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Telling a (Good?) Counterstory of Aging: Natural Bodybuilding Meets the Narrative of Decline

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Objectives. In Western society, the narrative of decline dominates the aging process. We know very little about the complexities of how people resist this narrative. The purpose of this article is to understand how a group of mature natural bodybuilders resisted the narrative of decline.

Methods. In-depth life story interviews were conducted with 13 natural bodybuilders aged between 50 and 73 years. Verbatim transcripts were produced and the data analyzed using a structural narrative analysis. A dialogical analysis was also utilized.

Results. The participants' experiences did not fit with stereotypical assumptions about decline and deterioration in older age. They all told counterstories to "natural" aging, yet what differed was how the participants' counterstories resisted the narrative of decline and the level of resistance that they provided.

Discussion. We advance knowledge in the fields of aging and narrative inquiry by revealing the multidimensionality of resistance. We demonstrated how participants storied resistance in different ways and the important implications this had for the way aging was understood and acted upon—by themselves and potentially by others. In addition to advancing theoretical knowledge, in this article, we also significantly contribute to understandings of the potential of narrative for changing human lives and behavior across the life course in more positive and nuanced ways.

Key Words: Aging well, Counterstories, Decline, Exercise, Narrative, Resistance, Restorying, Third age.

NEGATIVE depictions of growing old have been fueled by the medicalization of the aging body (Powell & Owen, 2005; Tulle-Winton, 2000). Indeed, Powell and Longino (2001) argued that biologically driven knowledge has consistently spoken "truths" regarding the decline element of adult aging, which has led us to understand the aging body as an ill body that needs to be "treated." Accordingly, much research originating in this framework has set out to address the apparent need for a "cure" by investigating

methods that might “fix” the “problem” and “postpone” aging. One discipline where this has been the case is sport and exercise sciences (Eichberg, 2000). Tulle (2008a) critiques the discipline for seeking to position itself as a key player in the fight against aging and as a supporter of antiaging narratives. She proposed that sport and exercise should be “reframed as a means of giving social actors the potential to renegotiate the meaning of physical competence, and particularly to bring out its more creative dimension” (p. 346).

These sentiments reflect a small but growing movement of social gerontologists and sport and exercise scientists concerned with generating different and multiple understandings of the aging, physically active body (see Phoenix & Grant, 2009). This emerging line of research has shown that in certain circumstances, masters (or “veteran”) athletes can and do attempt to resist negative depictions of aging through telling and enacting alternative—and potentially more creative—versions of the aging process (e.g., Dionigi, 2008; Grant, 2001; Horton, 2010; Kluge, Grant, Friend, & Glick, 2010; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009; Tulle, 2008b). This research has demonstrated that involvement in masters sport—and/or a physically active lifestyle in older age—can create possibilities for people to age positively and reconstruct what aging “normally” means. Being physically active in older age can challenge the self-fulfilling prophecy regarding the under use of physical and mental abilities over time (Wearing, 1995). Yet a tension runs throughout much of this research regarding what exactly involvement in masters sport challenges and how helpful it is to notions of positive aging. On the one hand, master’s athletes can generate new creative versions of aging, which challenge negative stereotypes of aging. On the other, they can be seen as (inadvertently) reinforcing the notion that aging is something to fear and fight through their extensive physical training at times for the purpose of working against a “problematic” aging body. The tension is a significant one because it has implications for how (active) aging is given meaning, at both an individual and a societal level.

Examining how masters athletes story their experiences of aging and sport can advance knowledge of the tensions that we have highlighted here. It can also address current gaps within the literature, which to date have focused primarily upon what masters athletes do in order to redefine the aging body (see Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009 for an exception here), rather than how masters athletes engage with the notion of decline through the stories that they tell. Understanding how older adults construct alternative storylines to those associated with inevitable physical decline and deterioration has relevance for recent conceptual developments within social gerontology regarding “the third age” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005; Laslett, 1996).

The third age refers to an emerging life stage within contemporary society that represents new possibilities for personal identity development through an expanded period of consumption and choice (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000). Drawing upon the work of Bauman (2001), Jones and Higgs (2010) argued that these characteristics represent and are reinforced by an ongoing desire for bodily fitness. They argued that the emergence of a third age has led to deviations from a unilinear notion of “natural” aging that was typified by disengagement, dysfunction, and disease. For them, the social landscape of aging is rapidly changing to the extent that “normal ageing now takes on a multiplicity of forms” (p. 1515). Diversity within the aging experience—including the pursuit of a “fit” (though not necessarily healthy) body—has become both the normal and the normative. Of course, just like the research noted earlier on sport and exercise, the third

age can be seen as problematic in terms of promoting excessive positive aging. That recognized, the concept does alert researchers to better understand the changing social landscape of aging and those persons within it, who deviate from a unilinear notion of natural aging. Against this backdrop, the purpose of this article is to examine the stories told by a group of mature natural (i.e., “drug tested”) bodybuilders to understand how they engage with the notion of aging as a process of decline.

Through intense, structured, and regular training, combined with careful manipulation of their diet, natural bodybuilders aspire to develop a hypermuscular and fit physique, which is not judged on bulk or strength but tone, symmetry, and definition. To date, the topic of bodybuilding has been used as a vehicle by researchers to interrogate a number of key social issues, such as health (G. Andrews, Sudwell, & Sparkes, 2005), gender (Bolin, 2003), and drug use (Monaghan, 2001). However, aging as an explicit area of inquiry has been consistently overlooked. This is a surprising omission, given that older adults who engage in forms of serious (physical) leisure (Stebbins, 2001), like natural bodybuilding, though it might seem relatively unusual today, may better represent future cohorts of older adults who live in and through the third age. Indeed, the International Health, Racquet, and Sportsclub Association (2011) reports that over the past fifteen years, the defining characteristic of commercial health industry change has been the growth in the population of older health club members. Similarly, participation in masters sport (either via the World Masters Games or involvement with the veteran movement) is also rapidly increasing (see Tulle, 2008b; Weir, Baker, & Horton, 2010). Finally, and with specific reference to bodybuilding, those who became involved with or indeed grew up witnessing the increasing popularity of the sport throughout the 1960s and 1970s are now approaching, or are in, older adulthood. Reflecting this demographic shift, structural developments are occurring within the sport to accommodate masters over 50s, 60s, and 70s, on the competitive stage. Focusing upon natural mature bodybuilders, therefore, is original and timely. It provides a unique opportunity to explore the complexity of the aging experience at a time where diversity is the norm (Jones & Higgs, 2010).

This article draws upon data from a funded project examining perceptions and experiences of aging in young and old adults (this research was supported by The Nuffield Foundation, UK [SGS/36142]). It extends previous work, which has demonstrated the significance of older adults in projecting key information about the aging process to younger people (see Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006a, 2006b). These projections can direct younger people toward or away from certain activities (e.g., sport and exercise) across the life course while also shaping their perceptions of a (creative or meaningless) future. Accordingly, in this article we examine such research questions as: How might stories of aging told by mature, natural bodybuilders challenge dominant assumptions about growing older in Western society? How do these stories connect—or not—with different audiences at individual and broader social levels? In deepening our understanding of the multiple and varied ways that (third) age identities are experienced, how do the accounts of mature natural bodybuilders overlap and differ? Addressing questions such as these is important. If policies and interventions are to successfully promote health and positive aging, then we need to understand not only what people do within the context of sport and exercise participation as they age but also how they story their experiences of this potentially nuanced intersection.

Conceptualizing Framework: Narrative Gerontology, Master Narratives, and Counterstories

Narrative gerontology is an emerging field within the broader study of aging (see Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, & Randall, 2010; Kenyon, Clark, & de Vries, 2001). One of the key themes that distinguish it from many other fields, and which makes it appealing to frame this study by, is that it conceptualizes our lives as “storied”. Human beings, as Bruner (2002) argued, have two complementary modes of thought: the logical-paradigmatic mode (involved with discovering laws and causal relationships) and the narrative mode (involved with constituting human experience, meaning-making, and the social). Research within gerontology, including that on managing decline via physical exercise, has tended to examine the logical-paradigmatic mode (e.g., Mänty et al., 2009; Peterson et al., 2009). However, as Bruner stressed, our understanding of human life will always remain deficient if we do not also examine the narrative mode. Others agree (e.g., Frank, 2010; Freeman, 2010; W. L. Randall & McKim, 2008; Somers, 1994) and call for more research directed at narrative. This article responds to such calls.

Narrative is a pervasive and crucially important form of human activity. It uniquely acts in human consciousness, shaping human conduct, projecting possible futures, and affecting who we are and can become. To neglect narrative would mean we are left with large deficiencies of knowledge. This includes, W. L. Randall and McKim (2008) proposed, the similarities and differences of peoples experiences of aging over the life course. Narrative enables the world to be experienced. What we (including researchers) are able to know as experience, therefore, depends on the stories that we tell and hear. These stories teach us much about personal experiences of aging. They can also teach us much about the social nature of aging. This is because, to borrow from Murray (1999), individual stories do not “spring from the minds of individuals, but are social creations. We are born into a culture which has a ready stock of narratives which we appropriate and apply in our everyday social interaction” (p. 53). Thus, by focusing on narrative, researchers can generate knowledge regarding how particular individuals experience aging while engaging with the contested domains of aging during the historical time period in which their life is lived.

Deeply embedded within Western society, the prevailing master narrative associated with growing older is the narrative of decline (Gullette, 1997). This narrative depicts aging as natural and an inevitable downward trajectory of physical deterioration. It portrays “a tragedy of accumulating deficits, diminishing reserves, and deteriorating attractiveness and strength: nothing more than denouement” (W. L. Randall & McKim, 2008, p. 4). Moreover, it is oppressive—downplaying the deeper dimension of aging and presenting aging as passively getting rather than actively growing old (W. L. Randall & McKim, 2008). As a consequence, insights into the other side of the aging story—the progressive, growth focused thicker narratives that may be more representative of the third age and what now constitutes normal aging (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005; Jones & Higgs, 2010)—remain largely unexamined. Generating awareness of these alternative stories of aging—amplifying stories that would not otherwise be heard—is important if more meaningful ways of aging are to be imagined and lived. However, loosening the stronghold of master narratives such as the narrative of decline is neither simple nor straightforward due to their powerful hold on society.

According to Nelson (2001), master narratives usually operate beyond awareness, subtly reflecting the expectations that individuals have of life and aging. Similarly, for M. Andrews (2004), “such storylines serve as a blueprint for all stories; they become the vehicle through which we comprehend not only the stories of others, but crucially of ourselves as well” (p. 1). It is this latent quality that gives them much of their power. Despite their strengths, oppressive master narratives such as the narrative of decline also have a number of defects. For example, on occasions, the normal behaviors prescribed by master narratives fail to match the individual experiences of group members regarding what they actually do (Nelson, 2001). In these instances, there are opportunities for counterstories to flourish. Counterstories are the stories which people tell and live that offer resistance to dominant cultural narratives. It is in their telling and living that people can become aware of new possibilities (M. Andrews, 2004). When told collectively, these “new” stories present the possibility for both individual behavioral and social change.

Method

The sampling strategies used in this project were purposive, maximum variation, and snowball (Creswell, 1998). From the outset, purposeful samples of both male and female natural bodybuilders aged 50 years and older were sought. No upper age limit was specified. This minimum age was selected because within the natural bodybuilding scene, the “Masters over 50s” category was the first to emerge in response to the growth in mature competitors (and is now preceded by Masters Over 60s, Masters Over 70s). Traditionally, the title “Masters” simply referred to any competitors older than 40 years, who at that time were considered unusual due to the typical “retirement” age in sport being mid-20s–mid-30s. Second, although these individuals may better represent future cohorts of older adults, at present, the number of competitive mature natural bodybuilders within the United Kingdom is relatively small. Ensuring a wide age range allowed us to maximize the number and diversity of our participants.

The sample was sought by posting a notice on a natural bodybuilding Internet forum inviting both male and female natural bodybuilders aged 50 years and older to participate in a research project concerning their experiences of aging and the sport. The initial contacts that were gained using this method were added to via snowball sampling. This is where further participants are identified from existing participants. Our final sampling plan included 11 males and 2 females between 50 and 73 years of age. The disproportionate representation of gender was projected when planning the study. This is because men significantly outnumber women within masters sport in general (Dionigi, 2008) and natural bodybuilding in particular.

To protect their identity, specific locations of the participants are not presented here; suffice to say that a range of British regions were represented within the sample. Participants were provided with information about the project and how the data would be used prior to data being collected. They were advised that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identity. Informed consent was gained, though it should be noted that in line with the research approach of Pink (2007), consent is ongoing. The project was awarded ethical approval by the lead author’s institution (Approval was awarded by the School of Sport & Health Sciences Ethics Committee [University of Exeter] where the lead author was employed at the time.).

Interviews were arranged with each participant at a location of his or her choice. The purpose of these interviews was to explore their experiences of aging and their sport. An interview guide was developed to provide a semi-structured framework and to encourage participants to focus on these experiences. The themes incorporated into the guide included key phases of their life, (entry into) a physically active lifestyle, experiences and perceptions of aging, and times of bodily change. Examples of questions asked include: "How did you get into bodybuilding?" "What does aging mean to you?" and "Can you tell me about how your body has changed over your life time?" All participants were first interviewed once, each lasting between 1 and 2 hr. One interview with each participant generated in-depth rich stories on their experiences of aging. Saturation was also reached. This is the point at which the information collected, transcribed, and then immediately analyzed begins to repeat itself. As Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2011) note, finding the point of saturation "requires an iterative process which involves collecting some data, assessing the variation in the issues raised, and then continuing to collect and assess data to determine whether saturation has been reached" (p. 89). That noted, after finding the point of saturation, three of the participants (two males and one female) already interviewed were, via the maximum variation sampling technique, selected to be interviewed again. They were interviewed again in order to conduct auto-photography research, including an auto-photography interview (see Phoenix, 2010) The second interview generally entailed returning to issues that had been missed in the initial interview guide and providing the participants with information about the auto-photography task. The third interview focused upon the images that the participant had produced as part of the auto-photography task. The data analyzed here supported identification of saturation.

Narrative Analysis

All of the interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and included in our analyses that proceeded in an iterative fashion. The authors adopted the position of story analysts: collecting stories and then conducting an analysis of them (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006; B. Smith & Sparkes, 2009). The results in this article are based on a structural analysis of the data (Riessman, 2008). This type of analysis "focuses on the way in which a story is put together" (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007, p. 85). It may also focus upon the stories a person tells to tease out what type of story they draw upon from the cultural repertoire available to them. A structural analysis is useful because the formal aspects of structure express the identities, moral dilemmas, perceptions, and values of the storyteller. It can also reveal the types of narratives that may constrain and/or empower people in relation to their aging process (Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010). Perhaps most pertinent, given the purpose of this article, is that a structural analysis examines the "hows" of people's lives (Riessman, 2008). Grounded theories methods, interpretive phenomenological analysis, and, for example, traditional content analytic methods focus on what is said (B. Smith & Sparkes, 2002). A structural analysis has in comparison the unique advantage of illuminating how different storylines are constructed. As part of this analysis, and as Riessman (2008) recommended, the researchers engaged in the interpretive act of probing into what could be made of the data by asking such questions as:

how and why incidents are storied, not simply the content to which language refers. For whom was this story constructed, and for what purpose? Why is the succession of events configured that way? What cultural resources does the story

draw on, or take for granted? What storehouse of plots does it call up? What does the story accomplish? Are there gaps and inconsistencies that might suggest preferred, alternative, or counter-narratives? (p. 11).

Such attentiveness to the purpose and accomplishment of stories bears resemblance to a recent addition to analytic methods: the dialogical analysis (Frank, 2010). Dialogical analysts examine stories not as mere products of telling or interpret only the story itself. They also examine what stories do and how they might affect lives in “positive” and “dangerous” ways. A dialogical analysis is sensitive to not only how a story is put together (as per a structural analysis) but also “the mirroring between what is told in the story—the story’s content—and what happens as a result of telling that story—its effects” (Frank, 2010, pp. 71–72). The story here then moves from an abstract phenomenon to be coded to an active and artful companion that is examined for the work it does on, for, and with people.

In order to develop plausible interpretations, and further bolster the rigor of the research project, (C. Phoenix) presented her findings on a regular basis with (B. Smith). The role of (B. Smith) was to act as a “critical friend” and provide a theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection upon and exploration of alternative explanations and interpretations as they emerged in relation to the data. This dialogic process was useful for various reasons. No single framework or idea (e.g., counterstories) was explicitly chosen to drive analysis or frame it prior to engaging in the analytic process. The research was not deductively driven. But, as J. K. Smith and Deemer (2000) argued, like numerous others (e.g., Denzin & Giardina, 2008; Ellington & Ellis, 2008; Frank, 2010; Riessman, 2008; Schwandt, 1996; Sparkes & Smith, 2009), qualitative researchers as finite beings always have preexisting assumptions that can permeate any analysis. This, they stress, is “how it is.” Epistemologically, this is because no matter how hard we try, we cannot achieve theory-free observation or knowledge. Thus, no one can escape or stand apart, truly independent from, their history, interests, preexisting assumptions, and so on.

However, this does not mean that “anything goes” or, as J. K. Smith and Deemer (2000) also suggested, that analysis cannot be rigorous and sincere. Dialogic processes, like those engaged in here, are useful to critically reflect on pre-existing assumptions, to challenge them if necessary, and to engage in more plausible alternative lines of inquiry that, as Tracy (2010) also suggested, can increase the rigor and sincerity of qualitative research. For example, immersion within the literature on masters athletes prior to analyzing the data may have permeated the first author’s thinking. Acting as a critical friend, the second author not only questioned her analysis of the data but also engaged in what Seale (1999) termed auditing and Tracey described as transparency. That is, he scrutinized a formal audit trail regarding matters like theoretical preferences; reading decisions and activities; breadth of the interview sample; accounts of the interactions among context, researcher, methods, setting, and participants; decisions about how much data to collect; and the process of sorting, choosing, organizing, and analyzing the data.

Results

In line with previous research involving masters athletes, a major thread running through all of the participants’ stories was their reluctance to view aging as reason to disengage with sport and exercise. For them, sustained (and for some, recently

developed) embodiment of a sporting identity provided opportunities to challenge assumptions informing the narrative of decline. The analysis provided original knowledge in terms of how these stories were constructed, their purpose and their intended audience, the cultural resources that informed them, and so forth (Frank, 2010; Reissman, 2008). It also revealed how, and the extent to which, notions of inevitable decline were resisted through the telling of counterstories.

The analyses revealed three different forms of resistance displayed across the participants' stories. They were characterized as being occasional and monadic resistance ($n = 7$), inconsistent resistance ($n = 4$), or regular and dyadic resistance ($n = 2$). In what follows, rather than presenting data from all of the participants, three cases were chosen: Keith (58 years), Ben (63 years), and Daniel (53 years). These cases were chosen to provide exemplars of each form of resistance. This way of presenting research findings is extremely useful when adopting a narrative approach (Flyvbjerg, 2006), particularly when examining the structure of the story. Narrative research frequently adopts a case-centered approach via the use of exemplars in order to honor agency, preserve complexity, and grant attention to detail when space in journals are limited (Reissman, 2008). Honoring, preserving, and granting how people differently resist is difficult when cases are pooled to make general statements. The words of Sears (1992) provide additional explanation for why these three participants were chosen here: "The test of qualitative inquiry is not the unearthing of a seemingly endless multitude of unique individuals but illuminating the lives of a few well chosen individuals. The ideographic often provides greater insight than the nomothetic" (p. 148).

Occasional and Monadic Resistance

Keith (interviewed once) was 58 years old at the time of interview. He trained in the gym every other day, and his participation in the natural bodybuilding circuit formed part of a lifelong involvement in competitive sport. He excelled in rugby as a younger man, moving into triathlon, and iron man competitions, as he grew older. Explaining what motivated him to engage in bodybuilding, he said:

Going to the gym is just about trying to keep yourself looking good, especially at this age. I look at younger guys, they can go around looking overweight, out of condition and drinking all that booze. But as we get older, our metabolism slows. If you're not looking after yourself, you just end up like the rest of the old people. I know that I look good, and it's also nice to be told that by others. I'm still in good condition for my age, and that's when you know you're on the right track . . . I see guys around my age, looking unfit, overweight, they're old and they look past it, as if they couldn't run anywhere or do anything physical, and I'll think, "there's no way I'm going down that route". I'm not willing to be there yet. So, it's like I said, I feel like I'm in my early 40s, despite being in my late 50s.

Keith's story (like six other participants, males = 5 and female = 1) showed an awareness of the exclusionary and identity damaging nature of the master narrative of decline. By insinuating that looking good was not the norm "at this age," and asserting that getting older was the cause of a deterioration in metabolic speed, Keith's account demonstrated how the master narrative of decline shapes and is shaped by his personal aging narrative. Conscious of the need to cope with dominant expectations set by this master narrative (Nelson, 2001), Keith's story illustrates how participants engaging with this form of resistance worked to distance themselves from perceptions of natural

aging—and accordingly those older adults who appeared to adhere to the narrative of decline. This process often involved the foregrounding of what Frank (1995) described as a “monadic” body, one that understands itself as separate from other bodies. Operating with a monadic-styled body, participants like Keith resisted the narrative of decline at a personal level but readily subjected other older bodies to the category of decline—reinforcing who they were not in order to affirm who they were. In this sense, participants like Keith who expressed a distinction between himself and other aging bodies, and who were “alone” in their resistance to notions of age-related decline, can be seen as telling stories of monadic resistance. The subculture of natural bodybuilding provided important narrative resources to help fashion such stories. For example, Keith said:

I think that people sort of get in the mindset, “when you’re old, this is how it has to be.” . . . But I’m not. I’m going to keep plugging on. Doing the natural bodybuilding gives me the whole package; fitness and a really clear mind, freedom of movement . . . I can do anything, just like as a younger person would in life. I mean, someone who is older, the chances are they’re going to sit down and they won’t get out of the chair again. But I would. I do! I just want to keep fit, healthy . . . I don’t want my family saying, “Oh, he’s a worn-out old crony.” I’d like to think as the years go by, I can look after myself and I don’t need someone to look after me. I want to keep my independence and the fitter I stay, I can do anything.

Occasional and monadic forms of resistance had the potential to uproot some portion of the master narrative. However, for those who told this story, their concern was not to question the unjustness of the master narrative of decline but to emphasize how their experiences of the aging process did not fit this natural aging script. The purpose was not to change the dominating nature of the decline narrative within Western society but to distinguish the storyteller from those who were perceived to conform more readily to its oppression. Confined to this monadic style of framing, the extent to which this form of resistance could act as a counterstory at a social level was minimal (Nelson, 2001). This was partly because the stories of resistance told by people like Keith rendered other older adults external to him. Resistance at a social level was also minimal as the counterstory lacked potential to travel into other fields and connect with new and different audiences (Frank, 2010; Nelson, 2001), as demonstrated in Keith’s comments about personal training:

I tried doing some personal training in the local gym because a lot of people were asking me about my training. But, I found that the people I trained seemed to think, well, they’d got other ideas. They didn’t want to stick to what I told them. To be quite honest, personal training is a young person’s job, unless you’re instructing people your own age where they will listen, but most people my age don’t want to be doing this. They want to be sitting at home. Young people won’t listen, so there’s no way I’d want to even think about trying to help out young people. They need people their own age, their own mindset, their way of thinking. They look at you and they just think, “Oh, he’s old, he’s burnt out” sort of thing. Yeah, well, they’re mistaken [laughter].

Although Keith somewhat privately challenged those who thought he was “old and burnt out,” he simultaneously displayed a reluctance to engage with the dominant

group (i.e., younger generations) within the gym environment, confirming—through his story—that personal training was a “young person’s job.” In this sense, opportunities for this counterstory to work on others are restricted because the form of resistance that informs it is only occasionally animated by the storyteller. When telling this counterstory, others too are rendered external to the storyteller. Thus, the counterstory can work to set a boundary between the teller and other older adults.

Inconsistent Resistance

Ben (interviewed once) was 63 years old at the time of interview. He entered his first natural bodybuilding competition at the age of 60. Having retired early from a job in management, he worked part time at a commercial health and fitness center overseeing the general practitioner referral scheme, which involved a number of older clients. Similar to all of the participants, Ben used the example of natural bodybuilding to directly challenge notions of natural aging and the inevitable physical deterioration that it is associated with. What differed in how Ben (along with three other participants, male = 2 and female = 1) storied resistance were his attempts to shift dominant understandings of who mature natural bodybuilders are. Unlike Keith and the others, who displayed occasional and monadic forms resistance, the participants exemplified by Ben’s story operated beyond the subculture of natural bodybuilders and within other, more dominant groups. For example, talking of his experiences at work he said:

There’s a guy who also works here (at the health club) who uses me for inspiration when he goes round on his chats with the customers. Sometimes he takes me along as a specimen (laughs). He’s only 26, so he takes me along and says, “Look at this guy here! He’s 63 and he can do it” . . . and I gain respect from the people I teach, I can pass that knowledge on, and use my own experiences to help people . . . That’s why I think it’s good for someone of my age to be doing personal training, because they [clients] can’t use the usual excuses about being too old to do it.

The above comments demonstrate how Ben resists the notion of inevitable age-related decline by acting as a “specimen”—using his position as a natural bodybuilder to show (and inspire) older adults beyond the bodybuilding subculture that age alone need not be a barrier to physical training. By projecting their story into the wider realm and audience of the health club environment—“passing experiences on”—participants like Ben offered a form of resistance that differed to the monadic nature of Keith’s. However, similar to those exemplified by Keith, this story worked for participants like Ben at an individual level. It featured them as repeatedly comparing their contemporaries (declining) bodies with their own embodied reality of being a mature natural bodybuilder. In this sense, the counterstory told worked on others by rendering them again external to the storyteller. But it did not work for or with others at a broader societal level. At a broader social level, the master narrative of decline was further reinforced as these four participants explained the benefits of intense physical training in older age. For example, Ben said:

It’s going to help me not be a burden on society or my family because I will be able to cope with myself . . . I’m going to fight off the aging process, and continue to be healthy.

Aspiring to “fight” the aging process and “avoid being a burden” reinforced the notion that growing older itself was problematic and something to resist. In this regard, participants like Ben told a counterstory, which displayed an inconsistent form of resistance. Nelson (2001) described this as “a patchwork form of resistance, bucking the narratives in certain situations, but not others” (p. 171). She asserts how in this inconsistent scenario, resistance only occurs when certain boundaries defined by the individual are overstepped. This was observed, for example, when Ben referred to one of his clients using age as a reason not to participate in an exercise program. The awareness exhibited by storytellers of what counterstories can do to an audience (in this case, be used as a persuasive device for those who believe they are too old to start exercising) is a distinguishing feature of those who use inconsistent forms of resistance as opposed to occasional and monadic forms. Nonetheless, for Nelson, both forms of resistance are problematic because they lack the consistent and persuasive type of resistance that is required to fully exploit the cracks existing within the master narrative of decline. Our analysis, however, goes beyond this. It demonstrates how projecting resistance in the form of either counterstory can always do something—even when the work of the counterstory occurs at the individual, rather than social level. Our analysis then also raises questions about any expectation that resistance must construct an overarching narrative of its own for social change to be realized. Such a narrative is perhaps most closely exemplified using Daniel’s story.

Regular and Dyadic Resistance

Daniel (interviewed three times) had been involved with natural bodybuilding for ten years. At the time of interview, he was a grandparent and full-time guardian to two school-aged children. He was also 53 years old and unemployed. Unlike the storylines represented by Keith and Ben that exemplified by Daniel acted as a counterstory to the master narrative of decline by directly—and openly—contesting it. For example, Daniel said:

I honestly look forward to old age! Because like I said there are people who are doing the natural bodybuilding who are older than me (gives examples). People look at that, and it gives them a bit more perspective on their life and it makes you think, “Yeah I want to be like that.” . . . Don’t look at age as a reason to think “I’m gonna stop doing this”. In natural bodybuilding, there’s no age limit to stop. You can go all the way.

What differed for those telling the kind of story Daniel tells was their acute awareness of the socially constructed nature of the aging process. For them, it was people’s assumptions about aging, rather than natural aging itself that directed older adults away from certain activities and toward others. This was exemplified in the following extract from Daniel:

I know sooner or later my life is going to end, but I want it to end when it needs to, and not because of being put under pressure by the atmosphere that’s been created by others to say that when you are 50 or 60 then this is the way that you are supposed to be. People get labeled as say a 40 or a 65 year old, and then people around them say, “This is the way you should behave”. But it’s the way of society. Certain people in society throw things upon us and label us and we think that we should fit into that box and that it’s set. I don’t fit into any box.

Aging is therefore tied to the body as a biological entity, and our biology imposes limits on what can and cannot be achieved. But understanding that aging is also socially constructed enabled two of the participants to tell a type of counterstory that could openly challenge the perception of the dominant group (i.e., younger people). These participants offered wholesale resistance to the meta-narrative of decline by challenging the views of the dominant group within the public domain. They also did this in a dyadic rather than monadic fashion. That is, their bodies related to other bodies, existing in mutual constitution with them and communicating with others across the life course. For example, Daniel explained:

Some people said that I should go and do talks, you know, to other groups of people about my bodybuilding because I'm a motivator and they say it would be great to actually go and do that. So, one day, I did! There was a school and I was asked to go in to talk to some youngsters.

In addition to using a story to challenge perceptions of the dominant group by, for example, visiting local schools and talking about his involvement in natural bodybuilding, Daniel's story was also projected toward his contemporaries by enacting an aging script that he perceived to be more liberating. He said:

I'm out there and I'm boogying and I'm dancing, I'm pumping iron at the gym, and they're going: "Disgusting! How can you be doing things like that? You should be in your home!" . . . What I find, whenever I try and talk to people about looking at their lifestyle and changing it, well as soon as I say I'm in my fifties everything stops.

They never ever believe me. So I'm also trying to say to them, "You can be like this, you can easily be like this. You just have to look at changing the way you are about yourself.

The two participants who told counterstories that openly challenged the dominant meta-narrative of decline aspired to repair the damage done to the identity of aging adults from the first person and dominant perspective (Nelson, 2001). Central to this was not just telling but also showing a counterstory through overtly occupying spaces such as the dance floor, a school, the free weights area in the gym, and of course, on the natural bodybuilding competitive stage. Stories like Daniel's offered wholesale resistance by saying in effect "I don't buy that story. It oppresses me. Now you're going to hear what I have to say about who I am" (Nelson, 2001, p. 171). In this sense, and in contrast to the inconsistent resistance story and the occasional and monadic resistance story, the counterstory of regular and dyadic resistance operated more powerfully at the social level.

But, just as a story can work for people by publically resisting aging as an inevitable decline, the story can also work on people who tell or hear it, tricking (Frank, 2010) them and others into believing that resistance is straightforward. Though perhaps the most powerful counterstory, the steer toward taking individual responsibility for embodying a "new" (normal?) aging identity is not unproblematic as it fails to take into account structural influences on individual behavior. This troubling aspect of what might be deemed as "aging well" underpins Jones and Higgs (2010) discussion of natural, normal, and normative aging (see also Cardona, 2008) and past critiques of successful aging (e.g., see Katz & Marshall, 2003).

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to examine how the notion of decline in older age was resisted in the stories told by an example group of “third agers,” mature natural bodybuilders. We extend knowledge in social gerontology, and in particular what Higgs and Jones (2009) referred to as the “new” sociology of health in later life, by identifying different levels of resistance and how resistance is made possible by accessing and telling counterstories. Three counterstories were found, each projecting occasional and monadic resistance, inconsistent resistance, and regular and dyadic resistance.

There were overlaps across these three counterstories. For example, all were stories told by individuals but framed by the narrative resources circulating within the field or subculture of natural bodybuilding. All stories, in varying degrees, also do resistance work. They work for and on (Frank, 2010) the participants by helping to constitute a more positive identity of aging than is traditionally depicted by the meta-narrative of decline. Thus, counterstories provided the groundwork—the resources—for a newly constructed kind of narrative identity formation across the life course by facilitating what White and Epston (1990) referred to as restorying. People seek to restory their lives when the collection of stories in which their lives are formed, fail to appropriate the stories that they tell themselves, and are told by others about who they are, where they have come from, and where they are going (B. Randall, 1996). This process can provide narrative options. These include options to connect with counterstories and, in turn, for constructing an alternative aging identity, thereby increasing viable opportunities to resist and engage in change (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). There were also distinctions across the counterstories. For example, distinctions across the counterstories were identified concerning their overall point, their intended audience, and the consistency with which they were told. The distinctions illuminate the various ways that narratives within the subculture of natural bodybuilding operate at the personal and collective level. They contribute a more sophisticated understanding of how resistance is accomplished along with the nature of that accomplishment. Such a contribution is useful not only in terms of developing a more comprehensive theorizing for how counterstories can be facilitated but also used more effectively to promote creative and meaningful experiences of aging through sport and exercise. This, of course, leads to deeper questions about what counts as “good” counterstories, what can they positively do, and what are their limits and dangers.

A criterion for what constitutes a good counterstory, according to Nelson (2001), is that it depicts the variations and diversity of the group. Distinguishing between the counterstories points to the degree of effectiveness each holds for resistance. As identified here, not all counterstories hold equal weight in terms of how good they are at resisting the narrative of decline. Identifying this has much to offer in terms of how we understand the role and meaning of masters sport and exercise in forging new (more positive?) aging identities. Although the counterstory of regular and dyadic resistance was the least commonly told ($n = 2$), it holds the greatest potential for evoking change in the form of generating more positive aging identities. A distinguishing feature of this counterstory was that it sought to work in mutual constitution with others rather than working on them by subjecting him or her to the narrative of decline, as the other two counterstories can be construed as doing. The regular and dyadic resistance story is told for an intended audience of both group (natural bodybuilders) and non-group members. In so doing, this counterstory can be

projected into different fields and can expand opportunities for different people to select, affirm, and get caught up in the story, thereby increasing the likelihood of personal and collective change. Indeed, for the prospect of social change to be maximized, the counterstory must be shared with others and heard. This, in turn, can lead to a collective telling.

Richardson (1990) noted the empowering effects of gaining access to counterstories by highlighting the transformative possibilities when (and if) they are told collectively:

Collective stories that deviate from standard cultural plots provide new narratives; hearing them legitimates replotting one's own life By emotionally binding people together people who have the same experiences, whether in touch with each other or not, the collective story overcomes some of the isolation and alienation of contemporary life It provides . . . the linking of separate individuals into a shared consciousness. Once linked, the possibility for social action on behalf of the collective is present and therewith, the possibility of societal transformation (p. 26).

Given this, it would seem that in contrast to regular and dyadic resistance, the counterstories of inconsistent resistance and occasional and monadic resistance have certain limits. They may be less effective for generating a substantive collective resistance to the meta-narrative of decline beyond individual or groups of natural bodybuilders as they remain within the confines of this population of third agers. This is significant because without traveling into different fields or generating affirmation from the dominant group, the extent to which damaged (aging) identities can be collectively repaired—and thus the success of the counterstory to truly resist—remains questionable. As M. Andrews (2009) argued, “Successful ageing, if it is to be anything other than an individual triumph, or a triumph of individualism, needs to extend its web beyond those who are considered “old” (p. 80). Knowing the distinction between different levels of resistance—or perhaps more accurately a continuum of resistance ranging from more individualistic to more social and collective resistance—is therefore vital. Whether counterstories are shared with other and directed toward members of the dominant group, the subgroup, or both would seem to be important to their success in dislodging meaningful portions of the meta-narrative's oppressive content.

Of course, none of this is easy or straightforward. A counterstory can work for people in positive ways, but it can also work on them by tricking them (Frank, 2010) into believing that resisting is simple when, in fact, one's corporeality can place limits on what can be resisted and how. Physical frailty can come with aging and, no matter how many counterstories one tells, the body's fleshy limitations cannot currently be overcome. Furthermore, the rhetoric of counterstories may produce a tyranny of cheerfulness that provides no place for those people who do not wish to or cannot view aging as a positive experience. Within the older population, there is social, health, and economic heterogeneity. Subsequently, taking on board and sharing certain counterstories may not be easy or even possible for all. For example, counterstories of resistance are likely to better flourish in certain social environments that place a high value on healthy behaviors and have the financial resources to promote them. An ontological story of resistance is more likely to struggle to survive in environments where the majority live on the poverty line and see their health as something outside their personal control.

Another potential limit or danger of counterstories can be framed around the relational dimension of storytelling. For example, some counterstories of resistance, as seen in the cases of Ben and Keith, depend on subjecting others to the category of decline. In this sense, although there is resistance to the idea of aging as decline at a personal level, this is still endorsed at a generic level and particularly in relation to others. This more subtle interpretation of the counterstories identified here thus suggests more is at work than just some form of resistance when people tell a counterstory. The counterstories like the inconsistent resistance and the occasional and monadic resistance also have the capacity to potentially position other older people as on a tragic downward trajectory of physical deterioration while downplaying any deeper dimension of aging that they might be experiencing. They can express a distinction between the storyteller and those who they identify as growing old. In so doing, not only are others positioned by counterstories in terms of decline. These stories can moreover disconnect people. They do their work of disconnection by setting up a boundary between those telling them and others who identified as following the narrative of decline. This practice can further limit collective storytelling. It can render people external to oneself or the group, excluding those who do feel their life is in decline from the “I” who embodies the counterstory or “we” who share the counterstory of resistance.

In addition to these relational, corporeal, and structural issues, we would also caution against giving the counterstories too much credence since a person’s access and ability to tell counterstories is constrained, as well as enabled, by what Frank (2010) termed “narrative habitus”: the collection of stories in which life is fashioned and that continues to shape life in a predisposed, tacit embodied way. For example, the natural bodybuilders narrative habitus may have disposed (but not predetermined) them to be attracted to certain counterstories, feeling in their bodies that the counterstory is for them, thereby providing them with the competence and volition to resist the narrative of decline. For others, however, their narrative habitus may dispose them to feel that the counterstories are not for them, that they have little competence to use them. Here, then, narrative habitus becomes constraining when it comes being attracted to and selecting counterstories that resist the decline narrative in ways the bodybuilders have offered.

Despite such potential constraints, the counterstories identified in this group of mature natural bodybuilders do, in varying degrees hold potential for people to resist the narrative of decline. Not least, we would suggest, they have the capacity to attract and hold listeners by arousing imaginations. After all, this subculture undoubtedly evokes an element of shock and intrigue from the story listener who, as Frank (2010) emphasized, are imaginative creatures. A story, unlike a code, guideline, or principle, asks first that the listener imagine. Frank suggests that it is this imaginative opening that make stories attractive and can explain why people might be willing to listen to a story and at times use it to re-story their own. Counterstories can arouse peoples’ imaginations concerning how their lives might have been different and the possibilities that still lie open to them. They can, as Frank put it, get under people’s skin.

Stories have the most singular capacity to generate the most intense, focused engagement among listeners and readers. People do not simply listen to stories. They get *caught up*, a phrase that can be explained by another metaphor: stories get under people’s skin. Once stories are under people’s skin, they affect the terms in which

people think, know, and perceive. Stories teach people what to look for and what can be ignored; what to value and what to hold in contempt (p. 48).

Without ignoring the constraints highlighted earlier, getting caught up in a counterstory is therefore not limited to the population of bodybuilders. These stories could be shared with different populations as part of an intervention program so that others can draw on them (if they so wish) to make sense of events, restore (restory) a sense of who they are, or find different ways of aging when the current story (e.g., decline) they find themselves part of, is not taking care of them. Indeed, stories of how people resist the narrative of decline might be utilized in counseling other older adults, who have effectively shut their stories down as they await old age—getting, rather than growing old—existing in the grips of what Freeman (2000, 2010) termed narrative foreclosure. According to Frank (2010), changing stories in both material and semiotic senses is a modest intervention worth taking. Indeed, this has been supported through illustration within narrative gerontology (see Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, & Randall, 2011). How exactly we change stories is thus a compelling area of inquiry.

To that end, the typology of counterstories of resistance we have identified not only builds a multidimensional picture of resistance and adds conceptual depth to our academic understandings of aging and resistance but also to notions of change and continuity. It could be maximized in interventions to change attitudes toward aging by illustrating how and where counterstories resist. The different types of counterstories highlight that aging is, in part, socially constructed. Understanding one's life in this way is liberating. It can open up opportunities for people to reflect on the story they live by (e.g., decline) (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000), recognizing that in certain circumstances, their life story may be more fluid than originally thought. If counterstories offer a gateway into this endeavor, then understanding how to tell a good counterstory is paramount.

Conclusions

We advance theoretical understandings of aging by illustrating how the meta-narrative of decline can be resisted via narratives circulating within natural bodybuilding. We also demonstrate how this process of “resistance” might not be as straightforward as initially thought. Locating this concept within a narrative framework, we highlight the potential of counterstories as an avenue to further understand the ways in which the “bad news” of aging might be diluted with stories of “good news” (W. L. Randall & McKim, 2008), and with this, new aging identities constructed. We certainly do not suggest that this is an easy or swift task to accomplish. However, despite the prevalence of the medicalization of aging, and the subsequent power of the meta-narrative of decline, we should not be dissuaded from seeing the potential of counterstories to evoke social change in the way that aging is interpreted and given meaning. As Nelson (2001) explained, “Many of them (counterstories) start small, like a seed in the crack of a sidewalk, but they are capable of displacing surprising chunks of concrete as they grow” (p. 169).

Although this article has advanced theoretically our understanding into how future cohorts of older, active third agers might experience aging, we are conscious that in doing so it has also raised further questions. We interpret this as a positive reflection of the dynamic field of narrative gerontology and a powerful rationale for future research in this area. For example, the disproportionate representation of gender and the

relatively wide age range (itself a characteristic of the third age) provide areas for further investigation. Likewise, though we have drawn upon the example of serious physical leisure, we do not wish to promote participation in it as a panacea for promoting more positive aging scripts. In this regard, other activities that might also evoke an interest, an inquisitive mind, and/or a passion, are equally worthy of study. Finally, although an international literature base shapes the article theoretically, our participants were recruited from the United Kingdom alone. Developing this line of inquiry within different countries and cultures could make further progress in the social science of gerontology.

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