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11 On Imagining Others Lives Within Narrative Research: Some Constraints and Possibilities

BRETT SMITH AND VICTOR PÉREZ-SAMANIEGO

According to Andrews (2007), “if we wish to access the frameworks of meaning for others, we must be willing and able to imagine a world other than the one we know” (p.489). This may be enabled, she suggests, through narrative imagination.

Our narrative imagination is our most valuable tool in our exploration of others’ worlds, for it assists us in seeing beyond the immediately visible. It is our ability to imagine other “possible lives” (Brockmeier, 2005) – our own and others – that creates our bond with “diverse social and historical worlds” (Brockmeier, 2005). Without this imagination, we are forever restricted to the world as we know it, which is a very limited place to be. (p.510)

Furthermore, for Bondi (2003) and Finley (2006), through imaginatively entering into the experiential world of participant’s lives researchers may increase their ability to better know them, experience empathy, reduce emotional harm, and thereby help them obtain significant knowledge of the human situation in ethically admirable, or at least ethically defensible, ways. Likewise, Mackenzie and Scully (2007) point out that it is often assumed that we can overcome epistemic gaps through the exercise of moral imagination: “By imaginatively ‘putting ourselves in the place of others’, it is argued, we can come to understand the experiences and points of view of others whose lives are quite different from our own” (p.337).

In what follows, drawing on various scholars, including Levinas (2001), I seek to problematise this sense of imaginative projection by highlighting a number of constraints to our ability to imagine a world other than the one we know. Before this, however, it must first be recognised that I am not suggesting that we should abandon trying to imagine others lives. On the contrary, this process can be a “valuable tool in our exploration of others’ worlds” (Andrews, 2007, p.510). Nevertheless, there are constraints to the imagining the worlds of other people that need highlighting. Here, without wishing to devalue what imagination offers, I wish to draw attention to two constraints: the body and

otherness. My modest aspiration is to offer a caution against overstating the power of imagination within narrative research.

The Storytelling Body as Constraint to Imagining Others Lives

Imagining oneself differently situated or imagining being another person is often dependent on what we know of the other person through the stories they tell and have access to. The problem is we can never gain direct access to a person's personal experience and inner world through the stories they tell out of their bodies and through them. As such our ability to imagine their lives is constrained. That is, a constraint to imagining others lives arises from the way imagination is constrained by the body's inability to share its experiences through storytelling in a picture or correspondence-like manner.

This constraint is augmented when one considers that not only are our stories that come out of our bodies social, but also bodily experience is social. As Mackenzie and Scully (2007) suggest, "imaginative projection is founded in personal experience, and therefore it is dependent on and constrained by the body, because the experiences of persons are themselves dependent on the body, in a number of ways" (p.342). First, according to Mackenzie and Scully, embodiment is a precondition of experience, at pre-social levels of perception and cognition. Secondly, experience is shaped and constrained by the specificities of embodiment. Here, Mackenzie and Scully note, the bodily constraints are both biological (the experience of pregnancy is biologically restricted to women in the human species) and social (in many societies it is mostly men who suffer a spinal cord injury through playing sport). Third, bodily experience is shaped and constrained by cultural meanings. Thus:

This constraint operates at the level of the socially held meanings in terms of which we make sense of our experience. In any society, for instance, the meaning given to a sexual assault can vary markedly depending on whether the act is perpetrated against a woman or a man, a child or an adult, or a person with a disability. Also, the bodies we are/have determine to some extent the social worlds that it is possible for us to inhabit during our lives, which in turn affects the social space that we can imagine inhabiting.

(Mackenzie and Scully, 2007, p.343)

It would appear, therefore, that there are difficulties of imagining oneself differently situated, or imagining being another person through narrative. These, in part, arise from the way the imagination is constrained by embodied experience and by the social possibilities foreclosed or made available by a person's specific embodiment and their access to narratives. In this sense, constraints seem to depend on attributes, such as the social nature of both the body and narrative. That recognised, thinking about the difficulties of

imagination requires a concept of otherness that transcends – or precedes – such attributes. This noncontingent otherness brings us to alterity.

Otherness as a Constraint to Imagining Others Lives

Alterity, as described by Levinas (1998), can be characterised as a person's *otherness* that precedes any attributes. As Levinas puts it, the other, as other is not only an alter ego. It is what I myself am not. Installing ethics as first philosophy, before the ontology of Being, Levinas thus calls upon the relation with the other as, in part, absolute distance. He maintains that, in order to encounter the other as the other, we must encounter the other on his or her terms rather than ours. Alterity in this sense is a relation that describes a difference that precedes what are generally thought of as differences. It precedes such differences as gender, age, ethnicity, state of health, or dis/ableness. As Levinas (2001) argues:

It is not because your hair is unlike mine or because you occupy another place than me – this would only be a difference of properties or dispositions in space, a difference of attributes. But before any attribute, you are other than I, other otherwise, absolutely other! And it is this alterity, different from the one which is linked to attributes, that is your alterity. (p.49)

Therefore, imagining putting ourselves in the place of another person is problematic because the other *is* other: absolutely and completely other to me. That is, as Levinas (1998) stresses, “An individual is other to the other. A formal alterity: one is not the other, whatever its content. Each is other to other” (p.162). As such, any attempt to grasp the other's lived experiences, to place oneself in his or her shoes or to imagine ourselves being another person, is constrained and elusive. This however does not mean abandoning trying to imagine the other person. Rather, it means that we need to recognise the limits of our imagination and encounter the other *as other* rather than on our own terms, thereby respecting and preserving alterity.

Respecting and valuing alterity should not, however, be confused with a desire to avoid the other. This is because, for Levinas (2001), we should respect the difference of the other as other *and* be responsibility for the other. Thus, Levinas calls upon the relation with the other as absolute distance *and* absolute proximity. Accordingly, whilst it may seem paradoxical or a tension in need of being resolved, Levinas suggests a balance is needed between recognising the other as other *and* being responsibly for them. In recognising this we arrive back at the argument that seeking to imagine oneself differently situated or imagining being another person is problematic because it risks violating what makes the other, other. For example, to think that one as a narrative researcher can put oneself in the shoes of a disabled person, to think

that one can get inside their experiences to better understand and empathise with them, is limited and risks violating otherness.

Some Reflections

In this chapter, I have argued that putting ourselves in the place of others is constrained and limited, in part, by our body and the nature of alterity. This, however, is not to advocate that we jettison empathy and imagination. On the contrary, it is simply to call attention to the difficulties of imagining other lives so that we might better understand some of the complexities involved in this process. In doing so, it is hoped that any exaggerated or romantic notions of imagining other lives is unsettled and I have disturbed the “warm fuzzy pursuit of empathy in which we assume a union of two or more selves in a mirroring relationship” (Lather, 2000, p.19). These intentions may be of further worth since overlooking the limitations of our abilities and willingness to imaginatively engage with others, and assuming that imagination is simply and always good, may result in an over-optimistic and perhaps misleading conception of the role that imaginative engagement with the lives of others can play in understanding and being empathetic. Narrative researchers, therefore, might best proceed with caution against overstating the power of imagination. This is particularly so given the potential dangers involved in projecting one’s own perspective onto the other by imagining oneself differently situated, or even imagining oneself in the other’s shoes.

According to Mackenzie and Scully (2007), one danger of these kinds of projection is that we simply project onto the other our own beliefs and attitudes, values and priorities, fears and hopes, and desires and aversions. Equally, we may misrepresent the others views, needs and concerns, and arrive at moral judgments that are inappropriate or paternalistic.

Another danger is that one can violate and infringe on the other person’s alterity, thereby committing symbolic violence. As Frank (2004) emphasises, “to infringe on the other person’s alterity – their otherness that precedes any attributes – is to commit violence against the other. Symbolic violence comprises the often subtle ways that alterity is challenged and violated” (p.115). For instance, a person who became disabled through playing sport may tell a tragedy story and a restitution story in which their hope is to restore their former body-self relationships and walk again (Frank, 1995). For some narrative researchers, whilst this storyline is in certain circumstances potentially problematic (Smith and Sparkes, 2005, 2008), wanting to walk again is viewed as the disabled others choice and they are respected for who they already are. Symbolic violence can occur however, if a narrative researcher says to the teller of a restitution story that they are wrong to tell this kind of story, that disability has nothing to do with their impaired body, and

they do not understand that the problems they experience have nothing to do with them but are due simply to structural barriers out there in society that restrict activity and oppress them. Accordingly, symbolic violence can be committed in relation to imagining others lives by projecting ones preference for a certain type of story over others and telling people which story to live by after becoming disabled.

Furthermore, according to Frank (2004), empathetically imagining how the other feels can be useful, “but empathy risks the symbolic violence of telling the other how to feel better” (p.116). A further form of symbolic violence is what Frank (2005) terms empathetic projection in which a person claims that you are as I am, and I *know* how you feel. In projecting oneself onto the other through imaginative empathy the difference between two people is denied. In denying that difference, one denies the other, and their alterity. Alterity, it should be underscored, is not opposed to empathy. But, as Frank reminds us, empathic imagination as an end in itself can be dangerous to alterity. Empathy tends toward unification, such projecting my fears and what would make me feel better onto you. Alterity is the opposite of unification with others and thinking that one can put their self in the place of others through our imagination.

Another potential danger involved in projecting one’s own perspective onto the other by narratively imagining oneself differently situated, or even imagining oneself in the other’s shoes is that one may *finalise* the other. According to Bakhtin (1984), finalisation occurs when a person claims the last, the definitive, finalising word, about who the other is and what he or she can become. So for example, one difficulty of truly imagining another’s life is that it requires us to know and predict what they would think and feel and do in the myriad situations he or she might encounter, and to reproduce and anticipate their emotional responses as the imaginative process unfolds. Yet, this is difficult and may be problematic because it can suggest that people’s views are ossified in time instead of having the capacity to grow and change. As a consequence, there is the danger of finalising the other. This is particularly problematic, Bakhtin suggests, since to finalise another person is not only an empirically inadequate description of the human condition, but it may leave the imaginer believing they have privileged knowledge, that there is nothing more to be said about the other, and there are no other prospects to be someone different. As he comments, “As long as a person is alive he [sic] lives by the fact that he is not yet finalised, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word” (p.59).

With all this in mind, what might be the implications of these issues – attractive as they might be – for narrative theory and practice? Two interrelated possibilities are offered for consideration. First, given such dangers attendant upon trying to imagine oneself in the other’s place, and if genuine empathetic imagining of the lives of others is as difficult as is suggested above, does

narrative imaginative engagement with the perspectives of others have any role to play in empathising, moral judgment and understanding the lives of the people narrative researchers work with? As already noted, like others (eg. Andrews, 2007; Mackenzie and Scully, 2007), I think it does. However, its role may be conceptualised not as a matter of enabling us to adopt the other's embodied standpoint or to understand the other 'from the inside'. Rather, to start with, its role could be to expand the scope of our compassion (see Levinas, 1998; Nussbaum, 2001 for instructive accounts on compassion).

A second possibility of theoretical entries into narrative imagination is that they invite us to explore our pedagogical practices. For example, within qualitative research texts it is often presupposed that to understand others, to attain knowledge, and to do so ethically, we should empathise with our participants by imaginatively putting ourselves in the place of the other. The danger is that this process is taken-for-granted and simply passed onto others. Whilst I'm sure others are more informed, this is what I have done in the past when teaching Qualitative Research and Narrative Theory to students. However, as we have seen, the assumption that by imaginatively entering into the experiential world of the people they study, qualitative narrative researchers may increase their ability to better understand another person, engender empathy, and help them obtain significant knowledge of the human situation in ethically admirable, or at least ethically defensible, ways, is not straightforward. There are problems and constraints involved. As such, we might consider raising such problems and constraints with others in various contexts and enter into dialogue with them about the benefits, and limits, of imagining of lives when doing narrative informed qualitative research.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the assumption that we can imagine being the other and imagine oneself in their shoes has been problematised. It has been argued that our imagination is constrained partly by ones embodied experience and alterity. Critics may however bemoan that all this talk about imagining others lives is no big deal. For me, imaginatively putting oneself in the other's place and violating alterity might not be a sound basis on which to do ethically admirable narrative research. Yet, the literature often suggests that to understand the other, empathise with them, and be ethical, this is actually what we should strive to do. At the very least, then, I hope this chapter may act as a resource for critically considering the role of narratively imagining other peoples lives and generate a dialogue about some of the complexities involved.

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