

CNR symposium for the BSA Annual Conference, University of York, 21-23 March 2005

The symposium theme

Narration is a discursive milieu within which the crucial question of who one is gets registered and deployed in unforeseen directions. In storying our lives and listening to the stories of others, the self emerges as narratable: it is constitutive of the very desire of listening to the story being narrated by oneself as well as by others. This narrative constitution however does not end up in pinning down the self within prescribed spaces, places, roles and identities. It does not produce an essence, neither does it require one. Narratability is not about intelligibility, but about familiarity with the 'spontaneous narrating structure of memory' (Cavarero, 2000). Lives and stories meet in a matrix of power and desire producing realities and saturating bodies. In this symposium we will explore various trajectories and lines of flight that the self as a narratable entity can follow. In following the proposition that narrative relations open up political spaces wherein storied selves are being exposed, transformed, ultimately deterritorialized, we want to focus on narrative moments of this process of becoming other, across the life course and life identities, but also between lives, while always remaining unique and unrepeatable.

Trauma, voice and the myth of the 'empowerment narrative', Molly Andrews, UEL

There has been much emphasis on the importance of victims and perpetrators of injustices telling their story as a means of working through the past. This story telling has occurred not only in the context of truth commissions, but in research on those who participated in such institutions, amongst others. As 'excavators of truth' many researchers see their job as documenting those stories. But what are the responsibilities of being an audience to tales of suffering? Oftentimes, researchers working with in-depth interviews tell themselves that through their work they are 'giving a voice to' their informants. However, the closer one looks, the more apparent become the cracks in the 'empowerment narrative'. This paper will explore the potential for 'othering' to become an implicit, though rarely analysed, aspect of research of this kind, and will consider the ethical boundaries of our responsibilities as listeners, and readers of traumatic stories.

Practicing ethics: a narrative about narrative research in South India, Catherine Kohler Riessman, Boston College

There is a growing movement calling for practicing ethics-in-context, realized in the give and take of research relationships on the ground, rather than in abstract principles. I look back on complex ethical conflicts faced during field research in South India when I was studying the meaning and management of infertility. Rather than writing in the propositional voice of mainstream scholarship, I develop a narrative composed of two linked episodes about ruptured understandings with a village family, and difficult experiences in an infertility clinic. At the micro level, there were failures in communication and at the macro level gender relations fraught with inequality. Storytelling makes the moral backstage visible, specifically dialogic field relations and emotions. The narrative form creates space for many voices and subjectivities. The paper adds to current debates about practicing ethics in health

research in the developing world by problematizing informed consent, confidentiality, and other abstract technical solutions.

Narrating lives with HIV: The many epidemics of signification, Corinne Squire, UEL

This paper analyses a group of interviews performed over 12 years with people living with HIV in the UK. It tracks the formations of identity constructed at different moments and from different positions in the epidemic; the discourses against and within which these formations range themselves; and the genres of signification they deploy. This variability of these identity formations qualifies, without undoing, the determining power of HIV. Across 12 years, participants become ‘different people,’ and the virus’s epidemiological and medical meanings also transmute. At the same time, the narratives generate chains of meaning between them, as well as breaks in the chains, where meaning fails.

Spatial stories/narratable selves: rethinking the private-privacy contour, Maria Tamboukou, UEL

Narratives of space have been a medium through which women’s lived spaces have both been represented and interrogated. In this paper I am exploring spatial themes in the epistolary and visual narratives of Gwen John, a British woman artist who lived and worked in France in the beginning of the twentieth century. In following trails of John’s ‘desire for an interior life’, what I am mostly interested in, is to explore how her *spatial narratives* are structured along the discursive constraints of the private/public dichotomy, but also—and perhaps most importantly—how the latter is being renegotiated in her narratives, opening up possibilities for the deployment of the private-privacy connection. In John’s both visual and written narratives, speech is portrayed as a hindrance rather than a medium of communication. Writing on the other hand is a solitary experience par excellence—it requires the ambience of an interior life as a sine-qua-non condition of its own possibility. However, it is by leading and indeed painting an interior life that Gwen can actually communicate with people without being crashed by their material presence. Paradoxical as it seems, solitude becomes a condition of possibility for her self to be constituted as relational and narratable.

Roundtable Discussion: Themes in Narrative Inquiry, Barbara Harrison UEL

In considering the range of papers in this round table, it is evident that the domain of narrative inquiry, if this is the right term for it, contains at one and the same time, some thematic concerns which may be found across the various kinds of research which investigators are undertaking, and a diversity in what is chosen as the particular focus of study. We should not be surprised by this of course since narratives of numerous kinds are both commonplace in our everyday world, and because they have become an important means by which sociologists and other social scientists have gained their data.

In this respect, I find myself returning again to a distinction found originally in ethnomethodologists concerns with language as constitutive of the social world: that between topic and resource. In this sense it is evident from the presentations that we have heard, that researchers use narrative as a resource: that is as a means for studying their particular topic of interest. This operates in two main ways: narratives existing or elicited are the data- existing as in the South African Truth Commission and in the writing and painting of Gwen John, and

elicited as in narrative of those living with HIV. Narrative is also a way researchers have chosen to 'tell us stories' of their own research, as in this case ethical dilemmas of fieldwork and ethical issues in a particular social and cultural context. It is now not uncommon to find research texts adopting something of the narrative form. In other research particular attention is given to the narrative itself- that is the text itself becomes the focus of analysis. Again I suggest this can happen in two main ways: Not unlike ethnomethodological concerns or those of discourse analysts, the narrative is analysed for how it does the work of 'telling the story'; what are its principle forms and means by which it structures a particular version of the experiences and meanings of things provided by the teller? Second, such narrative constructions are seen to perform important work for the writer/teller/ painter which while serving as a resource, are perhaps more often analysed for 'the doing'.

The four papers presented in this symposium suggest important issues for all researchers, not only those interested in narrative: First there are ethical issues. As with other forms of highly personal data production, it has been thought that narratives may present more difficult issues albeit within the framework of 'western' professionally and institutionally based ethical frameworks. Many narratives involve numerous actors other than the respondent or producer of the story. But it because much narrative research is essentially dialogic, it is produced relationally that many of these issues arise. For example, who is in control of the process of production? Many narratives are about or produced out of contexts of trauma and pain. As important as these issues are the potential for narratives to traumatise, and to harm as a consequence seems paramount for us to consider. As relational productions narratives are involved in communication, but all the papers suggest that interpreting this forms of communication does require some understanding of social and cultural context, and resources the lived lives provide for narrating. This is often a more complex process than we as researchers often assume. Finally, these papers deal with concerns with private space and public testimony and although these arise from different interests they suggest that private pain does become the matter of public consumption, and that the interface between the public and private domains often requires its own narrative construction as an arena for preserving an autonomous self.