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Nothing Changes: Experiencing Omission But Remembering Commission

Peer Reviewed Article

Susie Scott

University of Sussex

Contact: s.scott@sussex.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper explores Kahneman's conceptual distinction between the experiencing and remembering selves in relation to practices of reverse biographical identity work. The experiencing self refers to how things feel as they happen, whereas the remembering self describes how they appear in memory and recollection. I argue that this discrepancy occurs not only with the positive phenomena (things that really happened or existed) in our lives, but also with negative phenomena (absent, lost or missing things). Drawing on the sociology of nothing, I suggest that this corresponds to a transition from acts of omission to acts of commission. People experience biographical episodes of 'nothing happening' through random contingency, but (mis)remember them through stories with dramatic plotlines and agentic characters. This reflects the human narrativizing tendency to create order, coherence and meaning. I illustrate this with four cases, identifying intrapsychic and interpersonal narrative practices.

Keywords

Nothing; experiencing; remembering; self; omission; commission; narrative practices; reverse biographical identity work



Introduction

The stories of our lives are constantly evolving, changing and reshaping our emerging social selves. Disputing the modernist idea of a fixed, essential, core identity (Taylor 1989), narrative scholars point to the fluid, unstable and perpetually unfinished process of discovering ourselves (Polkinghorne 1988). Storytelling helps to impose order upon the phenomenological stream of lived experience (James 1890) through structured and coherent frameworks of meaning (Bruner 1986). We perform biographical identity work (Holstein and Gubrium 2000) by seeking explanations and plausible accounts. Previous research has focused on positive identity formation, based on things that really happened and actual, lived experience. Drawing on the sociology of nothing (Scott 2018, 2019, 2020a, 2020b), I argue that similar processes occur in tales of negative identity, where absent, lost and missing symbolic objects shape *unlived* experience.

Reverse biographical identity work (Scott 2020a) is therefore a slippery process, as stories of non-becoming change over time. Through an iterative sequence of narrative acts, such as scripting, rehearsal, telling and revising, biographical subjects ‘re-story’ themselves (Schafer 1994) in pursuit of an ultimate tale. This applies to negative identity no less than positive identity. We want to find meaningful explanations for the things that have not happened to us or that we have not experienced, to help us understand the persons whom we turned out not to be. Furthermore, these accounts are performative, communicative and dialogic (Jackson 2002) as well as socially pragmatic (Alexander 2004), directed towards audiences and aligned with cultural scripts. This invites an exploration of both the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of narrative practice (Gubrium and Holstein 2009) involved in re-storying unlived lives. In particular, I question whether memories of non-events differ from how they felt at the time.

Negative Identity: Reversing, Revising and Re-Storying

Following the narrative turn (Denzin and Lincoln 2017), attention shifted from the content of a story to the manner of its telling (Samuel and Thompson 1990). Challenging the assumption that we can directly access an original ‘life-as-lived’, Bruner (1987) argued that textual accounts only reveal the reflective and retrospectively composed ‘life-as-told’. Phenomenologically, this represents first order constructs (Schutz 1972), or how participants subjectively make sense of their own internal worlds. The imaginal dialogue of the storied mind is a creative, relational process (Fang 2020), and storytellers can be unreliable narrators (Stanley 2023).

Narrative inquiry (Chase 2011) analyses story form, structure and semantic features (Kim 2016). These include the temporal arc, plotline, genre, voicing and atmospheric tone (Polkinghorne 1995; Finlay 2011; Andrews 2014). Mythical structures may convey didactic moral lessons (Freeman 1993), such as the archetypal hero’s journey (Campbell 1949) or fables of spiritual growth (Jung 1933). Stories often follow a conventional ‘grammar’ of sequential stages: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda (Labov and Waletzky 1967). Turning point moments of epiphany (Strauss 1959) bifurcate a life into ‘before’ and ‘after’ a defining event, such as the revelatory awakening of new truths (DeGloma 2014; Twinley 2022).

Storytellers’ motivations have been studied in narrative psychology (Josselson 2004). For example, McAdams (1985) argued that life-stories tend to follow a central thread or ‘personal myth’, such as the quest for power or intimacy. This can serve the purpose of emplotment (Ricoeur 1984) through contextual



resonance: a ‘small story’ told about one incident is nested within a deeper, thematic ‘big story’ (Bamberg 2006). Fairy tale elements may also appear, such as hero and villain characters, ideological settings and nuclear episodes of dramatic action (McAdams 1993), and progressive or regressive trajectories (Gergen and Gergen 1986). We can also consider what is *not* talked about and excluded from the story: gaps, omissions, silences, deferrals and refusals (Georgakopolou 2007; Speedy 2008; Stanley 2023; Correia and Caetano 2024).

When stories are told to others, they change all over again. Narration is a socially performative act of communication with real or imagined audiences (Denzin 1989; Ochs and Capps 2001). Through recipient design (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974), speakers tailor their accounts to the hearer’s point of view and anticipated judgements, creating different versions for each situated occasion. Positioning theory (Davies and Harré 1990) suggests that subjects locate themselves in relation to dominant norms, values and discourses, adopting an epistemic stance towards territories of knowledge (Heritage 2012). These aligning actions (Stokes and Hewitt 1986) can help to make identity claims of perceived or aspirational belonging. Bamberg (1997) argues that self-positioning occurs at three levels: in relation to the original events (there-and-then), the current social situation (here-and-now) and the wider discursive community.

Narrators may seek to make their tale more ‘tellable’ (Sacks 1992; Smith and Sparkes 2008; Norrick 2021) to the receiving audience. They can draw upon common discursive resources, such as normative cultural scripts (Gagnon and Simon 1973), interpretive repertoires (Potter and Wetherell 1987) and vocabularies of motive (Mills 1940), to demonstrate (dis)identification, conformity or resistance. To avoid attributions of deviance, they can provide excuses and justifications (Scott and Lyman 1968) or disclaimers (Hewitt and Stokes 1975). Connecting one’s individual biography to a wider, collective social story can help marginalised groups to reclaim political citizenship and exercise narrative power (Plummer 2019; Letherby 2022). Occasionally, narrators address the audience directly, offering reflexive meta-commentaries (Riessman 2008) on what they have just said. This can involve pausing, reflecting and self-correcting (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977), or confessing to memory lapses. Paradoxically, such displays of self-doubt, forgetfulness and uncertainty can help to create an impression of authenticity (Norrick 2003), as the author appears sincere.

Temporal slippage occurs through iterative re-tellings (Chafe 1998; Prodromou and Demetriou 2017). Stories shift and evolve when they are repeated on different occasions (Blain and Millar 2025), and a twice-told story can hold different meanings (Bamberg 2008). Time work (Flaherty 2003) or time travel (Andrews 2014) involves moving between past, present and future perspectives, comparing different versions of oneself. In hindsight, an emergent truth may appear self-evident, as if we had known it all along (Tversky and Kahneman 1973). Nostalgia reshapes memory, as we recall lost situations to have been rosier than they were (May 2017; Jacobsen 2020), and this can extend forwards in rueing the disappointment of impossible dreams or prevented opportunities (Wilson 2022). The narrativizing tendency (Bruner 1991) makes us search for ‘the sense of an ending’ (Ricoeur 1980: 179; Kermode 2007) through resolution and closure, and this can create further distortions. Retrospective teleology (Brockmeier 2000), for example, involves reverse-engineering a meaningful sequence by working back from a known conclusion to an inferred beginning.

Here, I focus on one heuristic bias that is particularly relevant to ‘narratives of nothing’. Kahneman (2017) makes a distinction between two biographical parts of identity: the experiencing self and the remembering self. The experiencing self consists of momentary affective states, which flow through the conscious mind. These are the phenomena of lived experience, as they occur and feel at the time. They can be accessed immediately through introspection and captured through experience-sampling (Kahneman and Riis 2005).



The remembering self integrates impressions across the duration of a temporal episode, making a global evaluation of their overall meaning. As this is based on memory and retrospection, it is prone to empirical error (Kahneman et al, 1982).

When thinking about ‘something’ that really happens, discrepancies occur between these two perspectives. For example, when I am on holiday, I may find the day-to-day experience stressful, but when I come home, I just remember having a great time (Kahneman 2017). Additionally, the remembering self is biased by the salience of moments that are intense, unusual or emotionally valent, such as the peak of a happy occasion or the cessation of suffering pain (Kahneman 2000). Extrapolating this to whole life-stories, it is likely the same rules apply. My actual life-as-lived may be a series of random contingencies, but my recollected life-as-told focuses on some pivotal events. Autobiographers tell us about the significant moments that made them, rather than the infinite others that did not (Scott 2018).

Does the same discrepancy occur when we think about ‘nothing’? This paper explores how the experiencing and remembering selves differently perform *reverse* biographical work. I draw upon my sociological theory of nothing (Scott 2018, 2019, 2020a, 2020b) to examine the realm of negative phenomena: things that do not empirically exist but are subjectively meaningful. Social actors perceive negative symbolic social objects (cf. Blumer 1969), such as no-things, no-bodies, non-events and no-where places, which stand out as figural in their biographical landscape. My self-identity may be shaped by a person I miss, an opportunity I never had, a place I moved away from or a possession I have lost. We relate intentionally towards these objects (Husserl 1913) through acts of wishing, missing, waiting, yearning, hoping, imagining and remembering (Scott 2020b).

Social actors produce and accomplish nothing in two ways (Scott 2019). *Acts of commission* involve decisions not to do something or be someone: I consciously choose to refuse, reject, discard, avoid or surrender. They can also occur through the actions of another or be imposed by circumstance: I lose someone or have something taken away. Examples of this include bereavement, turning down a job offer, ending a relationship or gender transitioning. *Acts of omission* occur more passively, by default, and unintentionally. These are the places I end up if I do not do anything or nothing happens to me: there is a lack, deficiency or absence, and a sense of being without. Some omissive objects are very important to the individual themselves, while others are irrelevant until labelled as deviant by others (cf. Becker 1963). Examples of this include infertility, agnosticism, asexuality and educational disadvantage.

Putting these ideas together, this paper explores how and why the stories people tell about negative phenomena morphologically change. I shall argue that, often, the way that nothing actually happens to the experiencing self involves acts of omission, but that when subjects recall the episodes later, they reframe them as acts of commission. There are both intrapersonal and interpersonal reasons for this, which I will demonstrate with four cases. Furthermore, some narrators demonstrate a capacity for meta-communicative reflection, by doubting their own testimony and authorial credibility.

Methodology

The data presented below come from a four-year project funded by the Leverhulme Trust (grant reference RPG-2019-346), which formed part of my research on the sociology of nothing (Scott 2018, 2019, 2020a, 2020b). Informed by symbolic interactionist and phenomenological theories, the project explored how



people understand and make sense of ‘nothing’ in the context of their biographical life-stories. Through a qualitative analysis of written and oral personal stories, I examined the processes of reverse biographical identity work (Scott 2020a) involved in composing and telling these ‘narratives of nothing’.

The project had a mixed method research design, comprising three phases: a secondary analysis of archival data, thematic analysis of written accounts, and narrative analysis of in-depth interviews. Here, I focus on the third phase. The Research Fellow was Dr Nina Lockwood and we collaborated with the Mass Observation Project (MOP). This documentary archive holds a collection of life-writing from members of the British general public (Shaw 1994). The MOP began in 1937 as a large-scale social survey, recording the observations of ‘ordinary’ people about their everyday lives (Langhamer 2016). Later, the archive recruited a panel of over volunteer members, who regularly write responses to themed Directives on different topics (Sheridan 1993). Phase 1 consisted of analysing these existing secondary data, while Phases 2 and 3 involved setting up a new Directive on the theme of ‘nothing’.

The research received approval from my institution’s ethical review board. The main issues to address were anonymity, confidentiality, data storage and re-use (Corti and Thompson 2004). At the point of recruitment, MOP panellists give informed consent for their writing to be made available to future researchers. They are asked not to mention any identifying information in their responses, and are given an alphanumerical code, such as A123. I have changed these codes to pseudonyms to animate the data and improve readability.

In Autumn 2020, Nina and I commissioned a new Directive on the topic of ‘Nothing and the road not taken’. The brief invited panellists to write about one thing (person, object, event or experience) that they perceived as being absent or missing from their lives, reflect on what this meant to them and describe the feelings it evoked. We included a prompt list of suggestions, such as lost opportunities, missed persons, secrets and silences, decisions-not-to-do something and lucky escapes. The Directive can be viewed here: <http://www.massobs.org.uk/mass-observation-project-directives>. It received 195 written stories: 159 by email and 36 handwritten and sent by post. Nina and I independently conducted thematic and narrative analyses of this dataset, comparing our results and revising the coding scheme to increase inter-rater reliability. The findings of this Phase 2 have been reported elsewhere (Lockwood and Scott 2023; Scott and Lockwood 2024; Scott and Lockwood 2025).

We selected a subset of approximately 10% (21 participants) for Phase 3. Nina Lockwood conducted biographical life-story interviews (Wengraf 2001) with these individuals, either online or in their homes. The interviews had a semi-structured format, using a loose schedule of questions as a topic guide (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). Participants were invited to revisit the instance of ‘nothing’ that they had written about and reflect upon its significance of this within their whole life. This included discussions of self-identity, relationships and employment. The interview questions were carefully phrased to be neutral, non-leading and unambiguous (Rubin and Rubin 2012). As the interviewer, Nina engaged in active listening (Gubrium and Holstein 1995) and sought to convey openness, receptiveness and non-judgmental curiosity (Morgan-Brett and Wheeler 2022). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

I then carried out a narrative analysis of the interview transcripts, paying close attention to their form, structure and composition (Riessman 2008). I first analysed the data by hand, through immersive reading, open coding and annotations (Strauss 1987). From this, I developed a coding schema, which I applied systematically using the software program NVivo to create a more robust dataset. This process was informed by the approaches of Plummer (2001), Andrews (2014) and Kim (2016). I sought to identify emergent plotlines, affective mood-atmospheres, literary genres, and temporal sequencing. I drew upon the framework of fairy tale elements proposed by McAdams (1985, 1993) to identify character archetypes,



nuclear episodes and ideological settings. I also coded aspects of meta-communicative reflection by participants upon the interview as a narrative event (Brockmeier 2001) of re-telling. The discussion below is based on my data analysis.

Dramatic re-storying: turning omissive drift into commissive myths

My first observation was that some participants (mis-)remembered nothing happening commissively, through a clear narrative of dramatic action. This contradicted the omissive way in which they described experiences seeming at the time: vague, unintentional, elusive and opaque. Thus, at the intrapsychic level, there was a discrepancy between the versions given by the experiencing and remembering selves (Kahneman 2017). In lived experience, nothing unfolded gently in the background, with a subtle contingency. However, in storied recollection, negative phenomena stood out as salient and figural in the biographical landscape.

This demonstrates the technique of emplotment (Ricoeur 1984) and reflects the human quest for structure, order and meaning (Bruner 1991). It also resonates with McAdams' (1985, 1993) notion of personal myths, which anchor situated episodes within deeper frameworks of meaning. These include the archetypal hero's journey (Campbell 1949) through adventure, challenge and transformation. As McAdams (1993) argues, personal myths often contain symbolic imagery from fairy tales, such as heroic and villainous characters, ideological settings, and 'nuclear' moments of dramatic action.

Graham spoke about his frustrated career ambition to become an air traffic controller. Although he had undergone a long period of training, he had not quite managed to reach the highest level of the profession, and so remained 'stuck' as an assistant. Graham told a story of unrealised potential: a lost opportunity and an unmade self, who could have formed the core of whom he wished to be. Instead, his story centred on the reverse mirror image: a missing, non-identity that never had the chance to develop. To Graham's experiencing self, this felt like a state of omission. He drifted between different jobs, following his wife's career instead of his own and ending up in a 'no-where' place:

I think in the back of my mind I wasn't sure that I was going to be able to do tower control, and that's perhaps why... I mean it's a lot of upheaval, I think we felt, 'Let's see if we get through this', rather than move up there and then, and then, you know, it could all go pear-shaped again.... at the end of that, I was absolutely exhausted, and I really had to kind of think, 'what is my station in life? What can I achieve? I'm not going to be an astronaut, I'm not going to be an airline pilot, I can't even be a controller'...

Graham's remembering self, however, told another story. Reflecting upon what had (not) happened, he emphasised commissive intentions. Graham framed himself as a bold, strong-willed, determined character, whose motivations had been thwarted and whose future had been robbed. In this version, he was destined to be an air traffic controller, but that path had been foreclosed. At the beginning of his training, he suggests, his 'true' self was agentic, and this heroic imago (McAdams 1993) conveyed a powerful personal myth:

[I had] a really strong motivation, because again that feeling of, 'this is what I want to be, this is what I'm...' ... sometimes I'm quite stubborn, once I've set to do something, I will finish it. And I think I've always done that, so it's kind of like this is where I am, and I will keep going at it until I finally get to the end of it.



Graham then describes his dreams being shattered and his ambition thwarted. This narrative arc is a familiar 'sad tale' (Goffman 1961a) that draws upon the genre of tragedy: a brave protagonist goes into battle but is defeated by evil forces (Lieblich et al 1998). Audiences can grasp the distinctive features of genres and prepare their 'horizons of expectation' (Tonkin 1992) for what they are about to hear. When listening to Graham, what stood out were certain moments of dramatic action that seemed to prove his real self as being quite heroic. It then sounded unfair to learn that, despite these skills and abilities, he had been denied a lifetime's career opportunity. For example, Graham recounted a nuclear episode (McAdams 1993) in which, through commissive, intentional action, he had managed to avert a fatal air crash. Framing this as an intuitive judgement based upon expert knowledge, he implies that he deserved the job he missed:

So, these two planes are both approaching their runways and they would... well, they were going to meet at the same time at the cross point, that would have been the disaster... I could see that it was starting to get a bit tight... a little voice inside me kind of went, 'This isn't working out'... I just got that feeling in my water... So, what I did was I told the plane... 'Stop your approach, put the power on, and climb away from the approach.' And that was great, and he did that... It was very tight, and I'm just grateful to God that I had this sixth sense that something isn't right here and sent this guy around, because that saved the day, and there wasn't a collision on the runway.

A second example comes from Alice, who spoke about her lack of a loving father. Although this significant other (Mead 1934) was alive and empirically real, he had been absent and neglectful throughout her life and so appeared as a no-body figure (Scott 2019). Alice's experiencing self describes an omissive feeling of ambiguous loss (Boss 2000) for someone who was missing but not completely gone. She perceived her father as a negatively inverted image of the one she would have wanted, relating to him through what he was not. This involved noetic acts of wishing, longing and yearning for something that had never emerged (Scott 2020b). Alice describes experiences of frequent disappointment, which seemed to have no reason and were out of her control:

I think I experience it in that I see other representations of fathers that I think 'that is what is missing in my life'. And so only by seeing that probably can I know what's missing... It can be simple things, like I hear on the radio somebody rings in to say they want to say happy birthday to their father who has been such a help, and he's been such a support throughout their life... that's what a father should be.

... he never came with us on holiday. If he had free time, he would spend it on his own, we'd very rarely... we didn't really do family days out...

I can't understand how any parent cannot be interested in their own child. I just cannot fathom it. Yeah, it's just a mystery to me... I encourage him to visit, because I always hope, there's always that hope, 'Oh, maybe we will have a nice time', and then he visits and every single time he disappoints me.

When she reflected on this in hindsight, however, Alice's remembering self had a more prominent voice. This was the part that searched for meaning and wanted a story to tell. The plotline she created involved commissive elements, such as scenes of violent or abusive behaviour in the family home that unfolded as nuclear episodes (McAdams 1993). Far from being an absent figure, she portrayed her father as a villainous character who had sustained a threatening presence and intentionally caused harm. Retrospectively, she



identified evidence of his malevolent character; this now appeared as an obvious truth that had ‘been there all along’ (Tversky and Kahneman 1973):

When I think about my childhood, there's a couple of images that come to mind. One is him just glowering in the living room and like, it's just stuff like, you weren't allowed to walk in front of the TV without him like snapping at you... And then the other image obviously is around the one where he - I saw him hit my mum. And then the other image that I have in my head is just my mum crying, my mum just cried, and cried a lot. I mean when I think back that's what I think about my childhood, my mum crying... I can remember one occasion where he'd come home drunk, ranting and raving, and she was in the bedroom, in their bedroom, and my sister and I were at the top of the stairs, and he was coming up the stairs, screaming at us... I was seeing violence; I was very aware of what a horrible person he was.

Alice folds this into her personal myth (McAdams 1985), awakening to the discovery of an essential, underlying truth (DeGloma 2014). Reviewing the whole pattern of her life (Kahneman 2017), Alice’s remembering self becomes a victim, a survivor or a wounded storyteller (Frank 2013). She says, “I’ve given up hope that I will ever get it”. This in turn fuels her, “core belief that I am not good enough... he planted this belief in me that I wasn't good enough for him to love me, and nothing I ever did was good enough”. Thus, what had been a tale of disappointment in her father becomes a tragedy defining her own self-identity. This supports Bamberg’s (2006) argument about small stories being nested within bigger ones. However, in her search for ‘the sense of an ending’ (Ricoeur 1980; Kermode 2007) that affords herself greater agency, Alice creates a redemption narrative (McAdams 2010) about forgiveness and eventual healing:

I think I probably now look at him with pity, and just think ‘What a shame that you have to be like that’, and it does still upset me, and of course I do still feel that missing in my life, because otherwise I wouldn't have written about it. But I try and turn it around and just think, ‘Actually, he's the one that's missing out, because I am a good person, and yeah, and I am nice to be around and I am good company. He is the one that... and I've got a lovely family, and he is the one that is missing out’.

Tellable Scripts: Turning Omissive Deviance into Commissive (Mis-) Alignment

The second way in which participants’ stories evolved was by becoming (mis)aligned with cultural norms. In composing verbal accounts, particularly to explain or justify deviant behaviour, social actors often draw upon shared discursive resources. These include cultural scripts (Gagnon and Simon 1973), interpretive repertoires (Potter and Wetherell 1987) and vocabularies of motive (Mills 1940). These resources reflect the common stocks of background knowledge (Schutz 1972) within a local group or setting: their shared values, definitions, meanings and tacit understandings. By fitting their accounts into these template forms and indicating agreement, individuals can demonstrate belonging. Anticipating that some stories are more ‘tellable’ than others (Sacks 1992; Smith and Sparkes 2008; Norrick 2021), they may adapt their material.

Such discursive repositioning (Davies and Harré 1990, Bamberg 1997) reveals the performative and communicative aspects of storytelling. Narrators are oriented towards an audience and show reflexive self-awareness. By telling their stories in recognised and acceptable ways, they perform aligning actions (Stokes and Hewitt 1986) at the level of framing and representation, independently of the story content. That is, even though the substantive narrated events may comprise deviant conduct (as many ‘non-doings’ are),



people can talk about them in ways that are resistant or conformist. Dramaturgically, this suggests role distance (Goffman 1961b), by separating the actor from the character they play. The narrator offers a meta-commentary on the version of themselves that appeared in the story. Through ‘footing’, they convey an attitude towards the subject matter they are presenting (Goffman 1974). Usually, this involves displays of regret, shame and recalcitrance, as a symbolic apology for their conduct (Goffman 1961b), but occasionally actors stick to their guns and express pride or defiance.

In parallel, split consciousness occurs between the experiencing and remembering selves. Although the experienced (non-)events often involved social deviance, the way they were remembered did not always align with this view. Actors could choose how to frame their accounts and where to position them: with or against cultural norms. In doing so, they transformed an omissive experience into a commissive intention, which helped them make identity claims.

Jackie told about not having children, a prevalent topic throughout the dataset. The status of non-motherhood is politically charged, as it transgresses normative social expectations and gendered cultural scripts (Letherby 2002; Ramsay and Letherby 2006). It is also stigmatised in the context of dominant pronatalist discourses (Heitlinger 1991). Regardless of their private motives, women must navigate this public storied landscape and take up a conscious position (Morrell 1994; Park 2002). They may define themselves as being *childfree* by choice, as an act of commission, or *childless*, omissively, such as through infertility (Scott 2019). Respectively, this implies trajectories of becoming a non-mother (through rejection or disidentification with the role) or non-becoming a mother (through lack, absence or irrelevance) (Scott 2019). Of course, this dichotomy is oversimplified, and the reality is often a more complex, ambivalent mixture of push and pull factors (Gillespie 2003). The experiencing self drifts between alternative routes before ending up on either path.

When Jackie summarised her biography, it conveyed many acts of omission. Neither she nor her husband had ever felt a desire to have children, and so this prospect was absent and irrelevant on her perceptual horizons (cf. Husserl 1913). Being more focused on her career and location, she did not feel pushed away from motherhood so much as pulled towards something else (Scott 2019). Thus, Jackie’s experiencing self did not make an active decision-not-to have children, but rather it just gradually and subtly let that option go. Although she had a vague awareness of the potential possibility, she deferred it to the future until it was too late. Moving home to care for sick parents prompted Jackie’s realisation that the path was now closed:

Well, up until our sort of mid-thirties we had a restaurant/café, so, you know, obviously we were working in the evening, and we didn't -. We lived in a flat, which we rented. And then after the restaurant stopped, we sort of just, you know, carried on... My husband didn't have a proper career, and, you know, I wasn't working, I didn't do a lot of work. So we were a bit sort of hand-to-mouth, you know, in, you know... and none of our friends had children either, so, you know.

I just sort of drift through life, which is probably what I've done in a certain extent... I think a lot of it is just to do with drifting and avoiding responsibility and making decisions, and, you know, sort of thinking, 'Well, it'll sort itself out in the future'.

However, Jackie’s remembering self told a different story. Reflecting on her life-course, she began to speculate on possible reasons to explain her non-motherhood. Perhaps she was just not a maternal person, but she had not realised that truth until now (cf. Tversky and Kahneman 1973)? Or perhaps she had been politically resisting peer pressure, cultural norms and social expectations? Retrospectively, Jackie could identify moments when significant others had made pointed comments that could be construed as evidence.



With hindsight, she observed idealised expectations and the cost of sacrifice. Remembering being put off by encounters with friends who were mothers, Jackie ‘realised’ her motive of rejection:

there'd be a lot of pressure... I felt I'd be expected to do the same, you know, to sort of, well, you know, sacrifice my life to, you know, to be a mother...

... and then I'd sort of see old childhood friends and they'd say 'Oh, I'm sure you'll, you'll... your mum would love to have a grandchild', you know, that sort of thing...

I remember a couple coming round to visit. The mother... had these two very small children, and I think they must have been at the toddler stage and, you know, the temper tantrums. And she clearly wasn't coping at all, you know, with these two children, and, yeah, I felt very sorry for her actually, because I thought, you know, 'you're not happy in your situation'

Well, the sort of the stress and the illnesses and the getting them to school and all... I just had a completely negative view of the whole thing.

All of these rehearsed motives sound plausible and convincing, satisfying the audience’s wish for order, meaning and narrative coherence (McAdams 2006). However, none of them match how Jackie had really felt, if we believe her experiencing self. Why, then, did Jackie change her tune and offer this account? It could be that this was an aligning act, performed within the interview as a social interaction (Denzin 1970; Brannen 2013). Jackie positioned herself in critical misalignment with the dominant social script, citing a counter-discourse of resistance (Foucault 1971). Having begun with a tentative tale of ambivalence, she ended up firmly convinced that she must have felt “*completely negative*”.

The final example is from Clara, whose story concerned the death of her father in a motorbike accident when she was three years old. Although bereavement is an act of commission, insofar as someone once present is taken away, the experiences Clara focused on were more omissive. Growing up, she recalled a silence in the household about her father’s death: he was not acknowledged as absent and the accident was never spoken about. Clara believed that this was due to her mother’s struggling to grieve. Consequently, Clara’s experiencing self was shaped by feelings of uncertainty, wondering, mystery and suspicion. She knew that some information was missing but did not know what it was. In her imagination, her father appeared phenomenologically as a no-body figure (Scott 2019), and she searched for clues to reveal the hidden story:

it was something that kind of really didn't present itself dramatically in my life, because I was only very young at the time... I had to piece it together and make assumptions about the effects that it had on me from things that my mother had said, and memories of - I mean, I don't actually remember anybody - I don't - I wasn't ever told what had happened, that was the main thing, I was never told the full fact that daddy had an accident on the way to work, and very sadly he died... I was just told that he wasn't coming home anymore.

Later in her narrative, however, Clara remembered suffering anorexia nervosa at the age of 16. This became the missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle, which she used to explain the things she had not previously known. Retrospectively, she performed interpretive identity work (O’Connell 2020) by inferring a causal link between her early traumatic bereavement and her later mental health struggles. Clara’s remembering self reasoned that the anorexia must have been a psychosomatic conversion symptom (Showalter 1985) of unexpressed grief: both her mother’s bypassed feelings and her own unprocessed shock. This turned the



nothingness of her absent father from an omissive mystery into a commissive, generative moment. A dramatic nuclear episode (McAdams 1993) had catalysed a ‘comet tail’ sequence of subsequent effects (Husserl 1913). The reinterpreted story was bolstered by additional ‘evidence’ as Clara identified other adolescent stresses, such as her attractive younger sister and educational pressure at school. As a summarising coda (Labov and Waletzky 1967), Clara concluded that she must have turned to food restriction as something to control amidst the emotional chaos:

I can remember just feeling horrendously confused, because I had this huge drive to restrict, restrict food intake, and do a lot of exercise, but the feeling - there were very - lots of very chaotic feelings, quite angry feelings... I think I probably was experiencing an awful lot of emotions and fears... there were about four or five factors that precipitated the anorexia, and one of them my sister... I also felt very uncertain about my ability at school... I thought ‘Oh God!’ I don’t know, but I suspect that I just felt I couldn’t possibly do that.

Ostensibly, this theory makes intellectual sense and sounds plausible. However, this may simply be because it aligns with familiar, scripted representations of anorexia. In both psychiatric discourse and popular understandings, a common, clichéd trope is that anorexia is ‘about control’ through rigid, obsessive perfectionism (O’Connell 2020). This appears, for example, in Bruch’s (1978) influential ideas about the wilful resolution of identity crisis, and in feminist arguments about the denial and restraint of women’s appetites (Orbach 1986, Lawrence 1979). As O’Connell (2020) argues, people undergoing treatment for anorexia can become schooled in the clinical discourse (Dignon 2007), which reshapes their view of their own experience. The cultural script about ‘control’ may then have served as a convenient, available template for Clara to apply, allowing her to (mis)remember mystery as deterministic fact.

Discussion

I have shown how stories about ‘nothing’ can change over time, through processes of reverse biographical identity work. The heuristic bias of inconsistency between the experiencing and remembering selves (Kahneman 2017) creates narrative movement and slippage, as subjects reinterpret and re-story their unlived lives. The human tendency to seek narrative order, structure and meaning creates an artefactual layer of first order constructs (Schutz 1972), which can distort the way in which negative phenomena appear. This means that how people remember ‘nothing’ happening may be different from how it actually felt to them at the time. Mapping this on to the sociology of nothing, I observed how the original narrated events seemed to have occurred omissively, but that participants recalled them as being commissive.

In terms of generalisability, this observed transformation may be specific to narratives of nothing, insofar as ‘somethings’ rarely happen by omission. Positive identity stories tend to focus on commissive actions: doing something or becoming someone, rather than non-doing or non-becoming. However, comparable practices of re-storying may occur in other auto/biographical forms, especially where there is a possibility of memory distortion. It should also be acknowledged that not all of the participants’ narratives changed in this way; many remained consistently either omissive or commissive. Nevertheless, the pattern did appear in several different cases, and so it is worth exploring.

I identified two sets of narrative practices (Gubrium and Holstein 2009) that converted omissive tales into commissive ones. These occurred both intrapersonally and interpersonally. The first involved individuals searching for plotlines and courses of dramatic action, which they formed into personal myths (McAdams 1985) with distinctive features. These included fairy tale characters, such as heroes and villains, nuclear



episodes and ideological settings (McAdams 1993). The stories also indicated deeper frameworks of meaning, such as linear trajectories of human growth and moral transformation. Reviewing their past ‘comet tail’ (Husserl 1913) of historical non-events, remembering selves integrated disparate elements into a coherent tale with a central theme. Thus, Graham re-storied his drifting employment history as a tragic tale of unrecognised heroism, while Alice reframed her absent father as a lurking, hidden threat.

The second, interpersonal practices showed the power of audience, performance and communication. Experiences of deviant, norm-breaking conduct that seemed to have occurred omissively were remembered as commissive, decisive moments of resistant or conformist intention. These displays of agency were (mis)aligned with cultural scripts and wider vocabularies of motive, which made the stories ‘tellable’ (Sacks 1992; Smith and Sparkes 2008; Norrick 2021) and familiar to receive. Through role-distant statements and footing (Goffman 1961b, 1974), narrators guided the audience’s interpretation of their actions, presented appraisals of their own characters, and discursively positioned themselves in relation to shared values. We saw this in the case of Jackie, who recast her omissive non-motherhood as a defiant response to social pressures, and Clara, who solved the mystery surrounding her father’s death with a template trope about anorexic control.

This raises some interesting methodological issues about the status of narrative data. Just like stories about ‘positive’ (real or actualised) identity formation, those about negative or non-identities are epistemologically limited. We cannot directly access the underlying, original (non-)events of the subject’s unlived life any more than we can those of a lived life. These experienced phenomena remain privately contained in consciousness, or even lost in memory, absorbed in the regressive, retentive flow of successive ‘no longer’ moments (Husserl 1913). All that we can study are first and second order reconstructions (Schutz 1972) of the unlived life-as-told (cf. Bruner 1987): the subject’s reinterpretation viewed through our analytic lens. This double hermeneutic (Giddens 1984) reminds us that re-storying is a multi-layered, iterative process (Schafer 1994) that changes both the content and the author.

A final puzzle concerns the capacity for meta-communicative self-reflection. Some participants made not only implicit role-distant gestures, but also explicit references to acknowledge the ephemeral nature of the data and situatedness of the telling(s). For example, some interviewees reflected upon what they had written in their Directive response and commented on insights they had gained since. Others paused, revised and corrected their lines as they spoke them, noticing how they sounded and clarifying what they really meant (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977). Such communication out of character (Goffman 1959) is a sophisticated dramaturgical skill, demonstrating the polyvocal complexity of the narrative subject. If storytellers can doubt their own testimony and bear critical witness to themselves, how much can they – or we – ever know about nothing, and what makes this material disappear? These questions invite further research in the study of auto/biography, across the disciplines of sociology, psychology and narrative inquiry.

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Author Biography

Susie Scott is Professor of Sociology at the University of Sussex. She specialises in the micro-sociological theoretical perspectives of symbolic interactionism and Goffman's dramaturgy, applied to questions of social identity. She has written about topics including shyness, swimming pools, asexuality and politeness. Susie is the author of *Shyness and Society: The Illusion of Competence* (2007), *Making Sense of Everyday Life* (2009), *Total Institutions and Reinvented Identities* (2011), *Negotiating Identity: Symbolic Interactionist Approaches to Social Identity* (2015), *The Social Life of Nothing: Silence, Invisibility and Emptiness in Tales of Lost Experience* (2019) and *Narratives of Nothing: Storying the Unlived Life* (2026). She is also the co-editor with James Hardie-Bick of *Ex-treme Identities: Transitions Out of Extraordinary Roles* (2022) and *Existential Selves: Freedom, Chaos and the Search for Meaning* (2026), and with Wayne Brekhus, *Interpreting Identities: Dimensions of Power, Presence and Belonging* (2025).