Evolving Narratives in the Course of Retirement: A Longitudinal Study

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This paper presents results from the second phase of a longitudinal study of retirement. Data were gathered through interviews with 29 participants (65 to 66 years of age) who had previously been interviewed when they were 63 to 64 years of age and still working. Data were analyzed by characterizing each subject's narrative about retirement in terms of its narrative slope—progressive, stability, or regressive. These current narratives also were compared with the earlier narratives these participants told. It was found that, while anticipatory narratives may predispose persons toward action, they are not so much a fixed "script for action" as an orientation to act within circumstances. While participants' narratives anticipating retirement often turned out as expected, they were sometimes reshaped as a consequence of personal action, external events, and unexpected experiences within new retirement occupations. The study suggests that, while narratives play a role in shaping the direction of persons' lives, they also interweave with and change directions as a result of ongoing life events and experiences.

Recent occupational therapy literature (Jonsson, Kielhofner, & Borell, 1997; Jonsson & Andersson, 1999; Kendall, 1996; Rudman, Cook, & Polatajko, 1997) underscores retirement as a distinct and important occupational transition. Retirement, one of life's last major transitions, dramatically affects everyday occupational life. Studying retirement can be particularly useful for understanding change in occupational life. How persons achieve meaning in their occupations, maintain a balance in occupational life, and reorganize occupational behavior patterns all are potentially illuminated in the retirement process (Jonsson et al., 1997; Kendall, 1996; Rudman et al., 1997). Consequently, the retirement transition has much to reveal about how persons navigate complex life changes.

Current gerontological literature identifies a number of general problems in the study of retirement (Calasanti, 1996; Henretta, 1997; Light, Grigsby, & Bly, 1996; Reitzes, Mutran, & Fernandez, 1996). First, retirement may mean different things in different cultural and socioeconomic environments (Calasanti, 1996). Second, different studies have found conflicting results as to how retirement influences well-being and health (Gall, Evans, & Howard, 1997; Jonsson et al., 1997). One reason for such contradictory findings may be inconsistency in how concepts related to well-being and health are defined in research (Antonovsky, 1992). Indeed, a few studies, which focus on individual differences, have found that individuals differ widely in their...
perceptions of how retirement has affected their health and well-being (Jonsson et al., 1997; Karp, 1989; Richardson & Kilty, 1991). Third, retirement research findings concerning the impact of such demographic variables as level of activity, type of activity, and income on well-being are inconsistent (Gall, 1997; Jonsson, 1993). These discrepancies may be due to differences in research design (cross-sectional vs. longitudinal) and differences in the subjects' time since retirement (Gall, 1997).

Calasanti (1996) argues that theories that guide much of the research erroneously view retirement as a one-dimensional, well-defined event. Henretta (1997) and Jonsson and Andersson (1999) argue that retirement should be seen as a complex, unfolding process. Moreover, gerontologists have called for theories and research methodologies sensitive to the heterogeneity of retirees and the diversity of the retirement process (Calasanti, 1996; Grigsby, 1996; Light, 1996). Documenting individual heterogeneity and diversity in how societies and cultures deal with aging and retirement is critical to understanding retirement.

This study is part of a longitudinal, qualitative investigation following a group of Swedish men and women before and into retirement. The research has allowed examination of retirees over a period of time focusing on continuity and change within individuals and on diversity across the cohort's members. We have employed narrative concepts to construct an understanding of how persons experience and engage in the retirement process. Narrative thought stresses that humans create meaning about what they encounter in everyday life by plotting or framing experiences within narrative structures (Bruner, 1986; Gergen & Gergen, 1983, 1988; Polkinghorne, 1988; Ricoeur, 1984). Narrative in occupational therapy has been used to understand volitional processes (Barrett, Beer, & Kielhofner, 1999; Helfrich, Kielhofner, & Mattingly, 1994; Kielhofner, 1995). Volition is conceptualized as the process by which persons make choices that influence the course of their occupational lives (Kielhofner, Borell, Burke, Helfrich, & Nygård, 1995). Volitional narratives are theorized to motivate people to behave in ways that pursue a desired direction or avoid an undesirable direction. Within the context of this study the concept of volition focuses on how persons anticipate, experience, and interpret retirement.

In the first and second phases, our focus has been on understanding how older persons face and experience retirement, and how they shape their volitional narratives over time. In Phase One, we examined how the participants anticipated retirement while they were still working at the age of 63 to 64 (Jonsson et al., 1997). We used Gergen and Gergen's (1983, 1988) concept of narrative slope as an approach to analyzing these participants' narratives. They offer a means of describing the plot of a narrative by examining the direction it takes over time—that is, the narrative slope. In the first phase of the study, three types of anticipatory narratives were identified: (a) progressive narratives (anticipating life to improve after retirement), (b) stability narratives (anticipating life to be about the same after retirement), and (c) regressive narratives (anticipating retirement to make life worse).

Differences in narratives appeared to be related to how persons had experienced and interpreted work and how they envisioned being able to live after retirement. For example, a person who viewed work negatively may have anticipated a progressive narrative in which retirement would be viewed as an escape or release from a negative occupation. Alternatively, some persons who found work highly satisfying anticipated that the loss of work would make their lives worse. Still others who found work highly satisfying were able to envision how to maintain an active life with new interests, anticipating either a stability or progressive narrative.

Findings from Phase One illustrated that these persons tied their anticipations of retirement to their ongoing life stories. What they expected in retirement was inexorably linked to how life was for them as workers. Each constructed an image of a possible future in terms of the meaning already ascribed to the past and present. This study follows these persons into the period of their anticipated retirement to examine how each narrative unfolded and whether and how these persons' retirements developed in accordance with their original volitional narratives.

Method

In Phase One we randomly selected, from all people 63 years of age and working 50% or more in a region in Stockholm, a cohort of 32 working participants 63 years of age to 64 years of age, all of whom would be anticipating their retirement at about age 65 (general retirement age in Sweden). The time between the interviews in Phase One and Phase Two was approximately 2 years. One participant had died since the first interview, and two others could not be contacted. Therefore, there were 29 participants, all 65 to 66 years of age in Phase Two. Fourteen of the participants were women and 15 were men. Eight participants had formerly held blue-collar jobs, 15 held white-collar jobs, and 6 held management positions. Twenty-seven had retired (6 to 12 months before the interview) from their former jobs. Eight of the retired participants had found ways to continue some type of work, though not in their former positions.

Data Collection

The first author conducted an informal semi-structured interview (Kvale, 1996) with each participant, usually in his or her home. The first part of the interview was the same for all participants and covered the following themes: (a) the actual events surrounding retirement, (b) personal thoughts about being a retiree and the process of adapting...
to retirement, (c) the current ordinary week and its similarities and differences from a past ordinary week as a worker, (d) thoughts about the future as a retiree, and (e) overall opinions about the transition from worker to retiree. The second part of the interview was tailored to each participant, based on what the participant had narrated in his or her first interview 2 years earlier in Phase One. This allowed the interviewer to follow up on key statements, expectations, or issues that had emerged in the first interview. This second part of the interview, in particular, was designed to explore the unfolding narrative of each subject. The interviews, which lasted about 40 to 90 minutes, were audiotaped and later transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

The concept of narrative slope (Gergen & Gergen, 1983, 1988) that was used in the first phase of the study was the point of departure in the analysis of the participants’ narratives in Phase Two. This analysis was designed to answer the following questions: (a) Now that the person is retired, is the volitional narrative a progressive, regressive, or stability narrative? (b) Is the direction of the volitional narrative the same as that anticipated two years ago? (c) What personal or environmental factors influence the expected direction of the narrative? and (d) What evidence was there that the participants had actively sought to realize or avoid futures they anticipated in their narratives?

We classified the narrative slopes of the participants’ current volitional narratives by examining how they evaluated the course of their lives since retirement. To assure the validity of these classifications, we looked for consistency across different parts of the interview, consistency across concrete experiences described in detail, and at the overall evaluative statements of the participants. Using this approach, all but one of the narratives could be classified as progressive, stable, or regressive, including those of three persons who actively avoided retirement. One participant was in the midst of a transition and therefore could not be classified. The second step in the analysis was to compare the previous narratives of anticipated retirement with participants’ current narratives, attempting to account for patterns of continuity or discontinuity.

Results

Outcomes of Expected Regressive Narratives

Eight of the current participants had anticipated retirement with regressive narratives in Phase One. These narratives included an unexpected loss of things that were important at work (e.g., the sense of achievement and worth, social contact, something to do). Notably absent in these narratives was an anticipation that these values could be realized in other parts of their lives or in new activities. Now, about 2 years later, these participants’ narratives reflected two distinctly different directions in the actual course of their lives: (a) continuation of the regressive narrative, or (b) changing an expected regressive narrative to a stability narrative.

Continuation of the regressive narrative. Three participants (two women and one man) found retirement to be the negative change they had anticipated. Their current stories all revolved around themes of loss. Berit (all names are pseudonyms) described how she had lost contact with her working friends because of the differences in their everyday schedules. Maria, whose friends all were previously from work, said she felt quite isolated. Bengt, whose major loss centered on having something to do, described his situation as having to “find something to make each day pass.”

Both Bengt and Berit indicated that a central reason that their lives had gotten worse was that there was not enough to do. Berit described how she rationed available activities so that she would have one task for each day of the week. Bengt complained, “the weekends are not good for a single person like me. Because it’s like everything just stops.” Maria kept herself busy with her house and with sorting papers, but saw these activities as a poor substitute for work and viewed them as invaluable.

These three retirees who were living an anticipated regressive narrative described themselves as having to come to grips with the inevitable. As Maria described it, “I have resigned [to my fate], now I am just grateful that things didn’t turn out even worse.” As they saw it, life was now worse (as expected) and they had to accept and make the best of it. Berit had entertained the idea of volunteering, but had taken no action in this direction. Bengt and Maria’s approach to their original regressive narrative was one of acquiescence because they saw no other alternative.

Avoiding the regressive narrative. In contrast to the previous group, three participants were influenced by their original regressive narratives—that is, they actively sought to avoid their anticipated regressive narratives by continuing to work. Because Swedish contracts ordinarily mandate retirement at age 65, these men had to be creative to extend their work.

Two of the men, Ove and Åke, continued to work full-time. Ove had received special permission from his employer and from the union to work an additional 2 years after his official retirement age. He was very pleased with this and when asked to reflect on the fact that he could not forestall retirement indefinitely, he said, “I had my first job when I was 10 years old in the summer 1938. Since then, I have always worked, always, always. So it would be foreign to just have free time.” Just as his overt behavior had avoided retirement, his narrative also continued to avoid retirement by speaking of it as unimaginable: “I don’t think that far ahead. I take each day as it comes.”

Åke was officially retired from his former work with a full pension. Nevertheless, he managed to work unofficially, through personal contacts, as a salesman. In fact, he now works more than full-time. He only talks about being able to continue working, which he sees as “saving years” from
the period of being a full-time retiree. Åke speaks about his job as follows: “Well, it’s like a hobby. I have worked extra time before. I think it’s fun; you meet people and come to talk with them.” His future narrative revolved around plans to continue to work as long as possible.

The third man, Per, had retired from his former job, but managed to continue working by starting a consulting business. When he compared his current situation with his previous demanding job, he felt that it was difficult to adjust to his new, less-demanding lifestyle. His narrative described an ongoing transition from a high-powered job to a new form of work; that transition was not yet complete. Consequently, he was not sure of its outcome.

In his own way, each of these men was avoiding retirement in his current narrative. Ove could not imagine not working and took one day at a time without thinking about retirement. Åke planned to work indefinitely. Per was preoccupied with the transition from one form of work to another. Avoiding retirement altogether was an implicit theme in their life stories that were woven around continued work.

Stability narrative due to external factors. Two persons, Sven and Willy, did not experience retirement to be the negative event they expected. Interestingly, this difference was not because they had sought to purposefully change something about their retired lives. Rather, they both seemed surprised about the turn of events. The narratives they told of retirement attributed the surprising experience of their lives to external factors. As Sven put it: “I’m surprised that there haven’t been problems. I thought that time would go very slowly. But, no, it hasn’t been slow at all.” In both cases, these participants encountered unexpected opportunities to engage in meaningful tasks. Instead of things getting worse, they stayed the same for these participants. For example, Sven attributed the positive outcome of retirement to unexpected needs to repair and update his summer cottage and to his daughter’s request that he work on her apartment. So, for him, life was about the same. Willy related how his wife had actively coached him and found meaningful things for him to do at home and at their summer cottage. Consequently, their lives were quite satisfying despite the earlier expectation that things would get worse upon retirement.

Outcomes of expected stability narratives. The participants who originally told stability narratives in the first phase of the study were expecting life to stay about the same after retirement as before. These participants included 11 persons who expected retirement to be a continuation of the positive experience they had with work and 1 person who experienced work as negative and did not expect things to get better upon retirement. In Phase Two, this cohort told two types of narratives: (a) continuation of the expected stability narrative, or (b) unexpected experiences of regression.

Continuation of the stability narrative. The most common stability narrative was that things had turned out basically as expected. This group included nine persons who had a positive view of their former work and one person who had not experienced his work as positive. These participants’ stories were not without unexpected elements; however, these events or circumstances did not change the basic direction of the narrative. For example, Lisa expected a surplus of time in retirement, but once retired, she experienced a lack of available time and now concludes: “I can’t understand how I ever made it when I was working.” Some of the other participants in this group experienced the opposite—they had more unfilled time than they had expected. Gun, who missed her former work-related social contacts and busy schedule, commented, “Sometimes it is a little boring, you know. You have to find out things to do yourself. You can’t just walk around at home and feel pity for yourself.” As this quote illustrates, those who had previously seen work as positive and still saw retirement as positive, were taking responsibility for their retirement situations. They did not accept the idea that things were going to get worse, and instead took action to find things to fill up their time.

Alternatively, Göran, the one participant who previously held a negative view of his former work, initially found some relief in leaving his job, as he had anticipated. However, as time went on, he was surprised that he sometimes also missed being at work. This gentleman, who saw work as negative, described retirement basically as an event that did not have any major effect on his life.

For these participants, retirement was a continuation of how life had been previously. Their experience was one of stability. Retirement had happened without significantly affecting the quality of their lives one way or the other. Indeed, some people in this group emphasized how natural and almost unnoticeable their transition to retirement had been.

Unexpected experiences of regression. The second type of narrative, told by two men who had anticipated retirement with a stability narrative, was about an unexpected regression in retirement. One gentleman, Jörgen, characterized his experience:

You try to prepare yourself, inside your head, for the change. But when it’s there, you have a feeling that it’s not real. You still feel young, you know, with much left to give....It is a whole new experience. It’s like life itself sort of ends! You have worked for 50, 52 years since you were 12, 13 years old.

Jörgen was surprised that he experienced a larger loss of meaning than expected. His expectation that he would be able to occasionally work for his employer turned out to be unrealistic. This disappointed him and he felt that he “did not belong anywhere.” When asked what he did in retirement, he said: “I don’t do anything, not a damn thing.” In actuality, he did engage in some new activities, but he described them as merely a way of making the time pass. The new activities in retirement did not seem to supply the same meanings as work. The second gentleman, Bertil, who experienced regression misses both the work itself
(using knowledge and experience) and the broad social contacts he had in his service profession. These men experienced losses of meaning to a larger extent than expected. Unexpected loss of meaning that could not be replaced in retirement was the theme of these two regressive narratives.

Outcomes of expected progressive narratives. Nine participants in the first phase of the study told progressive narratives in which they expected life to get better in retirement. While six had a negative view of work and anticipated retirement as an escape, three experienced work as positive and saw retirement as offering an even better life. For some of the participants retirement turned out positive; however, this was not the case for all of them. Now, in retirement, some of those who anticipated things would get better told either progressive or stability narratives.

Continuation of the progressive narrative. Seven persons experienced the progressive narrative they anticipated including three who had held a positive view of their work and four who evaluated work as a negative experience.

Those three persons who had experienced work positively had been able to envision how the various positive aspects about work could be realized in other parts of life. They also expected retirement to provide them with new possibilities for living better by taking up new activities or spending more time and energy in activities they already performed. Whereas, some of these elders missed aspects of their working life, the positive experiences of their new involvements clearly outweighed any losses. Consequently, what they expected had come about—life was even better as a retiree.

Three of those who now evaluated retirement as a positive turn of events had expected life to get better after retirement, partly in relation to the relief from the obligation of working and partly in connection to increased involvement or plans for new activities. As they had expected, these participants had been able to leave their unsatisfying work and increase their involvement in activities they had done before retiring. Consequently, they felt that they now had a satisfying routine in life, and that things were better than when they were working. Jacob characterizes the viewpoint of this group of participants:

It has been very stimulating to be able to do what you want to do. I love to read and to travel and then to do physical exercise...My work as a teacher was such a terrible psychological burden.

A third and final type of progressive narrative, about an unexpected change that led to not retiring, was told by one person, Britt. She had previously told a progressive narrative in which she looked forward to retirement because she experienced her work as very unsatisfying. Her dissatisfaction was due to being unable to give the kind of social service to her clients that she deemed important. Shortly thereafter, she was offered a new career in her old company with a focus on internal service for her fellow employees. This change resulted in a new evaluation of work as challenging, satisfying, and fulfilling. She still worked part-time and characterized her situation, “I have had an ideal situation with gradually retiring. It’s not good to work full-time one day and then not work at all the next.”

Britt now viewed retirement as a gradual process and had plans to continue working in her current job and helping in her daughter’s shop. Like those who had anticipated retirement with a regressive narrative and avoided retirement, she contented herself with working and not thinking much about retirement. Her current narrative was a progressive one in which life had gotten better as expected, but, surprisingly, not by retiring. Both narratives were progressive but the focus shifted from getting away from an unsatisfying job to gradually retiring while continuing a challenging and rewarding job.

A failure of the progressive narrative. Two participants previously anticipated retirement with progressive narratives in which they were looking to retirement as an escape from work. In fact, in their previous narratives, the evaluation that life would turn better was more or less exclusively focused on the theme of relief from the unpleasantness or drudgery of their work. Their narratives did not contain strong anticipation of what they would actually do in retirement. As escape was a dominating theme in their previous narrative, the absence of more concrete plans differentiated these participants from those who realized their progressive narratives. These two participants now told stability narratives in which retirement was a continuation of a dissatisfying life. These narratives centered on unexpected consequences of leaving work that led them to reevaluate retirement. For example, Aina had found work very pressing and stressful with irregular hours on evenings and weekends. She felt that retirement was pleasant at first, but it quickly became boring. She said, “I don’t know what to do once [in] a while. It’s hard to find meaningful things to do...I hope I can find something that interests me, something I really can enjoy.”

Her current plight was an unsuccessful struggle to find a meaningful activity. She also missed the social contacts she had at work, especially because she and her husband had few social relations outside her family. Despite her current narrative, she still maintained that work had been unpleasant for her and she had no desire to return to working life. Rather, hers was a stability narrative in which she experienced difficulties dealing with her life situation both as a worker and as a retiree.

Another participant, Erik, expressed a very strong desire to get rid of a boring and physically demanding job as an industrial worker in the first phase of the study. In the previous interview, he had related with emphasis the relief he expected when leaving work behind. Now he had reemphasized things, “I have revised my opinion about retirement since I saw you last.” This participant misses the sense of routine he had while working and complains of how
undifferentiated time has become. Interestingly, he also describes how being at his summer cottage has taken on new meaning. When he worked, going to the cottage on weekends was a way to relax and rest. However, now that he's retired, going to the cottage no longer feels the same. As he sums it up, “I have learned that it's not that simple to become a retiree.”

A summary of the 29 participants’ narratives in Phase One and Phase Two is shown in Figure 1. The figure illustrates the relationship between the type of narrative with which participants anticipated retirement and the actual life narrative experienced in retirement.

Discussion

The findings of Phase One and Phase Two highlight the diversity of expectation and experience in occupational transitions. The discrepancies between participants’ expectations and their actual experiences of retirement are aptly represented by the summary statements of Lisa who noted, “I am surprised that it has been so easy” and Erik who reflected, “I have learned that it's not that simple to become a retiree.” With regard to gerontology, these findings underscore the importance of incorporating concepts sensitive to heterogeneity (Calasanti, 1996; Grigsby, 1996; Light, 1996) in older persons when examining a process such as retirement. At first glance, retirement may appear similar from one individual to another, but this study shows that, when examined closely, retirement is anticipated and experienced quite differently by different persons.

By examining participants’ narratives across time and on either side of a major occupational transition, we gained some understanding about how volitional narratives unfold. Twenty of the participants were living the retirement narratives they anticipated. This correspondence between expectation and outcome provides some support for the theory of continuity in retirement (Atchley, 1976, 1989; Long, 1987; Palmore, Fillenbaum, & George, 1984). It also suggests that most participants in this study experienced what they expected to experience upon retirement because they knew themselves, and their life circumstances, and likely acted in ways that influenced things in expected directions.

For about one third of the participants, however, life took a different turn than anticipated in their original volitional narratives. Some took action to avoid the negative outcomes they had expected. Others appeared to simply happen upon experiences that led them to revise their narratives, some in positive and some in negative directions.

This study provided a unique opportunity to examine the relationship between the volitional narrative and occupational behavior. Several writers have underscored that narratives influence how people act (Helfrich & Kielhofner, 1994; Kielhofner, 1995; Mattingly, 1998; Ricoeur, 1984). According to this argument, narratives guide and shape action because people act so as to continue their narratives in a particular direction—seeking out preferred or desired outcomes and avoiding those that are feared or otherwise judged undesirable. The assertion that narratives mobilize persons to action, has been central to several writings about narratives (Bruner, 1986; Ricoeur, 1984). However, limited empirical research on this phenomenon has been done. Also, to our knowledge, limited research has addressed how the relationship between narrative and action develops over time.

This longitudinal study suggests a complex relationship between narratives and behavior. For example, among

![Figure 1. Flow chart of the 29 participants’ retirement narratives at age 63 to 64 and at age 65 to 66 (by overall evaluation of work at age 63 to 64).](http://ajot.aota.org/)
those who told regressive narratives, some persons actively worked to avoid the negative turn of events by finding ways to continue working. These participants might be said to be among those most motivated by their original narratives.

On the other hand, others who anticipated retirement with regressive narratives more or less passively accepted their fate. Still others were spared from a regressive narrative because persons or circumstances interceded to change the course of retirement. Similarly, some persons expecting stability or progressive narratives took strategic action to realize their expectations whereas others appeared to “let things happen.” One style of narrative tended to focus on the self as actively shaping the life story including its future outcomes. This was true for progressive narratives and for stability narratives in which retirement was anticipated to be a continuation of a satisfactory life. In the second type of narrative, the narrators were more passive, like spectators observing their own unfolding narratives.

It is important to note that the active and passive styles of the original narratives did not always result in corresponding active or passive behavior patterns as the participants neared or entered retirement. That is, whether a person actually turned out to be more of a spectator or an actor in his or her life story was often shaped by ongoing life events. Consequently, both the degree of involvement of persons in shaping their own destinies and the actual direction that retirees’ lives took were functions of an interaction between the original narrative and unfolding events and circumstances. The original narratives represented a “volitional readiness” on the part of persons to interact in particular ways with ongoing life events and circumstances. Differences in those external circumstances and events may well have served to support or discourage active agency and to nudge the life course in one direction or another. Thus, while narratives can be said to motivate persons to behave in certain ways, how they motivate behavior is a function of the interaction between the narrative and environmental circumstance. Referring to Bruner (1986) and Ricoeur (1984), one could say that the narrative discourse is in continuous communication with the context—a communication that can change the very discourse of the narrative. Narratives interact with the ongoing stream of life, not only anticipating and interpreting events but also accommodating to the new directions toward which events may direct them.

Another interesting finding is that some participants’ volitional narratives evidently influenced their significant other, as in Willy’s case, whose wife took action to avoid his anticipated regressive narrative. This underscores the fact that volitional narratives not only are personal narratives, but also are public representations of the self that affect the lives and actions of others.

Some participants who made efforts to continue involvement in occupations did not find the same level of meaning and satisfaction in retirement as they had in work. Their loss or disappointment was not linked to a lack or failure of effort but to the meaning of the experience that their efforts generated. Still others found, to their surprise, that the experience of retirement activities was more satisfying than they expected. These findings suggest that efforts to engage in occupation are not always a guarantee as to how that engagement will “feel.” What accounts for these differences in the experience of occupational engagement warrants further exploration.

Conclusion
The following tentative conclusions might be drawn from the findings of this study. First, while anticipatory volitional narratives may predispose persons toward action, they are not a fixed “script for action.” Rather, volitional narratives represent an orientation to act within circumstances and events in a particular manner in which the interaction itself affects the narrative. As Mattingly points out, “Prospective narratives are continually projected, unraveled, and remade in the course of trying to live them out” (1998, p. 156). One important issue for future research is the nature of passive versus active styles of narrative and their influences on the course of life events.

Second, while volitional narratives anticipating the future often turn out as expected, they are subject to revision when circumstance or experience nudges them in new directions. Narratives are dynamically assembled (Kielhofner, 1995) as pre-existing tendencies within the individual that interact with emerging circumstance.

Third, narratives may take new directions as a consequence of any one or any combination of the following circumstances. People might take action to realize or to change their expected future narratives. External events may elicit new directions for the narrative. Unexpected experiences within occupations may lead persons to reinterpret their narratives. Narrative does not govern human circumstance, action, or experience. Rather, narrative interweaves with ongoing life experiences.

Implications for Occupational Therapy
The findings in this study underscore the usefulness of a narrative approach to understanding how a client might act, and illustrate the importance of external circumstances in shaping behavior and outcomes. Moreover, the findings revealed the unpredictability of what a person may experience in occupational engagement and pointed out the limitation of knowledge of an individual’s volitional narrative for predicting how things might unfold. Therapists must always recognize the volitional narrative as a “work in progress” of which therapy must become a part. Therapy communicates within the narrative and can change the narrative discourse. This therapeutic phenomenon emphasizes the importance of addressing the circumstances and events that shape the direction of lives as part of therapy.
Additionally, providing opportunities for engagement in occupations that may yield new experiences that may nudge the life course in a desired direction is important.

Limitations and Future Research

The concept of narrative slope (Gergen & Gergen, 1983, 1988) was used to analyze similarities and changes in directions between how retirement was anticipated and how retirement was actually experienced. This analytical approach represents one way that narratives might be characterized. Summarizing narratives in terms of their slopes necessarily leaves behind much detail about persons’ lives. While characterizing the slopes of these narratives allows us to understand something about the anticipated and realized directions of life courses, some of the ambiguity, ambivalence, and heterogeneity within individual narratives is simultaneously ignored.

Our longitudinal examination of the retirement process allowed us to discover how narratives unfold over time. Yet, time remains an important limitation of this study because the participants’ lives will continue to unfold and change. Because the experiences of retirement life are new in Phase Two, they may not be sustained over time. These new retirees are just beginning to establish their post-working lifestyles. Moreover, some of our participants have temporarily avoided retirement and will be facing the transition in the future. The inevitability of ongoing change for our participants leaves each narrative in this study unfinished. Fortunately, the ongoing narratives of the participants will be examined in the third phase of this longitudinal study, which will reveal the next chapter in their lives. ▲

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