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Introduction - Narrative, Memory & Everyday Life

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# Preface

This book is a collection of some of the papers presented at the fourth one-day conference hosted by the Narrative and Memory Research Group at the University of Huddersfield in 2004. As has become traditional, the conference was held in April and the theme for that conference was “Narrative, Memory and Everyday Life”. The Narrative and Memory Research Group was initially set up to facilitate work and to acknowledge a relatively broad spectrum of approaches to narrative theory and research. We hope that the conference and these papers continues to reflect a commitment to that ideal.

The conference in 2004 was attended by around 90 delegates from a range of different countries and occupations and feedback suggests that, as in previous years, the event was well received, informative and useful for the dissemination and development of ideas within the field of narrative.

# Acknowledgements

Our thanks as always are due to Liz Senior in the Conference Office at the University. Liz is an invaluable member of the team and she continues to ensure that our efforts result in a well organised and supportive conference. Thanks as well to the continued support of the School of Human and Health Sciences and our colleagues in the Department of Behavioural Sciences.

Susan Smith was again responsible for working on submitted papers and, in the face of some technical adversity this year, (not Susan's responsibility!) our special thanks go to her for her hard work in producing the finished text.

Last, but not least, we would like to thank all those people who attended and participated in the conference. It is always rewarding to see a mixture of familiar and new delegates – thanks!

*March 2005*

# Introduction

NANCY KELLY, CHRISTINE HORROCKS, KATE MILNES,  
BRIAN ROBERTS AND DAVE ROBINSON

As in previous years, and in keeping with the ethos of the annual conference, this collection of papers presents research by academics and practitioners in diverse areas of narrative inquiry. Of the 24 chapters some focus on issues of methodology, some on issues of theory and some a mixture of both in relation to issues of practice and everyday life. In order to provide some ‘coherence’ to the book we have organised the papers into three sections: methodological issues and techniques; the construction/reconstruction of identity and coherence; and, the application of narrative approaches to the understanding of everyday life at work. We do acknowledge that in many ways this organisation is an imposition of structure and indeed many chapters could be located in different sections.

## **Methodological Issues and Techniques**

This section is comprised of a number of chapters that address general issues of methodology or that consider the use of particular techniques in narrative inquiry. In **chapter 1** Catherine Riessman provides an overview of the development of approaches to narrative analysis, particularly with respect to the interpretation of oral narratives of personal experience. She outlines principles underlying several models of narrative analysis and concludes by highlighting the importance of reflexivity as a source of knowledge. The **next chapter** presents an account by two researchers, Everton Bolton and Zaheera Essat, who tell of their ‘journeys’ in developing appropriate methodologies in relation to their research topics. They describe the rationale for their choice of the Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method and Kip Jones summarises the chapter by an interesting consideration of the ways that the method incorporates reflexivity. This is presented as occurring at different stages of the research and he considers the way in which teams of researchers may be involved in the process of interpretation. **Chapter 3** presents a consideration of the efficacy of the Problem Centred Interview as a method for biographic research. Elisabeth Scheibelhofer outlines the theoretical foundations (grounded theory) of a method widely used in Austria and Germany. She provides an example of how the method, which involves multiple techniques of data collection, applies to an analysis of biographical interpretations of migration processes. She concludes with some of the advantages and

disadvantages of this approach and in line with other chapters argues for its role in facilitating reflection upon methodology in qualitative empirical work. In **chapter 4** Niamh Moore presents an account of the possibilities of using a narrative approach towards understanding people's perceptions of and decisions around risk, an area traditionally dominated by quantitative and positivistic approaches most notably in economics and psychology. Moore outlines some current approaches to the assessment of values in risk research which have begun to move away from traditional models, but (using the context of those people living around sites of nuclear power stations that are being or need to be decommissioned) she argues a movement towards methodologies with alternative epistemological foundations. Since everyday risks for individuals may be managed through stories and narratives within communities, and since risk is an effect of temporality, she argues that adopting a constructivist/interpretive approach might mean that the lives of those most affected by decisions involving environmental risk may be more actively considered.

The last three chapters in this section all focus on using a particular method to elicit narratives from individuals, that of a lifeline technique. Not surprisingly these chapters consider how narratives in relation to events across the life course are configured and what the meanings of the different configurations may hold for people.

In **chapter 5** Katriina Hugosson used questions with a lifeline, alongside questionnaires and event based questions, in order to ask women about perceptions of retirement and factors and events that were influential to women across their lifespan. By using this technique she identified six patterns of life, each varied by the overall tone that was adopted in the women's narrative accounts. Ivo Čermák and Vladimír Chrz continue with this lifeline technique in **chapter 6** where they consider the question of the possibilities of life story genres. Using interview material they suggest that three levels of genre operated in life stories: action, experiencing and reflection, and further that narratives were configured in a way that allowed individuals to express continuity, shape and meaningfulness in their lives. They conclude by discussing the possibilities of incorporating or extending different types of plot form the four classically described by Frye in the 1950s. In **chapter 7** Marek Blatný and Terezie Osecká used the lifeline to examine individuals' subjective perceptions of personal change in their lives. Using examples they illustrate how this technique may reveal two types of personal change: normative, that is those where changes are described in relation to those typical across a life course; and non-normative, those where changes were associated with events that may not be typically related to age.

### **The Construction/Reconstruction of Identity and Coherence**

This second section of the book is subdivided into two parts, first chapters that deal with the problem of identity and coherence in a postmodern, fragmented world. These consider how individuals may adopt narrative strategies in order to retain a sense of coherent experience and identity. The second chapters all address similar issues but these are themed through individual experiences of illness or recovery.

In **chapter 8** Ian Burkitt considers the ways in which many narratives within our postmodern world portray individuals as having an ‘unbearable lightness of being’, narratives that represent selves as fragmented and fluid. Burkitt questions the straightforwardness of such claims and considers the ways in which individuals may adopt narrative strategies in order to challenge and resist the ‘splintering of time, place and relations’ brought about by social relations of ‘flexible capitalism’. He provides an in-depth case example to illustrate the point that individuals can look back on their so-called fragmented lives and can create a thick narrative that allows for a coherent identity, a sense of agency and a possibility of shaping at least some aspects of their biographies. In the **following chapter** Jens Zinn continues to consider issues of social change and identity. He explores different ways in which individuals in times of continuous social change manage to produce biographical certainty. Based upon qualitative interviews he proposes a ‘typology of biographical action modes’ whereby five action patterns can be determined according to individuals’ ways of dealing with four reference points: those of dealing with norms, perceptions of uncertainty, conceptions of time, and ultimate grounds for action. He concludes by suggesting that all the modes represent different strategies and possibilities for constructing certainty in different aspects of our lives. Stephanie Taylor in **chapter 10** considers the way in which women experience problems in terms of identity and belonging in a society where increased mobility and instability of residence exists. She argues that women engage in reflexive work where they may emphasise choice and opportunity around changing place and its influence on identity. But she highlights that these attempts at constructing alternative identities to those of ‘born and bred’ may have associated costs. Using examples she considers the ways in which place and identity become redefined to incorporate a sense of agency in identity, yet presents an interpretation whereby in doing this reflexive work, women may be positioned as vulnerable by others and/or by social factors. In **chapter 11** David Hiles outlines a model of the ‘narrative construction of reality’. Hiles uses examples of two accounts of unpredicted immediate experiences to argue for the way in which narrativising events can turn the unexpected and unfamiliar into phenomenologically understandable experiences, which allow for a coherent understanding of the world. Hiles suggests that local knowledge, plausible events and ongoing concerns and fears are all drawn upon to create these ‘contingent narratives’, and that they are configured in ways that meet Bruner’s (1996) nine universals of narrative

realities. In the **final chapter** of this section Rudy van Kemenade considers the concept of 'national character'. He argues that national character is a form of cultural capital and, through language, this forms a way by which individuals can categorise and understand their worlds. For van Kemenade national character enables individuals to be who they are, and an opportunity to change character exists if their historical reality is recognised.

In the second part of this section the chapters can be seen to deal with similar issues, the re/construction of identity, but they are all themed through individuals' experiences of identity and coherence whilst living with or recovering from illness or traumatic life events.

Ruth Bridgens in **chapter 13** presents an analysis of the narratives of two men who had similar experiences of polio as children, and in later life, post polio syndrome. She presents an interpretation revealing how these men used memories of their early experiences in order to develop fulfilling careers that became a way of 'forgetting' polio. She then goes on to examine how they reconsidered those experiences in the light of post polio syndrome. This chapter highlights meaning making in conditions that appear to be ambivalent and contradictory whereby the men narrate a sense of self that demonstrates agential strength. **Chapter 14** by Brett Smith and Andrew Sparkes also explores memories in relation to remembered pain with sportsmen who are self-defined as disabled through spinal cord injury. They explore issues in relation to different memories of pain when men inhabited a particular kind of body, and how they dealt with pain during time in intense rehabilitation. Smith and Sparkes consider and outline an interpretation of times at which men hide pain and times at which men welcome pain. They argue that the meaningful experience of pain is integrally linked to individual context and wider cultural resources that allow a telling about pain in relation to gender. Sally Sargeant, Harriet Gross and David Middleton in the **next chapter** present an analysis of how young people retrospectively draw upon psychological and narrative resources in order to manage day-to-day living with Inflammatory Bowel Disease. They consider that these young people narrate their experiences in relation to issues of mind/body separation, illness disclosure and the protection of family and friends from negative experiences. Using accounts of public and private experience they argue that narrative coherence is indicative of psychological well-being. They end by making an interesting point about the need for complementary research, which allows access to accounts of experiences, as they occur. In **chapter 16** Jo Woodiwiss investigates ways in which self identified survivors of child sexual abuse and/or false memory syndrome drew upon narratives of abuse and therapeutic discourses in order to make sense of their lives. Using examples Woodiwiss examines the 'causal' nature of the relationship between abuse and unhappiness and dissatisfaction in adult lives. She argues that although women do recognise and draw upon the 'harm story' and 'healing discourses' they were considerably more

sophisticated in its incorporation into their own narratives than they are often given credit for. Woodiwiss concludes by commenting upon the position of women in a contemporary world of publicly telling about experiences of therapy and recovery.

The last three chapters in this section present research exploring the role of storytelling and writing/written documentation in relation to experiences of social and/or mental health issues. Raya Jones in **chapter 17** explores the ways that representations of the self in personal narratives told on the world-wide web can reveal cultural discourses of Bi Polar Disorder but also how they can incorporate individual experiences. These individual experiences appear to serve as both self-help mechanisms and as a mode of telling that may help others. She provides an in-depth account of one mans narratives that reveal a plot typical of a heroic journey. This man narrates his changing experiences and identity (over more than 18 years) which culminate in a positive sense of self. It is recognised however that using the web as a communication medium invited particular plot structures, and, in this case the aim of providing help to others necessitated some biographical trade off. In **chapter 18** Brendon Stone considers the ways in which writing of everyday experiences by those with psychotic disorders may help individuals re/create a coherent sense of self. He argues that writing facilitates a reclamation of self and agency and using the journals of two hospitalised women he illustrates how narrative practices and techniques allow a focus on interpersonal realms of experience. In **chapter 19** Mojca Urek considers the role and direction of verbal interactions and written documents in contemporary Slovene social work practice. She begins with the premise that social work interactions are currently problem centred as, by their nature, clients are within a system where they are defined as experiencing some kind of social problem/s. By outlining two research projects, one in relation to eliciting narratives from clients, and one in relation to recorded documentation of interactions and histories, Urek presents an argument for the recognition that much current professional practice may unnecessarily problematise individuals with a consequent impact upon self and societal concept. Urek concludes by exploring the ways in which a reconsideration of social work practice may facilitate better negotiating positions, more equal participation in helping processes and ultimately more empowerment for social work clients.

### **Narrative Approaches to the Understanding of Everyday Life at Work**

In this final section again issues in previous chapters are raised and discussed but, with the exception of the first chapter, they are all related through issues of an understanding of everyday life through occupation.

It is interesting to begin this section with **chapter 20** where Helen Dampier explores and challenges some of the assumptions of the concept of ‘everyday

life' in retrospective accounts. Using three publications of women's accounts of life in war camps in the South African war 1899-1902, she argues that they contain little actual reference to the memories of routine everyday existence in the camps. Instead the accounts focus upon memories of suffering and trauma, for instance, around the experience of hospitals and food. Similarly she argues that many of the accounts spend more time on telling of the capture by the British and the journeys to the camps than about camp life itself. She presents a case for the re/creation of history through the forgetting of everyday life and the remembering of events of suffering and trauma that accorded with Afrikaner Nationalist objectives of the late 1930s.

In **chapter 21** Philip Brown presents an interpretation of how service providers for those seeking asylum in the UK make sense of their roles and everyday practice. Brown argues that service providers are seemingly located in a position where there are conflictual professional demands placed upon them. Those are the demands brought about by legislation and policy to assert control over asylum seekers, and demands of a duty to care and support asylum seekers. Drawing upon Bakhtin (1984) Brown uses examples from interviews with service providers to suggest that in practice workers can negotiate this seemingly contradictory environment by being both one thing and simultaneously being another. He draws upon the concept of polyphony to argue that professionals narrate and perform their tasks not from a position of either controller or carer, but from a position of both controller and carer. Helen Dilks continues with the theme of negotiated identities in **chapter 22** concerning the occupational identities of shopfitters. Dilks draws upon interviews with a group of young shopfitters to explore how identities are created through stories of working and memories of everyday life on work sites. Such stories drew upon issues of age, nationality and occupational skill and created hierarchies of professional status. She considers how relationships between perceived insider and outsider groups are created and negotiated throughout the course of a 'job' by using narrative strategies concerned with honour and reputation. Dilks considers the ways in which identities are negotiated by recognising the skill of individual narrators at different times and in different places. In **chapter 23**, within the working environment of a day care centre for children in Finland, Eero Suoninen and Arja Lundán explore the ways in which different kinds of encounters between kindergarten staff and children impact upon experiences and perceived identities. They outline two encounters between an adult and a child presenting 'uneasy behaviour' and consider how different factors influence different perceptions of roles, identities and practice. Such factors include time resources, selective memorising/use of information and the presence of concurrent activities with other children. The importance of a recognition of negotiation and reflection in contexts where dynamic identities seem important are considered in the context of the current organisation of day care centres. In the **last chapter** Graham

Thurgood explores the ways in which ‘ordinary’ nurses in West Yorkshire described their experiences of working with new technologies in the 1940s. Using oral history interviews he is particularly focussed in his analysis on experiences of using the first antibiotics, more specifically their first use of penicillin. Using examples from interviews with three nurses, two of whom were students or junior at the time, Thurgood considers both the implications of the use of language and the ways that these three women perceived that ordinary nursing practice might be changed by its introduction. At the end of this chapter Thurgood makes the point that only ten out of 21 retired nurses mentioned using antibiotics in their interviews and of those ten most narratives were concerned with issues around its use rather than as significant life story events. He draws upon Berger (1997) and Roberts (2004) in suggesting that this may be accounted for by the understanding nurses had of their everyday practice at the time and by their remit to select which stories they wanted to tell, even though the historical significance of penicillin may now be recognised.