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Hiles, David

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4   Identity Positioning: Narrative Analysis of Sjuzet and Fabula

DAVID HILES

Abstract

In this paper I will argue that identity is the product of at least two processes – *subject positioning* and *identity positioning*. While the focus of much of the previous research in this field has largely been on subject positioning, it would seem clear that we can also participate to a greater or lesser extent in the construction of our own identities. I propose that we achieve these identity positions primarily through narrative – through the stories we construct of the person we are. Crucial to understanding the role that narrative plays in the construction of identity is the distinction between *sjuzet* – the way in which a story is being re-told, and *fabula* – the content of that story. The analysis of these features is particularly supported by Herman and Vervaeck's (2001) distinction between "unbounded" and "bounded" motifs in narrative. In exploring this distinction, it turns out that the sjuzet (the unbounded motifs) is especially important in understanding the construction of identity positions. This approach is applied to the analysis of holocaust narratives collected by the *Imperial War Museum Sound Archive*. These testimonies offer a constant theme of the struggle for identity in the face of overwhelming atrocities, horror and suffering.

Identity: Some Key Issues

> … a life examined … is a life narrated.   (Paul Ricoeur, 1987)

Identity raises major philosophical, sociological, political, phenomenological, psychological and clinical issues. At its most basic, we can ask in what sense can identity, the self, be said to have any reality? For example, John Searle (2004, p.37) introduces his discussion of identity by citing the ideas of the philosopher David Hume, who argues that there is no experience of the self, and that the identity that we ascribe to ourselves is entirely fictitious. Searle continues his discussion by outlining three families of problems with respect to identity: *(1) In what sense can we retain our identity through life's changes? (2) Is it necessary to propose a "self" separate from our body, its experiences?* and *(3) What exactly makes me the person I am?*

While Searle discusses the first two of these, he fails to address the third. Perhaps this is because it is less of a philosophical question, and more of a psychological and social question. In this paper, my focus will be on the third of these problems.

The approach to human identity that I want to explore emphasises the active role we can take in constructing our own identities. I want to introduce you to the idea of *identity positions,* and contrast these with the idea of subject positions. Furthermore, I want to demonstrate that some crucial features of narrative play a key role here. This involves a *narrative/participatory* approach to identity.

Of course, we live in a socio-cultural reality, and a consequence of this is the subject positions that we are placed in. But as Searle (1995; 1999) remarks, the meta-physical complexity of this is truly staggering. Subject positioning, which may be a necessary construct, is not a sufficient construct in explaining human identity. We do live in a discursive environment which does position us as subjects, and I regard social constructionism as an important attempt to theorize this socio-cultural reality. But the social constructionist approach fails to take account of personal choice, of agency, of what Foucault (1984) calls *"practices of the self"*. For example, if I was to ask you "to pull a face", you would do it in your very own way!! Wouldn't you!!!!

Using Jean-Paul Sartre's (1943) terminology, I want to align subject positioning with *"being-for-others"*, and with *"bad faith"* (see Hiles, 1997), and I want to find a way of accommodating what Sartre calls the *"original project"* - *"the potential to invent ourselves"*. I insist that I myself can endorse, celebrate, resist and contest the subject positions offered to me. It is important that we recognize that *in some sense each of us is the 'author' of our experience"*(Neimeyer, 1995, p.231), and that we can position ourselves in relation to the socio-cultural practices which surround us. It is this that I am calling *identity positioning*. The figure below illustrates the perspective that I am adopting. Identity is the product of at least two processes, which are closely inter-related. However it is necessary to make this distinction. My claim is that this is closer to being a sufficient model of identity. We participate in the construction of our own identities, and it seems that we can do this in a major way through narrative, ie. through the stories we construct of the person we are.
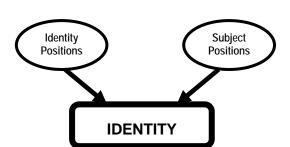
Figure 1:   Identity as Involving (at least) Two Processes

Narrative and Identity

The claim that there is an important link between identity and narrative has been around for a fairly long time. For example, Oliver Sacks (1985, p.105) argues that:*"it might be said that each of us constructs and lives, a narrative, and that this narrative is us, our identities… Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed, continually, unconsciously, by through, and in us"*.

Donald Polkinghorne (1988, p.107) suggests that: *"people conceive of themselves in terms of stories … as narrative forms, these stories draw together and configure the events of one's life into a coherent and basic theme"*. With a striking turn of phrase, Jerome Bruner (1990, p.122) describes narratives of identity as: *"that swarm of participations that distributes Self across its occasions of use"*. And the philosopher, A.P. Kerby (1991, p.1), stresses that: *"the development of selves in our narratives is one of the most characteristically human acts"*.

Many of the above claims are anticipated in the work of Paul Ricoeur. For example, in his paper, entitled *"Life: A story in search of a narrator"* (Ricoeur, 1987/1991), he is concerned with this tension: *"stories are told and not lived; life is lived and not told"* (p.425). He proposes that the stories that are told constitute a second level of discourse, which is*"always preceded by a narrative intelligence which issues from creative intelligence"* (p.429). Story has a mediating role: *"it is a mediation between man and the world, between man and man, between man and himself"* (p.431). Ricoeur draws upon Aristotle's definition of story: *"mimesis paxeos – the imitation of an action"* (p.432-3), and he proposes that: *"human life is profoundly different from animal life … we understand what action and passion are … we understand the meaning of project, goal, means, circumstances, and so on … such notions taken together make up a network of what could be called the semantics of action"* (p.433).

Moreover, *"it seems that our life ... appears to us as the field of a constructive activity, derived from the narrative intelligence through which we attempt to recover (rather than impose from without) the narrative identity which constitutes us"* (p.436); *"and so we try to gain by means of imaginative variation of our ego a narrative understanding of ourselves"* (p.437). With respect to the tension between subject and identity positioning, Ricoeur expresses this as follows: *"... the subject is never given at the beginning* [because …] *it would run the risk of reducing itself to a narcissistic ego, self-centred and avaricious ... In the place of an ego enchanted by itself, a self is born, taught by cultural symbol ... These stories give unity – not unity of substance but narrative wholeness"* (p.437).

In summary, I want to place the notion of narrative identity within the context of the philosophical work of both Heidegger (1927) and Ricoeur (1983; 1984; 1985; 1987; 1990). I propose that narrative achieves three fundamental transformations of reality, ie. in terms of:

Temporality (Heidegger's *"Time"*)
Matterings (Heidegger's *"concern", "ready-to-hand"*)
Configuration out of a succession (Ricoeur)

Narrative offers us the capacity to organize our experience, actions and self, by constructing a temporal configuration, by relating successive parts to the whole. Using our narrative intelligence, we choose what matters to us, and we participate in the construction of our own identities. Through the stories that we construct, we establish our identity positions.

Narrative Analysis of Identity Positions

It was in reading some narrative accounts of survivors of the holocaust (Smith, 2005), that I became aware of the subtlety of how identity positioning might come into being. The narrative accounts that I was reading had a profound impact on me, and I began to wonder about what was going on? It seemed that it was not just simply the story that was being told, but it was the way in which it was being told that mattered as well.

A crucial insight came when I realized the relevance of Herman and Vervaeck's (2001) distinction between "bounded" and "unbounded" motifs in narrative. Bounded motifs are fixed by the story that is being told, which if altered, will change the story as well. Unbounded motifs are not fixed, and while not essential to the story, are crucial to how the story is being told. This perspective in effect distinguishes *fabula* from *sjuzet*, respectively. The fabula is the "content" of the story, ie. an account of the original events as they might actually have occurred, while the sjuzet is the "form" of the narrative, ie. the

"window" onto the events offered in the telling of the story. It became clear, that when the sjuzet is examined closely, the subtle expression of identity positions becomes evident.

Developing a Methodology

The methodological issue here is very similar to the contrast in qualitative inquiry between content analysis and discourse analysis. The point is that in narrative analysis, we must focus on both the w*hat* and the *how* of the telling, upon both the story that is being told, as well as the way in which it is being told. Furthermore, I propose that this distinction between *content* and *telling* (ie. between fabula and sjuzet) is particularly important with respect to narrative identity.

Analysis proceeds by first breaking the text down into segments, or discourse units, as preferred. This is in contrast to some approaches which advocate presenting the transcript simply as numbered lines, which is more or less arbitrary. Since narratives are basically a sequence of episodes, or events, the preferred approach is to set out the text as a numbered sequence of segments, a segment being roughly a self-contained episode or a "move" in the telling of the story. This is not foolproof, but is relatively straightforward and has the advantage of being transparent. Then in the first stage of analysis the unbounded motifs are underlined. The basic result is that the fabula will "read" as a simple story, bracketed by the sjuzet.

The approach outlined here is just one component within a far more elaborate model of *Narrative Oriented Inquiry* developed by Ivo Čermák and myself (see Hiles and Čermák, 2007). In that model*, narrative analysis* proceeds further towards a micro-analysis of the *form* and the *content* of the narrative, drawing largely upon the work of Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) and Emerson and Frosh (2004).

Holocaust Narratives

The book where these holocaust narratives are published, *Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust* (Smith, 2005), contains the testimonies of over 100 survivors. This is harrowing reading. Quoting from the Foreword: *"Each of them preserves the memory of their suffering for ever"*. They are transcribed from the *Imperial War Museum Sound Archive*, which was begun in 1972, and contains 785 Holocaust related survivor recordings.

In my own study, I read through all of the testimonies, and selected a smaller sample for a more focussed analysis. This included the stories of Jan, Leon, Else, Sergie, Magdelena, Josef, Anna, Barbara, Abram, and Přemysl.

These were chosen as a representation of the struggle for identity in the face of overwhelming atrocities, horror and suffering.

The themes from the many testimonies are too many to present here – although *genocide, death, brutality, degradation, suffering* – alongside *hope, bewilderment, helplessness, humiliation, terror, horror* – and in particular, the recurring theme of *identity* are all present. The overall impression is one of profound authenticity. People found themselves a victim of the holocaust merely because of their identity – *Jew, Gypsy, Jehovah Witness, Communist, Homosexual, Disabled*, and very many of their narratives obviously concern the loss of identity.

Identity Positions Reclaimed

The narratives usually begin with identity positions constructed through references to birth, location, parents, family, home, allegiances, religion, and subsequently go on to describe confusion and loss of identity, and the small and subtle, but significant, ways in which identity could be retained. Each narrative becomes an attempt by the narrator to participate in their own reclamation of the identity positions they had lost.

The analysis is straightforward. First, the text is broken down into segments/episodes, and then we use Herman and Vervaeck's (2001) distinction between "bounded" and "unbounded" motifs in narrative. What is underlined here constitutes the sjuzet. What is not underlined is the fabula. Invariably, the fabula reads as a straightforward, but rather "flat" account. The sjuzet seems to bracket the fabula, providing context, emphasis, reflection and subtle positions with respect to the events being related.

Because of the limitations of space, we will consider just two examples, Jan and Přemysl.

Example (1): Jan Hartman - Czech Jewish youth, Auschwitz-Birkenau

1. *The next part was getting my number tattooed*.
2. *Two young slaves - I would describe them that way - came along;*
3. *one of them had a book, a typical German book, nineteenth-century type, nothing in it but numbers.*
4. *And the other one took a pen and bottle of ink and with this, very quickly and adroitly, tattooed us.*
5. *In Terezin nobody asked your name but the boys and other people knew who I was. But in Auschwitz you became a number, you didn't know anybody.*
6. *The only person I knew was my brother, we stuck together*.

Jan, after a time in Terezin, now finds himself in Auschwitz-Birkenau, about to have the last vestige of his identity taken from him, and replaced with a number. Jan's resistance to this removal of his identity is expressed explicitly in the sjuzet. He offers us the possibility that it was being with his brother that enabled him to retain one aspect of his identity position in tact.

Example (2): Přemysl Dobiáš – Sudeten Czech inmate, Mauthausen

1. <u>Not many of us are alive who remember the cruel murdering of Jewish prisoners in 1942 in that granite quarry</u>.
2. <u>I witnessed it</u>.
3. <u>While</u> we were working underneath the granite quarry, we noticed high up above on a very sheer cliff there was some gathering of prisoners.
4. We were asked to clear a part underneath.
5. <u>We knew subsequently that the people murdered were Jewish because when we saw them dead at the bottom we noticed the mark of the Star of David on their jackets</u>.
6. <u>While</u> we were watching, horrified, we noticed that on the top there was a circle of SS behind the prisoners.
7. The prisoners were pushed close to the rim and as we looked, the one behind was forced to push the person in front down until their turn came. This was down a sheer rock about one hundred feet <u>I would say</u>, <u>and</u> they drowned in the lake.
8. <u>There is now a memorial at the lake commemorating the action</u>.
9. The Nazis <u>at the time</u> laughed that the ones thrown to their deaths were 'parachutists'.

In my analysis of this profoundly unnerving narrative, I wanted to try to examine how Přemysl crucially positions himself as a survivor, as a witness, and ultimately, through his own memory of the events, as a contributor to the official memory/memorial. This positioning is achieved as much in the unbounded features of the narrative space, as it is in the story being told.

My point is that in narrative analysis, we must focus on both the *what* and the *how* of the telling, upon both the story that is being told as well as the way in which it is being told, evidenced in the sjuzet. This is in complete contrast to many of the approaches to narrative analysis that recommend tidying up the narrative to leave only the core narrative to be analysed.

Conclusion: Sjuzet and Identity Positioning

We have been concerned with a *narrative/participatory* approach to identity, and I have argued for the importance of distinguishing *sjuzet* and *fabula* in

narrative inquiry, particularly with respect to identity positioning. The sjuzet, defined as the unbounded component of a narrative, plays a crucial role in how each person positions themselves with respect to the chosen fabula *(eg. emphasis, commentary, witness, memory, identity, "plotting", coda, etc.).* The sjuzet is evidence of Ricoeur's narrative intelligence at work, constructing a configuration from a sequence, choosing and emphasising what "matters" in the telling, and stressing the identity position(s) being adopted.

I have tried to argue that current theories of identity fall short of any criterion of sufficiency. We need to understand human identity both in terms of subject positions *and* identity positions. Of course, the social constructionist perspective has a major contribution to make to any theory of identity, and I particularly like the view of human behaviour as: *situated – occasioned – action.* However, to my mind, this is not sufficient, and I prefer the following view: human behaviour as *situated – occasioned – EXPERIENCED – action.* Indeed, it is in taking account of personal experience that narrative plays its crucial role.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that while our sense of identity might be constrained by language, such that I might not be able to invent new words, or a new syntax, this doesn't preclude my being able to create a vast range of stories. In narrative, I can *create, compromise, celebrate* and *configure* who I am.

> … a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it. But you have to choose: to live or to recount.   (Sartre, *Nausea*, 1938, p.61)

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