



TELLING STORIES:

Language, Narrative, and Social Life

Deborah Schiffrin, Anna De Fina, and Anastasia Nylund, Editors

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■ Blank Check for Biography?: Openness and Ingenuity in the Management of the “Who-Am-I Question” and What Life Stories Actually May Not Be Good For

MICHAEL BAMBERG

Clark University

■ **IN RECENT PUBLICATIONS**, Alexandra Georgakopoulou and I (Bamberg 2007; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; Georgakopoulou 2007a, 2007b) have put forth the argument that life stories—that is, stories in which tellers cover their personal past from early on, leading up to the “here and now” of the telling situation—are extremely rare. People never really tell the true details of their lives, unless for very particular circumstance—as, for example, in life story interviews, and occasionally in therapeutic interviews. Of course, this is not entirely true. There indeed are occasions, although these cannot be characterized as typical everyday and mundane situations either, in which people opt for something like a life story in an attempt to do damage control to their (public) image.¹ Here I use one such incident to show how life stories provide a welcomed repertoire that on one hand seemingly opens up the narrator’s subjectivity, displaying genuinely personal information, but on the other hand does exactly the opposite: counteracting and undermining its goal of displaying openness and ingenuity.

In our ongoing discussions with Mark Freeman, in which we push for the investigation of small stories (Bamberg 2007; Freeman 2007; Georgakopoulou 2007b), we also have argued that work with narrative in the domain of identity analysis can no longer be restricted to the textual, referential level of what a story is about. Instead, narrative analysis, as exemplified in small story analysis, should aim to increasingly incorporate how the choice of linguistic devices is contextualized.² In other words, suprasegmentation, facial expression, and gesture—all in coordination with how language is put to use—need to be scrutinized in as much detail as possible. However, most of the time, there is no camera, or even set of cameras, that record the interaction from different angles—let alone on those rare occasions when life stories are shared.

The story I have chosen for analysis in this chapter, however, has been videotaped and is publicly available. It surfaced in the form of an interview that the politician John Edwards gave to Bob Woodruff, a reporter for ABC News, and was aired

August 8, 2008, on ABC's television newscast *Nightline*. In this interview Woodruff probes questions into Edwards's personal and private affairs. And as the interviewer makes clear to the audience at the beginning, Edwards is not only willing to answer these very private and personal questions but had also *asked* for them *to be asked*—to be able, as he states: “*to tell the truth so they [the American people] know the truth and they . . . know it from me.*”

This, as it appears, presents an interesting case from a big story orientation using narrative data to pursue identity analysis. We do have the usual constellation of an interview in which the interviewer asks the interviewee the who-are-you question. However, in contrast to the typical biographical setup, the interviewee has approached the interviewer, so that he, the interviewee, can answer the who-am-I question. In other words, we do not have to train the interviewer in techniques that tease out the answer to the who-am-I question; rather, the interviewee will volunteer the answers and the interviewer can lean back, be his normal, average self, and ask the kinds of questions anyone else would ask in this kind of situation.

The Data: The Interview and Its Context

The place of the interview is the Edwards's home in North Carolina; at least three cameras are present: Camera 1 presents the interviewer and interviewee as equally visible; camera 2 shows a close-up of the interviewer—with the interviewee's back partly visible; and camera 3 presents a full facial close-up on the interviewee. What actually was aired on August 8 has been pieced together into a 16½-minute exchange of answers and questions; that is, the viewer sees excerpts and does not know whether these excerpts were shot in sequence and how these segments were cut and edited into the final version. What was seen in the final edition on August 8 was a rotation between the three different camera angles, predominantly focusing on Edwards's face, particularly when he was speaking. In addition, ABC published a transcript on its website (www.abc.com). However, incorporated in the transcripts are excerpts that were not included in the aired interview. In addition, there were passages in the aired interview that were not included in the transcript.³

For the reader who is not familiar with the events that preceded this interview, John Edwards is a former North Carolina senator. He was a leading Democratic presidential candidate in 2004 and in 2008, and he also ran for vice president in 2004 in the election campaign with John Kerry. Until recently he was widely considered one of the leading voices in the Democratic Party, and then he was reported to have had an extramarital affair in 2006 while his wife Elizabeth's cancer was in remission. He had repeatedly denied the affair, but on July 21, 2008, he was confronted by reporters for the *National Inquirer* when leaving the Beverly Hilton Hotel, where he had met with the woman with whom he was alleged to have had the affair—which, in addition, was said to have resulted in her having a baby.

After the interview was aired, in the next four days, discussions erupted in the media. A number of blogs popped up, reflecting a large public interest in the story.⁴ Though at the beginning the discussions centered on the moral question of Edwards's actions, they quickly shifted to whether he is trustworthy in that interview or lying, and what made him go on television and volunteer this interview in the first place.

In sum, the public became intrigued with the *real* John Edwards—the man who is married to a woman with cancer, who had an affair with another woman, who ran for vice president, and who gave that interview on *Nightline*. Monday, three days after the interview, this discussion raged across morning shows, and the same night, during *Inside Edition*, a “body language expert,” Tonya Reiman, declared “I can tell you he’s being honest when he was talking about *I didn’t think I was ever going to get caught*, because there’s not much changing in his facial expression, there’s no movement.” And she continued: “The expression that really surprised me was the smile. . . . He’s coming out to discuss that he’s an adulterer and he starts out by laughing, so my impression is that he’s trying to mask the true emotions that he has: guilt, remorse, shame.”

In contrast to discussing the topic of his honesty, here I focus on three brief excerpts from the interview and analyze how the interviewee’s excursion into biographical detail can be taken to constitute attempts to answer the who-am-I question, and I conclude that biographical detail may be the wrong device for occasions like this. The segments chosen for analysis are three brief passages in which Edwards talks about his life and the person he is. Excerpt (i) surfaces almost two minutes into the aired interview and lasts 1 minute, excerpt (ii) follows 12 seconds after segment (i) ends, and excerpt (iii) lasts 5 seconds and ends 25 seconds before the end of the interview. Obviously, the viewer of the whole interview (or reader of the transcript) has more than these three excerpts to form an opinion vis-à-vis Edwards’s identity. However, the three excerpts are the ones in which he explicitly makes claims as to what kind of person he is, how he came to be who he is, and his involvement in this as an agent and/or victim. In other words, he claims to *explain* how he became who he is, laying out his biography—although only briefly: the consistencies and changes across his life course, his own agentive involvement in these changes, and how he differs from others but at the same time is the same as everyone else.

Identity, Sense of Self, and the Who-Am-I Question

Although designing characters as protagonists and antagonists in fictitious time and space can open up new territories for identity exploration—with the potential to transgress traditional boundaries and test out novel identities—narratives of factual past events are dominated by a rather different orientation. The delineation of what happened, whose agency was involved, and the potential transformation of characters in the course of events are firmly in the service of demarcating and fixing the identity under investigation. If past-time narration is triggered by the *who-am-I question*—that is, having the quest for identity or sense of self of the narrator as its goal—then there is no space for ambiguity, boundary transgression, and the exploration of novel identities. On the contrary, the goal is to condense and unite, to resolve ambiguity as much as possible, and hopefully come up with an answer that lays further inquiry into one’s own past and identity to rest.

However, the reduction of identity to the depiction of characters and their development in what the story is about leaves out the communicative space within which identities are negotiated and the role that narration takes in this space. Reducing narratives to what they are about irrevocably reduces identity to be depicted through the

referential or representational level of speech activities—disregarding the real life in which identities are under construction, formed, and performed. However, it is within the space of everyday talk in interaction that narration plays an important function in the formation and navigation of identities as part of everyday practices and for its potential function to orient toward “the human good.” Nevertheless, although identity and our sense of who we are both are necessarily acquired in our everyday practices, there seem to be some overarching dilemmas, if not aporias, that need to be tackled.

The three most pressing dilemmas center on (1) issues of “*continuity and change*,” posing the question how it is possible to consider oneself to remain the same across time, let alone a lifetime, in the face of constant change; (2) issues of “*uniqueness and conformity*,” whether it is possible to consider oneself as unique in the face of being the same as every other person (and vice versa); and (3) around issues of “*agency and construction*” (or “*who is in charge*”), asking whether it is the person, the *I*-as-subject, who constructs the world the way it is, or whether the person (*me*) is constructed by the way the world is, in which *I* (as undergoer) am subjected to it. And although these dilemmas may sound at first quite abstract, they surface in every turn in making sense in interaction with one another.

Attempting to resolve these dilemmas in terms of positing an intrinsic dialectic between (1) constancy and change, (2) uniqueness/specificity and generality/universality, and (3) the two directions of fit, from person to world and from world to person, points up correctly that the three dilemmas are linked with each other in a number of illuminating ways. Constraining the analysis of identity and identity formation to one of the dilemmatic areas will not suffice. Empirical work in the domain of identity research faces the task of tying these three contradictions together: Viewing the narrating subject (1) as not locked into stability nor drifting through constant change, but rather as something that is multiple, contradictory, and distributed over time and place but contextually and locally held together; (2) as positioning self in terms of membership claims vis-à-vis *others*; and (3) as agentive, though simultaneously situated and contextualized in a sociocultural context. Along these lines, identity is not confined by just one societal discourse and can change and transform and consequently better adapt to the challenges of historical change and their increasing cultural multiplicity in an increasingly globalizing environment.

Starting from the assumption that narration is a verbal act that is locally performed in situated interactional contexts, its function in identity formation processes cannot be reduced to the verbal messages conveyed. Rather, the local interactional contexts in which narrative units emerge form the foundation for the inquiry of identity formation and sense of self. Though transformations from oral to written forms of text traditions are widely studied within the long-standing frame of the hermeneutic cycle, work with transcripts from audio records is relatively new. Much newer, and becoming rapidly more sophisticated, are concerted efforts to audiovisually record narrations and to analyze how they emerged in interaction, including the sophisticated ways in which they were performed. Audiovisual material, of course, can be more microanalytically scrutinized in terms of the contextualized coordination of narrative form, content, and stylizations of performance features in the service of identity formation processes.

An Analysis of Edwards's Story

Excerpt (i) (shortly after the opening of the interview): Having stated for the over-hearing audience that people have an enormous sympathy for Edwards's wife Elizabeth and that she (also) was going through cancer, the interviewer ended with the question "how could you have done this?"—with a falling intonation—framing his turn to be followed up by the interviewee as an act of defense.

- 1 W: . . . how could you (.5) have done this ↓ =
 2 E: =can I explain to you what happened ↑ (0.5) uhm eh
 3 first of all it happened during a period
 4 after she was in remission from cancer
 5 that's no excuse in any possible way for what happened
 6 this is what happened ↓
 7 I grew up as a small-town boy in North Carolina
 8 you know
 9 came from nothing
 10 worked very hard
 11 eh dreamed that I'd be able to do something hopeful eh
 12 helpful to other people with my life
 13 I became a lawyer
 14 ehm through a lot of work and success I eh got eh some
 15 acclaim as a lawyer
 16 people were telling me
 17 oh he's such a great person
 18 such a great lawyer
 19 such a talent
 20 you're gonna go no telling what you'll do
 21 and this is when I was thirty thirty-one years old
 22 then I went from being a senate young ↑ senator
 23 to being considered for vice president
 24 running for president
 25 being a vice presidential candidate
 26 and becoming a national public figure
 27 all of which <.5> fed <.5> a self-focus
 28 and egotism
 29 and narcissism
 30 that leads you to believe
 31 that that you can do whatever you want
 32 you're invincible
 33 and no and there'll be no consequences
 34 and//
 35 W //so you
 36 E nothing <.5> nothing could be further from the truth
 37 W so your assumption was . . .

I will briefly work through the first excerpt with a focus on the management of the three identity dilemmas mentioned above: Edwards reacts to the interviewer's challenge of his moral standards (line 1) by asking (back) for permission to *explain* (2)—which is hearable as a deferential act though framing his upcoming account as an explanation. After a brief excursion into the time frame when *it* happened (3–5), he repeats his preannouncement from line 2, reannouncing that there is a string of events that will serve as an explanation (line 6). It is of interest that he chooses to give an account in terms of what happened, that is, a chain of events that can be taken to serve as the answer to Woodruff's initial question, instead of, for instance, a simple character description (e.g., *because I sinned* or *I am bad*; or worse: *I was born bad and I didn't change*).

Starting with line 7, Edwards launches into a narrative that positions himself as a character in the remote past of his boyhood (7), coming *from nothing* (9) but working *very hard* (10) and having dreams of doing good to others later on in life (11–12). Using his childhood and North Carolina as the spatiotemporal setting, he presents himself as a character who is agentively moving himself in an upward trajectory from childhood to adolescence, as someone who anticipates a future and makes it happen; and in all this work and success are stressed as the factors that made this possible, all the way up to a lawyer (lines 13–15).

At this point, however, Edwards's style of self-characterization changes. Subsequent from here, he is presented (presents himself) in a recipient/undergoer position. Others are taking the role of agents; they see something in him and become the incentive force for his *going somewhere* (lines 16–21). This design of self-presentation through the voices of others is maintained for what *became* of him in the years after he turned thirty-something (lines 22–26) and culminates in his summary statement: "*All of which fed a self-focus and egotism and narcissism that leads you to believe . . . you are invincible*" (27–33).

The events recapitulated span the lifetime of a fifty-five-year old: from childhood to a successful adult man. The overarching cohesive device by use of which these events are connected is one of change (in contrast to constancy): from an agentive character toward one that is more passive, from someone who had to work hard for success to someone who was moved into a career in politics. And the position from where this process is stitched together is not only retrospective but one from where success became handed down on a silver platter; symbolizing an inherent negative devaluation for a self—for any self. Though his story started out with the self (his self) in subject position (7–15), the *I* fades into the background, to ultimately be replaced in lines 30–32 by *you*. This use of *you* is most likely to be heard as the "inclusive you" (everyone, including the speaker), marking the change from "who I used to be," a special little boy in North Carolina, to who I am now, someone who is a "national public figure" (26) but ultimately just like everyone else when it comes to being corrupted into self-interest: an ordinary everyone, a *you*. In sum, Edwards navigates skillfully the balancing act with regard to the self/other dilemma: *I* started out special, and although it looked as if I became even more special in my career as a politician and national public figure, when it comes to our egos and narcissisms, I am just an ordinary person—just like you. The membership categories he alludes to

(small farm boy, hard worker, becoming a helpful lawyer) are set up and juxtaposed against a career in politics (being *a great lawyer, running for president*), aligning him as speaker with the master narrative of politics and publicity as corrupting otherwise noble characters.

In addition to Edwards's navigation of the identity dilemma of presenting himself as different and same vis-à-vis others, he manages to navigate both other dilemmas equally well: There is change over time. Though the rhetoric of youth in biographical reasoning typically is employed as a time for mistakes, due to immaturity and lack of experience, against which later life can stand out as the quest for an improving (moral) sense of self, Edwards opts for a different trajectory: When you are young, you are less subjected to the complexities of life, particularly the fast pace of a career in the public realm, and therefore much less self-centered and concerned with yourself. Similarly, his agency across his life course is said to have decreased. He constructs a sense of young self that was highly agentive and accountable—where accountability is usually assumed to go along with responsibility—but over time his agency diminished, and this may not only have implications for a claim with regard to responsibility but also with the negative values attributable to the public status of celebrities.⁵

Line 36 has been left out of the analysis thus far because it is not part of the story. Rather, it characterizes an overall evaluative stance—where it is not clear whether Edwards denies the assumption that *you* (as in *we*: everybody) are invincible, asserting that human deeds actually *do* have consequences. This certainly is one possibility; and it actually would explain why he is on *Nightline*, doing just that, explaining. However, the viewer also could interpret this statement to imply that he is taking back his story—that he actually does not see himself as changed. He may not even see himself in terms of diminished agency, and politics maybe isn't all that bad. We will pick up the ambiguity that is not resolved at this point after our discussion of excerpts (ii) and (iii).

Excerpt (ii) (following shortly after excerpt i): Excerpt (ii) follows the first only 12 seconds later and is preceded by Edwards's reaction to Woodruff's question about whether he did not think he would get caught. Edwards responds by alluding to the length of the affair ("it was short") and that it was a judgment mistake. At that point he returns to his life story by orienting the audience to what is important about it (him):

- 1 E: and <1.0> and the important thing is
- 2 how I could ever get to the place
- 3 to that place
- 4 and allow myself to let that happen
- 5 and I believe the reason it happened
- 6 is because I'd gone through this lo::ng process
- 7 where I became
- 8 at least on the outside
- 9 something different

- 10 than that young boy who grew up in a small town
 11 in North Carolina
 12 and coz that young boy would never have done this
 13 never thought about doing it to his family to his wife

Although Edwards's life story in segment (i) was foreshadowed twice, his reference to the "important thing" serves as a discursive device to refer back and condense a previous stretch of discourse. Line 2 clarifies that Edwards is referring to the story captured in segment (i). "The place" in line 2 is changed to "that place" (3) (in parallel to where I let *that* happen line 4), which usually denotes a more distant position, particularly if *that* is made the explicit choice that is supposed to override his previous use of *the*. Starting with line 5, he once more delves into the *reason* for what happened, going back to W's original question "How could you"?—and it is "this long process" that is given prominence in terms of how this change came about. In terms of how the speaker positions his agency and responsibility, it is the process that is made the semantic agent; and judging from his intonation, the length of that process contributed significantly to what happened.

Here, in excerpt (ii), Edwards skips the details of the course of time laid out in excerpt (i) and orients his audience from the end point of his developmental process (the here and now) back to his beginnings, for which he claims the right family values to be in place. This certainly supports our analysis of excerpt (i) and it also removes an interpretation we were left hanging with above: whether possibly his disclaimer in line 36 was an attempt to take back his story. This interpretation does not seem to hold. Rather, he reinstates his story with its emphasis on change, and he attempts to once more bring it to the point where the claims of change and diminishing agency coincide. However, now with a new concession in line 8: "at least on the outside." This comes somewhat as a surprise; if the viewer is instructed through the details of the story in excerpt (i), and repeated here in its gist of excerpt (ii), to make a distinction between his original self and his now corrupted self, we are told in line 8 that there is a difference between his inside self and an *outside* self. The outside self is the one that is apparent to the superficial onlooker who sees change where there actually may be constancy, and who may lay blame to the internal self while other agentive forces may have forced themselves onto the outside self—leaving the internal self untouched. Thus, underneath or behind this *outside* is the internal self—and presumably it is *the real* one, lingering on from his childhood—something politics, success, and narcissism were not able to replace?

Excerpt (iii) (close to the end of the interview): Excerpt (iii) follows up on the interviewer's question about how Edwards's supporters who thus far trusted him would see him now. Implied in this question is an underlying assumption that the change claimed by Edwards is posing a challenge to the public's sense of a continuous identity, a challenge that requires the interviewee again to address his position on change versus constancy. Edwards briefly reiterates the purpose of the interview "to tell the truth"—which the public will hear from him. Then, he summarizes his position on the constancy/change dilemma in the following two lines:

- 1 E: I am no different from the person they knew
 2 I'm at my core exactly the same person

These claims come as a surprise when compared with the claims Edwards made in the previous two excerpts with regard to how he had navigated constancy and change thus far, and what he claimed had caused that change—even though Edwards already hinted at a difference between what may be visible from the outside and what *is* inside. Here, the claim is that the core, his *real self* at the inside, never changed. The small boy is alive—and even more so, it is claimed to be his core, true, and authentic self. We will revisit this seeming contradiction below.

Analysis of Edwards's Storying Performance

As I argued above, to reduce answers of the who-am-I question to people's verbal responses, and the analysis of identity to the analysis of those responses, would not do justice to the ways selves and identities express themselves and navigate everyday situations. In the remainder of working toward a better understanding of how biographical identities are made use of in interview situations, I focus on one other important nonverbal means of communication: facial expression. Unfortunately, the use of gestures, particularly the use of the hands, is not available from camera angle three from where the focus is on John Edwards's face (see figure 9.1).

In response to Woodruff's "how-could-you challenge," Edwards leans slightly forward into the interviewer, with raised eyebrows, gazes fully toward Woodruff, and asks back "can I explain what happened" (line 2). His demeanor is deferential—not defensive—but he assertively presents a knowing sense of self, inviting the audience into his "knowing position." When he repeats this introduction for his biographical tour through his life stages in line 6, the camera focuses for a moment on the interviewer—suggesting that some other piece or pieces of what has been said may have been edited out. Starting from his boyhood, he works himself into a narrative style that is oriented toward the interviewer. With line 16, Edwards



Figure 9.1 The Focus on John Edwards's Face as He Says "Can I Explain What *Happened*," Excerpt (i), Line 2

Source: Clip from the interview with John Edwards on *Nightline*, ABC Television Network, August 8, 2008.



Figure 9.2 The Focus on John Edwards's Face as He Says (on the left) "*People Were Telling Me*," Excerpt (i), Line 16; and (on the right) "*Such a Great Person*," Excerpt (i), Line 17

Source: Clip from the interview with John Edwards on *Nightline*, ABC Television Network, August 8, 2008.

changes his posture into a more upright and erect position: he moves his head back, pulling his eyebrows down so that his eyes become narrow (figure 9.2). This facial expression is joined by a slight headshake; and this facial demeanor is maintained all the way to line 21. Overall, facial expression, head shaking, and his move into a backward, more erect posture join forces with verbally deferring agency to others—what they have made of him. As such, these lines contrast starkly with his forward orientation and open face expression when talking about himself as young agent (lines 7–15).

With the following lines, where he refers to his career as a politician (lines 22–26), he returns to what we could call his narrative baseline: leaning slightly into the interviewer, no frown, no headshake. However, when he refers to the three negative features (*self-focus*, *egotism*, *narcissism*), which mark the outcome and the high point of his career development, the same kind of skepticism and distance return to his bodily demeanor and facial display. Then, in line 36, this distance is replaced by a light and short smile, coinciding with the second mention of *nothing*, and a bit stronger with *further* (figure 9.3).



Figure 9.3 The Focus on John Edwards's Face as He Says (on the left) "*Nothing*," Excerpt (i), Line 36; and (on the right) "*Further*," Excerpt (i), Line 36

Source: Clip from the interview with John Edwards on *Nightline*, ABC Television Network, August 8, 2008.



Figure 9.4 The Focus on John Edwards's Face as He Says (on the left) "Never Have Done *This*," Excerpt (ii), Line 12; and (on the right) "Exactly the Same," Excerpt (iii), Line 2

Source: Clip from the interview with John Edwards on *Nightline*, ABC Television Network, August 8, 2008.

What his facial expression can be taken to index is a personal distancing vis-à-vis what others have done to his "original" identity. His life as a boy and his accomplishments for which he claims agency are told in a style that indexes comfort; in contrast, the influence of others on him is indexed as causing discomfort. When he appeals in line 36 to *the truth*, he returns to the narrative style of signaling "comfort"; his bodily cues signal a frame from boyhood (back then) to the truth (the here and now), providing continuity to his biographical self.

This interpretation is confirmed by a closer look at excerpt (ii). Referring to how he became different from *that young boy* and how he would have acted (lines 9–13), Edwards leans forward, raises his eyebrows, and again invites the audience into his "knowing position." His eyes then become narrow and display a critical distance and disapproval of the actions alluded to (e.g., adultery). Finally, in excerpt (iii), Edwards's display of a light smile, comfortably leaning back, and closing eyes seal his biography: He confidently shows (and tells) that the young boy and he speaking in the here and now are one and the same person. His smile, contextualized this way, may be taken as masking guilt, remorse, or shame, as suggested by "body language expert" Tonya Reiman. However, if we pay close attention to the sequential display of facial and verbal expression, it is more safe to interpret his smile as providing a local cue for how he positions himself as confidently underscoring the moral stance he has taken vis-à-vis *what happened*: I explained what happened—and *myself*. My position is one of continuity: I am the same person I used to be (figure 9.4).

Summary and Conclusions

Before I launch into a brief and final discussion of the analysis thus far, it should be clear that both analyses—the analysis of the text as well as of facial expressions—could have been more refined and elaborated, and, in addition, supplemented by the analysis of other expressive modalities, providing more evidence for the overall orientation suggested in this chapter. Though one aim here is to demonstrate how small story analysis begins to incorporate multimodal forms of analysis into identity research, the second aim is to demonstrate the limits of biographical material.

Returning to Edwards's navigation of the three identity dilemmas, he characterizes himself as a young boy in highly agentive terms, and he claims this sense of who he was as pertaining to the here and now. It is his *inside* or *core self*, as he calls it, that always was in place—and is brought out back into the open in this interview—fully visible to the viewers. In terms of differentiating himself from others, he marks himself as a member of two categories: (1) the North Carolinian, hard-working male who works his way up the sociopolitical ladder; and (2) the young overachiever who gets catapulted by others into popularity and celebrity status. Being a member of the second category causes him discomfort, and he displays his critical distance by way of verbal and facial (physical) means. Remember that it is his membership in this category that he framed as the cause for *what happened*. So he marks it off as imposed and antithetical to his *real* identity. Now, if we as onlookers of the interview or as interpreters of biographies are looking for a coherent presentation of someone's sense of self, the data are contradictory. Either Edwards changed—and his explication stands: He went from good to bad, but his bad was imposed by others. Or he did not change, and he is still the same boy he used to be—but in this case, what happened should never have happened. How can he have it both ways?

The answer lies in the functions that biographies can serve—and what they may not be good for; as the brief excerpts from Edwards's interview document, navigating identity is profoundly dilemmatic. Asking the who-am-I question—or, with the data at hand, being confronted with the who-are-you question as in Edwards's case—is business that results in navigating at least three dilemmas, continuity/change; sameness/difference with respect to others; and last but not least, agency (who's to blame). This means that answers in the form of identity narrations will never be simple or clear, especially when having to do some heavy-duty moral accounting.

This has two sets of consequences, one for the use of biographical data in appeals to the public, the other for biography and biography research more generally. The first can best be put forth in the form of a piece of advice: The attempt to answer the who-am-I question in a way that attempts to reaffirm who I really am—that is, to make a claim to authenticity and truth—is problematic. Factual narratives work within the same boundaries and presuppositions as fictional narratives. They are excellent means to test out identities, to explore, and to revise. And this can be done—with a helpful interviewer—in therapy or research settings, or in everyday interactions, where we have demonstrated repeatedly the function of small stories in positioning identities, taking them back, and revising them—in short, in testing out boundaries and engaging in identity practices. Laying claim to and positioning a real or authentic self in narratives distorts and deflects from what narratives “are good for.” In navigating identity dilemmas, (i) setting up boundaries between *I* and *you* and simultaneously flattening them, (ii) maintaining that we are the same young boy we used to be but having to account for our actions in adult-like categories, and (iii) navigating agency in terms of credit and blame are excellent territories for identity formation processes—maybe even for truth seeking—but problematic for holding claims to authenticity and truth.

NOTES

1. Being reminded that some people sit down to write their life stories, because they “have a life” that *needs to be told*—or, for that matter, have others write their life stories, is a very different situation that would require a separate discussion.
2. There seem to be some serious misunderstandings of what the terms “context” and “contextualization” stand for. Context is not the surroundings of language and text! Rather, language and texts are aspects of how speakers contextualize, i.e., cue how they want to be understood in situations (contexts).
3. It appears that the transcript has been made from excerpts that were originally considered to be aired but then dropped for a more refined and “cleaned-up” version.
4. Between August 8 and 12, www.abc.com counted 1,160 people who posted an opinion on their Blotter, and 60 more who commented on the transcripts from the interview.
5. It may be noteworthy that Edwards’s appeal to the equation of (his) celebrity status and (shallow) ethical values in his interview occurred in the same days as John McCain’s endorsement to present Barack Obama side by side with protocelebrities Britney Spears and Paris Hilton.

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