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Introduction - Narrative, Memory & Identity: Theoretical and Methodological Issues

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Preface

This book is based on papers presented at a third one-day conference hosted by the Narrative and Memory Research Group at the University of Huddersfield. The conference was held in April 2003 and was entitled 'Narrative, Memory and Identity: Theoretical and Methodological Issues'. The Narrative and Memory Research Group has been running for five or so years with members from the disciplines of both psychology and sociology. When establishing the Group we placed the emphasis on providing a forum for researchers in the Division of Psychology and Sociology to share ideas in a friendly and supportive setting. The three conferences organised to date aimed to reflect this ethos and have enabled researchers to come together from across the United Kingdom and beyond to discuss and develop their interests in narrative research and theory.

Once again the conference was a resounding success. It would be easy for members of the Group to take credit for such a well-organised and welcoming event. Alas we must resist such temptation and firmly acknowledge the patience, good humour and meticulous attention to detail of Liz Senior in the Conference Office.

Acknowledgements

First we would, once again, like to thank all those people who participated in the conference and in particular those who have taken the time and effort to produce a version of their paper for this book. As you might expect, with work in this area, it is also necessary to offer our thanks to all those people who participated in research that forms the basis for many of the chapters in this collection.

Organising a conference is a huge responsibility and a somewhat stressful time. Therefore we would like to thank our colleagues in the Department of Behavioural Sciences, in particular the postgraduate students, for their practical assistance and invaluable contributions both in terms of planning the event and ensuring smooth running on the day. Finally, Susan Smith has once again been responsible for transforming the text of versions submitted into the polished artefact. As usual Susan a job well done - thank you.

March 2004

Introduction

DAVID ROBINSON, CHRISTINE HORROCKS, NANCY KELLY AND
BRIAN ROBERTS

The chapters contained in this book address a range of theoretical, practical and methodological issues of relevance to those people who are involved in, or have an interest in, narrative approaches to social science research. As you might expect in a collection of papers concerned with narrative approaches it is possible to identify common threads that twist through them all. In order to try and help the reader we have imposed some organisation on the papers and grouped them into themes that we hope make some sort of sense to the reader! In any act of ‘grouping’ there is always a sense in which the decisions made are to a certain extent arbitrary and this book is no exception. There are 22 chapters in total organised into two main sections. The first section comprises papers that are primarily theoretical in orientation and address issues concerning the re-presentation of lived experience, the collection and interpretation of narratives. The second section contains chapters that are more concerned with the application of narrative research to understand the experiences of individuals.

Section 1: Theoretical Issues: Re-presenting Lived Experience, Collecting and Interpreting Narratives

The papers in the first section of this book are organised into three themes: re-presenting the lived experience, the relationship between the researcher and the participant, and issues in the analysis of narratives. The first four chapters of this section are concerned with the problems facing all researchers who are trying in some way to re-present lived experience. Maggie O’Neill presents a thought provoking exploration of the relationship between art and ethnography. She uses research that investigated the lived experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK as a vehicle for developing her arguments concerning the nature of social science research and its inherent ethico-political dimension. Some of the themes in O’Neill’s chapter are also evident in Barbara Howey’s autobiographical analysis of the nature of creative painting. She explores the complex nature of the relationship between identity and the act of painting. In the third chapter Pat Chambers presents an analysis of the role of the ‘field diary’ in narrative research. Her arguments are structured around the question, ‘Is the use of a field diary in biographical research and narrative analysis sheer self-indulgence or an essential tool?’ Chambers concludes that a field diary

should be considered to be an essential component of biographical research and that it forms the basis for the development of a critical and reflexive approach. Brendan Stone considers the limits of narrative and the implications that these have for the autobiographical accounts of people experiencing some form of 'mental illness'.

The second theme in this section concerns the relationship between the researcher and the participant in interview settings. Barry Godfrey argues that traditionally an empathic relationship between the interviewer and interviewee has been seen as an important feature of interview based research in the social sciences. He goes on to discuss a number of issues that arise from this assumption, for example, what happens in situations where the interviewer takes a dislike to the participant? Godfrey also considers the implications of his arguments for situations where the researcher doing the analysis is not the person who conducted the interview. Pattman and Kehily draw on the experiences of the first author during a series of interviews with a young person. They argue that the emotional reactions of the interviewer towards the interviewee should be explicitly acknowledged during the analysis and representation of narrative accounts.

The final theme in this section of the book addresses concerns associated with the analysis of narrative data. In the first chapter in this section Vanessa May presents a convincing case for the inclusion of historical context in the analysis of narrative data. Angela Meah, Jenny Hockey and Vicki Robinson explore the contradictions and omissions evident in narratives of heterosexual identity. They highlight the importance of silences and exclusions in narratives and point to the importance of the 'unsaid' in the construction of identities. Danny Meetoo explores the experience of time by individuals with diabetes mellitus. He argues that an understanding of the temporal dimension of individual's lives is a necessary prerequisite to developing appropriate self-care management programmes. Diana Medlicott focuses on the importance of space and place in the experience of prison. She argues that a sense of place and an attachment to particular places constitutes a dynamic aspect of an individual's identity. In the final paper in this section Brian Roberts presents a broad ranging account of the ways in which we establish connections between our experiences in rendering our lives meaningful. He argues that notions of fantasy and motivation have been rather neglected in the analysis and interpretation of narratives.

Section 2: Methodological Issues: Using a Narrative Approach

The collection of papers in the second section of this book are organised around two themes of health and illness narratives and occupational and career related narratives. The chapter by Frances Reynolds explores women's strategies for living with multiple sclerosis. She highlights the importance of context, in particular relationships with close family members, but points to the complexity of such influences. Reynolds also reminds us that illness is not experienced in a vacuum but is embedded within complex social settings. Anthony Page is concerned with the extent to which notions of fragility or instability are evident in the narratives of people diagnosed with manic-depressive disorder. Although he identified some changes in the participants' sense of self during episodes of their disorder, Page concludes that there is no support for the view that manic-depressive disorder results in fragile or unstable sense of self. John Keady explores the ways in which individuals narrate and interpret an assessment for a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. He identifies distinct power differentials in the assessment process and suggests ways in which they might be reduced. Like Medlicott he draws our attention to the importance of space and place in the ways in which people experience the world. Keady proposes that consideration of the physical environment within which the assessment takes place should be taken into account in any steps taken to reduce the threatening nature of an assessment for a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. Laura Camfield explores the ways in which people living with dystonia make sense of their illness. She argues that one of the problems facing people with dystonia is that there is no discursive space for their stories to be heard. Camfield discusses the implications of this with reference to Foucauldian ideas of power. Jane Richardson, Bie Nio Ong and Julius Sim consider the implications of living with widespread chronic pain for a person's identity. They draw on two case studies to provide contrasting accounts of living with chronic pain. They argue that 'invisible' pain creates a tension between a need to demonstrate the reality of the pain and a need to create an identity that is not based upon 'being ill'.

The second and final theme in this section of the book is concerned with occupational and career narratives. Sion Williams and John Keady present an account of research that has investigated the utility and effectiveness of using a biographical approach in nurse education. They outline an approach to learning which is located in affective experience and discuss its implications for the development of a 'person-centred' approach to health care. Sue Frost and Dallas Cliff explore the career narratives of nurse academics. They suggest that the narratives of nurse-academics have a 'political' function in the sense that they privilege certain stories and certain ways of seeing the world. Frost and Cliff explore the implications of the narratives for the development of nursing as an academic profession and the professional status of nurse academics. Ivo

Čermák describes the use of a life line technique to elicit life-stories. He identifies a number of genres of life-stories and suggests that each contains two basic psychologically relevant content modes. Čermák refers to them as ‘coping with burdens’ and ‘emotional tuning’ and suggests they correspond to the behavioural and experiential level respectively. Helen Dilks explores the negotiation of identity by workers in the shopfitting industry. She discusses ways in which the ways in which accounts of events change according to the relationship between the audience and the narrator. Dilks proposes that different accounts of the same event are created as a means of influencing the power relationships in the workplace. Judith Sixsmith and Margaret Boneham present an exploration of the relationship between social capital, health and womanhood for a group of socially deprived, younger working class women. In the final chapter in this section Wendy Phoenix Chin presents an analysis of how national and political contexts can influence the processes of identity construction in narrative fiction.