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## 6 NARRATIVE

Narrative research explores how individual selves in capitalist society are performed, and it can show us ways out of the prison of identity.

From the 1960s there were many humanist objections to the way traditional laboratory-experimental studies in psychology dehumanised participants and also, as a consequence, presented a dehumanising picture of the human being as a kind of clockwork mechanism. Traditional studies neglected the sense that people gave to their own lives, and humanist ‘new paradigms’ aimed to study that sense (e.g., Reason and Rowan 1981). The term ‘narrative psychology’ has emerged to capture the spirit of humanist alternatives to this demeaning image of human beings, and to find a way of representing the stories people tell about themselves (Crossley 2000).

In capitalist society people are treated as objects that must sell their physical and mental labour power to others. They are ‘alienated’ – separated from their own creative abilities – and a sense of purpose in their lives is then restricted to the little narratives they construct about themselves, and to their ‘identities’ as secure fixed points of certainty in a world where the present seems to be dissolving ever more rapidly into an uncertain future. Instead of imagining that we are really finding these fixed points inside people’s minds, narrative research can help us explore how the self is made out of cultural resources and how it feels as if our lives must have a certain shape with personal identity lying at the core (Squire 2000). In this perspective, *‘narrative’ is the performance of the self as a story of identity.*

The development of narrative psychology can therefore enable us to do two things at the same time, each equally important to capture the dialectical relationship between what we do in the world and the material we work with. First, narrative research respects each individual story and whatever shape of a life that emerges from a person’s account of times of uncertainty and fixity. Second, we show how this sense of personal identity emerges as ‘figure’ against the ‘ground’ of culturally-given images of the self, and how identity operates as a complement to and consolation for alienation. This chapter shows how we can study the way people perform themselves, and how biography may be remade in the course of an autobiographical path out of fixed identities as prisons of the self. When someone grasps that everyday performance of self as an opportunity to reflect on the limits of narrative they open the path to carry out some radical action research upon their own lives.

### **Five key ideas in narrative analysis**

These five ideas in narrative analysis hold the key to the way a story may be heard and retold by a researcher, but only if the dialectical relationship between these ideas – ‘agency’, ‘temporality’, ‘event’, ‘context’ and ‘format’ – is taken seriously. That relation between the five ideas holds them in tension in a particular manner at a particular point in history, so that individuals may tell their stories to others in a way that both represents themselves and reflects on their representation.

- First, one of our aims in the research process is to restore *agency* to the author of a narrative. Agency was stripped away from people when they were treated as if they were objects in mainstream quantitative psychology, and this ‘objectification’ of thinking and behaviour – breaking it down into meaningless measurable factors – produced a kind of knowledge for the researcher that they thought was scientific, but nothing for the objects of their research (Billig 1994). The ‘subjects’ of narrative research are treated as exactly what the term ‘subject’ should denote. But there is an important precondition for being the subject of a narrative, which is that agency has a certain relationship to time, events out of their control, a social context and a characteristic way of relating what has happened so that it makes sense to others.
- Second, we open a space for a story to be told within a certain temporal frame, and we want to make that frame flexible enough for someone to talk to the researcher and for the narrative to be represented to a wider audience. The process of filtering a story so that it makes sense both to the author and to their readers may mean that it has a beginning, middle and end (Freeman 1993). However, we also make the temporal structure a topic in its own right, so that alternative ways of reflecting on what happened may, for example, make an event in the past reappear as something new. Revolutions, for example, not only change the present but also change the way the past is understood, so that those who struggled against oppression are then included in a narrative that breaks open the identities held in place by the old regime. But, this questioning of linear time is also designed to better restore agency to the story-teller so that they can give sense to what happened in context in a certain stylistic shape.
- Third, narrative research is concerned with how someone relates events that are about something; that thing may be disturbing or incomprehensible, or it may be an event that brought about an unexpected change that was then viewed or now viewed as positive. We term this thing ‘event’, and we mean by that something that intrudes or hinders, but which also then becomes a necessary reference point for the narrative. In this way narrative research makes salient the embodied material character of human life (Nightingale 1999). But, this positive or negative event is always seen as interpreted by the subject as agent, as woven into a certain causal structure, as understood in relation to other events and narrated within a particular kind of plot.
- Fourth, accounts given by individuals are always embedded in certain kinds of social relationships and set against a certain kind of cultural background. A narrative is always already also a cultural narrative, and an individual or a group will rework available elements into a specific shape to produce something distinctive that captures and represents their own experience. Research into idiosyncratic stories needs to include some attention to the cultural resources that are used to make them distinct (Ahmed 2000). But, the context is, again, reworked in a certain way by the teller of the tale, in a certain order to make sense of specific events.

- Fifth, we study the way stories are told as narratives or worked into the form of narratives in the process of the research. The form of the narrative is as important as the content, perhaps sometimes even more so. The plot of a narrative is always organised around some kind of format, in a shape that may be immediately recognisable – as a scientific report or romance or tragedy, for example. The genre that is used to give a certain feel to the narrative also conveys something to audience of how they should interpret it (Squire 1995). But, we also attend to the way the person who creates the narrative makes themselves into the author so that they can relate the events in a certain order, and how they use the story to make sense of things that happened to them.

People tell stories about particular things that happened to them or about the course of their lives in a certain culturally-specific way in capitalist societies, and this means that ‘the comments of individuals should not be taken at face value, rather, they need to be located in wider structures of discourse and power so that their implications and ramifications can be fully understood’ (Crossley 2000: 36). The order of telling, the puzzling about powerlessness in the face of external forces, the social relations that determine what counts as important for life and the style in which a story is told, are bound together so that it seems as if the individual story-teller is the centre, as observer and actor. Narrative research traces how these dialectically interrelated aspects of subjectivity are put together, and how they may be connected with the stories of others.

**Box 6.1** *Beware interpretative phenomenological analysis*

One way of analysing interviews that has appeared recently in qualitative research in psychology, and which appears to offer a rigorous set format for interpreting what people say is interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA presents itself as a ‘method’ that will be able to ‘tap into a natural propensity for self-reflection on the part of participants’ (Smith et al. 1997: 68), but its attempt to get an ‘inside perspective’ on the meanings that someone intends to convey during an interview – the ‘phenomenological’ part of IPA – leads to some particular problems when it is used alongside individualistic versions of narrative research (McAdams 1993). The problem is fourfold:

1. *The search for intentions* – in which the researcher believes that what someone says is what they really deeply intend to say, or they try to dig beneath contradictions to find the real intention underneath. This means that the actual structure of the narrative, the cultural resources being used, and the nature of the interview as a performance are wiped away.
2. *Naïve realism* – in which the researcher treats what is told to them or what they read in a written narrative, as empirical truth, which they then refer to as if it is real. This means that they fail to notice how an account is crafted for certain rhetorical purposes out of certain kinds of cultural resources, and for the researcher as a certain kind of audience.
3. *Constructivism* – which is an approach that is often equated with ‘constructionism’; Constructivism in psychology is simply concerned with different perceptual and cognitive views of reality, and so it tries to discover

underlying mental processes in the individual that construct things. Constructionism is closer to some of the way that ‘constructivism’ is used outside psychology, for it aims to show how the individual itself is also constructed.

4. *Reduction to the individual* – which is a way of viewing narrative that separates figure from ground so that we concentrate only on what we imagine to be the ‘inside’ perspective. This means that we lose sight of how what is ‘inside’ is dependent on what is ‘outside’ the individual as the context for the narrative to make sense to us.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is certainly an attempt to restore human agency to interviewees in psychological research, but it is too easily compatible with trends in narrative research that turn the approach back into mainstream psychology again. We would then be led to the mistaken view that the narrative ‘is there all along, inside the mind’, and that it is ‘a psychological structure’, so that the task of the interviewer is to discover ‘the truth already in place in the mind of the teller’ (McAdams 1993: 20). The search for intentions, naïve realism, constructivism and the reduction of narrative to the individual are all things to beware of in narrative analysis, or any kind of radical qualitative research.

The next two sections focus on the way we may research ‘*limited narratives*’ surrounding particular events, and then how narrative analysis may be used for broader ‘*biographical accounts*’.

### **Shaping limited narratives**

A first task of narrative research is to define the scope of the material. It may be fairly clear from the start of the research that the scope of the material will be less than a complete life story, and most narrative research does not have the resources – in terms of time and material support – to reconstruct a life narrative. Even the sketch of a life trajectory in narrative research needs to focus on certain episodes, and most narrative analysis is concerned with strictly delimited stretches of time. There are a number of research questions you need to clarify before undertaking any interview or analysis of already written material for a limited narrative. In this chapter we will be focusing on narratives derived from interviews. (For a fuller discussion of analysis of other kinds of text see Chapter 7.) First, *What is the narrative about?* It may be useful to formulate the answer to this question as a causal sequence as if it were the outline of a chapter, which starts ‘In which...[the person did this or that, or this or that happened to them, and what other sequences of events occurred]’ Second, *What is the author aiming to convey?* The story-teller may want to impart a message or moral to an audience, and it may be useful to sketch out what that may be in the form of ‘And so we see that...[they discovered this or that about themselves, or we have learnt this or that about the relationships]’ Third, *What are the limits?* You need to know what kind of limits you will need to respect so that the *telling* of the story can be brought to a close. Sketching a preliminary response to the first two research questions can help tackle this third question, but it may also be useful to anticipate adjacent areas that you will not be asking about.

An example summary of narrative:

In which Jan took part in an experiment when she went for a degree course admission interview, and was told by the researcher that she was ‘unusual’, but there was something the experimenter did not know. And so we see that there is a difference between what psychologists know and what we know about ourselves.

Here we see displayed answers to the first two questions, and we knew from preliminary discussion with Jan before the interview that the thing the experimenter did not know was not something terribly traumatic that she would find difficult to talk about (and so we surmised that there would be some limits of the telling of the story). This summary only briefly sketches how the episode unfolded in the course of the interview, and how it came to appear as a ‘narrative’ with a certain shape. We will outline the process of the interview, which also contains the substance of the analytic process, and along the way we will be able to see more of the narrative. We will trace the process through three main steps, keeping in mind the key ideas of narrative research – ‘agency’, ‘temporality’, ‘event’, ‘context’ and ‘format’.

*Step 1* is to define this narrative as an episode located within a certain kind of *research problem*. In this case we can take our cue from Billig’s (1994) discussion of the way reports of psychology experiments ‘depopulate’ them, rendering the actual people and events invisible. Billig’s answer to this problem was to ‘repopulate’ the experiment by writing a little fictional vignette to bring alive again what might actually have happened. Here, we have a slightly different take on the same research problem, with the character Jan speaking the first person, and our research problem is the way mainstream research excludes the actual experiences of the people who take part in them. ‘It was funny’, Jan said, ‘the guy was hovering around the interview room, and he asked me to take part in this dual listening task I think he called it’. She went on to tell how she had to repeat out loud sentences coming through one earphone while there was interference from the other. ‘The thing was’, she said, ‘At home I used to practice repeating what I heard on the radio out loud over the last few years cos I thought I’d like to be a radio presenter’. She did so well on the task that the experimenter told her, as he thanked her for taking part, that she was ‘unusual’. ‘Was that why they offered me a place on the course?’ she said towards the end of the narrative interview. What we notice so far is that Jan presented herself as compelled to do the experiment, with little agency, but ends up with the narrative of someone who outwitted the experimenter, as someone who became an active agent. The key event at the beginning of the story was the giving of the label ‘unusual’, and Jan was able to show how the label was actually very different (it was because she had practised the task) from what the psychologist thought (that her perceptual cognitive abilities were unusual).

*Step 2* is to ask how the narrative strings together different events or aspects of the main event into a *causal chain*. There is a difference here between the way the causal chain might be thought of as a chronological sequence of events – in which, for example, Jan being told that she was unusual was determined by her practice at home repeating what was said on the radio – and how they are put together in the narrative. In the narrative causal chain, for example, she takes part in the experiment (one point in the chain) and there was something the experimenter did not know (a following point in the chain). And there is a difference between the sequence of events when Jan

told us the story and the way the events function as narrative. So, in the interview, for example, she started off by saying that ‘Maybe I only got a place on the course because they thought I had some weird cognitive abilities, cos there was this experiment when I went to my interview’. In the narrative causal chain, however, what Jan is aiming at (that there is a difference between what psychologists know and what we know about ourselves) emerges from the story of how there was something the experimenter did not know (one point in the chain) but they offered her a place on the course perhaps because they thought she was unusual (a following point in the chain). So here we are starting to see how Jan positions herself as author and agent in the narrative, in a certain narrative temporal sequence, around an event as it would be understood by the experimenter but understood differently by her in the context of psychologists thinking they are able to find things out about people.

*Step 3* is to identify the way the narrative is put together so that it may be read as a certain *genre*. This is a question that can be explored in the course of an interview through a reflective question about what kind of book or film this episode might be. It would be difficult in this case, for example, to write the narrative in the genre of heterosexual romance, for the episode is not structured around the fascination Jan had for the vibrantly masculine experimenter and how she eventually went on to marry him. She hints at something comic about the event when she tells us that it was ‘funny’ the way the guy hovered around, and there are elements of mystery in the way the ‘unusual’ cognitive ability she was attributed with by the experimenter was eventually explained. We arrive now at how we might characterise the format of the narrative, and we could suggest that it contains elements of science fiction (hints of strange mental powers discovered by the scientist), of comedy (his bizarre mistake), and of detective fiction (save that the person who thought they were the detective turns out to be deeply mistaken about what he thought he had found).

This is the account of one individual, but by locating her narrative in a particular *research problem* (Step 1) we were able to show how the little bit of single subjectivity that emerged in this story was put together, and how the narrative may be connected with the stories of others. By attending to the way the narrative was constructed in a certain kind of *causal chain* (Step 2) we were able to show how the story functioned to produce a certain kind of message, what the author of the story was aiming at. The identification of *genre* (Step 3) may also be an opportunity to connect the way this narrative is put together with other kinds of ‘detective’ and ‘science fiction’ narrative in psychology (Squire 1990). The narrative here is an opening for Jan to develop an autobiographical account that challenges the part psychology plays in alienating people from what they know. Box 6.2 summarises the broader stages of the analytic process, including for this kind of ‘limited narrative’.

### **Biography and identity**

All narrative hints at the production of ‘identity’ and how it is performed – including the way it is performed in a research interview – but in a biographical account which takes in a much longer stretch of life, the question of identity is often explicitly foregrounded. The three research questions still need to be tackled before the empirical part of the study is undertaken – What is it about? What is the author aiming at? What are the limits? – but the stakes are much higher. The first two questions are more difficult to determine for sure at the outset. The third question – What are the

limits? – should be explored in some detail in a preliminary interview. Here we will focus on a preliminary interview, for which there is, of course, no transcript; instead, a summary of key issues and some reflection on them that point to how the research interview might proceed. Transcripts of actual interviews should be attached in the Appendix of a report. (There is a fuller discussion of interviewing in Chapter 4.)

An example summary anticipating a biographical account:

Jan agreed to participate in a study of personal trajectories of people who become psychologists, and how they change when they have completed their training. We discussed reasons why she said she felt ‘ambivalent’ about taking a degree course, and why she continued to worry about the power she held over others as normal or abnormal. Some childhood experiences of psychiatry that she mentioned as important were explored. We also asked her how she thought different kinds of readers of the account might interpret it.

There is already in the frame of the research study a research problem, and here the biographical account will itself be embedded in a broader causal chain that has been determined by the researchers. The questions for the preliminary interview were about how Jan might find a way of speaking that produced something novel, and whether there were areas of the biography that we should be careful to avoid. We also included some reflection on whether it would actually be better not to proceed with the full interview process, which we envisaged taking place as six one-hour sessions organised as different ‘chapters’ of the book of her life as one useful structuring frame for the interviews (McAdams 1993).

First point of focus: *a ‘genre-in-the-telling’*. It is important to anticipate not only what the format of eventual biographical narrative might be, but also the way it may be told. The way it may be told has a bearing on the decision to proceed with the interviews for a biographical account. For example, if the overall format of the interview is in the genre of ‘tragedy’ – in this case, perhaps, as the fateful mistake to train as a psychologist and the train of woes it set off culminating in utter desolation – then it would be necessary to think carefully about whether the researcher was able to offer the support the author would need as they experienced that narrative again in miniature in the course of the interviews. The focus on a limited narrative from Jan (of the experiment in which the psychologist told her she was unusual) gave some indication that the genre-in-the-telling might be more comedic, or maybe in the format of a detective story. Her account of how she wondered what psychologists really did and then discovered the truth – that ‘they don’t really know what people think after all’ – might have produced a tragic narrative, but one in which the psychologists were the tragic figures, not Jan. This would mean that the genre-in-the-telling would not itself be tragic. When we said in the summary that some ‘childhood experiences of psychiatry ... were explored’, this was with a view to determining what shape the experiences might have as limited episodes, and whether it would be possible to keep them contained. There is a possibility that the genre-in-the-telling could be ‘therapeutic’, and this would mean that there would be a particular kind of call to the researcher, and the risk of sliding into a ‘therapeutic’ narrative (Parker 1998). In this case, the event was told as a joke, not something traumatic that would be painful for Jan to relate in the interview.

Second point of focus: *the review and production of a 'moral career'*. The notion of 'moral career' is useful for identifying what the beginning and end points of a prospective biography might be. In 'western' culture it is often assumed that a person's moral career starts with physical birth or development of conscious awareness and ceases with physical death. However, it is also possible to conceive of moral careers as having quite short durations in relation to specific social worlds. One's moral career through a student society at college, for example, might commence with the first meeting you attend, culminate in being elected as secretary, and end with degree graduation which is when you leave the college. There might then be a 'moral career' in relation to limited narratives about life in the society. The notion also is applicable to broader biographical accounts. For example, Harré (1979) drew attention to the way a moral career in Japan might culminate in an eventual point of recognition of success or failure way after the physical death of the individual concerned. We do not need to romanticise this other culture to take the point that the way the trajectory of a life might be bounded does vary. In Jan's case we were focusing on the moral career of becoming a psychologist, and so we were able to anticipate from the preliminary interview that the 'childhood experiences' she mentioned – the most important being one in which she was told she would be taken to a psychiatrist by her mother because she told lies, which led her to puzzle what a psychiatrist was and why it would make her tell the truth – would be the beginning of the moral career. We were also able to anticipate that a final 'chapter' of the narrative would be the possible future abandonment of the identity of psychologist (which was something she promised herself every now and then).

Third point of focus: *the mobilising of 'identity scripts'*. One of the most useful notions in narrative research is that of 'identity scripts'. In this case, for example, one of Jan's identity scripts is that of 'psychologist'. The research will then attend to two aspects of this identity script that are held in tension for the author of the account. The first aspect is what is perceived to be the identity of a psychologist – what kind of person becomes a psychologist, what personality attributes would be expected of a psychologist, what image you imagine them to have of themselves and what other people think of them – and this collection of things is treated as a culturally-available 'identity script'. The second aspect is how the image is taken up and lived out, how it is performed in such a way as to put a distinctive personal stamp on the identity so that other people are perhaps a little surprised at how you function in that category of identity because you do not conform entirely to their expectations. This performance of identity, then, entails the repetition of elements of the identity script so that it takes on some substance in its own right and the improvisation of it in such a way that allows a little ironic distance from it. We assume that Jan will be able to elaborate 'identity scripts' for 'psychologist' and for 'psychiatrist', 'experimenter', 'scientist', 'academic' and the range of other overlapping characters that will appear in her narrative.

In this way we are able to anticipate, with Jan as co-researcher, what the format of the narrative might be, something of the context for her biographical account, key events, the order in which they might appear in the narrative, and how she presents herself as an agent taking choices. We would then be able to reflect on how the various elements of her recounted experience are put together in narrative, and how they may be connected with the stories of others. What we have described here could, of course, also be turned around and used to elaborate an autobiographical account in which the



researcher writes about themselves (Ellis and Bochner 2000). The production of narrative when someone develops a biographical account should also be an opportunity for them to stage for us their autobiography (even perhaps partially so in a limited narrative). And because individual lives are made possible by material conditions and social networks, the discussion of any particular narrative should connect with broader narratives (even to connect personal revelation with social revolution). Box 6.2 summarises the broader stages of the analytic process, including for this kind of ‘biographical account’.

**Box 6.2**      *Stage by stage to narrative*

These six stages summarise what you need to do.

1.      *Production schedule* – where you identify the ‘research problem’, and set out what might be interesting about it, including some reflection on how the possible narratives circulate in culture. Write a plan for the work.
2.      *Auditions* – where you find authors for the narratives, those who you will treat as ‘agents’ able to discuss with you the impact of certain ‘events’, whether for a limited narrative or biographical account. Find co-researchers, actual or virtual (in life or in already written accounts).
3.       *Casting* – where you anticipate in a preliminary interview what the ‘genre-in-the-telling’ might be for a biographical account, and what the boundaries of a ‘moral career’ might be. Check that these co-researchers will be right for a biographical account or limited narrative.
4.      *Improvised scripting* – where you give the stage to the author of the narrative to rehearse and produce in a distinct form for you the kinds of ‘identity scripts’ that are important to them. Make time in the preliminary interview for discussion of these issues.
5.      *Performance* – where you see elaborated the narrative in a certain ‘temporal order’ in the ‘context’ of other kinds of similar narratives, in a way that becomes visible to the teller as author and listener as researcher. Conduct the interview or the analysis of the written account.
6.      *Reviews* – where you may finally be able to determine what genre of narrative has been produced, and how a causal chain has appeared in the performance, with an assessment of what is old and what is new about it. Write it up, including reflexive analysis and discussion connecting with broader narratives.

**Narrative truth in context**

The story of research in a report is also, of course, a ‘narrative’, and there is a conventional format for psychological reports that usually makes them conform to a certain genre, that of the ‘scientific communication’ (in which a hypothesis is formulated and tested so that conclusions can be drawn). This genre is more secure in quantitative research in psychology because the author avoids use of the first person, but qualitative researchers too unfortunately often try to mimic that genre. (There is a

fuller discussion of report writing in Chapter 11.) The narrative of a piece of narrative research, then, will include the usual ‘chapters’ – Introduction, Method, Analysis and Discussion – but its self-reflexive character as narrative, which should appear as a final section of the Analysis as ‘reflexive analysis’, raises some conceptual questions about how it relates to the ‘truth’.

We have already raised the possibility that a biographical account in narrative research could be produced by the researcher, as an autobiographical account. We can go further than this, however, to include fictional accounts. Culture is saturated with narrative, and many ‘identity scripts’ and formats for ‘moral careers’ are formulated quite explicitly as fiction well before being lived out as the truth by individuals and collectives. There is good precedent for the device of using fiction to bring to life the different kinds of truth of what it is to be a person in narratives of psychotherapy (e.g., Orbach 1999).

Narrative research does not discover what the truth is, but rather how someone makes sense of an event that they may have had some difficulty in describing so that it becomes true to them. Not all events are traumatic in the clinical sense of the term, but many events can have a ‘traumatic’ quality, in so far as something happens that is unpredictable and inexplicable. As some commentators on narrative in therapy have pointed out, perhaps the appearance of something incomprehensible and the attempt to make sense of it by integrating it into a narrative is the closest qualitative research can get to the ‘real’ (Frosh 2002). In this chapter we term those points when narrative might touch the real ‘events’.

The third issue concerns how little individual narratives might also be big individual narratives, and how they might then connect with a very big historical narrative. The assumption of a well-known name of an individual may be entirely contingent, and it may then function as part of a narrative so that it produces an identity for this character singled out as a key figure, as if they were entirely responsible for the historical events that then took place. Political narratives may exactly display how a certain image is picked up and turned into an identity by followers of the individual, who is then treated as an ‘example’ (Parker 1996). The task of the analysis is then to show how the story of this single subject cannot be understood without connecting it with the stories of others.

Truth is stranger than fiction, but the alienation and separation of individuals one from the other under capitalism often renders narratives of exploitation and resistance into no more than fictional accounts. Research that attends to how individual identities reduce experience to the level of the individual can open a space for the exploration of collective narratives so that the truth about injustice can be articulated and the material conditions in which it is embedded can be changed, through new dramatic revolutionary ‘events’ yet to be performed. An individual separated from social relationships performs a kind of fiction, a narrative as partial truth, and it is when collective events happen that its nature as truth becomes visible (Burman 2003).

**Box 6.3**      *Marking out pitfalls in narrative research*

Things that should be avoided, and which would count against a good evaluation of a report include the following little bits of narrative:

1. *'They really told me their story'* – as if you were able to go 'backstage' in someone's life and they revealed something the way it was rather than the way they wanted you to hear it. You need to focus on the way it was told as a performance, and ask what the performance was about.
2. *'I think it was therapeutic for them telling me about this'* – as if you were able to slide from being a researcher into being a counsellor, and as if something traumatic that you were digging out for public view could then be covered over. You need to avoid intrusion into painful private material.
3. *'They were a good example of what it was to be like this'* – as if a person presents themselves within a certain kind of category, and this means that you should interpret them as being of that type. You need to focus on how 'identity scripts' are used, and what the limits of an identity might be.
4. *'This is what they meant by it'* – as if you could decode the story they told to discover what they really thought about it or, worse, what underlying psychological processes would explain it. Stick to the narrative as built up out of cultural elements and given an idiosyncratic twist.

### **Reproduction and transformation**

The emphasis in this chapter on the 'performance' of identity has been with a view to opening up the possibilities for transformation rather than the simple reproduction of what we study. The task here has been to use narrative ideas to open the way for people to do a form of 'action research' for themselves rather than waiting for an expert to come in and do it for them. People develop narratives to account for events and for times of uncertainty and change. This means we also need to reflect on what we are doing in terms of how individual change can be connected with collective change, how the form of narrative reflects certain cultural assumptions and how 'identity scripts' can be rewritten.

Early on in narrative research a decision needs to be made about whether the 'author' of the narrative will be one individual who is questioned carefully about the course of events, or whether a number of people will be included in the study so that a composite picture can emerge perhaps of a collective narrative. Usually narrative research decides to focus on individuals, but many of the most important narratives we live by are collective narratives, of class or nation for example. This more difficult process then needs to rework some of the main assumptions of traditional narrative research, which are based on 'personal narratives' as individual stories (Holzman and Morss 2000).

A useful methodological device in narrative research is to organise an interview around the motif of a 'book', and to ask the co-researcher who is invited to be the author of the narrative to work through the different 'chapters' of the book of their life (McAdams 1993). Of course, this is but a metaphor, and the arrival of books in the world was a function of certain kinds of technology; wide readership for books was made possible by mass production. Certain kinds of books devoted to an individual life story are also quite late arriving in western culture, and the horizon of the 'novel'

as a life story is bound up with the formation of ‘imagined communities’ that determine ‘modern’ forms of national identity and nationalism (Anderson 1991). Now, this historical location of the novel and the notion we have of life narrative as like a book raises interesting questions about how we might now tackle new forms of identity, including so-called ‘postmodern’ identities (Holzman and Morss 2000). It would be possible, for example, to better tap into contemporary forms of narrative by organising the research around the motif of palimpsests, film re-makes or interactive CD-ROMs. Against the insistence of clinical psychologists with too tidy minds that non-linear narrative is indicative of thought disorder, we learn from this rich variety of cultural practices that narrative does not have to be linear to be narrative. Radical research in clinical psychology, in contrast, studies the way normalisation is constructed in narratives of ‘mental health’ (Harper 2004).

The perspective adopted in this chapter owes a lot to the writing of the feminist philosopher and cultural theorist Judith Butler. For Butler (1993), the category of ‘identity’, which is drummed into each human being in western culture as soon as they learn to speak, is a crucial element in the reproduction of the heterosexual matrix that has caused so much misery to lesbians and gay men, not to mention heterosexuals. It also underpins various forms of religious fundamentalism, including Christianity as its model form. Not only ‘gender’ but also ‘sex’ is repeated to the child and then repeated by them so that it becomes an identity category outside of which it seems they will not be able to exist. The subversion of male and female categories has been a focus of ‘queer theory’ and ‘queer politics’ inspired in part by Butler’s writing. To ‘queer’ identity categories goes beyond identification of oneself as ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’, and it disturbs the lines of division between the categories so that supporters of lesbian and gay liberation in heterosexual relationships, for example, can also be ‘queer’. What this work does is to ‘muddle the lines between queer theory and feminism’ (Butler 1993: 239). Not only does it open the way to new political alliances, but it also disturbs many of the assumptions that psychology is founded upon (Gordo-López and Cleminson, 1999). Box 6.4 describes how elements of queer theory discussed by Butler can be brought to bear on identity.

**Box 6.4**      *Theoretical resource link to queering identity*

These are seven elements of the queer theory challenge to identity derived from Butler (1993):

1.      *Differentiating relations* – Treat the appearance and experience of being who we are as determined by what we are not. Even what it is to be a ‘child’, for example, is determined by the activity of those around it who are ‘adult’, including those who then write mainstream developmental psychology textbooks about those they are not.
2.      *Power, construed as a subject* – Take agency seriously precisely because it makes use of power relations, not because it is the source of power. It is possible to be a nice person when one becomes a psychologist, for example, but one still operates as a relay of powerful practices of normalisation and pathologisation that are not nice.

3. *Subjected to gender* – Masculinity and femininity are identity scripts that demand a choice for one or the other and obedience to them. This helps to explain why the first thought that usually pops into the heads of an audience for another dull psychology seminar, for example, is to ask if there were any differences between men and women.
4. *Reiterative and citational practice* – Key terms that define identity are cited and repeated so many times that they seem to refer to real things. One of the ways psychology pretends to be a science, for example, is to publish papers that cite strings of other studies, and so to reiterate the same old categories until they are taken for granted.
5. *Identification with a normative phantasm* – Images of what seem normal, average or stereotypical identities are secure prisons of the self. To speak as one of a category allows you to present yourself as ‘normal’, for example, and if you do it often enough you will get through psychological tests so well that you will be happy to apply the tests to others.
6. *Racializing interpellations* – Identity categories are also cited and repeated to form race differences and calls for subjects to take them up. Interpellation, as a call to people within a category, turns ‘race’, as well as sex and class, from being a process into a thing, and then into a racist industry for studying psychological differences, for example.
7. *Queer performativity* – The deliberate acting out and parodying of identity scripts so that they are questioned and transgressed opens space for resistance. Try saying, ‘speaking as a psychologist’ when you go to a party, for example, so you start to see how ridiculous the performance of knowledge claims are by those really speak ‘as’ psychologists rather than as people.

This kind of research has direct links with ‘narrative therapy’, and the most radical kinds of narrative therapy have also been an important resource for thinking about how personal narratives are constructed out of cultural resources (Monk et al. 1997, Parker 1999c). There are still some unresolved questions in narrative research about how bodily processes can be articulated into a narrative account, rather than simply turned into a narrative ‘about’ the body (Yardley 1997) or about the unconscious (Dunker 2005, Parker 2003b). There is a danger, for example, that the reduction to ‘narrative’ could obscure the way lives are constructed in material relations of exploitation and resistance, and the way these aspects of context should not just be turned into another story (Newman 1999). However, narrative research developed in the way described in this chapter may help to bring history alive again so that it is not merely the recounting of the chronological order of past events. Then the work turns into action research, for the way we grasp the past has a direct bearing on the way we can break from the present and make the future.

### **Further reading**

Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’*. London: Routledge.

- Holzman, L. and Morss, J. (eds) (2000) *Postmodern Psychologies, Societal Practice and Political Life*. London: Routledge.
- Monk, G., Winslade, J., Crocket, K., Epston, D. (eds) (1997) *Narrative Therapy in Practice: The Archaeology of Hope*. Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco.
- Squire, C. (ed.) (2000) *Culture in Psychology*. London: Routledge.