

Paper submitted for Qualitative Inquiry special issue on narrative.

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What is the subject?

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1. Introduction

Since the ‘narrative turn’ in the social sciences (Mishler, 1991), an assumption that is often made is that selves and stories are linked. It is said that our very ‘selves’ are ‘storied’ (see, for example, Bruner, 1990; Eakin, 1999; McAdams, 1997; Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992), or that stories are the cornerstone of our identity (see, for example, Holstein and Gubrium, 1999). Sarbin (1986) postulates a ‘narratory principle’ whereby persons think, feel, act and make moral choices according to narrative structures. Andrews (2000:77-78) summarises the position succinctly: “Stories are not only the way in which we come to ascribe significance to experiences.....they are one of the primary means through which we constitute our very selves.....We become who we are through telling stories about our lives and living the stories we tell.” On this view, narratives not only help us to organise and make sense of experience, and not only help us imbue our lives with meaning, but in these very acts of meaning-making, the human subject sculpts a narrative identity (see, for example, Widdershoven, 1993).

Others take a more sceptical view. Craib (2000), for example, argues that selves are always more than stories can express – for him, stories that claim otherwise are ‘bad

faith' narratives. Craib worries about a sanitised, even idealised, view of narrative. For him, the sorts of psychic realities that can be talked about in the language of psychoanalysis necessarily evade narrative formalisations. Frosh (1999) poses a similar problem in a different way: "What is outside discourse?", he asks. He is worried about the postmodern 'collapse of self-boundaries' and the idea that the self is no more than an effect of language/discourse, an 'alienating fiction' (p381). Like Craib, Frosh invokes the language of psychoanalysis to think about those aspects of self and identity that are internal to the psyche. For him, a discursive or narrative (Frosh, 2002) account of the self cannot do justice to its persistence, interiority and complexity. Hollway and Jefferson (2000a, 2000b) tackle the problem by positing a 'defended' subject – a subject whose unconscious defences against anxiety will colour their experiences and relationships and fashion the stories that they tell. On this view, particular ways of 'reading' personal narratives, using psychoanalytic concepts, permits insight into the complexities of the human subject.

But Frosh, Craib and Hollway and Jefferson are going further than just saying that there are selves, or aspects of selves, that lie 'beyond' the story. What they are also saying is that the selves that are expressed in stories – Rosenwald and Ochberg's 'storied selves' (1992) – are superficial covers for something that is much more deep, complex and threatening. Frosh (p382) says, for instance, that "identities are ... important protective devices against something worse". The common position taken by these critical thinkers is that the storied self, far from encapsulating the 'real' self, or expressing/constituting identity, is something that *defends against* it.

Importantly, though, whether we believe that selves are constructed or revealed by stories, or whether we take the contrary view that selves are more concealed by them, both positions assume some kind of linkage or, more likely, a complex matrix of connections between narrative and identity. My project is to explore these links between stories and selves, beginning with how we might theorise a 'narrative subject' in such a way as to take account of both opposing positions set out above. That is to say, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the issue of "What is the subject?" with reference to the determining power of language but that does not lose sight of the significance of specifically psychic realities.

First I will consider ‘narrative’; I ask what kind of thing do we have to imagine narrative to be in order for us to think about it as a primary locus for selfhood? Next, I focus on the nature of the subject, and I ask what kind of entity do we have to imagine the subject to be, such that the self is capable of being realised in narrative? Finally, I speculate on the processes by which selves and stories are linked, and the means by which it may be said that subjectivities are narratively produced. First, a few words about ‘Narrative psychology’ – the theme of the symposium.

For many, the need for a ‘narrative psychology’ arises in order to take account of the ‘turn to language’ in social science. On this view, a significance is accorded to language, at both individual and social levels, that is absent in traditional psychological paradigms. Traditionally, language is seen merely as a means of representation and communication – a transparent medium by which ‘reality’ is reflected and conveyed in a meaningful way. On this view, meanings are given in language and are, more or less, self evident in any given community where the language is shared. By contrast, a critical approach challenges this mimetic view of language and problematises the production of meaning. It sees language, not as reflecting experience, but as constitutive of both experience and subjectivity. It sees meaning as the outcome of ongoing processes of negotiation – always partial and contingent, never final or fixed.¹ On this view, then, a specifically narrative psychology is required to frame a different view of the human subject as primarily a self-reflective meaning-maker.

For others, however, a ‘narrative psychology’ becomes necessary because the ‘turn to language’ is seen as in danger of reducing the subject to an effect of language. On this view, formulating a ‘narrative psychology’ becomes crucial if the ‘turn to language’ makes it difficult, or impossible, to talk about an ‘inner’ world or to recognise a specifically psychological realm of experience.

It was this kind of dilemma posed by the changes in the landscape of social science that led us to conceive the Narrative in Psychology Symposium that we organised at the British Psychological Society Centenary Conference in Glasgow in March 2001 from which the papers in this special issue derive. We began with a recognition of, on the one hand, the constitutive power of language. On the other hand, however, we saw

that social constructionism could deny, in important ways, the felt realities of agency and an experiencing self. Could a 'narrative psychology' enable us to take account of all the complexities of subjectivity, including unconscious processes?

Crossley, in her paper, explicitly wanted to salvage something of the 'individual' for psychology – she saw it as something of an endangered species in the face of postmodern deconstructions. Other contributors to that symposium were more circumspect about psychology's 'individual'. All were clear that we shouldn't sidestep the complexities of subjectivity, but we formulated those complexities in different ways. Burman, and Parker, and Hollway and Jefferson all were sure that we needed to find ways of working with both conscious and unconscious processes in narrative work. Hollway and Jefferson, for instance, found it helpful to postulate a 'defended' psychosocial subject, theorised psychoanalytically. But implicit in all the papers was a felt need to hang onto some notion of a specifically psychological subject, or of the subject as a psychological being. It became clear that there were creative tensions around how each of the presenters, as well as others who came to the symposium, were thinking about both 'narrative' and 'subjectivity'.

2. Narrative

For many, the attraction of narrative studies lies in its promise to enable us to think about a human subject who is socially situated and culturally fashioned, at the same time as that subject expresses a unique individuality and an agency that makes the subject, at once, quite singular but also part of more or less local and global communities. But 'narrative' is a vague term and means many things to many people. I would like to ask what kind of thing do we have to imagine narrative to be in order for us to think about it as a primary locus for selfhood?

There are now many distinct orientations towards narrative (for example, realist, phenomenological, psychodynamic, textual and so on) each of which has different implications for our understanding of the linkages between selves and stories and of how subjectivities are produced. Whilst I don't think that it's helpful to get bogged down in issues of definition – of saying precisely what narrative is and is not, even if that were possible – I think that it is useful to identify some of the common characteristics of narrative across different orientations. My purpose here is not to

draw boundaries of inclusion/exclusion, nor to make judgements about the worthiness of some narratives as opposed to others, but rather to uncover some common assumptions about the nature of narrative and consider what the possibilities and limitations might be if narratives are considered to be the locus of the self.

Gergen gives us a useful summary; he sets out six characteristics of narrative. First, and most importantly, a story has a point and the point is saturated with value. Narratives are evaluative frameworks and thus to tell a personal story is to take up a moral position – it is to make a claim for a particular moral dimension for the self. Taylor (1985:3) summarises this idea succinctly when he says “To be a full human agent, to be a person or self in the ordinary meaning, is to exist in a space defined by distinctions of worth. A self is a being for whom certain questions of categoric value have arisen, and received at least partial answers.” Secondly, an intelligible story is one in which events are selected to make the point more or less probable, accessible, important or vivid. Narrative demands, Gergen reminds us, have ontological consequences. Thirdly, the events in the story are typically placed in an ordered arrangement, according to local convention. Fourth, the characters in the story typically have continuous identities across time. Fifth, the ideal narrative is one that gives an explanation – it suggests or establishes causal linkages that form the basis of the ‘plot’. Finally, the narrative is framed as a narrative, using conventions that signal the beginning and the end, generating a sense of direction and a feeling of purpose.

The implicit view of narrative that inhabits Gergen’s account, and renders narrative problematic as the locus of subjectivity, is that of narrative as a thing, a static product. Yet there is some tension here, as Gergen also draws our attention to three crucial aspects of narrative with implications for identity. First is his emphasis on the moral dimensions of both narrative and the self. This is Taylor’s (1989) main point – that ‘modern’ selfhood and morality are inextricably intertwined themes. Secondly, he reminds us, not only of the social and cultural dimensions of narrative, but also of its inevitably interpersonal nature; to narrate is to assume or imagine an audience but it is also more than that – it is engage *as a self*, as an active, interpretive human agent, with others and with the world. This is Macmurray’s (1970) point – that persons are only persons insofar as they are persons-in-relation. Thirdly, and again this echoes Macmurray, persons are embodied human agents; what makes us human is our ability

to act intentionally in terms of the perceived nature of the Other. There are thus tensions in Gergen's account between a static and a more dynamic view of narrative.

If we are thinking about narrative as the locus for subjectivity, a view that makes better sense than an implicit idea of the story as a static product is that of narrative as a dynamic practice. This practice – narration -is, at once uniquely individual, yet social, cultural and interpersonal. It is the practice of active human agents, where those human agents are intentional and embodied, and where their practices have an inevitable moral dimension. Narration is a dynamic signifying practice that is the work of embodied human agents in cultural settings. At times those settings are local, at times more global; the historical, social and geographic contours of our lives fashion the language and discourses that we employ to construct our stories and make claims about our selves.

But, as practices, are those acts of narration merely 'performances'², as Craib or Frosh might argue, or do they, as Hollway and Jefferson would say, contain and potentially reveal something of the hidden depths of psychic realities? The notion of 'performance', for some, implies a degree of superficiality, of inauthenticity of the self that inhabits those narratives. This is because it is contrasted to an assumed 'real' – a binary, real or performed, underlies our thinking – where the 'real' is the privileged of the pair.³ But, at the same time, a focus on practice/performance implies an open-endedness that leaves room for creative possibilities and for us to conclude that the self is always more than any one narrative can hold. It also refocuses our thinking towards relationships, rather than identities; and when we focus more closely on relationships, the self/other boundary becomes blurred in interesting ways. It reminds us that we are who we are, not just inside ourselves, but in relation to others, and those interactions with others, real and imagined, present or absent, occur routinely on many levels, including the unconscious.

3. The Subject

Henriques et al. (1983), in *Changing the Subject* problematised 'the individual' of psychology and replaced it with a more nuanced notion of 'subjectivity' that was situated, contingent, realised in language and always had an unconscious dimension. Subjectivity was, very decisively, a discursive phenomenon. The new emphasis on

discourse seemed to offer the possibility of talking politically about self and identity – discourse was about social structures and frameworks for understanding – of situating selves in webs of social relations. But there was a downside. For those who felt that psychology, as a discipline, had left out all that was interesting and ‘subjective’ about the person, discursive psychology offered rather fewer possibilities. Those of us who wanted to bring together both the personal and the political were in a real quandry. Parker (1992), a pioneer of discursive psychology, later drew our attention to the fact that discursive approaches, in their focus on language and text, could tell us nothing about what was going on in people’s heads when they used discourse. The implication was that discursive psychology, interesting and useful though it might be, couldn’t touch a specifically psychological realm of experience – indeed, it seemed to deny the very existence of such a realm of experience, of any ‘inner’ world. Our aim, in organising the symposium, was to think about how we might re-introduce ‘the subject’ into a new kind of psychology that could recognise the developmental and experiential significances of both inner and outer worlds, without sidestepping the complexities of either.

In thinking through the discursive aspects of subjectivity, I was drawn to Althusser’s work. His ideas about ‘interpellation’ – how ideologies ‘hail’ the subject – ‘hey, you!’ – such that the subject (mis)recognises her or himself in the ‘mirror’, thus internalising social relations – were exciting and had been used by Judith Williamson, in her groundbreaking work on advertising, to good effect. Her work reminded us of the very important fact that social relations and cultural symbols exert a psychological ‘hold’ over us, and that we can only really understand the workings of the social and the cultural if we are prepared to look for the complex ways in which they is manifested and processed at the level of each human subject. Althusser’s formulation appealed because it seemed to address both the absence of the psychological in Marx, and the (apparent) absence of the political in Freud.

Davies and Harre’s 1990 paper on Positioning: The Discursive Construction of Selves showed that the power of discourses could only be realised if individual human subjects were prepared to engage with them – positioning themselves with respect to the discourses, with consequences for their selves and identities. Clearly, discourses are not determining of either selves or identities, not least because human subjects

can refuse the positions they offer, or they might negotiate a slightly modified position. I am reminded here of that axiom of Marxism, that people make history, although not in conditions of their own making. Davies and Harre's work offered a place for thinking about the human subject as a psychological subject, actively engaging with discourse, perhaps identifying with a particular discursive position, perhaps not. The result of discursive positioning, argued Davies and Harre, was the discursive construction of self. It has become commonplace to talk about 'the self' as 'discursively constituted' or as 'constituted in language'. But, from a psychological point of view, it's as if there's little (if anything) more to 'the self' than it's multiple and shifting positionings in discourse, or language, its presentation in narrative. It's as though 'the self' only exists through its fleeting yet continuous identifications with discursive positions. Yet some feel (see, for example, Crossley, 2002) that this postmodern take on the self is quite at odds with the kind of unified, coherent and continuing self that people often feel themselves to 'have' or to be.

But, even a discursive self demands that we take some account of extra-discursive factors – how else are we to account for the fact that discursive positions may be accepted, negotiated or resisted? Equally a narrative self demands that we imagine aspects of that self that are, at some point at least, external to the story. A more complete conception of a narrative self demands that we take account of the subject's moral agency, her embodiment, and the force of unconscious fantasy, as well as the determinations of language, discourse and story. Crucially, too, selves are always relational (see, for example, Macmurray); subjectivity is intersubjective – arising and being sustained only in interactions (see Day Sclater, 1998). But there are also factors intrinsic to the story, and to the act of telling, that have a significant bearing upon how we conceptualise a narrative self.

Cohan and Shires (1988), drawing on the work of Benveniste (1971), show that an understanding of the divisions of subjectivity in narration is central to the structural analysis of narrative. They offer a perspective that may be useful in our quest to understand the nature of the 'I' that proliferates in our discourse, a perspective that helps us to re-orient our understanding of the links between the self and signifying practices. For our purposes, five main divisions may be identified and usefully applied to the analysis of personal narratives in social scientific research. First, the *speaking*

subject is the ‘author’ of the text, the person who tells the story. In psychology, this is the subject we want to know something about – the embodied, living, breathing person. But the divisions of subjectivity in narration indicate that it is not possible simply to ‘read off’ information about this person from what they tell us in their personal narratives, in the same way that traditional psychology ‘reads off’ information from, say, personality tests. Secondly, in telling her personal story, the speaking subject produces a text in which she articulates herself as an ‘I’ – the *subject of speech*. This ‘I’ is a discursive element that stands in for the speaker – it is a signifier and not a referent. The ‘I’ of discourse is not co-terminus with the embodied speaking subject, the narrating agent, but marks the way in which that agency traditionally is represented in discourse. Because of the conventions of language use, ‘I’ appears to point outside of discourse to a real speaker as its referent. But, as Benveniste shows, ‘I’ simply marks out the linguistic condition for subjectivity; it bears no necessary relationship with the speaking subject. ‘I’ is an ‘empty signifier’ that becomes full only in discourse (Cohan and Shires, 1988:105). Thirdly, the *narrating subject* is a linguistic subject and not a person. It is the subject that expresses itself in the language that constitutes the text. It is the agency responsible for the telling as an enunciation. In life history work, it is the ‘I’ who tells the life story *at the point of the telling*, the ‘I’ in the ‘now’ of the story. The speaking subject uses linguistic conventions and discursive devices to tell a story in which it appears that the speaking subject is identical to the narrating subject. But the former is a person, an embodied subject, and the latter is linguistic, and there is no *necessary* correspondence between the two. Fourth, the narrating subject articulates a *subject of narration*, a character in the story. The *subject of narration* is a signifier that represents the narrating subject. Finally, the *narrated subject* is the signified of the narration. As such it is, as Cohan and Shires (1988:108) argue, not only commutable to a signifier, but is forever divided from the narrating subject by the intervention of the subject of narration.

This emphasis on the fragmentations of subjectivity in narrative reflects the multiplicity of identifications that we can make and leads us to ask about how it is that identity typically assumes a unity and an internal coherence. The unity of the self becomes an achievement, rather than a given. The use of the personal pronoun ‘I’ in personal narrative has the effect of unifying the diverse forms of subjectivity that

appear in the story. Through the use of 'I', *the speaking subject* appears to be co-incident with the *narrating subject*, and (invoking a developmental narrative) also co-incident with the *subject of narration*. These subjectivities coincide around the name that links them to the embodied person who speaks the narrative, achieving an apparently unified subjectivity – the *narrated subject* of the narrative. What this shows us is that narrating and narrated subjects are not co-terminus, but are divided by a subject of narration, and neither can be straightforwardly linked to the original speaking subject.

It is often assumed in analysing personal narrative data that we are uncovering something about the real embodied human subject that produced the narrative, what Plummer refers to as the 'breathing, passionate being in the full stream of social life' (Plummer, 1995). Quite apart from the issues raised by a recognition of the role of the researcher in the production of 'personal' narrative accounts, which are not the subject of this paper, our brief foray into the structural analysis of narratives shows that the subjectivity we are so prone to assume manifests itself in the personal narrative is likely to be much more elusive than we have previously thought. Our access to the selves that are constituted in stories, or that lie behind those stories, is necessarily constrained by our formulations of those selves.

Does our argument lead to the conclusion that subjectivity is *just* a linguistic phenomenon after all, that we can't have any access to the 'truth' of the living, breathing, embodied human subject, because language is always going to mediate our access, always get in the way? The answer to this is both yes and no. 'Yes' because subjectivity as manifested in narrative clearly *is* a linguistic phenomenon - talking subjectivity is, in fact, talking subjectivity; it's using language to express who we think we are or who we claim to be. And those processes, by which subjectivity is continually reconstituted, are both social and personal ones – we draw on cultural resources to tell our stories, but it's we who choose what to use, what to include and what to exclude. Though our choices are constrained, transgressions can and do occur. 'No' because subjectivity is not *just* a linguistic phenomenon – to phrase the issue in this way suggests that selves are superficial, insubstantial, and implies also a limited view of language. Language and discourse and narrative are complex socio-cultural systems; most crucially, they are signifying practices that operate at many levels.

Further, subjectivity can be expressed in ways other than through talk (art, poetry, dance, ordinary 'body language', and so on). And just because something is a linguistic phenomenon, doesn't mean that it's *merely* a fiction.

I have found it helpful to conceive of subjectivity as neither internal nor external, nor even as a product between 'interactions' between the internal and the external, but as a process. The process is one of always-becoming, it is psycho-social, it involves the ongoing 'identity work' of a human agent, and is dependent upon what Winnicott (1971) called a 'potential' or 'transitional' space in which aspects of the self are created and transformed in relationships with others and with the matrices of culture. Narrative is important for the creation and maintenance of the self because it can constitute such a 'transitional' space.

4. Narrative as transitional space

How can telling one's story be productive of subjectivity? How is the self constituted in stories? I have argued elsewhere (Day Sclater, 1998) that Winnicott's notion of the 'transitional phenomena' is useful in providing a psycho-social understanding of the dynamic links between selves and stories. Personal narratives, like Winnicott's transitional phenomena, have their origin neither wholly inside the teller, nor wholly outside of them in culture. Rather, they are a dynamic mixture of the subjectively experienced, the objectively perceived and the relational, and are reducible to none of these things. Winnicott devised the idea of the transitional phenomena to explain how it was that individuals were able to achieve autonomous selfhood when the infant begins its life in a state of merged dependence with the mother, a dependence so complete that, initially, the baby has no sense of itself as a separate self. The idea of the transitional phenomena explains the process through which separation and individuation is gradually achieved. The baby makes the transition from complete dependence to relative independence, from subjectivity to a capacity for objectivity, from a location in an illusory inner world to an appreciation the external world, and other subjects, have an existence independent of the baby's perceptions. The transitional phenomena facilitate these changes because they represent a space where the infant's emerging self is contained at each stage; mother and infant participate to create and maintain an area of experience whose crucial feature is that its inherent paradoxes - the fact that it belongs simultaneously to both internal and external

reality - remain unchallenged. This is a creative space – and, Winnicott says, it continues to have significance throughout life, in relation to creative and cultural pursuits and religious experience – where the infant explores, negotiates and integrates inner and outer worlds and the infant’s nascent self emerges and is nourished.

To tell one’s story is to occupy such a transitional space. It’s a way of integrating the inner and the outer. The story provides an intermediate or transitional area of experience in which the self continually negotiates its position in the world, inscribes itself in relation to the available cultural scripts, integrates past, present and future through acts of remembering and telling.

5. Conclusion

Whether we take the view that selves are constructed in or by stories, or whether we think that selves, or significant aspects of those selves, are more likely to be concealed by narratives, we are assuming some connections between narrative and identity. In this paper I have begun to explore the links between stories and selves, specifically by unpacking ideas about ‘subjectivity’ and ‘narrative’, to enable us to think about how we might to theorise a ‘narrative subject’ in such a way as to take account of both opposing positions. In order to explore the issue of what kind of entity we have to imagine the subject to be, such that the self is capable of being realised in narrative, one that recognises the determining power of language but that does not lose sight of the significance of specifically psychic realities, I have suggested that subjectivity is best seen, not as the product of anything, but in processual terms, as a dynamic state of always-becoming in the ‘transitional’ spaces of culture that are, at once, both cultural and psychic spaces. I have further suggested that a useful distinction might be drawn between narrative, as a product, and the act of narration. On this view, it is possible to address the concerns of those who worry about those aspects of the self that lie outside the story. Narrative becomes embodied practice – something that intentional, moral human agents routinely do every day of their lives – a way of simultaneously constructing and reconstructing both ‘the individual’ and ‘the social’. Winnicott’s notion of the transitional phenomena helps us to theorise the linkages between stories and subjectivities, and to appreciate the deep psychological significance of relationships and of culture.

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¹ For a clear exposition of the post-structuralist view of language as constitutive of social and individual reality, see Weedon (1987).

² The emphasis on the performative derives from Judith Butler's work. See Butler 1990, 1993.

³ Foucault's view is that power operates at the level of the body, through the discourses and technologies of self. The discourse that positions 'the real' and 'the performative' as binary opposites is one of those discourses of the self. For Foucault, power operates through rather than over subjectivity; individuals aren't often 'disciplined' against their will, but are enjoined to regulate themselves. Discourses do not have to be co-ercive to the extent that they command our subjective investments. See Foucault 1979. See also Rose 1990.