

Clock Time versus Story Time:
Narrative Dimensions of Care for the Fragile Self

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Abstract

In this paper we contrast two conceptions and cultural scripts of time in paid caregiving: clock time versus story time. We argue that tension between the two undermines the humanity and continuity of care. Further, we find that the implications of incongruity regarding conceptions of time – between caregivers and recipients – are especially deleterious with respect to care for those with cognitive illnesses (e.g., Alzheimer’s disease) that undermine language, memory, and thus identity itself. In caregiving research in institutional settings, one line of critique has focused on the fragmentation of care according to the quasi-industrial model of work. This process of commodification pre-supposes managerial control as well over the *temporal* rhythms of care-giving encounters. We extend this argument to say that identity, and intimate relations through which identity is supported in care, presuppose a narrative ordering and conditions that allow stories to be developed, shared, and preserved over time. The setting for the present study is not a custodial institution, but instead a small, quasi-domestic residential care setting. This suggests that clock time is not merely imposed from above, via formal authority, but is also a cultural resource that caregivers may deploy in order to manage emotional and pragmatic problems of daily life. Still, they, like the older care recipients involved, show a nascent awareness of the power and importance to care of shared stories.