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Introduction - Narrative, Memory and Life Transitions

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Preface

This book is based on papers presented at a one day conference in April 2001 entitled 'Narrative, Memory and Life Transitions' at the University of Huddersfield. It was hosted by the Narrative and Memory Research Group at the University. The Group has been running for four or so years seeking to use the contributions of psychology and sociology to an understanding of biographical narrative and memory; using this work in research. The Group was established to provide a forum for researchers in the Division of Psychology and Sociology to share ideas in a friendly and supportive setting. It was our intention to organise a conference that reflected this ethos and to enable researchers to come together and discuss narrative research and theory.

The conference was a huge success, not least because of the support we received from the Conference Office. Joan Wragg and Janice Bradley made sure that everything ran smoothly and was well organised down to the last detail - even to the extent of making sure that the table cloth was positioned correctly! Sadly Joan died in February this year - we will all miss her.

Acknowledgements

We would 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. On behalf of all the researchers who have contributed to this book we would like to thank the people who have participated in the research that is reported here. The organisation of a conference requires the support of colleagues. Our colleagues in the Department of Behavioural Sciences have provided a steady stream of good ideas and, at times, inspiration.

Susan Smith was responsible for transforming the text from the versions submitted to final product. Thanks Susan, you've done a wonderful job!!

February 2002

Introduction: Narrative, Memory and Life Transitions

CHRISTINE HORROCKS, KATE MILNES, BRIAN ROBERTS AND
DAVE ROBINSON

The Rise of ‘Narrative’ Analysis in the Social Sciences

For some time numerous writers have noted the rise of narrative within the broad range of the social sciences. It has been suggested that this development represents a significant narrative or biographical ‘turn’ in the theoretical and methodological basis of the various disciplines (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Josselson, 1999; Roberts, 2002). In the trajectory from positivism, neo-positivism through cultural representation, discourse and postmodernism or other ‘moments’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) a point had been reached which sought to restore some sense of the individual as an acting, reflexive person. Feminist and other radical approaches have highlighted the benefits that can accrue from the crossing of disciplinary boundaries. It is very apparent that under the heading of ‘narrative’ ‘historians are talking to literary theorists who are talking to anthropologists who are talking to linguists’ and even psychologists are speaking to sociologists (Josselson, 1999). The narrative approach has been developed in various ways since the pioneering work of writers such as Sarbin (1986) and Polkinghorne (1988). The term narrative has been applied in a variety of ways, for example, to mean a description, a commentary, or an explanation in various types research accounts across the disciplines. In relation to biographical work it has been most closely identified with the notion of ‘story’ that has tended to have certain assumptions such as having a beginning and end (a chronology) and a cast and ‘plot’. There are further issues here concerning what can be ‘told’ in such a form - what may be unconscious or unknowable. These issues, and others, have provided a range of challenges for academics committed to narrative research. Nevertheless, the popularity of narrative appears to be growing and is being used by an increasing number of researchers in a variety of contexts.

The use of the term 'narrative' implies a connection to a life that is both lived and told. Individuals draw on the surrounding cultural meanings and actively interpret past events in the construction of their stories. The 'story' is an account which is carried forward and re-interpreted as part of our lived experience and so is not necessarily linear or chronological, consistent, accurate or complete (Josselson, 1999, p.3). A number of writers (for example, Gergen and Gergen, 1984; Gergen, 1999; Riessman, 1993) have pointed to the various forms which narrative may take. These include basic types, such as romance or tragedy that can be found in 'real' lives.

Life Transitions

Here, the main focus is upon 'life transitions' - how lives are understood, interpreted and major events in life rendered meaningful with possible consequences, not merely perhaps physical, but in terms of shifts in identity. 'Life transitions' in sociological and psychological research have been understood a number of ways, such as stages in the 'life course', career shifts, life history events, as another 'page' in the life script or plan. Typically there has been little consideration given to individual interpretation or experience. In traditional approaches to psychological research issues of 'agency' have played at best a secondary role. Even the interactionist approaches of the 1960s, largely focussed on the creation of deviancy, while seeking to give a 'humanistic' portrait' of the individual tended (for some critics) to re-insert another form of determination - that of labelling.

Writers such as Denzin (1989) sought to overcome this 'objective-subjective' divide the individual life by using such terms as 'epiphany' - moments in life that still have to be understood, interpreted and acted (rather than reacted) upon: Denzin, assessing the 'classic natural history approach' argues:

'It is a logocentric project. It seeks to find reason and order in lives. It views lives as rational constructions. It sees in a life materials for the testing and development of scientific hypotheses about human behaviour. Turning lives into objects of study, this approach gives scant attention to the problems involved in describing real lives with real, objective meanings. While announcing a concern for the differences between objective experiences and their subjective, interactional meanings and expressions, the approach tells us surprisingly little about the gaps between experiences and their expressions'. (Denzin, 1989, p.52)

In the study of lives in sociology, psychology and related disciplines various terms have been used to understand the changes in an individual's life. These include turning points, stages, and, more recently, 'epiphany'. Narrative approaches provide a means of understanding the inter-linking of individual

and structure, micro and macro perspectives, objective and subjective and memory and 'lived experience'. The following articles, from diverse positions and in a variety of contexts, provide examples of how narrative can shed some light on these interrelationships. Thus, the idea of 'life transition' is used here not to indicate a socially ungrounded individual interpretation of events and situations, neither is it to be seen as socially determined - but a dialectically interpretive formation as cultural meanings are exchanged and acted upon. Here narrative is both a representation and a 'living interpretation' guiding and rendering meaning to life's experience.

The Contributions

Introducing Narrative

The remit of the book is to explore a number of issues relating to the events of life and subjective interpretation through narratives - the lived accounts of individuals facing change in a number of contexts or areas of life. The contributions have been organised into five sections. The first section, 'Introducing Narrative', contains papers written by the keynote speakers at the conference. In the first of these Michelle Crossley presents an overview of narrative theory. She highlights the central role played by language and stories in the process of self-construction. Crossley argues narrative acts as an 'organising principle' for the way in which we make sense of the world and our place in it. However, she also points out that it is possible to overplay the concept of narrative and if we attempt to use it to explain everything there is the danger that it becomes meaningless. Crossley closes her chapter with a discussion of the effects of traumatic events on peoples' narratives and the way in which narratives can be used to restore a sense of order and coherence to a person's life. Phil Salmon's chapter draws on her own childhood experiences to explore issues of the 'narrating I' and the 'narrating me'. She challenges the idea that the only way to describe our lives is to use a narrative that is continuous and coherent. Salmon presents episodes from the early part of her life which are not stitched together to form a seamless narrative but are discontinuous and heterogeneous. She suggests that this provides an alternative way of narrating one's own personal experiences.

Self and Identity

This section examines issues of 'self' and 'identity' in a number of contexts. The chapters are concerned with the perennial questions, 'Who am I?' and 'What is a self?' Pat Chambers uses feminist gerontology to explore the issues of later life widowhood. She argues that current conceptualisations of later life

widowhood are inadequate. Chambers proposes an alternative framework that recognises the diversity of experience and multiple narratives of later life widows. Pam Green Lister explores the ways in which survivors of sexual abuse can use creative writing to reconstruct their memory of past events. Many women survivors experience memory loss that has implications for their sense of self. Green Lister argues that creative writing can provide a means through which survivors can make sense of their lives and move towards developing a coherent life narrative. Louise Livesey focuses on the narratives produced when women disclose their own childhood sexual abuse to other people. She argues that the linguistic resources available to survivors of abuse are constrained and shaped by cultural narratives. The accounts that women give need to be consistent with what the 'audience' expects. This can place limits on what it is actually possible to tell when one is disclosing childhood sexual abuse. Livesey recognises the socially constructed nature of narratives and emphasises the power of the listener in the construction of meaning and the production of narratives. Minna-Leena Pulkkinen explores the way in which a 'self-inflicted socially repressive experience' is integrated into an identity narrative. She uses narratives counselling sessions conducted as part of the community service required of convicted drunk drivers in Finland. Pulkkinen is concerned with issues of personal agency and how the notion of responsibility is constructed within the counselling sessions. In the final paper in this section Christine Horrocks explores the concept of self-change in drug users sentenced to Drug Treatment and Testing Orders in the United Kingdom. Horrocks discusses the implications of the metaphors used by one particular drug user and argues that the orientational metaphor, 'moving forward', carries with it both costs and benefits for the narrator.

Parenthood and Relationships

This section offers a set of rather contrasting views on the issues of parenthood and relationships. Jan Draper conceptualises becoming a father as a form of transition and draws on ritual transition theory to understand men's experiences. She explores the changing nature of men's involvement in the birth of their children and suggests that despite being encouraged to be a part of the pregnancy and birth cycle men are marginalised. Draper argues that seeing the transition to fatherhood as a 'rites of passage' will enable us to develop a better understanding of this particular life event. Carole Jackson focuses on the family unit and explores the literacy traditions of three families. She discusses the role of grandparents and the tradition of mothers as guardians of family literacy. Jackson highlights the complexity of family literacy and points to the importance of family history and tradition not only in issues associated with learning to read, but also in family life more generally. Sally Johnson explores the way in which women make sense of and interpret the

bodily changes they experience during pregnancy. She argues that women draw on a progressive narrative, one in which they strive to maintain control in the face of potential threats to their self and identity. However, Johnson points out that the narratives drawn on by women reflect dominant cultural narratives of an idealised, slim female body. She argues that such narratives may be problematic, since the pursuit of such ideals can have a negative impact on the psychological well-being of women during and after pregnancy. Veronica Kleinert is concerned with the constitution of inclusion in the lesbian community. She argues that 'gossip' provides the basis for perpetuating and promulgating knowledge and collective memory. Kleinert sees lesbian culture and its language as being inseparable and argues that an analysis of the language used by a particular groups, in this case the lesbian community, it is possible to develop a better understanding of their culture. Teresa Peck concludes this section with an examination of the changes that take place in narratives about the marital relationship when couples decide to divorce. She argues that focusing on the negative aspects of their partner and relationship enables people to disengage from the closeness of their relationship. If one partner is unable to do this once the decision to divorce has been taken the psychological consequences can be extreme and enduring. Peck concludes her paper with a call to pay greater attention to the narratives of relationships that have endured as well as those that break down.

Illness

An important part of the study of narrative has been the question of time. The two articles in this section have a common focus on how identity or biography shifts following injury or illness - in an attempt to reconstruct narrative, for instance, to provide a new coherence to life. Frances Reynolds presents an analysis of narratives elicited from women who have experienced some form of chronic illness such as cancer. She argues that participating in some form of creative activity, such as embroidery or textile art, enables people to develop alternative identities which provide additional coping resources during times of stress. Brett Smith and Andrew C. Sparkes present some findings of a project looking at the lived experiences of men who have suffered spinal chord injury as the result of playing sport. They discuss the problems sportsmen have constructing a valued sense of self in the face of an injury which prevents them from participating in their chosen sport and also in many everyday activities they had previously taken for granted. Smith and Sparkes highlight the diversity of narratives produced by their participants and point out that some men reject the 'personal tragedy' storyline and prefer to see their current situation as providing an opportunity to reject disempowering identities such as hegemonic masculinity.

Theoretical and methodological issues

The study of narrative raises a range of very important theoretical and methodological issues. In this section a number of these are addressed. Catherine Bates examines the neglected area in narrative of 'visual memories' nature of memory and in particular looks at the role of visual images in the process of remembering. Bates contrasts the roles of objects and photographs as ways of evoking memories of past events and people. She puts forward a case for the conceptualisation of memory and remembering as embodied experiences and not simply processes and structure that exist inside the head of an individual. Brian Roberts raises the issue of the researcher's own biography in the understanding of others. In a reflective piece he discusses his own experiences of conducting biographical research and encourages researchers to acknowledge and reflect their own histories when they are conducting research. Myrian Sepulveda Santos explores the relationship between narrative and memory by drawing on the work of Derrida and Benjamin. She argues that although memory and remembering are social constructions this does not mean that the past can merely be constructed and created in ways that are consistent with contemporary discourses. The past is also a 'lived past' with its own spatial and cultural boundaries. Dave Robinson outlines an approach to eliciting narratives in interviews which goes some way to addressing power differentials in the interview context. He describes the use of photo-elicitation methodology in an investigation of the construction of identity during the transition to university. In the final chapter of the book Nancy Kelly presents an account of the way in which community and cultural narratives can be identified in the decision-making processes associated with child protection cases in the United Kingdom. Using documentary analysis Kelly shows how the underlying beliefs and community narratives about 'mothering' can impact on how decisions are made.

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