7 Analysing Narratives: Dialogic and Symbolic Dimensions

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Narrative research in social sciences concerns primarily first-hand accounts of real life events or situations. Narrative analysis typically concerns how the informant's story is 'put together, the linguistic and cultural resources it draws on, and how it persuades a listener of authenticity' (Riessman, 1993, p.2). The research paradigm understates the role that narrative fiction may play towards its writer's self-understanding (Jones, 2002). It is premised on a notion of autobiography as the 'royal road' to the self, in contrast with Freud's famous premise that dreams are the royal road to the unconscious. Whereas Freud, Jung, and their contemporaries located the possibility of self-knowledge in the analysis of fictive productions believed to express unconscious intrapsychic dynamics, narrative scholars locate self-knowledge in conscious productions that explain own experiences. Some narratologists avoid the study of short-range personal stories on grounds that these are 'induced by situationally motivated tasks' and therefore sustain narrative identities that are ephemeral and therefore of doubtful generality (Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann, 2000, p.201). Yet, as Bamberg (2004) points out, 'small stories' inserted into a conversation function to fine-tune the speaker's positioning.

Small stories versus autobiography may serve the reflexive project of the self in different ways. Autobiography could be viewed as 'a *dialogue* that the author keeps with himself or herself' (Gullestad, 1996, p.5). Small stories could be linked to what Shotter (1996) - speaking about utterances in general - described as 'our embodied embedding in this whole flow of temporally irreversible activity' that is accomplished by the 'fleeting, changeable nature and enormous complexity' of utterances and their 'strange *dialogical* nature', ensuring that everything we do, 'in being a response to an other or otherness in our surroundings, inevitably relates us to them in some way' (p.294). Shotter's statement conveys a different meaning of 'dialogical' than does Gullestad's claim about autobiography. The main purpose of the chapter is to articulate the functional distinction. I would like to reserve 'dialogic' for the ways in which narratives (of any kind) embed the narrators in an immediate social context. A narrative may simultaneously serve also to reorient the narrator towards own situation - a function to be taxonomically differentiated from the dialogic by introducing the term 'symbolic'. The present use borrows from Jung's definition of a symbol as 'the best possible formulation of a relatively *unknown*

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thing ... standing for something that is only divined and not yet clearly conscious' (1921, para. 817).

The distinction is illustrated below with empirical material that was collected for other purposes by students, who gave me their permission to use it (the original studies are not replicated here). All children's names have been changed.

Text 1

The material for the following is taken from group interviews conducted with ten-year-olds by undergraduate students Serena Garratt and Siân Owen. They asked the participants to imagine 'dream' and 'nightmare' schools, having hypothesised quantitative gender differences and differences between children with and without behavioural problems in terms of generating aggressive and other themes. In planning the study, the students worried that audiotaping the interviews would make it difficult to identify individual speakers. Their solution was to videotape - and the children 'performed' for the camera. The transcript in focus is a particularly poignant instance: the protagonists in the drama of the interview include the camera, with which Tina interacts silently, and this has consequences for Emily's contributions.

The interview lasts 14 minutes 45 seconds. The girls sat in a line of three chairs close together, facing the interviewer (unseen on the video). Emily was in the middle, Tina to her left and Sue to the right. The camera, operated by the other student, was behind the interviewer. It captured a wide range to either side, but it must have seemed to Tina that she would be left out of the picture. She really wanted to be noticed. She kept fidgeting and glancing at the camera excitedly. Right from the start, she nudged over onto Emily's chair. Within six minutes she entirely vacated her chair, now sharing Emily's, and at one moment was resting her head on Emily's shoulder. Sue sat squarely in her own seat; but being plump, her arm was pressed against Emily's. Emily, a thin girl, sat squeezed between them.

The transcript starts with the interviewer asking the girls to describe their dream school, to which Tina immediately says that she would 'have a party every day'. The interviewer echoes: 'A party every day, yeah' (with rising intonation, expectantly). Emily says that she would like 'a disco every day'. She is chewing gum and her words are muffled. The interviewer echoes with lowered intonation, 'A disco and … (indistinct)'. Sue offers brightly, 'A swimming pool on a beach?' The interviewer echoes emphatically, 'A swimming pool on a <u>beach</u>? Yeah, that will be good (.) what else you'd have?' Those first few turns set the norm. Throughout the interview, the girls mostly list characteristics of the imaginary schools, addressing the interviewer who echoes and prompts for more. The girls collaborate implicitly among

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themselves by elaborating each other's ideas, but also assert their individuality by bringing in new themes or diverting something another has said. Occasionally they insert an explicit statement of what they personally like or dislike. For example, describing the nightmare school later in the interview:

> Tina   (*pulling her chair forward, though already seated on Emily's, and leans forward so much that Emily has to lean back*): It'd be a spooky creepy school (*smiles at the camera*)
> Sue: And they'll be all fights and blood all dripping

The interviewer echoes this and prods for more.

> Sue: Loads of swearing
> Tina: Loads of swearing too

The other two are simultaneously saying something (indecipherable). Tina rocks back and forth in front of Emily, and for a moment we cannot see Emily's face.

> Sue   (*to Emily*): Yeah (.) I hate swearing
> Emily   (*to Sue, matter of fact*): Oh I love it

When reading or watching the full interview, Emily's provocative disclosure at this stage does not come as a surprise. The conspicuous departures from the pattern established at the outset are all initiated by Emily. She interjects personal stories or projects herself into the fantasy in provocative ways.

Emily's first 'small story' is 3 minutes and 10 seconds into the interview. Tina has just suggested that they could pick their own teacher in the dream school, and Sue amplified, 'A nice kind one'. Emily becomes animated, and discloses that she likes Mrs K., who was their teacher but is not anymore. Emily continues telling about another teacher, Mr J., who had to be hospitalised. Tina joins in, speaking over Emily's story, and presently 'hijacks' the storytelling, recalling the pop-up glittery card that they made Mr J. The interviewer redirects them to the agenda of the interview, 'So what about in your pretend school? What is the teacher going to be like?'

> Emily   (*lips moving as if answering inaudibly*)
> Sue: Really kind (.) will let us do anything

Next, Emily tries a couple of times to get back to the topic of Mrs K., but doesn't manage to complete a sentence. Tina and Sue also speak, and the interviewer is responding to them. Presently, Tina mischievously offers 'fights' (in the dream school), and Emily amplifies: '[The imaginary teacher would]

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Let us fight (.) I'd beat up my brother at the disco'. The interviewer echoes this questioningly, and it is Tina - not Emily - who nods vigorously. Again the interviewer redirects: 'So what would the school look like?'

> Emily   (*loudly, gesturing with expansive arm movements*) All lights all around
>   the school

Emily briefly leads the ensuing exchange, but the theme is soon exhausted. When the interviewer prompts with a question about the dream-school playground, Emily becomes animated again with the idea that they would be allowed to ride their bikes on the grass, which is forbidden in the actual school. Again she recalls some real incident, and the other girls 'hijack' her story by finishing it. Again, the interviewer steers them away from reminiscence by asking what else they would do in the classroom. The student-interviewer seems anxious to get 'useable' data, but the timing of her prompts inadvertently marginalises Emily's efforts to assert her own presence.

Tina is again the first to respond to the interviewer's question about the classroom.

> Tina: Watching telly.
> Emily: Tidying up (.) I wish we could tidy up.
> Interviewer: (*inaudible query*)
> Emily: Yeah I do (.) me and Charlotte like to…' [*The rest is unclear, but sounds
>   as if describing what she and Charlotte did*]
> Interviewer: So that's it (.) watch telly?
> Emily: And … [*unclear*] it
> Sue: Dance to music
> Tina   (*smiling broadly whilst pulling her chair to close the narrow gap with
>   Emily's chair*): Wreck everything
> Interviewer: Wreck everything?
> Emily: Ah yes (.) I wish we could watch TV make a mess (.) eat everything (.)
>   put Top of the Pops on (.) eat everything have all drinks

The girls start to tell each other about their favourite food. Just as Emily begins to say something, the interviewer intervenes, prompting for 'anything else' that they would like to have in the dream school.

> Sue and Tina (*simultaneously say something indecipherable*)
> Emily: Do punching and fighting (.) kick
> Interviewer: What? You'd fight each other in your ideal school would you?
> Emily and Tina: Yeah!
> Interviewer: What else?
> Sue   (*looking at something happening off-screen*): Come into school and don't
>   have to pay for dinner

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Emily   (*pointing in the direction of Sue's gaze, saying something inaudible and giggles*)

Sue (*to Interviewer*): You could do your own printing

Interviewer: Do your own printing (.) yeah?

Emily: Mess up the library

Interviewer: You'd like to mess up the library? I thought you liked to tidy up

Sue: Oh yeah, doing the decorations on the Christmas tree

Emily: Being the cleaner (*laughs loudly*)

Interviewer: That's what you'd like to be?

Emily: Yeah

Sue: (*mutters something to Emily*)

Emily (*to Sue*): I do at home (*folding her arms*)

Sue (*to Emily*): How much do you clean?

The interviewer intervenes and introduces the nightmare school. There is an embedded 'small story' in the above exchange: Emily will mess up the library and then be the cleaner. In this way, via the dramatic 'punching fighting and kicking' that momentarily got the interviewer's attention, she gets back to her liking of tidying up.

The dark side of the being-a-cleaner story is not the references to disorderly behaviour. On the contrary, it is the allusion to order. As the cleaner, she has adult powers. Whereas children have power only to cause disorder - for if they are orderly, they are seen as merely compliant - an adult, a cleaner, has the power to put things right. What is Emily trying to put right here?

Emily was the 'problem' child assigned to this group. When I first read the transcript (before seeing the video) and mentioned her tactics to the class teacher, he said that it was just like her. Emily positions herself as tough - she loves swearing, fighting, and so forth - but seen on the video she does not come across as aggressive or hostile. Her provocative interjections are spoken calmly, in good humour. She did not react directly to Tina's invasion, but sat squeezed in her own seat, mostly with folded arms or hands in her lap and looking straight ahead at the interviewer, calmly making outrageous comments. In the power dynamics of the immediate situation, her manoeuvres to control the conversation take on the implication of a 'look at me, I'm still here!' cry. It almost doesn't matter what she says, as long as it keeps her visible. Watching the event, her verbal aggression transpires as a non-aggressive attempt to manage the threat to her sense of self that is posed by Tina's invasion, and which the interviewer inadvertently exacerbates, without resorting to a confrontation.

The dialogic dimension of Emily's small stories and other statements emerges from an analysis of how her utterances relate to other elements of the interview. This posits the interview as a *social act*, defined as 'a dynamic whole - as something going on - no part of which can be considered or understood by itself - a complex organic process implied by each individual

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stimulus and response in it' (Mead, 1934 p.7). At the same time, something 'peculiar' to Emily predisposed her on-the-spot responses. There was a response pattern recognised by her teacher as typical of her. Another child would have reacted differently to Tina's invasion. Emily's wistful fantasies have the effect of altering her orientation to her own situation, hence changing how she enters her own experience as a person. This is their symbolic dimension.

Text 2

The following story was written by eight-year-old Adam at the request of postgraduate Nicola Critchlow (2003). He was given the keywords: classroom, teacher, children, an incident, teacher's reactions, children's reactions. I left his text as written except for changing the boys' names, because he put himself and real classmates in the story (hence the repetition of Adam). There was no Mr Smife (possibly Smythe) in the school.

> **The Art Teacher**
> One day Ben, Adam, Adam and Carl were going to school when they heard a car crash so Ben, Adam, Adam and Carl found out it was the Art teacher Mr Smife. Mr Smife are you ok said Ben yes thank you for pulling me out said Mr Smife. By the way Art lessons first today thanks Mr Smife said Adam and Adam. After Aessembley Carl said Art lessons my favorut min to said Ben, Adam and Adam. The next morning Mr Smifes car blew up and Mr Smife died. Ben, Adam, Adam and Carl were so sad came to Mr Smifes funeral and never did art again because the perfect art teacher was so good no art teacher was better.

Most of Adam's classmates wrote about realistic conflicts or told stories in which the teachers hardly feature. Adam's story is unique in that the relationship between the teacher and the boys is positive. There is striking symmetry of power: the boys save the teacher and he teaches them something they love. Yet he dies. There is a sense of foreclosure in the story. Critchlow spent some time in the school and recalled that Adam liked art, but she finished the fieldwork before I read the story. We are therefore left with an Adam imagined by us through his fantasy, and can only speculate what it might mean for him.

The story has the simplicity of a fairytale. Compared with the protagonists of modern literature, fairytale characters are two-dimensional, lacking psychological depth and 'voice'. Mr Smife and the boys have symmetrically complementary functions. Teacher and boys compensate for something that the other lacks or cannot do; and the story as such, its plot or *mythos*, derives its dynamic from the playing-out of their complementary functions. Following Jung, von Franz (1987) regarded fairytales as snapshots of intrapsychic states.

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Likewise in Jungian analysis, a dream's elements are said to represent various aspects of the self. Jung (1934) instructs analysts to ask what conscious attitude the dream might compensate whilst figuring out the dream's meaning hermeneutically, ie. by considering how its elements are interrelated. Applying this in literary criticism, Dawson (2004) posits that in each novel there is a figure (not necessarily the obvious hero) which pulls together all the elements of the novel into a coherent whole. He calls it the *effective protagonist*.

Adam put himself in the story, but the effective protagonist is not his self-representation, for Adam-the-character is indistinguishable from the other boys. It could be Mr Smife, perhaps a personification of Adam's attitude to art. In my preferred reading, however, it is the activity of art itself, to which all five characters relate. Art functions as an active force, a non-anthropomorphic element that defines the relationship between the boys and the teacher. It also defines 'Ben, Adam, Adam and Carl' as a single unit, unified in their attitude. Although art is not personified, and is not even an event (we don't follow the boys into the lesson), it is still relevant to ask about the conscious attitude that the story compensates.

'The Art Teacher' was produced in the classroom. The children were used to writing creative stories, and the teacher encouraged them to write 'interesting' ones. Adam spells badly but he is a sophisticated storyteller with a dramatic flair. The repetition of 'Ben, Adam, Adam and Carl' has the ring of oral storytelling. He had an actual audience in those boys, for the children showed their stories to each other. Adam's conscious attitude to writing an 'interesting' story and writing for a known audience makes his text different from a dream. It is heuristic to consider its literary genre. The story has a sad ending, but does not have the characteristics of a tragedy identified by Frye (1957): tragedies centre on the hero's isolation, whereas comedies deal with social groups and attempts to fit in. Could Adam's story be compensating for a sense of isolation regarding art? The story positions him as 'one of the lads'. It informs Ben, Carl, and the other Adam that he is growing out of childish things like art; and that he is just like them in that respect, for they share the adventure and irreversible loss of growing up. 'The Art Teacher' thus performs an act of social affiliation - not by telling about it - but in what it takes for granted: that he and his friends do everything together and feel the same. This is its dialogic dimension. Tragic heroes are 'wrapped in the mystery of their communion' with something we see only through their struggle, that is the 'source of their strength and fate alike' (Frye, 1957, p.208). Perhaps Adam's inner struggle was with the feeling that loving art is incompatible with 'laddish' masculinity. The story thus shifts from one genre to the other according to how we read it. This indeterminable nature gives it the quality of a living symbol, pregnant with meanings.

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Reflections

The scope for deriving an analytic construct depends partly on being able to make a clear differentiation between the two concepts, the dialogic versus symbolic, but the boundary is clearly blurred. Emily's utterances were responsive both to others in the immediate environment and to her own situation. Adam's story likewise seems to perform dialogic and symbolic functions.

The conceptual distinction could be envisaged as a continuum between the dialogic (with an emphasis on the interpersonal) and symbolic (with an emphasis on the intrapersonal) dimensions. Some narratives may gravitate towards the dialogic, others towards the symbolic, but there is probably a mixture of both in any narrative that is meaningful to its producer.

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