

Centre for Narrative Research, UEL, Gender Institute, LSE, and The Open University

Postgraduate Seminars in Biography and Narrative, 2003-4

All seminars will be held in the Gender Institute, London School of Economics, Columbia House, Aldwych, London WC1, Tuesdays from 5-6.30pm, rooms tba

All welcome, especially graduate students.

Tuesday October 7 **Sonja Miettinen, University of Helsinki and The Open University**

Watching a parent die: Bereavement narratives of daughters who stayed by the side of a dying mother

Due to the rise in general life expectancy, elderly parents' death in the middle years of life has become a common experience. However, this kind of loss has not yet been paid very broad or systematic scientific attention. My PhD research is based on narrative interviews with seventeen middle-aged daughters. In this presentation, I am focussing on descriptions of the last times of the parent, which seems to be a crucial part of the bereavement narratives the narrators told: they typically engaged in painful, detailed recollection of the parent's last times in the interviews. I am interested in the storylines describing the dying process of the parent in a hospital setting and how the narrators position themselves as daughters in relation to others - the parent, other family members and the hospital staff. I will be comparing the differences and similarities of two daughters' narratives about mothers who have died from cancer. The stories will be analysed in the context of social bonds between mothers and daughters and the practices of caring for dying people in hospitals in contemporary Finnish welfare state.

Sonja Miettinen graduated from the University of Helsinki with an MA in social sciences in 2001, and since then she has been doing her PhD at the Department of Social Policy, University of Helsinki. She is a visiting PhD student at the Open University for the year 2003.

Tuesday November 4 **Ruth Ballardie, Victoria University, Australia and Centre for Narrative Research, UEL**

Tomboy lives: An exploration of tomboy identity amongst lesbian and heterosexual women

The 'tomboy' is traditionally conceived of as a transient experience of girlhood, stopping in early adolescence in response to social pressures associated with sexual maturation. This naturalistic enquiry into tomboy experiences, informed by feminist and social constructionist perspectives, explores the complex development of gender identity within the fabric of social relationships, through the recalled experiences of nine lesbian and nine heterosexual women. In considering childhood, adolescent and adult experiences, these women recall an awareness of gendered power relationships

and described their refusal to comply with gendered norms, transforming their 'tomboy ways' into age-appropriate strategies of resistance. Early adolescence critically challenged their sense of gender identity; involving rupture or alteration of important relationships with fathers and male friends. Sexual harassment and sexual objectification were significant experiences. Sexual orientation did not appear to significantly affect tomboy experiences, amongst these women. Tomboys, rather than being 'token' boys, may be better described as girls who transgress gender boundaries and develop important skills and attributes through negotiating complex social relationships. They remain in an ambivalent position, with complex relationships to both masculinity and femininity, rejecting the confinement and limitations associated with femininity, rather than women, per se. For these women, the felt sense of 'difference', the search for personal authenticity and their active engagement in social contestation suggests that their experience could be placed within a paradigm of identity, rather than 'cross-gender behaviour'.

Biographical note: After completing undergraduate psychology, in disillusionment, I 'discovered' phenomenology and psychocultural studies through graduate diplomas in grief and loss counselling and psychoanalytic studies. I was lucky enough to find a university that encouraged qualitative research and a psychoanalytic perspective, completing my honours year with a study of the lives of women who had been tomboys. I hold a scholarship with Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia to do a PhD continuing my previous work with a thesis entitled "Tomboy Lives, Tomboy Bodies" - a multi-generational study, with a concurrent Masters in Clinical Psychology (psychoanalytic orientation). I currently work in mental health community support.

Tuesday December 2 **Kate Milnes, University of Huddersfield**

'What's good for the goose is good for the gander' – or is it? The potential dangers of storying young women's sexual experiences and relationships within 'sexual equality' narratives.

This seminar will explore the implications of some of the findings of my recently completed PhD thesis entitled 'Dominant cultural narratives, community narratives and past experience: their impact on young women's sexual experiences'. Past research into the sexual experiences of young women has identified a tendency amongst young women to 'story' their sexual experiences within a romantic narrative framework. Within romantic narratives, young women tend to be portrayed as passive and responsive whilst their male counterparts are portrayed as active, heroic and risk-taking. The 'romantic' construction of female sexuality can be seen to place significant constraints on the options open to young women in negotiating their sexual relationships and ensuring their own sexual autonomy and safety.

The young women taking part in my PhD research often appeared to challenge the 'sexual double-standard' and those aspects of the romantic narrative that they found constraining by narrating their sexual experiences within alternative narrative frameworks. For several of the young women, narrating their experiences within 'sexual equality' narratives appeared to open up a range of sexual behavioural options that would not be available to them were they to story their experiences firmly within a romantic narrative framework. However, it would appear that, perhaps as a result of

the pervasive nature of the romantic narrative, women are still not permitted to engage in sexual relationships on the same terms as men without the very real fear of negative consequences. Based on my analysis of the personal narrative accounts of the young women taking part in my research, I will argue that whilst drawing upon 'sexual equality' narratives might enable young women to challenge or resist some of the constraints imposed by romantic narratives, it can also create new sets of constraints and pressures.

Kate Milnes is a lecturer in psychology at the University of Huddersfield. She has recently completed a doctoral thesis which explored the lives of a group of 'young' mothers using a feminist narrative approach to understanding lived experiences. Her major research interests are narrative psychology, feminist research methods, sex and sexuality and adolescence.

Tuesday January 13, **Sofie Bager-Charleson, Surrey University and Lund University**

The parents' school? Narrative research about parental involvement in schools

Over the last two decades, educational reforms have stimulated an enormous growth in innovative school thinking. This has encouraged independent schools; it has also affected mainstream education. It seems clear that parents and other interest groups, previously excluded from general pedagogic practice and planning, are now faced with new opportunities and responsibilities. It is equally clear that parents "invest" in these newly won options in very different ways. I have chosen to contribute to this wide area through a narrative analysis of different stories and accounts relating to one particular parent-founded school. I have compared narratives with each other to get an insight into the experiences revolving around the school, primarily guided by the question; Why was this parent-founded school started? In accordance with the tradition of language-oriented qualitative studies, the interest in this study has been to "discover how language makes things happen" (McLeod 2001:19). The involves an emphasis on for "narrative knowing" in the sense that Grassie (1994) refers to it when he refers to our aim to "trespass" uniquely personal, temporal and cultural distances; a narrative offers an opening into others' meaning-making processes. The overriding theoretical framework for the study is Critical Hermeneutic Thinking as explored by Ricoeur (1970) and Habermas (1981), under the influence of both post-structuralism and phenomenology. Parents' narrative accounts are explored within this framework in a way that allows for considerations of both the unique combination of biographical events of the individual and the role of social, culturally shared factors. The study shares Hollway & Jefferson's (2002) contention about a research subject as a "psychosocial" being and has tried to expand hermeneutic thinking accordingly. This suggests a methodology that seeks to combine unique biographical events with socially shared meanings, interactions and situations. In this case the school founder's autobiographic texts plays an important role. They are related to other sources, primarily written but also to verbal accounts relating to the school, in an attempt to weave the narratives into one "story" about the school. It is suggested however, that the "story" about the parent-founded school in question is a doubly "layered" (Polkinghorne 1988) one, with at times contrasting narrative schemes. The study

explores these narrative schemes with reference to both psychodynamic and existential thinking. The concept of a “repair” motive also is introduced, following Alice Millers’ (1982) suggestion of that there is no form of child rearing, which does not reflect needs within the adults themselves.

Sofie Bager-Charleson is a scholar and therapist with a past in radio journalism. She is interested in narratives as means of gaining insight into people's meaning making processes, in both a personal, unique sense for the individual and in a cultural sense with regard to how culturally available narratives may be construed and maintained. Sofie's PhD thesis is based on narratives about a parent founded school, and is expected to be published by Kluwer later on this autumn. Sofie has been linked to Lund University in Sweden since the 1980s, although she lives in Surrey since 1993 and now works with Surrey University through a project about narratives and psychotherapy.

Tuesday February 3 **Margaret Volante, Surrey University**

Learning lives: Reframing the discipline of nursing

I have been troubled for some time with the representation of reflective practice in the nursing literature which never quite gets to a point of linking individual cases of nurses’ learning to a more collective and universal knowledge system of nursing practice. For my doctoral studies I collected data through life story narrative interviews with district nurses, community psychiatric nurses and health visitors. Biographical interpretive method guided the data analysis and interpretation of the nurses’ own accounts of learning and experiences of professional practice. The method permitted analysis and interpretation of subjective meaning as well as the structuring influence of the social context. The impact of structuring agencies on subjective meanings can be uncovered.

In comparing three cases where the subjective meaning of learning was different, similarity emerged in that how they learned defined their practice. In all cases practice was individual rather than collective but differed in the primary focus. Where learning was instrumental, practice was focused on the task. Where learning was objective knowing, practice was focused on the evidence base. Where learning was subjective knowing in the action, practice was focused on relationship.

I explore the influence of the structuring agencies of the divided discipline of nursing (nurse education, nursing practice, nursing research) on nurses’ learning life history through processes of knowledge production and representations of reflective practice in the nursing literature. In moving my interpretation on linking the private with the public, I use reflective practice from Argyris & Schön (1974) and concept of ‘biographicity’ (Alheit & Dausien 2002) to propose reframing the discipline of nursing as collective knowledge and collective praxis. Within such a discipline of nursing the formation of nurses’ biographical learning is the concern of nurse education in the formation of these collective processes.

Margaret Volante is Head of Academic and Practice Development in the European Institute of Health & Medical Sciences at the University of Surrey. Her passion for

learning about and understanding learning in nursing practice is linked with her own learning work as a curriculum developer, nurse lecturer, nurse, graduate student nurse and prior to that an undergraduate student of pharmacology. She works with local NHS Trusts on strategic contemporary developments for practice, which has involved setting up networks for developing practice across academic and service settings. This is reflective of her research interests in the learning and knowledge creating processes nurses and other health professional undertake in the doing and development of practice.

She became interested in biographical methods, when evaluating the implementation of a course supporting nurses to use their experiences in practice as a source of learning. This led to her using in her doctoral studies biographical interpretive method, which emphasises the influence of historical events on biographies, to explore nurses' formal and nonformal learning in professional practice contexts.

She is currently involved in developing the use of narrative methods within the nursing curriculum. This is as both a learning activity for the nurse in the generation of professional knowledge for the ongoing enhancement of practice and development of expertise and a method of enquiry of nursing practice.

Tuesday March 2, **Catherine O'Neill, University College Dublin**

Living poorly or dying well: Identifying the case structure of the processes involved in decisions in the care of older people

Decisions in relation to the care of older people within a hospital setting may oftentimes be problematic. Questions as whether to treat a patient or leave him/her alone, employ invasive diagnostic tests, what to do when there are differences of opinion between health care professionals and what happens when medical judgment differs from the patient or family, or there is confusion about the wishes of the patient. Although these issues and dilemmas are embedded in peoples' lives and the social world they inhabit, mainstream sociology, has with a few exceptions remained on the margins of these complex human problems. Individual biographies and relationships, the ethos of the health care, wider economic and political pressures, all shape and contribute to the process of how these decisions are actually negotiated within an organisational setting. This paper will present a particular case study drawing on biographic narrative interpretive interviews with health professionals and family members. These interviews are part of an ethnographic study in progress by the author, which is exploring ethical decision-making in the care of older patients within an organisational setting.

Catherine O'Neill is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology, University College Dublin. She is also a Lecturer in the Faculty of Nursing & Midwifery, Royal College of Surgeons, Dublin.

Tuesday April 6, **Dina Matar, LSE**

Narrative and news consumption – the Palestinian diaspora in Britain

In this presentation, I provide an overview of ongoing research on the extent of the role of news stories, as a form of narrative, in the negotiation of Palestinian diasporic identification. My case study is the Palestinian diasporic community in Britain. As members of a highly visible ethno-national diasporic group, the Palestinians in Britain form an ideal subject for an examination of this kind. These people's identities are both formed and transformed by their location in history and politics, as well as by kinship and their position in the host society. At the same time, their identities are negotiated and transformed through their material and cultural consumption. Based on empirical evidence, and taking into account the diversity of the Palestinian diaspora in Britain and the various news media the Palestinians concerned are exposed to, I argue that it is through their engagement with the continuous, and, in particular, the televised news stories of and related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, that the respondents express ambivalent and dynamic discourses of identification that alternate between closed thinking about identity and ones that are more discursive and open to possibilities.

What is interesting here is the way respondents employ narrativisation as a way to make sense of news stories. In the empirical work, this was evident in the capacity of some informants, in making sense of news stories, to emphasize their biographies – their personal stories and histories become an extension of the news narrative and vice versa – the capacity of others, particularly the younger generation and those born in Britain, to reflexively question who they are, where they come from and where they belong, and the capacity of yet others to emphasize the performative dimensions of identity, reflected in individual and group actions to assert sameness and difference, belonging and non-belonging. In all these manifestations, there is an element of narrativisation that comes across in the way respondents talk about their news consumption experiences and choices.

Dina Matar is a PhD student at the [Media@lse](#) Department. She is in her fourth year and hopes to finish the thesis by the end of the 2003-2004 academic year. Dina's research interest lies in news consumption as a cultural practice and its impact on identifications, particularly when dealing with diasporic and minority groups. Her case study is the Palestinian diasporic community in Britain.

Dina has also taken part in a cross-cultural collaborative research work on audience responses to post-September 11 coverage, sponsored by the BFI, the Open University and Swansea University, under the leadership of Dr. Marie Gillespie. Her work is due to be published in a special issue of the *Journal for Ethnic and Migration Studies* by the end of 2003. Dina is also working on a chapter for a book on globalisation, transnationalism and diasporic ruptures, to be published in Canada.

Dina worked as a professional journalist and editor between 1981 and 1999. She covered foreign and economic news for Reuters, Dow Jones and the Wall Street Journal and worked in several countries, including Lebanon, Egypt, Hong Kong, the US and the UK, where she had editorial responsibilities for Europe, the Middle East and Africa regions. She has a B.Sc. in Chemistry from Jordan University and an M.Sc. in Comparative Politics which she completed at the LSE in 1999, where her thesis focused on ethnic conflict regulation under the supervision of Professor

Brendan O'Leary. Dina has been employed as a part-time lecturer in international journalism at City University since 1999.

Tuesday May 4 **Matthew Gill, LSE**

Accounting Language and Values

Many attempts to understand contemporary accounting scandals, such as those surrounding Enron or WorldCom, founder because they accept that accountancy has discovered the unambiguous language of fact. They therefore assume that these important social phenomena can be fully blamed either on individuals or on the formal rules within which individuals operate. I argue that this is not the whole story. The language accountants use in their work influences their ability to conceptualise and to debate ethical issues, and therefore is not neutral or factual but inherently value-laden. That language must therefore be a factor in understanding why accountants behave as they do, both in high-profile criminal cases and in general. My research aims to discover what values are embodied in the language used by accountants in their work. To achieve this aim, I am conducting in-depth interviews with young male chartered accountants working in the larger accountancy practices in London, or in other words with members of the archetypal group within the profession. I will analyse the interview transcripts using rhetorical and stylistic methods. My presentation will cover the conceptual background to the study, and will then discuss in detail my empirical findings and their sociological significance.

Matthew Gill has been studying for a PhD in the Sociology department of the London School of Economics since October 2002, supervised by Professor Richard Sennett. Before beginning his research he spent four years working for PricewaterhouseCoopers, where he qualified as a Chartered Accountant. He also holds a BA and an MA in English from King's College London.

Tuesday June 1, Nicki Ward, University of Birmingham

Subjective identities and social exclusion: being a lesbian in a gendered and heterosexualised world.

Over the past two decades the concept of social exclusion has become increasingly prominent in both academic and policy discourse and it has been suggested that it is a concept which allows us to examine the cultural and social injustices experienced by those with subjective identities (Williams, 1998). This research examines the processes of marginalisation and exclusion experienced by lesbians and their use of agency to negotiate these experiences. Drawing on feminist and participatory research methodology the research used biographic narrative methods to gather the life stories of lesbians, these 'stories' were then transcribed and an initial thematic analysis completed. The transcript and initial analysis was then shared with participants and a second meeting was arranged with participants to enable a dialogic development of the analysis. Further analysis is being developed which will look at the research relationship, key themes and issues within the women's stories and issues of

recognition and redistribution. (Fraser, 1997). This seminar presentation will draw on initial analysis of the data to explore the value of using a biographic narrative method. This will include discussion of using of life stories to illustrate processes of exclusion and expressions of agency, and the benefits of biography to explore the experiences of hidden populations and for addressing some of the ethical issues involved when researching on sensitive subjects.

A social work practitioner with 20 years experience of social care, **Nicki Ward** returned to full time study as a mature student in 1997. She is currently doing PhD research using biographical methods to explore lesbian experiences of social exclusion and mental wellbeing. Nicki is also interested in other equalities issues and contributes to teaching in qualitative and feminist research methods, service user empowerment and anti discriminatory social work practice.

Tuesday July 6 **Ruksana Patel, Cambridge University**

Memory-making and meaning-making: Life histories in a context of socio-political transition

The focus of this paper is on the memory and meaning making processes entailed in life history interviews with a generation of former youth activists in South Africa, who were involved in political resistance against the apartheid state. The aim is to understand how this generation of political activists reconstruct and negotiate their memories of political violence and resistance, in a context of rapid social change. This paper will also attempt to understand how personal and generational social memories are positioned in relation to the national narratives of truth, reconciliation and healing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the construction of the 'rainbow nation'. The discussion for this paper will draw on in-depth life history interviews with an age cohort generation of political activists who were in their adolescent or young adult stage during the 1980s, which was a period of heightened political repression in South Africa. In situating the study in South Africa as a 'site of struggle', and grounding the narratives within a specific historical period, the paper hopes to analyse how the individual narratives of this generation of political activists, intersect with the historical memories of the past. Narrative is understood as both a memory-making and meaning-making activity of remembrance, which serves to bring historical consciousness to bear on the transactional and structural impacts of the violence of apartheid and underscores the agency of socio-political actors. Theoretically, questions on memory as both an individual and collective activity and the role of 'memory politics' and 'identity politics' in transitional contexts are considered.

Ruksana Patel is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Cambridge since October 2001. Her background is in sociology and clinical psychology. Her research and clinical interests cohere around issues of political commitment, resistance, torture and resilience.