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Pulkkinen, Minna-Leena

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# 6 The Integration of Narrative Identity in Self-Inflicted Socially Regressive Experience

MINNA-LEENA PULKKINEN

Research on narrative identity has mainly focused on progressive adaptation and survival narratives of life-change in cases in which the change in the individual's situation has been brought about by factors outside his/her control. The present study, however, is concerned to examine the way in which a self-inflicted socially regressive experience is integrated into an identity narrative. The study was carried out in the Department of Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. The material was collected from voluntary five-hour counseling sessions included as a part of the community service required of convicted drunk-drivers. The theoretical starting-point is the theory of narrative flow, which is based on the idea that the foundation of identity is an inner narrative, a process through which experiences are interpreted. The inner narrative constructs and manifests itself both in action and in the stories told about acted-out life. From the perspective of this dynamic, a person driving under the influence of alcohol can be seen as indicating a conflict between an inner narrative and a socially legitimate story. Regardless of offender's own attitudes towards the offence, (s)he is confronted with personal choice and responsibility when (s)he faces social reality (legal and social sanctions). In order to understand self-inflicted, socially regressive experiences the approach used has to be sensitive to both social reality and personal choices. Here the integration of an experience is studied from the viewpoint of sense of agency, ie. a person's ability to understand his/her responsibility as an agent in relation to his/her motives, impulses, and social reality. As the integration of experience is considered within the framework of the theory of narrative flow, the sense of agency is examined in stories of acted out life, in the social stock of stories and in ways of interpreting circumstantial conditions. In this presentation, the integration of experience is examined through agency only by concentrating on talk about narrator's own drunken driving. The following questions are asked: 1) how does the narrator understand his/her drunken driving and what meaning does s(he) give to it, and 2) how does the narrator convey his/her responsibility in relation to his/her motives and impulses for driving under the influence of alcohol.

## **Introduction**

In narrative psychology the self is seen as a complex organization of experiences, and stories and narrating as an integrative way of interpreting and making experiences understandable. Research on narrative identity in the social sciences has mainly focused on examining progressive adaptation and survival narratives in life-changes in which a valued goal and positive outcome is reached, eg. Maruna, (1997) and Hänninen (1999). Narrative identity research has also placed its emphasis on experiences in which life-situations have changed due to factors outside the individuals' personal control. Exceptions have been presented in studies of narratives of recovery from addiction problems, eg. Hänninen, (1999) and criminality eg. Maruna, (1997, 1999) and Willot and Griffin (1999). Implicit, but not specially addressed in these studies is the theme of self-inflicted behavior, and through this, the themes of choice and responsibility. I first came across the questions of choice and responsibility in self-inflicted, socially illegitimate behavior, when we begun our project with convicted drunk-drivers at the University Clinic of Psychotherapy in January 1998. We started by organizing five-hour counseling sessions (FCS) for clients whose prison sentence had been commuted to community service and who voluntarily included the FSC in their community service. Drunken driving is defined here as self-inflicted behavior due to the harmful consequences, like imprisonment or fines that are result from one's own behavior. Besides being self-inflicted, drunken driving behavior may be considered – in the narrative way of speech - as a regressive drama of action on account of its regressive plot line in relation to a socially valued and legitimate goal, that is to obey the rules of society. Out of this context emerged the research question concerning narrative identity: how do individuals integrate a self-inflicted and socially regressive experience, like drunken driving, into their identity narrative?

In order to provide a background for this presentation I will briefly state the idea behind the FCS. The five-hour period is divided into four sessions, such that the first session lasts two hours and the other three sessions last one hour each. The sessions are planned according to the principles of narrative approach and cognitive therapy. The first half of the five-hour period aims at encouraging the client to narrate stories about drunken driving situations. Clients are furnished with open questions tell openly, but eventually drunken driving situations are talked through as a series of events: the events or situation prior to the driving, the situation in which the choice to drive was made, the event of getting caught, and subsequent events linked to drunken driving. The basic therapeutic idea is that the personal stories of drunken driving are studied in detail together with the client, the aim being to understand how the choice to drive under the influence of alcohol was made. Personal stories of drunken driving are further discussed in the last half of the period, which is more structural and has the therapeutic aims of gaining an

understanding of the experience of drunken driving. Emphasis is on personal choice and responsibility for deciding future behavior.

Generally, narrative identity research tends to relate the narrative integration of experience to how successfully the narrator can formulate and internalize the experiences of lived life and include those experiences in his/her life-story or identity narrative. Integration means that by creating a story of lived experience the narrator integrates the events symbolically into a narrative plot, and thereby enhances his/her subjective experience of the continuity of the self. At the other end of the continuum is the disintegration of narrative identity, as is described by Holma (1995) in a study of the identity narratives of psychotic patients. The identity narrative of a psychotic person may be collapsed or not coherent enough to be understandable in a socially shared reality. A failure in reality testing may be interpreted as a loss of agency with the result that society has to take responsibility for that individual. When examining drunken driving at the level of actual behavior, it can be understood and shared socially, but is contradictory and regressive in terms of social conventions and rules. If the offender has not lost agency, (s)he has to take responsibility for his/her actions. The question of responsibility is a defining aspect of drunken driving on the societal level, but has consequences on the private level when a person is sanctioned. How personal choices and responsibility are understood in self-inflicted, socially regressive experiences is an especially interesting question in the context of counseling and intervention.

Reported narrative studies Maruna (1999) and Willot and Griffin (1999) have elaborated the issue of self-inflicted, socially regressive experiences from perspectives of explanation and survival. In the study by Willot and Griffin (1999) working-class male offenders convicted of economic crimes refused to take the role of immoral wrongdoer and instead justified their criminal behavior by presenting a cultural discourse of male breadwinning and the expectation directed at them to provide for their families. Earning through crime was seen as a last resort and justified by one's own suffering under the broken promises made by the State. It became clear that the stories showed the competence of these economic offenders to understand and explain their behavior, and the external pressures they presented as motives for their behavior signified their limited freedom to make choices. However, the economic offender's Robin Hood type of cultural narrative would not be expected from convicted drunk drivers. Though possible, altruistic social motives or societal reasons are not generally associated with repeated drunken driving. On the contrary, drunken driving is often characterized by the fact that although it does not necessarily harm anyone, on every occasion it puts others on the road at greater risk, and in some occasions impoverishes, cripples, and kills.

The theoretical starting point chosen to describe the integration of narrative identity in self-inflicted, socially regressive drama is the theory of narrative

flow, a model proposed by Hänninen in her dissertation “Inner narrative, life, and change” (1999). In this model different aspects of narrative are conceptualized, and the concepts and relations between them are elaborated. In case of self-inflicted experiences the model needs to be expanded to include conflict between inner narrative and socially legitimate story, and through this the themes of choice and responsibility. I have combined the theory of narrative flow and the idea of the sense of agency in order to understand and describe the integration of narrative identity in self-inflicted experience. Crucial point for understanding this integration is the idea of the inner narrative as a mental and creative process, in which experiences are interpreted through internal narration. In narrative interpretation processes we lean on narrative patterns and models that are derived from our personal history and cultural stock of stories. We are constantly making choices from our stock of stories in our acting (and narrating) and by so doing we are also constantly changing our personal stock of stories. Inner narratives – that is the interpretative processes through which the possible integration of experience happens – can be detected in acting and narrating, because inner narrative is both manifested and constructed in real acted out life and in stories told about the lived life.

Viewed from the theory of narrative flow, a person who has driven under the influence of alcohol has, by acting against the rules of society, acted out an inner narrative that implies to the selection of socially unacceptable and illegitimate narrative patterns and meanings from the social stock of stories. When a person is convicted in court he/she is assumed to be the agent of his/her behavior and has to take responsibility for it. From this starting point an interesting question is raised: how does agency emerge at the level of the narrated story? Stories are approached here by studying the sense of agency within the framework of narrative flow. The concept of sense of agency is understood as a person’s ability to understand his/her own responsibility for the self as agent in relation to his/her motives, impulses and social reality. As the integration of experience is considered within the theory of narrative flow, the sense of agency is examined in told stories of the acted out life, in the social stock of stories and in ways of interpreting circumstantial conditions. In this investigation, the integration of experience is approached through agency by concentrating only on talk about individual’s own drunken driving, even though it is impossible to avoid to referring to other levels of the narrative interpretation process because of the dynamic interaction that exists between levels. The following questions are asked in narrative analysis: 1) how does the narrator understand his/her drunken driving and what meaning does (s)he give to it, and 2) how does the narrator convey own responsibility in relation to motives and impulses to drive under the influence of alcohol.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The author carried out FCSs with 30 convicted drunken drivers, whose prison sentence had been in court commuted to community service and who voluntarily included the FSC in their community service. The three cases presented here are the first three FCS clients.

### *Procedure*

The FCSs with 30 persons were carried out between January 1998 and March 2001. The sessions were planned to function as psychological evaluation and treatment. In the first half of the period the participants were encouraged to speak freely about their drunken driving. The second half of the period concentrated on aiming to understand how the choice to drive under the influence of alcohol was made. All the sessions were videotaped.

### *Data analysis*

Analysis of the study material began by listening and reviewing the videotaped sessions. Tapes were next transcribed. The transcribed discussions were read and references to drunken driving were extracted. Transcripts of these parts of the texts were further imported into Atlas-ti (Thomas Muhr, Berlin, 1997), a software package for the analysis of qualitative data, and preliminarily analyzed using grounded theory techniques based upon the principle of developing theory from data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Fielding and Lee, 1998). The cases are introduced here only in the form of an abstract of the original stories with the aim of illuminating the research question.

### *Case 1*

The client is a middle-aged woman who has been twice convicted of drunken driving. Before getting caught for the first time, driving under the influence of alcohol was not a rare event for her. She justifies her behavior by pointing to the similar behavior of others in the neighborhood and by calculating the likelihood of not getting serious sanctions, (there were no other offences in her record). She understands the reasons behind her choice of behavior: the choice of driving under the influence of alcohol was made according to a rational calculation of pros and cons of immediate consequences. She does not consider herself as the only agent in relation to driving under the influence, but she also attaches responsibility to other people by asking why those around her did not take away her car keys at the moment when she was about to drive. After being

forced to deal with the consequences of her choices in broader social reality (legal system, newspapers), the social shame she felt from getting caught, was so influential that she stopped this habit for five years. However, her sense of agency in relation to drunken driving was still defined in terms of punishment. Initially, it was the calculation of legal sanctions, whereas now it is social shame as a sanction that she considers as the reason for not driving under the influence of alcohol any more.

Her explanation for the next drunk driving incident is clearly different. She understands this case of drunken driving as a result of the emotionally and socially draining experience of being battered by her boyfriend. The situation, in which a neighbor brought over things that had been dropped in the garden during a violent quarrel the previous night, was humiliating and unbearable to contemplate, and she started drinking. Drinking and taking her car to obtain more alcohol in this situation may be interpreted as indication of self-harming, emotion-focused coping. In this story of drunken driving the importance of social judgments and criticism of her sense of agency is once again emphasized. In the situation in which she was assaulted, she interpreted herself as the object of social criticism, and felt shame. This diminished her sense of agency, and her ability to understand the situation both then and now is weak. It became apparent, that situations, in which she sees herself as an object of social judgment and criticism, are crucial to her sense of agency.

### *Case 2*

The client is a middle-aged man convicted twice of drunken driving. He presents quite a strong sense of agency in his stories of drunken driving incidents by indicating his ability to understand and differentiate his choices. However, his understanding of the consequences of his choices comes across as more moderate. In his stories of drunken driving he elaborates insights and makes links the narrative material related to his drunken driving behavior. At the beginning of the period he describes his impulsiveness and tendency to lose his ability to judge as explanations for drunken driving. Later he connects his drunken driving with his tendency and willingness to rebel against authority. He states that he does not respect authority, because he himself does not receive respect from decision-makers and politicians. He further develops this insight by linking this repetitive pattern of behavior to his childhood object relations.

In his narratives he shows that his decision to drive under the influence of alcohol was made in order to please other people or not to let them down. As he evaluates his drunken driving behavior, he places the pleasantness of his experience higher than obeying rules and does not consider the risks or possible consequences of his behavior. His story echoes the kind of justification found in a study of working-class male economic-crime offenders

(Willot and Griffin, 1999), who justified their actions by claiming betrayal by the state. By acting in oppositional ways he perceives himself as accomplishing something, but does not notice that at the same time he is maintaining and feeding the vicious circle of getting punished by authority and, feeling of being treated badly. His story of drunken driving conveys the integration of narrative identity in terms of the competence to understand his choices, but not in terms of understanding the consequences.

### *Case 3*

The client is a middle-aged man with one conviction for drunken driving. In his story drunken driving is identified as a turning point in his long continued regressive narrative of control of his life, in which he finally loses his sense of agency. He explains this by his subordination to his “domineering” and “controlling” wife. He perceives himself to have lived with the shadow of divorce for the last couple of years, and the gradual realization of the possibility of being left alone had threatened his sense of agency. In his stories his choices in many respects are derived from altering feelings of despair, and resistance, which he does not seem to be able to differentiate. His choosing to drive under the influence of alcohol was defined in his story as a sign of illness, as a result of which he had no control over his actions. By stating that it was not him, who was driving the car, he conveys how distant this experience is to him as an agent. However, when his story is studied carefully, it emerges that the choice to drive was made in order to be able to keep his word to his wife. (Before drinking he had promised to deliver some goods to his wife.) After the counselor reflected and rephrased his drunken driving as an aim to do something for the wife and maybe for their marriage, he states that he felt that he was both obligated and willing to do something for her. In his attempts to influence his situation he both shows agency, and lack of sense of agency, as drunken driving is something that he did in order to accomplish something, but also something that he does not consider as a personal choice. Instead, he places the experience outside of himself, and considers it as a sign of illness. However, he evaluates drunken driving incident positively, because it changed the course of his life, which he was not able to do out of his own understanding and free will. The drunken driving experience does not seem to be integrated into his life narrative, but is left outside of the narrative organization of his experiences.

### **Conclusions**

The preliminary analyses and experiences derived from FCS show that drunken drivers differ in their competence at and ways of integrating a self-



inflicted, socially regressive drama of action into their identity narrative. Sense of agency seems to be fruitful way to study experiences, which are invested with the themes of choice and responsibility. In a study of the stories of persons who have “recovered” from crime (Maruna, 1999) one main finding was that in their stories reformed ex-offenders indicated a greater sense of control over one’s destiny and taking responsibility for the future than active offenders. This can be interpreted to mean that sense of agency in behavior is related to social progressiveness. When the focus in this study is on narratives of recently convicted drunken drivers, the plot organization in the stories under examination then is quite the reverse of the progressive stories of reformed ex-offenders. Rather than emphasizing a view of future, the focus is on recent, and verifiable behavior. Though progress in relation to a valued goal, namely, giving up criminal behavior may be crucial in gaining sense of agency, the interest in the present study is to examine sense of agency as a person’s understanding of his/her responsibility as an agent in relation to his/her motives, impulses and social reality.

The three cases presented and preliminarily analyzed here exemplified some of the possible ways of understanding the integration of narrative identity in self-inflicted, socially regressive behavior. In the future, hopefully, by analyzing systematically the sense of agency in drunk drivers’ stories, personal stock of social stories, and interpretation of life conditions, it will be possible to describe the integration of narrative identity in self-inflicted experiences more coherently.

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