 28 day plan, and it says you mustn't miss any. But, you know, you get to "Day

10” and then you start missing it (laughs). But what this does for you is bring everything into alignment. I mean if you’re doing weights, you’re not really letting your body stay in the right shape that it should be, I don’t think. You’re putting it under pressure. And maybe if you’re supervised it’s ok but I think a lot of people they do it and then their shoulder goes or whatever and then they can’t go to the gym because their shoulder has gone.’

In addition to signaling the way in which small stories might be generated and recorded through interactive interviewing, the analysis of such data illuminated that Fred’s knowledge of health and exercise practices is important in terms of his ability to accurately construct an identity of *being fit and healthy*. Of significance here, with a lack of educational opportunities, Fred relies upon lay knowledge of health and exercise gathered from library books, fitness publications, the television, radio and so forth. One potential problem associated with this is signaled in the field notes above, where Fred actively draws upon and embodies knowledge relating to yoga practice that is dated, perhaps inaccurate and possibly harmful. Such errors in his knowledge could call into question his identity of being fit and healthy. That said, Fred’s lay knowledge of health and exercise wasn’t always gathered from outdated sources as shown through a different small story:

*Field notes – 04/01/07*

Fred is driving and we are on our way to the café for a late breakfast. We are talking about Christmas, and Fred tells me that his daughter has renewed his subscription to *Men’s Health* as a Christmas present. ‘Oh wow!’ I reply – conscious that I sound a little too surprised. This is not a magazine I would generally associate with 70-year-old men! ‘It’s interesting’ he tells me ‘...although there are lots of articles that are quite rude in there’. He laughs, as do I, and from this I assume Fred’s referring to the articles devoted to sex and how to please your partner. ‘I like *Runners World* too’ he continues, ‘but fortunately the lady down the road gets that and lets me have it when she’s finished, so I don’t have to buy that one.’

This small story shows Fred’s engagement with the popular health and fitness media. Indeed, during our meetings, Fred regularly referred to such publications and described the latest diets and exercise regimes that he had read about (or heard about from people who had read similar publications). This would seem to reflect the increasing presence of health ideologies within Western society. Specifically, while traditional narratives associated with old age have been linked to notions of legitimate (and expected) ill health, more recently narratives tied to activity, healthism, and individual responsibility have been promoted. These signal the increasing importance of health, bodily being and performance in contemporary Western societies (Jolanki, 2004). It also indicates the extent to which health has become a key component for defining not only well-being, but the ‘goodness’ of individuals and society (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991; McCallum, 2001). In relation to Fred’s story, such an emphasis on individual effort in relation to successfully performing the identity of being fit and healthy, sits comfortably with the notion of individualism associated with the ontological narrative currently framing his everyday experiences; ‘*Life is what you make it*’.

Another strategy that Fred uses to construct an identity of being fit and healthy is abiding by what he terms the ‘laws of living’. These were informed by his lay knowledge of fitness and health. According to Fred, ‘laws of living’ are rules that you have to follow,

if you want to be healthy. Failure to follow them was believed to result in poor health and/or an early death as had been the case with a number of his family members and friends. Thus, again reflecting notions of individualism within Fred's storytelling, poor health could be interpreted as a consequence of failing to abide by certain rules. When asked to elaborate upon his laws of living during the formal interview setting, the following big story was elicited:

Smoking is out, too much alcohol is out. And the other thing is you've got to go to bed at the right time. Animals, when it is dark they go to sleep. When it's dark we go out into the town. But, for me 10 o'clock at night, bang, and get up at 6 o'clock. I don't always get up at 6 o'clock, I wake up at 6 o'clock and then I go down and get a cup of tea and then go back to bed for a bit. Food, you've got to eat properly and, don't have another big meal until you've been to the bathroom. As long as you keep yourself regular that's the thing. And, sometimes I think to myself 'I should start training everyday' and I think 'no, hang on a minute; you're doing quite well at the moment, why do you want to push it? Why do you want to push it too far?' But I do think that the cross section of probably cycling, swimming and running or even walking, if you can't run then walk. Walking is excellent. It is excellent exercise but I do think you need this cross section of different exercises to keep really fit.

The above comments signal the importance of routine for Fred in his everyday life. They also show that the everyday routines currently structuring his laws of living are predominantly associated with the physical body. For example, getting enough sleep, exercise, and eating the right foods are key to accomplishing this identity. Of importance, however, what Fred deems as being 'enough' or 'right' in this context, is seemingly a result of his lay knowledge of health and exercise. Thus, the potential problems associated with this knowledge (i.e. that it could be outdated/inaccurate) also bear some relevance here.

In addition, the underlying assumptions of Fred's laws of living may also be problematic in terms of their deterministic undertones. In other words, the belief that bodily outcomes are predictable, and that health is something which can be formulated by following rules and routines is a dangerous one. Instead, an awareness and appreciation of our body as a fleshy physicality which is wholly unpredictable in that it can become ill, leak, limp, hurt – often without 'good reason' – should remain in the foreground of our existence and everyday life (Frank, 1991, 1995).

### *Being leisurely*

In addition to stories about being fit and healthy, Fred constructed a second identity of 'being leisurely' while describing himself as someone who made the most of life. Being leisurely was characterized as slowing one's pace, and being flexible in terms of commitments throughout the day. It is also tied to experiences of temporality in everyday life. Specifically, being leisurely involves having the time to take one's time, and accordingly feel as though one could live in and enjoy the present rather than race towards a future or dwell extensively on the past. This big story offered by Fred during the formal interview outline his experiences of being leisurely in the present. He said:

When I was young I was always getting on, doing the next thing ...When I started with the dry cleaning you used to have to do 8 garments an hour, and by the time

I left you had to do 30. So you were always running all of the time, always running, always running ... I mean now you just go out there and watch those flowers or see the trees. You know for 30 odd years while I was working I never saw the bees or the trees or anything because you're working. You had to get there; you had to get there, chasing the dollar ... Life now is very wonderful and you've got to get on and enjoy it. I get as much enjoyment from some things now as I ever had. And it's just the simple things, to go down to the café and eat that breakfast. I'm in no hurry am I? Now I can go down there leisurely, have three cups of tea possibly and really enjoy every morsel ... I go down there and it usually takes over an hour because Stella (the owner) is very good but the only thing is sometimes you're sitting there for a long time waiting for your breakfast. You sit there in all the smoke and everything, it's sweating hot but it's a good leveller. That's what life's all about.

Fred's remarks show how he draws upon the identity of being leisurely and in doing so, is able to reinforce the ontological narrative of 'life is what you make it' that currently frames his everyday experiences. They also show how being leisurely is relationally constructed against experiences of time during Fred's working years as a dry cleaner. These years are shaped by memories of being rushed and under the social pressure to make money. As such, Fred's past was dominated by a feeling of pressured time (Phoenix, Smith & Sparkes, 2007), which seeped into his ('always running') body, and a time orientation of *living the present as the future* (Roberts, 1999). Indeed, now 70 years old and having been retired from work for 17 years, the reduction in pace along with the option and ability to be leisurely in everyday settings is an identity that

Fred makes use of in order to accomplish his ontological narrative; *life is what you make it*. Importantly the identity of being leisurely enables Fred to not only adopt a time orientation of *living the present as the present* (Roberts, 1999) but in doing so develop a sense of appreciation and value for the present. Indeed, as the comments above indicate, the notion of appreciation is tied to the temporal experience of everyday events, perhaps as opposed to so called 'great achievements'. For example, Fred stresses that 'it's just the simple things' such as being at the café that bring enjoyment and act as 'a good leveller'. There is a sense that for Fred, existing within that physical space – eating, drinking and interacting – in a leisurely manner and without the need to rush is currently what life is all about. This is what defines making the most of life, and therefore reinforces his ontological narrative in the present. Furthermore, this experience seems very much embodied, in that smelling, seeing, tasting, as well as moving through space more slowly, becomes symbolic of this experience of temporality – the experience of being leisurely in ones everyday life, and not *having to 'run'* anymore.

Of significance, our analysis also revealed that Fred's use of this identity was not confined to the formal interview setting. Rather, from a small story perspective, time and again, Fred performed the identity of someone who moved, and lived in a leisurely manner during interactions beyond that of the interview. Two examples of this are shown in the following small stories which were recorded as field notes by Cassandra:

*Field notes – 16/04/07*

As I pack away the ipod at the end of our second interview, I ask Fred when it would be best for us to meet again. 'Up to you, up to you my dear' he replies, 'whatever suits you, I have all of the time in the world.'

*Field notes* – 10/05/07

We had arranged to walk down to the Café for an English breakfast, but the rain started and Fred offered to drive instead. On our way down the main road, he slows to let somebody in another vehicle pull out in front of him 'I always let them go' he says, 'I mean I'm in no rush am I.'

These comments were not made in a wistful or regretful manner, but instead with a tone of satisfaction. Indeed, Fred's identity of being leisurely challenges the common misconceptions of older people's time being empty and/or meaningless by illustrating how he is in fact an active player in his time experiences (Tsuji, 2005). Furthermore, though the *pace* of Fred's life is slower, being leisurely does not necessarily equate with doing nothing. To successfully accomplish the identity of 'being leisurely' and subsequently reinforce an ontological narrative of making the most of life, a slower paced 'leisurely' life that was *full*, as opposed to empty is seemingly required. Thus, like the participants in Tsuji's study, Fred's everyday life was shaped by a 'busy ethic'. This involves activities being perceived as 'work without the feeling of work' (Savishinsky, 2000: 81), and is illustrated further in his description of his daily routine:

By the time I've cycled home [from the café], and then I walk down to the library and in the evenings, well I often go down to the football club. It's just a matter of making the time go by. But it's amazing; because I couldn't find the time to work again, no, no, work no (laughs). I've got so many jobs I could do here [at home] if I wanted to, I just don't do it. But I enjoy life to the full, and of course, I know most people, so I'm having a yap all the way down [to the café], and that takes double the time to get anywhere. If you do have to walk everywhere, it does take quite a bit of time. You think you can get to the café and back in an hour, but you can't because by the time you've thought 'Oh Christ, I better nip in to the paper shop and get a paper' or something like that, you know put the tax on your car or whatever. Everything always takes so much time. I can't believe how people have time to work anymore (laughs).

It would seem therefore that for Fred, the identity of being leisurely also involves keeping busy. Though the *pace* of life slows (being leisurely), the *activity* (being busy) remains important in terms of positioning oneself as somebody who is making the most of life.

According to Freedman (1999), the 'busy ethic' for the elderly differs from the 'working ethic' of their earlier years. He suggests that what distinguishes activities between these two groups is not *what* they do, but *how* they do things. Furthermore, Freedman proposes that older people understand that doing things slowly can be a virtue in that a slowing of pace allows the possibility of nurturing and deepening relationships. The above comments from Fred would seemingly offer further support to Freedman's observations. For example, being able to take twice as long and chat on the walk to the café is the type of everyday occurrence that differentiates the leisurely, flexible, present from the pressured past where time had to be controlled. In this sense, it could be suggested that Fred welcomes the opportunities that accompanied his ageing process in

relation to the possibilities of *controlling*, rather than being *controlled by* time. In the former case, Schmotkin and Eyal (2003) propose that individuals feel that they are able to organize their own time, have enough flexibility to deal with scheduled tasks, make new plans, and also find time for relaxation. In contrast, the latter case of being controlled by time has been associated with people feeling rushed, overburdened with things to do, and as if they are constantly running out of time. By feeling in control of the pace and content of his life at present Fred appears to be able to handle time as an ally rather than a foe. For Schmotkin and Eyal, this is important as personal time conceptions have been identified as a key element of well-being in later life. Constructing and maintaining an identity of being leisurely could therefore be seen as being central to Fred's ability to narrate a story of positive self-ageing, and show that he is making the most of life.

### *Reflective comments*

The analysis provided of Fred's narrative performance illustrates the active work involved in accomplishing a positive ageing identity through the use of both big and small stories. It also reinforces the notion that narratives are embodied, lived, and central to the process of meaning-making. They do not lie in the waiting for telling but are an active part of everyday interaction. Indeed, as part of what Laz (2003) would call him 'acting his age', Fred is seen to draw on a variety of narrative resources ranging from the media, friends and experiences of his physical body over time.

The personal implications of this process are clear. From these resources, Fred artfully crafts a coherent narrative of positive self ageing that stands in opposition to prevailing western notions of negative ageing. As such, his use of the ontological narrative '*Life Is what you make it*', provides a point of resistance to the dominant meta-narrative of decline that is currently associated with ageing in western society and links 'growing older' with negative images of deterioration and emptiness. Importantly, as part of Fred's narrative accomplishment of positive self ageing, he skilfully combines two interrelated strands within his ontological narrative that situate his identities of 'being fit and healthy', and 'being leisurely'. These are connected in a dynamic fashion by the big and small stories that operate in his life. In other words, Fred artfully crafts this narrative of positive ageing by connecting selected events in certain ways and giving them particular meanings (indeed, somebody else could interpret his life events – frequent periods of ill health, and so forth – through a decline model).

The methodological implications of a performative take on Fred's storytelling are also highly significant. Specifically, given that the accomplishment of Fred's ontological narrative *does* involve the use of big and small stories about contributing identities, we would suggest that to focus on one at the expense of the other would leave the analysis imbalanced and impoverished. This observation would seem to have some relevance for those (e.g. Bamberg, 2006b), who with good reason remain sceptical about the coexistence of big and small stories. However, our interactions with Fred lends empirical support to the suggestion made by Freeman (2006: 131), that big stories and small stories do indeed complement each other and when 'taken together, they represent a promising integrative direction for narrative inquiry'. Thus, while acknowledging that there may be occasions where big stories are focused upon in more detail than small stories (and vice versa) in terms of analysis, the fact that Fred actively uses *both* forms of storytelling when describing his life discourages us from viewing the

use of big and small stories in narrative inquiry as an either/or situation. Therefore, rather than seeing the inclusion of small stories into big story research as an add-on, we interpret their (co)existence as an opportunity to employ a variety of perspectives as a means to further untangle the threads of meaning that are attributed by individuals to everyday experiences such as growing old. After all, a variety of perspectives are inherent to the qualitative approach in general (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996), and as Straus (1987: 7) reminds us qualitative researchers 'have quite different investigatory styles, let alone different talents and gifts, so that a standardization of methods ... would only constrain and even stifle social researchers' best efforts'. Given these points, to view big and small stories as a case of either/or, might inadvertently operate to constrain the creativity of qualitative researchers. In doing so, it could also run the risk of failing to acknowledge and explore in full the artful creativity of the storytellers themselves. As Gubrium (2006: 250) notes,

'Approaches that do not take into account how those concerned make meaning and organize their experiences through time shortchange narrative identity, as one size fits all fits nobody'. Being attentive to Fred's use of big *and* small stories on this occasion, has enabled us to explore how he strategically situates himself in a number of key identities, in order to accomplish a narrative of positive self ageing. He artfully crafts this in opposition to the 'one size' narrative of decline and deterioration, which is commonly (yet often mistakenly) associated with growing old in the West. We hope that our article stimulates further research that challenges a strict *either/or* notion regarding big and small stories, and instead explores the dynamic ways in which both big *and* small stories work to shape a life.

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### ***Notes***

1. Following Bamberg (2006) and Gubrium (2006), the distinction between big and small stories is individually based. This is different to Holstein and Gubrium's (2000) parallel but social distinction between discourses of identity and individual life stories.

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