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20 Parallel Worlds: Narrative 'Versions' and Cultural Exchange in an Occupational Environment

HELEN DILKS

Abstract

The concept of 'narrativity' has emerged as a powerful communicative device employed by workers for the creation and maintenance of group identity in transient occupational situations. This paper explores the negotiation of identity and practice by workers in the shopfitting industry as they move between 'parallel worlds' according to differentiation by gender, ethnicity and age. The nature and authenticity of narrativity as a research device is examined, and the most prominent narrative themes are discussed in terms of their usefulness as boundary 'markers'. It is argued that narratives serve a dual purpose by providing the means for capital accrual within the occupational environment, and for the dissemination of collective knowledge within and between parallel worlds. The substantive relation of 'truth' to the 'event' described in narratives depends to an extent upon the actual, or the perceived nature of the relationship between the narrator and the listener. The presentation of different 'versions' is considered as a means of achieving temporary rapport between groups and individuals whose identities are constantly changing, and the ability of various agents to adapt their presentation in order to negotiate a balance of power is examined.

Main Text

Story-tellers from the distant past seem to become endowed with an almost magical quality which is somehow missing when the ideas and moral traditions relate to the more recent past, or even to the present (cf. Morgan, 1991, p.42). This becomes more pronounced when the discussion relates to the occupational environment, within which 'stories' may be perceived as having less significance as 'anecdotal' value than other forms of data which can be obtained through standard interview procedures (Baldry, 1999, p.540; Dingwall, 1980, p.872). It is argued here that narrative practice as adopted by

shopfitting workers has value not only as empirical evidence, but also that story-telling plays a crucial role in the ongoing negotiation of identity which necessarily takes place in constantly changing employment environments. Shopfitters as a group can be difficult to categorise due to movement between trades and employment status, but the term generally refers to workers involved in the refurbishment of retail stores and public buildings. For the purposes of this article, I have chosen to differentiate between two groups of male workers in the first instance, known as the 'old shopfitters' (OS) and the 'young shopfitters' (YS), whose stories have formed the foundation for a much longer work (Dilks, 2003). Relationships between the different agents can therefore be analysed on the basis of differentiated 'versions' which enable the individuals in question to accrue 'shopfitting capital' by enhancing their group identity.

Historically, to fall outside the scope of the 'known' craft network was by definition an admission of a man's inability to function as a respectable tradesman, leading to an inevitable decline in his material security:

... anonymity was the most dangerous condition that a journeyman could experience, because it was the surest route to exile from the trades and entry into the world of hospitals and the poor ... (Sonenscher, 1989, in Farr, 2000, p.206)

The criteria used for the employment of men on site are usually based on the recommendation of the foreman - either being 'known' from a previous acquaintance (personal or occupational), or being approved on the basis of performance - which may depend upon the person's willingness to co-operate in illegal activities organised by the foreman. A man was introduced onto the site by the foreman as a 'good lad', the implication being that he was a hard and willing worker even though he was a labourer and previously unknown within the network. During the interview, the respondent confirmed this interpretation by describing himself as 'not being happy' unless he was 'always busy with some work or other'. However, some time after the interviews, it transpired that an argument had occurred on site between the foreman and the labourer, as a consequence of which the labourer had left the site. An explanation for the sequence of events leading up to the labourer's premature departure is taken from a narrative given by the respondent in a telephone conversation (see *The Labourer's Story*). As an outsider to the shopfitting network, having worked 'in demolition' since his youth, the labourer was taken in (in both senses) by the foreman, believing that despite his status as 'a general dogsbody' he would be treated the same as everybody else so long as he followed the informal rules set out by the foreman. By describing the worker as a 'good lad', the foreman is able to exploit his obvious vulnerability to increase his own cash holding and also demonstrates his power over the other men by example.

The Labourer's Story

The foreman kept a caravan on site, and let out beds to workers at £5 per night. All time sheets were completed by the foreman, who had booked until 8pm instead of the actual earlier time worked. A fee was charged for this service - everybody had to agree to it, otherwise the foreman would either enter an earlier time than was worked, or the worker would have to stay until the designated time. On several weekends the foreman had left site, leaving the respondent in charge of locking up the site, promising him extra pay which never materialised. The labourer could not claim this any other way, because nobody knew that the foreman had gone home: 'I paid my own way'. The respondent had fallen into debt, and been obliged to borrow money from the foreman. At first, the foreman had seemed sympathetic, and offered the loan to help out - but then he had demanded extra money for this service. The labourer was unwilling to pay the foreman any additional money, because he was still in debt. He had argued about the amount payable. Not long after this, the foreman had publicly blamed the respondent for damaged decoration actually caused by one of the subcontractors at some of the windows, and had thus provoked an argument. After the argument, the labourer had walked out. The following day he had returned and waited 'for a considerable time' to see the foreman 'to sort it out' but the foreman refused to see him. He lost his job.

Upon further questioning after the incident, and contrary to his previous recommendation, the foreman gives a different version of the worker's attitude to work. He becomes an 'idle worker' who had for several weeks reported late for work, was often drunk at work, and was generally not 'up to scratch'. By presenting the labourer in an unfavourable light, the foreman establishes not only the unreliability of his performance, but also the unreliability of his testimony. The procedure is a self-protection measure, to pre-empt the possibility of an official complaint by the labourer. According to the labourer, he had habitually 'nipped out' to place bets for the other workers, and nothing had been said when he called in 'for a quick drink' on his return. This only became an issue after the argument. However, although pressured by the shopfitting management, the labourer does not step outside of the sanctioned boundaries of the 'shopfitting code', and indicates that he is not willing to become (known as) an informant.

This narrative demonstrates that much more is going on than competition over economic resources. Bourdieu (1996) conceptualises the access to resources by differentiated agents as dependent upon the accrual of types of capital: economic, cultural, social and symbolic achieved through *struggles* (in

Peillon, 1998, p.215). The labourer cannot seem to accrue any form of lasting capital whatever he does, although others are able to retain their reputation in spite of their actions. He is 'his own worst enemy', and 'brought it on himself', and is remembered only for his shiftlessness. It would seem that for some people 'cash' can temporarily buy 'capital' - but it cannot guarantee its consequence lasting beyond the necessity of the moment. Alternatively, for others the endurance of 'social' capital is accepted beyond all evidence of customary group sanction. Bourdieu (1984) refers to this in a slightly different context as having the ability to derive profits from 'negative assets', although here it is achieved not through self-exploitation, but through the strength of insider membership (p.37).

The significance of the social network for the accrual and 'use' of social capital is not new, of course, as Bourdieu has clearly identified throughout his work:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition ... which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively- owned capital ...

(Richardson, J. (ed), 1986, p.248-249; cf. Granovetter, M., 1985; Coleman, J., 1988, pp.101-102)

Bourdieu sees this form of capital as both a shared asset and a product of group membership, defined according to specific boundaries through mutual recognition and the operationalisation of 'obligations of exchange' within the group, which is extended further by Coleman (1990) to become real or potential resources gained through relationships (in Lin, 2001, pp.22-23). The exchange value of capital from one form to another can have a powerful cumulative effect on social relationships, with the ultimate conversion into 'symbolic capital' which has 'the power to create "the official version of the social world"' (quote from Bourdieu, 1984, in Harker et al., [eds] 1990, p.14). It is argued that these 'official versions' are initiated and sustained through narrativity, as workers negotiate their identity in the occupational environment. It is possible that different forms of capital may also exist as 'parallel' concepts which operate in a similar, but not identical manner within different worlds eg. the 'official' (foreman's version) and 'unofficial' (outsider version) worlds of capital in shopfitting). Again following Bourdieu, who defines the disjunction between 'official rules' and 'actual behaviour' in terms of the 'habitus', or 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions' which, though inherited, are also infinitely adaptive to outcomes without being 'the product of obedience to rules', different forms of capital are 'mutually convertible' thus allowing for capital exchanges between individuals and groups within the class system (1990, p.53; Callinicos, 1999, pp.287-295; Jenkins, 1992, p.41). It is

this capacity for improvisation which allows the habitus to represent the dynamic intersection of structure and agency, which enables actors to ‘play the game’ of social interaction (Bourdieu, 1984, p.101; Calhoun et al., 1993, p.4). However, the exchange of capital within the formal, official systems, whether in the form of a class hierarchy, the financial economy or social/cultural/intellectual relations does not account for the additional interplay of the informal, narrative systems or any potential intersections of the two systems. It is not only a question of observing that agents manipulate official capital exchanges from rules to actual or customary behaviour, but also that their strategies encompass diverse combinations of both official and unofficial capital exchange.

The strategies employed by the YS in establishing their capital acquisition are traced through the legitimisation of their narrative versions. The YS, aged between 18-25 years and in various stages of training, emerged as a distinct group during the latter part of the research. They were distinct because they did not participate in any of the fraudulent activities on site. As non-qualified tradesman, and because of their age, they were not regarded as being full members of the dominant site group. The subject of their narratives is the experience of injustice and discrimination at the hands of the OS, and their subsequent employment of adaptive strategies to assert their group identity. They were usually allocated a work space which was isolated from the other men (and any adult activities) in order that the OS could set their own agenda without being overlooked by non-group members. The YS were resentful about this - but refused to join in the ‘payment for favours’ system, whereby the foreman booked additional hours of work for individuals for a ‘fee’. The YS were increasingly excluded from any underhand deals carried out by the OS with the foreman. As a final part of the exclusionary process, the foreman repeatedly passed on accounts of the careless mistakes of the younger men, including their inability to work hard, and their preference for talking rather than working. His final comment:

They are nice lads - but they are ‘idle’ - they are nothing more than glorified labourers. You can’t send a boy to do a man’s job.

To be labelled as ‘idle’ was an insult to the YS reputation - the opposite of the revered title ‘good lad’ which conveyed the foreman’s blessing - and had the potentially dangerous consequence of restricting future employment within the local shopfitting network. Far from allowing themselves to feel frustrated by their exclusion, however, the YS began to initiate their own methods of accruing capital. They gathered information on the behaviour, practices and habits of the older men in exchange for favours. They let it be known that they had contacts’ in the office (although they would never make an official complaint), and implied that it might be in the foreman’s interests to treat them

reasonably. They took every opportunity to belittle and show up the older men, and began to re-negotiate the balance of power in their favour. They gained capital acquisition through:

1. Superior strength (for work) - rather than paying the foreman off for less work, they revelled in demonstrating their physical prowess and endurance.
2. Stamina (for holding drink) - the OS would drink moderately and still return to work 'under the weather', whereas the YS regularly imbued large quantities of alcohol without impediment.
3. Relationship status (fidelity) - the OS stories of their sexual exploits served only to widen the gulf between the two groups. The YS (who described themselves as 'old married men' although they were all unmarried) were in long-term relationships, and by implication, monogamous as opposed to promiscuous.
4. Personal hygiene - The YS were 'clubbers' which suggested a certain state of cleanliness and fashion not shared by the OS 'pubbers'.

It can be seen that the YS initially have restricted capital in the form that the older members enjoy, being excluded from the most daring fraud, which includes actual theft of goods from sites, and from the benefits of payment for perks such as leaving early etc. However, they subsequently introduced their own version of capital which is not shared by the older members, in the form of 'underpants'! Clean underpants became a symbol of high status among the YS - dressing well, and being clean, is of the utmost importance to men who frequent clubs rather than pubs for recreation. They did not share the same relaxation as the older men - eg. betting, and they had no use for 'whore houses' - being able to acquire sexual favours without payment by virtue of their youth, physique and personality (YS version).

Social capital is not identical for these groups, but the new 'paradigm' has to become accepted more widely to become useful throughout the network. Networks are already in existence for the OS, who have established their identities through previous work experience (on a particular job) or recognised ability (through known skill). YS do not have full access to these networks because they have not been working long enough, and they build up social capital by working hard when the OS do not, and by getting over problems by their own instinct and collective ingenuity. In effect, the OS narratives have been devalued in the estimation of the YS, and replaced by those narratives with a greater capital exchange value. Nevertheless, the YS may have remained an excluded group if they had not made an impact on the social occupational

world by getting their 'versions' accepted within this network. They therefore remain careful to pay lip-service to the traditional regime of 'customary favours', being always mindful of the potential damage that a foreman could do with a 'bad' recommendation, and not wanting to be seen to actively undermine or expose current 'cash' practices. While there is a potential for the foreman to 'misrecognise' the situation with the YS, in as much as they have apparently reversed the impact of his exclusionary practices through this re-negotiation of capital exchange, as a key figure in the shopfitting organisation the foreman still has the power to define the environment of the exchange in the interests of himself and the other OS.

Firstly, this is achieved relatively easily by direct command, as the YS are reluctant to overtly oppose the legitimate authority of the foreman. Knowing (or recognising) what to the OS is 'an obsession with cleanliness' by the YS, the foreman gave all dirty jobs such as cleaning gutters, drains and toilets to this group. This succeeded in 'punishing' the YS in a meaningful way and at the same time relieved members of his own group from an unwanted involvement in this area. Secondly, by playing on the YS belief of OS incompetence as expressed through their inability to perform certain tasks, the OS are able to use a 'misrecognition' technique to fool the YS into doing jobs which nobody else wants to do:

The Floating Pooh Narrative (1)

Everyone came up to me and said 'You'd better get in that loading bay because the waste pipe has fell off the back of the toilets ... and there is pooh all over the floor'. So I went to have a look and ... erm ... there was probably about five or six people standing around looking at all the pooh all over the floor. Pooh and wee and toilet paper was all coming out the back of the toilet. Somebody had actually put a plank across the floor, because the floor was dipped down in the middle so that they could get across to the toilet. I asked 'Who knocked that off', meaning the pipe at the back, and they said 'I don't know', so I said 'Why haven't you put it back on'. They said, 'Well I'm not paid to put pipes back on'. So then I just said well, 'I suppose I'm paid for it then, am I', and I went and put it back on. It would have been easier to put the pipe back on in the first place than laying the wood down. People were still going to the toilet in it, and watching the stuff come out the back of it. Can you believe it.

In this narrative the YS is confronted with the apparent incapability of the older shopfitters and labourers to solve the problem in a reasonable or even logical manner. They have not been able to think beyond the need of the moment in order to resolve the difficulty, even to the extent of becoming part

of a crowd observing an unexpected spectacle. However, their actual knowledge is revealed when they comment on the specific nature of the job which is not appropriate to their skilled status as craftsmen (shopfitters) or adults (labourers). The YS is initially summoned as an observer, but quickly steps in as the 'hero' to save the situation - as expected by the other workers. The YS 'misrecognises' the situation as one which requires his expertise in the face of the incomprehensible stupidity of the other workers, who are content to be so labelled if it relieves them of the need to take action demeaning to their status as workers and as men.

Regardless of the ulterior motives of the OS in this and many similar instances, the YS are able to make use of such narratives to accrue additional capital. The stories are accepted as legitimate capital within the YS world, because the heroes confirm the group's collective knowledge of the OS as 'idle' and celebrate the resourcefulness and 'courage' of the YS through humour. In Narrative no.2, the YS are able to laugh at themselves and at the same time exclude the OS from the group experience. This new way of looking at situations has earned the YS an exchangeable form of capital, which, although the OS may find distasteful according to their capital accrual criteria, eventually becomes accepted as a legitimate version throughout the entire network. In this extract, ongoing negotiation is evident between the narrator and listener as the YS struggles to find the appropriate language to describe the male YS experience to a female researcher. His choice of words enables a 'delicate' subject to be introduced without causing offence, while retaining the basics and subsequent capital value of the story.

The Floating Pooh Narrative (2)

The lights had just gone out. Dave was going in to the same toilets - they're a static toilets you know in like a container on site - and as he was walking into the toilets a bloke went 'I wouldn't go into that trap if I was you' ... you know, meaning because of all the water and everything, but Dave didn't want go in the one where the bloke had just done a smelly pooh so he went in the one he said don't go in. Then he pulled his trousers down and went to sit down on the toilet seat, then obviously as he was sitting down ... things that dangle down between your legs, you know ... went into the water ... and as he made contact with the water it made him jump, and as he jumped he slipped over and fell in it all. Then he came running out the toilets and he saw me ... and then he went to get a shower back at the hotel then during his time at the hotel the lights had come back on and I went to have a look at what he'd sat in ... and I had great pleasure in showing him later.

In conclusion it can be seen that narrativity within an occupational environment has much to offer as a means of crossing boundaries and establishing inclusion and exclusion zones. Occupational identity is transient, in as much as the YS will eventually become the OS, although group identification may not necessarily be based on age. What is consistent however is the type of acceptable stories which enhance each individual's identity, and in turn provide a store of capital upon which to draw in ever changing occupational situations, including research interviews. It takes several repetitions for the narrative to reach its final, polished form, at which point it achieves its full potential as a 'capital earner'. There will be different versions according to the gender/age/ethnicity or other marker of group belonging, but basically the content will remain the same. Throughout the narratives there is an undercurrent of morality, but when projected towards a particular audience, the morality becomes anchored to stereotypical generalisations on the basis of assumptions about the differentiation of the listeners. It is therefore acceptable to present the stories from an insider/outsider perspective, which can be adapted by changing the locality of the former, or situated in the past for the latter, according to the extent of renegotiation necessary in order to 'craft' the narrative towards different listeners for maximum capital value. In this way the evolution of the shopfitting narrative moves on from negative experiences, transforming them into something more positive and of more value in the social shopfitting world.

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