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Estrella – a gifted narrative

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This article is a narrative analysis of a written story. Most scholars in the field would agree that a true narrative is an oral story, narrated by one person to another. The telling should then be tape-recorded and transcribed into a written text, which constitutes the essence for narrative analysis. I chose to analyse this particular written story using Labov’s (1982) typology of structural elements and Gee’s (1991) structure of poetic devices since it has all the qualities and requisites for a ‘natural narrative’. I therefore find it possible to interpret in a similar way as one would interpret a verbally narrated account. In the context it was given to me as a researcher, it represents just one part of a set of activities performed with a group of young people in León, Nicaragua, exploring the phenomenon of sibling caretakers. I consider the narrative is as part of an ongoing conversation with one of these caretakers and I will try to explain in this paper how I came to view it in such a way.

My research design is based on interplay between analytic frames and data. Following Ragin (1994) I have tried to be as open as possible in my interpretation of the narrative. In the analysis I was guided by the theoretical ideas of Labov (1982), Gee (1991), Riessman (1993), Mishler (1986a, 1986b) and Poindexter (2002) in particular. I tried to create an encounter between these analytic frames and images generated from data, resulting in what Ragin labels ‘representations of social life’. I found that the young girl’s narrative revealed her transition from childhood to adulthood and by sharing her feelings with us she co-constructed a representation of herself as a responsible and able young woman prepared to take on motherhood.

Situating sibling caretaking

From their analysis of a sample of ethnographic studies from 186 societies, Barry and Paxon concluded that children were by far the most common caretakers of small children. Mothers were the principal caretakers in less than 20% of these societies and even here

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others had important roles in caretaking alongside the mothers (Barry and Paxon, 1971). Even if sibling caretaking is widespread and is documented in various ethnographic studies (Mead, 1928, Wolcott, 1967, Schildkrout, 1978, Zukow, 1989), the phenomenon as such has not been well researched from the caretaker’s point of view. Weisner and Gallimore (1977) argued that the responsibilities for care could only be understood in the context of the home setting, and that field-based methods of anthropology were best suited for studying sibling caretaking. Increasingly, ethnographic approaches are used when researching the everyday social worlds of children (James, 2001, Emonds, 2005).

Experiences from research with street-working children imply that also being a caretaker in childhood can be seen as an agent of socialization (Invernezzi, 2003, Woodhead 1999). Cicirielli summarizes in his article on sibling relationship in cross-cultural perspective that “siblings in non-industrialised countries are socializing agents of other siblings (older or younger)” and that these countries “have formalized or institutionalised the use of older siblings in helping care for their younger siblings” (Cicirielli, 1994: 11).

For sibling caretakers the household work including nurturing of siblings is shaping their future lives and constitutes part of their socialization. Their work can also bring self-worth and increase self-esteem, especially when they become aware of their importance for their families. The overall emotion expressed by the sibling caretakers in our study was pride, even if their situation often was characterized by stress and coping problems (Dahlblom et al, 2009). Similar findings have been reported by Kosonen (1996) from a study on siblings in Scotland that both caretakers and those who were looked after perceived it as a predominantly positive experience.

On the other hand, even if sibling caretakers noticeably achieve essential life skills, their long-term personal development is likely to be hampered by the obligations they have as caretakers, in that they have limited access to basic education, since school usually interferes with their duties at home (Dahlblom et al, 2009).

Nicaragua has a history of political turmoil. In 1979 the dictator Somoza was removed from power in a revolution followed by civil war. The country has also been devastated by recurrent natural disasters. These conditions have affected the entire society, rich and poor, and the pattern of loose family structures is not considered unusual in this context.
They are a distinctive feature of Nicaraguan society, in which households may be variously composed of extended kin (Lancaster, 1992). In this cultural context, sibling caretaking is just one form of raising children where multiple care-giving arrangements are the norm, and sibling caretakers play an important role in their families and in society at large. However, the traditional ways of shared management care of children has been put out of place and the pattern of households composed of extended families has been replaced by households headed by single women. Children are home alone without adult supervision, exposing them to a different and often harsh reality (Quesada 1998, Tully 2007).

Closely linked to these multiple caretaking norms is the culture of machismo, where men are considered superior to women, as are the related norms concerning women’s roles such as elevated motherhood and that a woman’s place is in the home (Lancaster, 1992). These are influential in Nicaragua, and deeply rooted in all segments of society, as is Christianity. The Catholic Church is by tradition predominant but new evangelistic currents are becoming increasingly important. Christian norms and values are strong at all levels of society.

**Sibling caretakers in León, Nicaragua**

Our qualitative study on sibling caretakers was conducted in León, the second largest city in Nicaragua. Our research team was composed of Swedish social scientists from Umeå University and Nicaraguan public health researchers from the Centre for Demographic and Health Research (CIDS) at León University.

The main objectives of our study were to identify, describe and analyse the life situation of sibling caretakers in economically deprived areas, with a focus on how they themselves perceived the caretaking. We concluded that this group of children has a limited social network due to their marginalised situation (Dahlblom *et al.*, 2009). In their communities, sibling caretakers appear to be invisible since they stay at home and interact with very few people outside their own family. Sibling caretaking is also so common that it becomes ‘invisible’ in another way, too: most people have experience of looking after siblings or being looked after by siblings, but very few reflect on the phenomenon of what it means to be a caretaker in childhood. As a result of the kinship system with extended families in Nicaragua, not only siblings but also children of close relatives were cared for.
One sub-study began with a discussion group consisting of young caretakers. From there, we developed various participatory research activities over a period of more than one year. All interviews and activities with this group of young people were conducted by the author (KD) and a Nicaraguan researcher (Andrés Herrera Rodríguez). In one activity we asked the group to write short individual narratives on their experiences of caretaking, and also more specifically about events that had taken place during caretaking. We preferred written narratives as we wanted to avoid the children adjusting their narratives to the norms of the group or to us as observers. The instructions for writing the story were simple and very open:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation for writing your story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did a special event occur when you were alone at home looking after your siblings?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did something special happen?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you feel when looking after your siblings?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You can write anything you like!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.

All eight participants wrote us something. Most chose to write in the form of a diary, perhaps inspired by the way we asked about their day-to-day work in the group sessions. The story I selected for this narrative analysis was written by a 16-year old girl, who choose to call herself ‘Estrella’. I felt ‘Estrella’s story’ to be representative of feelings of children involved in caretaking and, because of its qualities, very challenging to interpret. ‘Estrella’s story’ succeeded in giving a good image of caretaking and its emotional meaning. In English estrella means ‘star’; the girl explained, ‘you may give me the name Estrella since I am very fond of stars’. In the group ‘Estrella’ had been very active, talkative and open. She was to begin studying at university so I expected her to write a long account of her experiences. When she handed over her story we were all gathering for a group session, so I only had chance to take a quick glance. I saw that she had only written a few lines (Figure 1). I assumed therefore that she had been too busy to devote time to the assignment or that she for some reason did not like the task. I also realised that I had expectations of her that she now seemed unwilling to fulfil. However, reading her story made me understand that she had chosen to tell us something very important and valuable to her, showing that she trusted us and that her story could be perceived as a gift.
Analysis

Interpreting Estrella’s message, which by its rhythm and creativity has the form of a poem, is a matter of translation. Susan Sontag, the literature theorist and philosopher, makes this clear in a speech from 1995 published in her book *When the Stress Falls* (Sontag 2001). Translating is not just reproducing: it is to take part, to improve the encounter between the teller and the listener. Sontag is interested in the ability of translations to transform. It can be about moving from attitudes to action, the transmission of diseases and also about dying or being reviewed. In the context of research, however, the aim of the translation is to expand meaning and understanding: reading between the lines and grasping what is under the surface is often necessary when interpreting a text. The aim is to apply ‘heuristic power’, in order to help the reader to further develop the text and reach a new understanding of it.

When transcribing taped accounts, sounds, pauses, and changes in voice are transferred to the written form. The handwritten story was transcribed onto computer, formatting it as closely as possible to how the original story was presented. In the process of ‘unpacking’ the structure of the written narrative, similar potentials and tools for
interpretation emerged as described by Riessmann when transcribing and analysing taped stories (Riessmann, 1993).

Estrella describes a turning point in her life in the form of a short narrative about experiencing a special feeling. First, when choosing a font resembling handwriting, I discovered that the appearance is very harmonic and well distributed over the page, just like the original (Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Computerised text of the narrative in Spanish and English](image)  

The English translation does not fit as nicely, however, showing that the original text has poetic structure, in line with Gee’s theories on human narrative sense making of how people choose to construct their stories (Gee, 1991). This leads me to conclude that when writing, people have a universal way of organising and structuring their stories. This is especially true when the story is presented as a poem which adds rhetorical strength to the message. In his study of poetry and AIDS in Tanzania, Mutembei (2001) for instance showed how different ways of expressing attitudes to the pandemic influenced people’s knowledge, feelings and coping abilities.

Estrella’s story is divided into paragraphs, ‘stanzas’ in Gee’s terminology, which form coherent and meaningful units; although not all of them are exactly four lines (Gee, 1991). The title of Estrella’s story is a response to our request, indicating that we had an ongoing communication in writing. When giving the instructions, we had not noticed that we had formulated the first two questions in such a way that they could be answered with a simple yes or no. This oversight did not prevent any of the participants from writing a story. Mishler concludes that:
…the form and content of a particular question appears to be less important in whether or not a story will be elicited than the general stance of the interviewer as an attentive listener and how the interviewer responds to a response.

(Mishler, 1986 b: 235)

Estrella’s story has all the requirements for a classic interpretation of what builds a natural story according to many scholars of narrative research. It has a beginning; middle and an end in a temporal order whose meaning would be completely different if the order were changed. It has a plot, it moves through time, and it is told as if it could have been observed and perceived as something actually happening and in parts would be possible for someone to observe. Yet it is an account of how this girl chose to recall this event and it is not necessarily the truth, or what really took place. Using Labov’s model, the narrative was structured in the following way:

| acc. Labov | 1 Ab |
| 1 | This is my story |
| 2 | 10-13 CA |
| 3 | One day my mum went to work and brought |
| 4 | my sister, my dad went to work |
| 5 | 15-18 Ev |
| 6 | and I had just got home from school |
| 7 | when my older sister asked me to take care of her |
| 8 | daughter (my niece) who was only a month and fifteen |
| 9 | days old |
| 10 | |
| 11 | 20-22 Res |
| 12 | When I was taking care of her, I took her in my |
| 13 | arms and an emotion or a feeling awoke in me, |
| 14 | the desire to be a mother because I like |
| 15 | to take care of children especially the newborn. |
| 16 | It was an excitement or a very special feeling for |
| 17 | me but I began to think that in order to have a |
| 18 | child I need to have a stable and solid economic |
| 19 | basis. |
| 20 | I felt very happy, useful, like a new |
| 21 | person who had been born again, with feelings I had |
| 22 | never experienced. |

Table 2.

In accordance with Labov (1982), I label her title an abstract (Ab) since it is a summary of the narrative, even though it does not contain the content of the story. With this she also lets us know that she is going to tell us a story, her story. In lines 3–8 she introduces
the setting, the persons and the time of the event – the orientation (Or) in Labov’s terminology. The single complicating action (CA) in the story, lines 10-13, is the answer to the question ‘And then what happened?’ She then evaluates (Ev) her experience in lines 15-18 and summarizes it in lines 20-22, and brings us to the present of how she feels after having had this experience, the resolution (Res).

Estrella told us later that in her story she let us know something she had not revealed to anyone else. Reading the text, we find that she discovers in a very special moment that she wants to become a mother herself, something considerably different from taking care of other people’s children. Looking at the text of the narrative, a striking translation insists on being observed. Estrella states that she was taken by surprise when holding the baby in her arms. She tries to label her feelings but has difficulties anchoring them to her life experiences: it is very difficult for her to describe this feeling. In line 11 she uses two words, ‘emotion’ and ‘feeling’, and in line 15 ‘excitement’ and ‘very special feeling’ to try to capture this experience in words. These words, however, are not out of the ordinary and do not really describe what she is experiencing. When asked about this in the interview, she mentioned problems finding words to express her feelings at that moment because she had never experienced anything like it before. She was happy to discover the simile of ‘being born again’. Her feelings when she took the baby in her arms swept over her and suggested a kind of turning point in her life. She then immediately moves from surprising emotions to plans and rational thinking (stanza 3). Her feelings of happiness were transformed into plans to create a stable economic basis in her life in which her desire for motherhood could come true.

This story also represents a shift from childhood to adulthood. In lines 16-18, as mentioned above, she writes that she needs to have a stable and solid economic basis before she can have a child, showing that she is thinking sensibly. By this she tells us that although she now has a strong desire to become a mother, she is responsible and ready to wait until the appropriate time.

The use of the word ‘useful’ in line 20 is puzzling. Perhaps it refers to the true meaning of life for her – to become a mother, adhering to the norms and values in Nicaraguan culture. The story of Mary and her conception has a central role in Nicaraguan religious life. Motherhood is very important in Nicaraguan culture, and mothers, particularly grandmothers, are treated with special respect. It might also reflect that she is thinking...
that by becoming a mother herself, she will contribute to her family and their expectations of her.

Labov’s model does not, however, include the questions ‘What is missing from the story?’ or ‘What is wrong in the story?’ Sometimes this is as important as what is said. Estrella’s description of this, according to her feelings, very important moment in her life indicates that norms prescribing motherhood were absent in her life before. If not, why was she so surprised? Further, she does not refer to any partner, nor does she speak about love. Nor does she talk about having a relationship with someone before having a child. Her focus is the mother-child relationship. In this respect, she is not at all adhering to the norms and values of her society. She seemed to be more governed by unexpected feelings than adapting to norms. She might however be pragmatic in the sense that even if the prevailing norms are to marry and wait until then to have children, this is not what is really happening. Teenage pregnancies are frequent and many children in Nicaragua are raised by single women. Very young parents are typically not married, nor do they live together. It seems, however, that even if the mother-child relationship norms are there in the Nicaraguan context, they are not consciously internalised by Estrella. It is also likely that her focus on economic rationales depend on the fact she does not have a partner. I would also argue that Estrella’s story is a co-construction. Mishler introduces this concept as a missing component in Labov’s model (Mishler 1986 a). By including the talk and paralinguistic cues given by the interviewer in the transcripts, the interaction is captured. Estrella’s story was addressed to me and my colleague. Even if we were not present when she was actually writing the story, we were present in her mind, encouraging her to write it down. She trusted that we would respond to her, which we did as promised, and because of our recurrent encounters her trust tended to be evidence based.

To me the story represents how she as a child caretaker incorporates caring, nurturing behaviour actively and imagines that this is the essence of what life is about – to become a mother and have children of her own. This desire has nothing to do with the actual possibilities of having and raising a child, but is a sort of readiness to have a family of her own. Estrella was caught in expectations of getting an education, having a profession, and to ‘go forward in life’ quoting the Nicaraguan proverb. This meant that she would have to wait until she was older before she could have a child. In her situation, getting pregnant would mean increased conflict with her family, especially with her father, who had high expectations of her to study and do well at university. It would be impossible for her to
enjoy a pregnancy while still living with her parents. Having a child would present her with difficult choices: moving, giving up her studies, or becoming more dependent on her family in helping her to take care of the baby. Her story describes an event that Strauss and Glaser labelled ‘status passage’ (Strauss and Glaser, 1971): the young woman imagines a new phase in life, a phase in which she will become a useful and fortunate citizen. Because of her emerging desire to become a mother she now planned for it in more rational way.

**Two years later**

We met again when I decided to write this paper. As well as asking her permission to use her story, I wanted to hear her view on what she wrote at that time. Estrella’s immediate comment, when we asked her to read her story and tell us how she felt about it, was “It’s an illusion!” She found that her hope for the future when writing the narrative was unrealistic. Reality did not meet with her expectations. She told us that she was now receiving treatment for problems with her ovaries and that she was afraid of becoming infertile. She was preoccupied by her illness, and had various problems in connection with this. The relations in her family were strained, especially with her father, and she had separated from her boyfriend. The medication she was taking had side effects (nausea) and she had constant worries about how to pay for the treatment. Her feeling that the story was an illusion was obvious. In her new situation, she felt it was an impossible dream, never to be fulfilled. Even if she would be able to care for small children in her daily life and to plan for a profession working with children, she did not feel that was satisfactory. She conveyed a very pessimistic view of her future.

**Conclusions**

I found that ‘unpacking’ the text, as a way of making a structural analysis, was constructive (Riessman, 1993), as was using Labov’s terminology. Through this I discovered things in her story that I had not reflected upon before, for instance that Estrella was able to find the sophisticated metaphor of ‘been born again’ to express her feelings. The understanding of cultural values and aspects of motherhood in Estrella’s society was illuminated in the poem and increased my knowledge on these issues. By this time, I was aware of and had learnt about the strong influence of Christianity in Nicaragua. In Sweden our prevailing perceptions of motherhood are similar, springing from the same basic Christian outlook, but not as vivid and concrete. In the interpretation of Estrella’s story, it was also
interesting to analyse the social meaning and social actions in the narrative clause as suggested by Labov. Mishler (1986 a) uses this approach and discusses the potential of analysing the dynamics of social status. In our case I can observe that Estrella is trying to convince us that she is able and responsible and has changed into a mature person. By augmenting the model elaborated by Agar and Hobbs (Mishler, 1986 a), we can include more information on cultural values. Agar and Hobbs also point out two underlying assumptions present in all interpretations of personal accounts or telling: first, that regardless what the story is about it is also a form of self-representation, and, second, everything that is said functions to express, confirm and validate this claimed identity. This can be applied to Estrella’s story, since she wants to give us a picture of herself as a young woman who is ready to take on the most important thing a woman can do, become a mother.

Using the structural analysis suggested by Labov was constructive, but to get closer to the teller’s meaning with the story I found it instrumental to include the interaction between the actors, i.e. the teller and the listener/reader. Mishler states that:

…stories are context-sensitive, their form and content responsive to the aims and conditions of an interview situation

(Mishler 1986 b: 248)

Even if written stories are more disguised and reflected than oral ones, they are also context dependent. In this case the interaction between the teller (Estrella) and the reader (me) were crucial, but in a positive way. My impression of Estrella was that she wanted to give me her story in a trusting and undisguised way. I asked her to assess my interpretation of her text – that it was about the transition from childhood to adulthood, and about her insight that the ultimate meaning of her life is to become a mother and bring children into the world. She still had this conviction, which is why her concerns about becoming infertile were so strong. She also said that she always perceived herself as more mature and responsible than others of the same age, both at the time of writing the story and at the time of our later meeting.

Cynthia Cannon Poindexter, an advocate for the outlook that meaning can emerge from method, writes:

Narrative analysis, a systematic way of listening to interviews and re-presenting qualitative data, is one way of bringing greater rigour to qualitative research
because it highlights the interviewers co-construction of the data, facilitates a more detailed transcript, and deepens the analysis.

(Poindexter, 2002: 73).

To me written stories can be ‘listened’ to and analysed in this way. In addition, talking to the person who wrote the story and discussing the meanings elucidated by the interpreter will ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. I have called this paper ‘A gifted narrative’; by that I wish to emphasise my view that a written story is addressed by someone to somebody else – and depending upon who the intended receiver is, the teller adjusts her/his story accordingly. In the case of Estrella, it also carries the double meaning that she herself felt gifted to have had this insight of crucial parts of life and that she wished to share this with us.

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