

Life Stories of Troubled Youth: Meanings for a Mentor and a Scholarly Stranger

Jane Eagan and Avril Thorne

I was doing well for a little while until that little demon came back into my head saying this stuff was boring and to experiment again. Stupid me, I listened.
(Suzanne, age 18)

Not long ago, a teacher of troubled youth grew weary of the school district's failure to understand why it was difficult for her students to come to school. She asked her students to "tell truth to power" by sending the school superintendent a booklet of their personally crafted life stories. In the 5 years she has taught at Penny Lane, Jane has come to connect with many of her students and feel the weight of young lives laced with homelessness, violence, and drug abuse. When school authorities ask, "Why don't these kids come to school?" Jane responds, "How can these kids possibly show up every day considering the problems they face?" She wanted the authorities to provide economic and political support for the work she was trying to do. As she explained the writing assignment the students grew silent and their eyes drifted up to the ceiling as they considered her proposition.

Six months later, Jane handed the school principal and the district superintendent a bound collection of stories from eight Penny Lane students, explaining that:

The stories are the kids' own; I didn't tell them what to write beyond the essay topic itself, which was to write about why coming to school has been difficult for them. I only edited spelling and grammar, and removed proper names to mask their identities. The stories took about three weeks to write. The kids designed the cover for the book and the title, "Diamonds in the Rough." Each kid got a copy. With the kids' permission, and that of their parents, I am giving you these stories in the hope that they will bring attention to our plight and help us to acquire more classroom resources.

The life story project was successful. Jane's classroom got new desks and a new rug and her students said they felt more respected and interested in coming to school. Although the students were acquainted with each other, the booklet of stories

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was their first exposure to a detailed chronology of each other's lives. When Jane asked them what it was like to read each other's stories the students said they were surprised at how many of their classmates' lives were like their own or even worse.

This chapter happened when Jane got permission from the students and their parents to show the stories to her friend Avril, a narrative researcher. After reading through the stories in one sitting, Avril felt deadened and continued to feel numb for several days thereafter. These kids' lives were much more tumultuous than the lives of many of her college students. Methamphetamine pervaded entire families. Some parents were in jail for extended periods, leaving their kids essentially homeless. Furthermore, these troubles tended to be narrated in a perfunctory fashion, as if crisis had become routine.

In discussing the stories it became clear that we saw them through different lenses. Jane saw the stories from a guidance perspective. She is personally and professionally invested in the authors and sees more in the stories than the authors say. She not only works with the authors on a daily basis, but is also privy to some events that the authors have not disclosed but which have drawn the school's attention. Penny Lane is situated in a small community that is not very mobile and teachers tend to have intergenerational knowledge of the ups and downs of the families' lives.

Avril, in contrast, did not know the authors of the stories. Like many narrative researchers, her sole knowledge of the informants was the stories they produced and the prompts that elicited the stories. Avril was particularly intrigued by the possibility that the writing assignment produced a considerable audience problem for the authors. The audience problem refers to the person or persons to whom a story is directed, the real and/or imagined reader or listener (e.g., Thorne & McLean, 2003). Intended audiences presumably contour how autobiographical stories are told (Bruner, 1990; Pasupathi, 2001; Thorne, 2000). The audience for the story would seem to be especially important for adolescents, whose reference groups are expanding exponentially and for whom peers are particularly important (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998). In this case, the students knew that others besides Jane and the superintendent would be privy to their stories because the booklet would be distributed to their classmates and would also be available to their parents or guardians.

We now proceed to illustrate how the concerns of a proximal mentor and of a distal narrative researcher played out in their interpretation of two of the stories. We chose the stories of "Suzanne" and "Jeff"¹ because they represent an intriguing contrast. This contrast is partly conveyed by the range of troubles that emerges in their stories. As can be seen in Table 6.1, Suzanne experienced periods of homelessness, parental incarceration, hard drug use, and assaulting others. Jeff's story, on the other hand, references only a history of criminality and the offense that landed him in Penny Lane, fighting with a school principal. The stories also differed considerably with regard to how these troubles were elaborated. Suzanne's story is long and detailed, whereas Jeff's is very short, the kind of minimal story that narrative researchers might discard as a dud. For each story, we begin with

¹Proper names have been changed to mask identities.

Table 6.1 Kinds of trouble referenced in each story

Author	Trouble			
	Homelessness or foster care	Family member incarcerated and/or drug addicted	Personal history of hard drugs	Personal history of assaulting others
Suzanne	X	X	X	X
June		X	X	
Ruth	X	X	X	
Will	X	X	X	
Teri		X	X	
Shirley			X	
Winona				X
Jeff				X

Jane’s experience-near perspective, followed by Avril’s more distanced view. We then pool our perspectives to consider what we have learned from each other in the process of interpreting the stories.

Suzanne’s Story: “Transformation”

Jane’s Proximal Analysis

I think that the title Suzanne chose for her story, “Transformation,” captures the overall turn of events in her life very well, but let us start at the beginning. Suzanne’s narrative begins when she was 2 years old. Her mother was arrested for robbery and forgery and was sent to prison. Her dad did not know what to do with Suzanne, so he took her to live with her aunt:

She had dogs, cats, rats, and fish. Her house was outrageously messy. There was poop all over the floor along with pee from the animals. There was mold along the walls and a nasty smell to go along with it all. I liked her a lot, I mean even though her house was disgusting. I guess I stopped liking her when I turned four. Maybe that’s when she thought it was okay to whoop me all the time. She was twisted crazy. For example, I broke a blue plastic chair from the dollar store, and she put me in a headlock. Let’s just say there were a bunch of bruises on my upper body.

The way in which Suzanne describes what happened is clear and orderly. She does not feel sorry for herself or mince words. This is just the beginning of what she will go through. When she was living with her aunt, she began to train in roller skating. She excelled and was a national champion at the age of 12. “School and skating was my only escape from everything and everyone that tore me apart.” This connection kept her safe for awhile. When she was 11, she ran away from her aunt’s house:

Enough was enough. I couldn’t take one more beating from her so I had to pack my stuff and go. I went to my grandma’s house but that was just another disaster waiting to happen. Let’s face it; she was too old and I was young and damaged. I had to go one last time and I did.

This time it was to my roller-skating coach's house. It was queen royalty status to me because I had everything I wanted. There were tons of food, cable, heat, hot water, and all those things you're supposed to have. It was a good life, so I thought. Slowly that life got boring and very, very lonely.

In her story, I can see readily Suzanne's ability to connect with people who will help her. She also reflects on her actions and the results those actions caused. Throughout, her writing maintains an almost cheerful tone as she describes her situation. The thoughts are orderly and the writing is full of nuance and detail.

When Suzanne began junior high school, she says that "I missed my mom so much, but I was too scared to admit it thinking I was going to be judged." Suzanne began drinking, then lying, and manipulating to cover it up. She says further:

In eighth grade I lost my virginity to a boy I thought I was madly in love with. I had no morals and karma was coming back to me because boys started to lie and manipulate me to get what they wanted. My self-esteem became so low, and I thought I knew everything.

I think these statements reveal an intensely reflective capability. Suzanne understands how she acted and why. She explains the ways that she tried to cope with her own unhappiness and why it did not work. She accepts full responsibility for her mistakes and regards the errors of others without apparent grudging hostility.

At age 14, as she entered high school, Suzanne's high-risk behavior escalated. She met new friends with whom she would smoke cigarettes and weed; she started seriously drinking alcohol. During that year, her beloved coach and his wife divorced:

After [the coach's wife] left, skating lost even more value to me. I felt like I had fallen into a black hole. Coach was a decent parent, but let's be real, every girl needs a woman figure to teach her things that men don't know. So now I had no motivation to go to school, and I was becoming an alcoholic at age sixteen. I stopped coming home, and when I would come home, it would be like five in the morning and I would be shit-face drunk.

As things continued to spiral down, she was kicked out of the coach's house. She went to her friend Annie's house and asked Annie's mom if she could live with them. The mom said yes, on the condition that Suzanne go to school. Suzanne agreed, but soon grew bored and ran away with Annie to Las Vegas. When she had finally burned her bridges with Annie's mom, Suzanne ended up on the streets of San Francisco's Tenderloin District, a notoriously dangerous neighborhood. Here she reached rock bottom:

I was poppin pills, smokin weed, drinking, doing coke, and even some meth here and there. My brain started to do crazy things, like it wasn't even connected to me, and that's when it happened. We robbed an innocent kid for just about everything he had. It was broad daylight in the avenues and everybody saw. I felt so crazy. I didn't know what was happening to me. I was slowly fading away. He was getting kicked in the head as well as being hit with a chain that had a padlock connected to it. Just a few minutes later we were all arrested.

This passage is a powerful statement of how a child's early abandonment was the beginning of a slow descent into a drug and alcohol-induced nightmare. I think the honesty is compelling and that the bold facts are frightening. Now when the school

board wonders why all students do not graduate, they will understand the answer to the question. There is so much more to the problem than meets the eye.

After writing about what happened in her life and the ways that she tried to cope, Suzanne tells the story of her transformation:

I spent three weeks in juvenile hall and then I was transferred to Sierra County. My mother rescued me. She's officially my queen. Everything happens for a reason and I am glad it did. I got to live with my mom for the first time in years and that's when everything started to go back to normal.

I'm happy just about every day. I go to school and work throughout the week. I have bills and big responsibilities. . . Now I appreciate small things and the fact that I'm still alive. I guess through everything that happened my mother coming back into my life was the best thing. . . Mostly because of her support and me willing to take her guidance, I have goals. . . My future has just begun and it's only going to continue to get brighter.

I think that the most remarkable thing about Suzanne is that she has gone through so much, but still remains positive. The optimism in Suzanne's life story genuinely reflects the way she approaches life. Suzanne is one of the most engaging and charming students that I have worked with. She was able to immediately connect with me when she came to the school during her junior year. She was positive and seemed to light up the room when she entered in her tight pants and stiletto heels, carrying her little Chihuahua. In class, she has a steadiness about her as she prepares to graduate and become an adult. During the time she has been at our school, she has gotten a job, a driver's license, and a car. She was not ready to apply to the nearby junior college for fall; she wants to work for a while first. She ends with, "My future has just begun and it's only going to continue to get brighter." By external measures, she is doing well; attending school, getting straight A's, working, and staying out of trouble. She is positive and excited about her future. What a girl. I believe that she will be fine.

Avril's Distal Analysis

To understand Suzanne's story I began by charting its ups and downs. As can be seen in Table 6.2, Suzanne's narrative reads like an adventure novel, with over a dozen turning points in 16 years. Until age 12, Suzanne's turning points are mostly passive on her part, as she is passed from one home to another. By age 12, she is doing great with the coach and his wife. Then emerges a pattern of getting bored when life is comfortable and hitting the road to seek adventure. When Suzanne finds refuge with the coach and his wife, she says "I had queen royalty status. . . with tons of food. . . heat, hot water, all those things you're supposed to have. It was the good life, so I thought. Slowly that lifestyle got boring and very very lonely. Skating was dumb to me, and school was a joke. I wanted to experiment."

Suzanne's adventurer voice emerges most clearly in the episode in which she abandons her comfortable life at Annie's house to run away to Las Vegas. Notice that the adventurer is attributed to a "little demon" in Suzanne's head, as if she had no control over her actions. The story is very entertaining and told as if she

Table 6.2 Turning points in Suzanne’s life

Bad events	Age	Good events
	1	HAPPY BABY. “Looked happy in baby pictures”
MOM IMPRISONED FOR FORGERY “Everything started to go downhill”	2	
	3	SENT TO LIVE W/SLOPPY AUNT “Happy until age 4”
BEATEN BY AUNT indiscriminately	4	
	8	COUSIN TEACHES ME TO ROLLER SKATE
	9	“I was good at it, my escape”
SUSPENDED FOR FIGHTING	10	
RAN AWAY FROM CRAZY AUNT	11	
GRANDMOTHER COULDN’T KEEP ME “She was too old, I was young and damaged”		MOVE IN W/COACH & HIS WIFE “Queen royalty status, had all I wanted”
“Slowly got bored and very lonely”	12	NATIONAL SKATING CHAMPION.
SUSPENDED FOR DRINKING. “Skating was dumb, school a joke”	13	MADLY IN LOVE; SEX WAS GREAT
BOYS START TO MANIPULATE ME	14	MET ANNIE, INSEPARABLE FRIENDS “drank and smoked weed every day” WE STOPPED GOING TO SCHOOL
COACH DIVORCES, I MISS HIS WIFE “lost the only mother figure I had in my life” “I kept coming home shit-face drunk”	15	
COACH THROWS ME OUT	16	ANNIE’S MOM TAKES ME IN “I agree to go back to school”
BORED, NEEDED A VACATION		RAN AWAY W/ANNIE TO LAS VEGAS
HAULED BACK BY ANNIE’S MOM ANNIE’S MOM THROWS ME OUT DRUG LIFE IN THE TENDERLOIN ARRESTED FOR ROBBERY, ASSAULT 3 WEEKS IN JUVENILE HALL PRISON		MOM RELEASED FROM “Rescues me, my queen” LEAVE REGULAR HIGH SCHOOL START SCHOOL AT PENNY LANE SCHOOL,WORK, HIKING, BOWLING
	17	“Back to normal, happy most every day”
	18	

is performing on stage to a live audience. She knows how to engage the listener’s attention and the story seems well rehearsed.

I was doing well for a little while until that little demon came back into my head saying this stuff was boring and to experiment again. Stupid me, I listened. Anyway, Annie’s mom was driving us insane so we decided to take a vacation of our own. If you’re thinking a little

sleep over at a friend's house that lived down the street, you are so damn wrong it's not even funny. Can we say "Las Vegas, Nevada?" Some friends came from there and picked us up, and our trip to hell began. We got there with eighty bucks to our names and no way to get back. Funny, right? Wrong! We stayed at a friend's house for a day, but then we had to go. Where? You'll be surprised. We ended up sleeping at some apartments at the pool in the lawn chairs. There was also a vacant apartment so we decided to sleep there too. The next couple of nights we slept in a friend's garage, it was so hot. It was so hot it was hard to sleep because you couldn't stop sweating. The weather was getting unbearable and we were straight stranded and might I add, hungry.

This adventurer voice is very different from the voice Suzanne uses in describing her current life:

I'm happy just about every day. I go to school and work throughout the week. I have bills and big responsibilities. When I have free time I do fun things like bowling, playing pool, hiking, and going to the beach. Don't get me wrong I still have a couple of beers here and there but nowhere close to the way I was abusing it before.

Suzanne's current life of getting straight A's, bowling, playing pool, and hiking is very different from the high adventure of her prior life. In her past life nothing stayed the same for very long, and when she got comfortable she hit the road in search of excitement. She showed a repeated pattern of getting bored when things were going well and jumping ship for an adventure that ultimately ended badly.

Has Suzanne really "knifed off"² this pattern of escaping comfort to seek trouble? Knifing off refers to changing one's present social circumstances so as to eliminate old options. Military boot camp, a supportive spouse, and a steady job are some of the changes that have been found to transform the lives of delinquent young men (Caspi & Moffitt, 1993; Maruna & Roy, 2007). Penny Lane is hardly a military boot camp, but for Suzanne, reuniting with her mother is a radical change of pace. For the past 2 years, since moving in with her mother, Suzanne seems to have succeeded in altering some of her old ways.

Notably, Suzanne does not claim to have reformed entirely. Of her redemption, she says, "Don't get me wrong I still have a couple of beers here and there but nowhere close to the way I was abusing it before." She is frank about saying that it is a struggle to stay on the good path, which she does by telling herself that:

Nobody said life was supposed to be easy, but it's the bumps in the road that helped create the person I am today. Now I appreciate small things and the fact that I'm still alive. I took a lot of things for granted but if I could take anything back that I did, I wouldn't change it for the world.

Although I am not privy to Suzanne's personal life, I will hazard a guess that her mother is a key conduit for Suzanne to make meaning of her past in ways that help her to cope with the temptations of the present. Her mother clearly has experienced considerable trouble in her own life. Imprisoned for 13 years for burglary and forgery, she gained custody of Suzanne upon being released from a halfway house.

²"Knifing off" is a violent masculine metaphor that does not seem to reflect how Suzanne undergoes transitions between the bad path and the good path.

Mother and daughter presumably have many stories to exchange about their adventures and transgressions. Suzanne may have found a true confidante in her mother. Together, they seem to have embarked on a joint project of going straight, a joint reclamation and rebonding as their relational connection is restored, and perhaps re-storied.

The mottos that punctuate Suzanne's life story may voice the kinds of life lessons that she has heard from her mother, who like Suzanne, is struggling to transform her own life. Reflections saturate Suzanne's story. For example, after describing being violently beaten by her aunt, Suzanne says "Like everybody always says, 'It could be worse.' Well, I believe that saying." Of her sexual promiscuity at age 13, she says, "My self-esteem became so low, and I thought I knew everything." On losing contact with the coach's wife, Suzanne says, "Coach was a decent parent, but let's be real. Every girl needs a woman figure to teach her the things men don't know." Of her rock bottom period in the Tenderloin district, she says, "Guidance was out of the question. I just wanted to be grown and do my own thing." Of being rescued from Juvenile Hall by her mother, she says, "Everything happens for a reason and I'm so glad it did." She ends her story with a string of lessons: "It's the bumps in the road that helped create the person I am today. Now I appreciate small things and the fact that I'm still alive. I took a lot of things for granted but if I could take anything back that I did, I wouldn't change it for the world."

I think that the voice of Suzanne's mother (perhaps channeling that of their guidance counselors) is also apparent in Suzanne's reflections on the cause of her troubles: acting out because she missed her mother. In the seventh grade, when Suzanne was suspended for drinking alcohol at lunchtime, she attributed this to "I missed my mom so much, but I was too scared to admit it thinking I was going to be judged, so I acted out in various ways." She does not say to whom she is scared to admit missing her mom, but it is perhaps the coach and his wife who have taken her in and do not regard pining for a convict as healthy. The loss of the coach's wife plunges Suzanne into a "black hole. She was the only mother figure I had in my life." At the end of her story, she says, "My mother coming back into my life was the best thing. She might not always know what to do or say but I wouldn't trade her in for everything. Mostly because of her support I willing to take her guidance, I have goals." Suzanne does not idolize her mother, she sees her vulnerabilities, but she listens to her and apparently takes her advice.

Notably, Suzanne is also capable of telling a transgressive story without lacking the story with moralisms. Rather than completely repudiating the excitement of her prior life, Suzanne can resuscitate that excitement by telling an action-packed, motto-free story. A case in point is the story about running away to Las Vegas. Arguably, action-packed stories aimed at entertainment may also be part of the repertoire that is exchanged between Suzanne and her mother. The fact that Suzanne and her mother have each lived normatively transgressive lives puts them on a somewhat level playing field. Unlike many parents and adolescents, who tend to preserve certain domains of privacy (Dolgin, 1996; Dolgin & Berndt, 1997; Thorne, McLean, & Dasbach, 2004) Suzanne and her mother can perhaps talk about

anything. Whether the mother is an adequate moral compass or whether Suzanne's claims of redemption are true, I have no idea, although the lessons learned seem a little too bubbly given the weight of the story.

Comparison of Our Perspectives on Suzanne's Story

Jane is more confident than Avril that Suzanne has changed her ways. With the aid of abundant knowledge beyond the story per se, Jane sees a resilient and charming young woman who recounts the events of her past in a temporally organized fashion, reflects upon the meaning of her troubles, has a close relationship with her mother, and is making plans for her future. This knowledge leads Jane to see Suzanne's story as a harbinger of hope.

While agreeing with Jane that Suzanne's story shows positive indications of maturity, such as reflection and a coherent timeline of events, Avril hears two voices in Suzanne's story, the adventurer and the redeemed, with little evidence that the two voices have come to terms with each other. The adventurer voice seems intended for peers, which may include her mother given their similar transgressive histories. The redeemed voice seems directed toward Jane and the school authorities, telling them what they want to hear. Suzanne's investment in each of these voices is unknown. However, she seems to have developed considerable skill in moving between the delinquent world and the world of mature adults. Suzanne's apparent bilingualism is in some ways adaptive, although Avril wonders if her repeated pattern of hitting the road when life gets comfortable is going to continue.

Jeff's Story: "Welcome to My Life"

We now turn to Jeff's story, which is much more sparse than Suzanne's. Jane and Avril differ in their interpretations of why his story is so sparse. As with Suzanne's narrative, Jane sees Jeff's story as confirming what she knows of him apart from the story per se, albeit the confirmation is of a different sort. Avril, in contrast, tries to discern the particular listeners to whom Jeff has addressed and/or is addressing this story.

Jane's Proximal Analysis

Jeff is a lanky and handsome junior at Penny Lane. Jeff spent 3 weeks crafting a five-paragraph life story and every sentence was a struggle. He hates to write and would prefer to be outside working in the garden or building things. Also, in contrast to Suzanne's story, Jeff's narrative shows little reflection on his experiences. He begins by discussing why school was difficult:

During my freshman year in high school, I was more into drinking, smoking weed and cigarettes than doing my homework. That's what all my friends were doing. I started smoking cigarettes when my brother offered me a Lucky Strike when we were on vacation. I

started drinking when my friend and I stole my mother's vodka, and weed. Well, I just started smoking with my friends.

What is most striking is his tone as he casually presents a laundry list of substances that he has used as if it were an accomplishment. (Often in our school, these kinds of statements are seen as honor badges that students think will gain them acceptance.) This kind of boasting is common. He says further:

My first alternative school was C (high school). That's when my smoking and chain smoking happened.

Jeff's passive description of these events suggests that he neither can control his life, nor does he accept responsibility for it. These are merely things that have happened to him. He states the facts but does not think about how they have affected his life. He describes another incident in the same manner:

I got kicked out of S (another high school) about two months into my sophomore year for punching the principal in the face. When he was messing with my friend, he said something stupid to me that I didn't like; he tried to hold me back for leaving. This was while I went to H (another high school). Luckily, I didn't get into trouble for that. However I got kicked out of H a little while after that for I don't really know what.

Here, Jeff's narrative is very vague and disordered. His explanation of the fight with the principal does not explain his violent response. In the last sentence, he cannot even explain why he got kicked out of the school. Considering what a major event that would have been, his lack of understanding and reflection is significant. Another list of problems is presented:

I was always getting into trouble with my friends. Once I got off probation for two counts of battery, one count of theft, one count of brandishing a knife, and two counts of assault, I got right back on for worse things, so I decided to leave (school) before I got into even more trouble.

Again we have a list of problems and no real reflection about their import or prevention. He underplays the seriousness of his crimes. His decision is just to leave yet another school.

When he arrived at Penny Lane, Jeff was quiet, attended irregularly, and nearly always refused to do his work. During his first 6 weeks, he failed five out of six of his classes. It takes effort to fail so grandly. He seemed to repel all my attempts to connect with him. I would alternately approach him, get rejected, then back away. I refused to give up on him; I kept trying. However, he was not ready to connect with me.

In the last paragraph of the essay, Jeff says:

Going through all these hard times I've realized that I can make it through school if I really push myself. Having other people around me pushing me to do my best helps me a lot. Now I know that if I have to face difficult times in the future, I know I'll be able to get through them with the experience I've had in the past.

This ending was a surprise. I did not realize he was pushing himself. He did begin to do some of the work; he considered this was an accomplishment. In his story, he also expresses gratitude for people pushing him to succeed. He had never suggested

this to me in any way. I still am not quite sure how to take this. Is he just hard for me to read or is he fooling himself? It never seemed like he appreciated my attempts to try to get him to do his work. In his conclusion, he expresses how his previous experiences will guide his future decisions. This seems to be very general and without apparent logic.

At the end of the school year, I could feel that Jeff was beginning to trust me, but this connection was still sporadic. In June, he told me he and his family were moving to Southern California. I was saddened that he would face yet another new beginning. I really hoped that he could indeed learn from his past and build on his small successes.

I found it particularly difficult to communicate with Jeff and to gain his trust. As with all of my students, I try to create open communication with them and to maintain optimism and faith that they can turn their lives around, up to the point that they abandon me for drugs, alcohol, or jail. I recognize that trust is a two-way street. They test me to determine whether I am trustworthy because they have learned that connecting with others is fraught with danger. If they trust too soon or with the wrong person, they could be badly hurt. If they constantly withhold trust, it is much harder to make any progress. At the time he wrote his story, Jeff was just beginning to accept my help. I grew to count on his help in the garden when the work required strength and building skill. He seemed to appreciate his special responsibilities. If I only had him for another year, I think that Jeff could make great personal progress.

Avril's Distal Analysis

I wish I could talk with Jeff to determine whether the title he chose for his story, "Welcome to my Life" was intended as sarcasm.³ Jeff tells us very little about the events of his life or what those events mean to him. Possibly, Jeff is one of those people who defy a key premise of narrative psychology, that human beings are natural storytellers (Bruner, 1990). He may not be inclined to story his life, a skill that is nurtured early on by parents and other elders (Miller, 1994; Nelson, 1988). His gender may also come into play here, since boys are socialized to be perfunctory about their troubles, while girls are socialized to emotionally elaborate their problems (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Thorne & McLean, 2002).

Contrary to Suzanne, who seemed to relish writing the story of her life, Jeff seemed to approach the story as a distasteful assignment, producing a skeletal list of problems that have made it difficult for him to come to school. Unlike Suzanne, who started her story at birth, Jeff starts his story at age 14, when he was first kicked out of a school. He then enumerates only the bare bones of what bounced him from one school to another, and eventually landed him at Penny Lane.

³On checking with Jane, Avril learned that Jeff borrowed his story title from another student. How much do researchers miss by not knowing the process by which life stories are written?

Because I am interested in identity communities, the people with whom one associates and grants access to one's life, I am particularly intrigued with how Jeff incorporates other people into his story. One part of his community consists of peers and adults who led him astray. He was initiated into drinking and smoking pot and cigarettes by his older brother and his friends. He had ready access to such substances from his mother, whom he implies is hypocritical. He was "kicked out" of two regular high schools, one for punching the principal in the face "when he was messing with my friend. He said something stupid to me that I didn't like; he tried to hold me back for leaving."

Another part of Jeff's community consists of people with whom he has a special connection. There seem to be precious few of these. The first "good" adults to appear in Jeff's story are some teachers at his first alternative high school. [Emphasis added in italics]

For the most part, it was a fun school. I liked all my teachers, made a lot of new friends, and then in my junior year my favorite teachers left. So I left that school about two months into my junior year because I was always getting in fights with one of my old friends. My friend Luke had to tell me to calm down quite a few times before I killed someone. I guess you could say that's why school has been hard for me.

Jeff does not connect his favorite teachers' departure with his own, although perhaps he departed at that point in spirit. He also mentions that he accepted the guidance of his friend Luke, who suggested he calm down so he did not kill someone.

Jeff's story generally portrays a world of neglectful or hostile adults. Because I do not know Jeff, I will refrain from inferring how this experience inflects his internal psychological and emotional structure. But the fact that some fond attachments (a few former teachers and his friend Luke) leak into Jeff's threadbare narrative seems, to me, hopeful. Jeff appears to have some close connections with people from whom he accepts advice, although, in contrast to the highly verbal Suzanne, he does not make a grand story about it. I think that Jeff is aware of his own role in his troubles but that he is unwilling to confess his culpability to the school authorities, the target audience for the stories. Jeff's surprisingly upbeat finish, "Having other people around me pushing me to do my best also helps me a lot," suggests that he is open to Jane's guidance, whom he seems to view as a mentor rather than a distant authority figure.

Comparison of Our Perspectives on Jeff's Story

Jane views the guardedness in Jeff's story as symptomatic of his general guardedness, which jibes with her own experience with Jeff as closed off and taciturn. Jeff's timeline of past events is a jumble, and he does not show evidence – in his story or in his dealings with Jane – of having reflected upon, integrated, or learned from his problems. Avril, who has never met Jeff, attributes his guardedness to his being much less verbally inclined than Suzanne. He is not only loathe to express his feelings in words, but is also reluctant to acknowledge to the primary audience, the school authorities, his own role in his troubles. Avril emphasizes the passages

in Jeff's story that indicate that he has some positive attachments to others. That he expresses appreciation for teachers who push him to succeed, including Jane, seems like a positive harbinger.

Near and Distant Views of Life Stories

Collaborating on this chapter has been a hermeneutic challenge born of different professional investments. For Jane the mentor, the stories confirmed her impressions of the students who wrote them. Suzanne's redemptive storyline reflected the bubbly young woman with whom she felt close and who seemed to have embarked on the good path. Jeff's story reflected the guardedness that he displayed in his relations with Jane and his failure, in general, to come to grips with his past and to acknowledge his own role in his troubles.

Avril had neither a professional nor personal investment in the authors; rather, her interest was in the process by which the stories were written. In trying to imagine what it was like to write the stories, she was particularly intrigued by the enormity of the audience problem that was built into the writing assignment, which required the students to expose experiences that were potentially self-incriminating. Furthermore, the school superintendent was not the only audience for the stories. Jane edited the stories, and classmates would ultimately read them, as would, potentially, the parents who had given permission for the stories to be shown to others. The worlds of school, peers, and family are rarely so aligned, particularly for youth with little social or cultural capital (Cooper, Domínguez, & Rosas, 2005; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1999). In interpreting the stories, Avril tried to imagine to whom particular passages were directed, because crafting a story that would pass muster for all of these audiences would seem to be a challenge. The audiences for particular parts of each story seemed to oscillate. Some parts of the story seemed to be positioned toward peers and other parts toward authorities, as if valued audiences were in the process of being sorted out.

In trying to read between the lines of the stories, Avril was more skeptical than Jane that Suzanne was fully launched onto the good path and that Jeff was closed off. Both stories referred to multiple strands of relationships and identity constituencies, suggesting that each author was operating on multiple tracks. The fact that Suzanne wrote a story that portrayed both an adventurous self and a responsible self suggests that she is multilingual, able to navigate her multiple worlds quite fluidly. Jeff's general guardedness made sense if one saw him addressing the story to the school authorities, who would be prone to demand a moral accounting in their terms (Lightfoot, 1997; Polanyi, 1989). Although Jeff's account of getting kicked out of high school for "I don't really know what" is not an adequate account from the perspective of a teacher, it could well be an adequate account for a like-minded buddy. Avril would like to be privy to Jeff's trouble telling to parents and to peers, to see if and how he switches gears, how he does things with these stories. She would also like to know how Suzanne recounts her troubles to her mother and how these recounts might vary when talking with "bad path" or "good path" peers.

Stories presumably reflect local and larger systems of meaning, but how local are these meanings? This question seems particularly important in late adolescence, when reference groups are shifting and expanding, the cognitive capacity for reflection increases, and society (whatever that may be) increasingly expects mature accountings. Parents, teachers, and peers are the soil on which adolescents grow a life story, and these soils may each encourage somewhat different kinds of developments. Jeff's apparent reluctance to claim responsibility for his misdeeds might be an adaptive response to parents and prior teachers who have been dismissive or punishing of his efforts to do so. Likewise, Suzanne's alacrity in switching from the delinquent adventurer voice to the mature voice may be a skill that she has developed as she has alternately found refuge with peers and adults.

As a result of collaborating on this chapter, Jane is now using story writing more frequently in the classroom. She has asked her current crop of students to write about turning points, an assignment that presses them, if they are not doing so already, to frame something bad in their lives as having turned good (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001). She is trying to teach them that reflecting on a troubled past can help create a better future. Sadly, many of these students have considerable trouble talking about, let alone storying, a positive future. For her part, Avril has become discontent with her presumption that narratives per se are "experience-near." Narratives are more experience-near than surveys, but experiencing the storyteller is much more experience-near than collecting anonymous stories from strangers. While collaborating with Jane, she felt at a profound disadvantage not having met the authors and not being able to discern to whom they were aiming each turn of the story.

We would like to emphasize that the meanings that we drew from these stories do not simply reflect Jane's personal investment in her kids and Avril's distanced narrative expertise. It is not the case that Jane sees the kids through rose-colored glasses, while Avril dispassionately discerns their true weaknesses, or that Jane is susceptible to emotional bias whereas Avril, the hyper-educated professional, has superior objectivity. Rather, we view our investments in the stories as complementary. Jane knows what the kids and their lives are like apart from the stories themselves and sees the stories from an active guidance perspective. Avril, like many narrative researchers, has a myopic perspective; she sees only the stories and can merely imagine the authors. By pooling our perspectives, Avril gained more information about the persons behind the stories and Jane gained more appreciation for the challenges posed by the writing assignment.

We also shared some common ground in that we discovered we had similar assumptions about what counted as a good story. We each valued stories that showed reflection on adversity, acknowledgement of one's own role in events, and a narrative that is generally coherent and makes sense. Avril knew that such features have been shown to be associated with greater well-being (e.g., Hauser, Allen, & Golden, 2006; King & Raspin, 2004; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). The fact that a layperson and a narrative researcher concurred about what features were positive harbingers suggests that we drew our narrative values from the same source, dominant cultural narratives about what counts as a good story (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 2006). In many ways, Suzanne's story exhibits plentiful signs of resilient recovery from adversity

(Luthar & Zelazo, 2003; Masten, 2001). For example, Suzanne-the-story-character forges connections with competent and caring adults, shows self-regulatory skills, and presents an optimistic but not overly idealistic view of herself. Suzanne-the-person also seems to be doing well. She now attends school regularly, is getting straight A's, and is friendly and upbeat.

We have interpreted the stories in a way that we hope is consistent, personally and ethically, with empathy for the unusual predicament confronting the story authors. These stories were not written anonymously to an implacable researcher, but for purpose of gaining material resources for the students, to encourage them to reflect upon their past with an eye to the future, and to build mutuality in sharing their stories with fellow classmates. To coldly judge whether each story is pathological and whether each kid is truly "bad" is counter to our intentions and sensitivities. Jane has a personal and professional relationship with the kids, and Avril was powerfully impacted by the stories and what they said about Jane's sensibilities. Avril's respect for Jane's dedication to her students led her to be cautious in pathologizing the stories and to be careful in choosing which themes to highlight. For example, based on an image in Suzanne's narrative, the chapter could have been entitled "Young and Damaged," and we could have called the school "Shady Lane," instead of "Penny Lane." Writing this chapter necessitated a level of sensitivity and respect that is rarely required in anonymous empirical research.

Postscript

Six months later as we were revising this chapter, Jane heard that Suzanne was taking an algebra course at a community college and supporting herself by being a stripper. Jane was disappointed with the latter development and felt that the redemption in Suzanne's story had not been possible. Avril saw Suzanne's student and stripper activities as a continued tendency on Suzanne's part to live two lives. There was also news of Jeff. He suddenly returned on his own from Southern California, seemingly resolved to finish high school. Initially homeless, he now sleeps on a friend's couch. Jane says that he comes to school every day but is often sullen and difficult to mentor. Avril is as mystified by Jeff now as she was earlier; she has no idea who Jeff's identity constituencies are, but it seems that something is holding him to Penny Lane. Perhaps it is Jane.

Acknowledgments We are deeply grateful to Jane's students for entrusting us with their stories and to Avril's research group for their comments on a prior draft of this chapter. We would especially like to acknowledge feedback from two anonymous reviewers and from Paul A. Nelson, Lauren Shapiro, Steve Bearman, and Barrie Thorne.

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