

# 14 Illness as an Occasion for Story Telling: Social Influences in Narrating the Masculine Self to an Unseen Audience

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This paper is an analysis of the testicular cancer video diary of a man whose pseudonym is Cal. Although there are many analytic pathways one could take the focus here is on how the 'imagined audience' influences the presentation of identity in his illness story. In one sense this video diary is a personal record of one man's struggle with cancer but, although the video diary was made by himself and for himself, there is evidence of an 'unseen and unspecified audience' throughout. In Bakhtin's terms there is a dialogical framework. It is suggested that a consideration of this 'audience' is significant in that it indicates culturally appropriate ways of telling illness stories.

## **Illness Stories and Narrative**

Narrative studies have documented the importance to many people's identities of presenting a coherent life story (Linde, 1993; Riessman, 1993). Events such as illness or divorce that disrupt expected trajectories (and hence their coherent life stories) are often the focus of people's narratives as they attempt to reconstruct coherence. Similarly, there is a whole body of research that recognises that illness is one occasion where the life story may be disrupted and necessitate the production of a transitional narrative, or plurality of narratives (Crossley, 2000; Frank, 1995). However, illness stories are not simply a description. Through careful positioning identities are performed (Frank, 1995; Reismann, 1993). Furthermore, it is argued that illness stories are both personal and social. As Arthur Frank (1995, p.3) has argued:

... from their families and friends, from popular culture that surrounds them and from the stories of other ill people, storytellers have learned formal structures of narratives, conventional metaphors and imagery, and standards of what is and is not appropriate to tell. Whenever a new story is told, these rhetorical expectations are reinforced in some ways, changed in others, and passed on to affect other's stories.

Recently, in Western societies, there has been a growth in the video diary. Traditionally the publication of life stories have been limited to famous people but increasingly there has been a move to the emergence of ordinary stories from 'the margins' where the narrator is often located as a member of a class or gendered group (Plummer, 2001). Plummer suggests that these hidden or ordinary voices open up the space for the silenced to begin to appear. The video diary is now a familiar genre and is often used as a form of expression for ordinary people. As Frank's quote suggests life stories are not told in the same way in all cultures. What is privileged in telling one's life story changes between different societies. Notably, Western narratives are centrally concerned with notions of the self (Plummer, 2001).

### **Analysis**

Analysis of the video diary followed a discursive approach to narrative. Within the narrative tradition people are understood to be constructed by the stories they tell (Denzin, 2000). Andrews, Day Slater, Rustin, Squire and Treacher (2000) argue that the narrative self is a psychosocial subject that is constructed not in an inner or an outer realm but at the intersection between the psychological and the social. Subjective experiences such as Cal's represent the interaction of these two sites. Bakhtin's (1986, cited in Maybin, 2001) work on 'inwardly persuasive discourse' is a useful concept here. Inwardly persuasive discourses refer to inner dialogues that individuals perform in reflecting on their own experience. Similarly, Mary Gergen (2001) discusses the notion of 'social ghosts' when referring to private conversations that are held with someone who is absent but exists or is imagined. The dialogic quality of language evident in both of Bakhtin and Gergen's work hints at some kind of internal and external disputing process. Indeed, Bakhtin argues that language is the site of social struggle. By employing different speech genres individual voices are evaluative. Invoking another person's voice also produces an evaluative position that can work rhetorically to support one's own position. Furthermore, Bakhtin argues that as language is the site of social struggle conflict often occurs between discordant authoritative forces such as medical discourses and more local forces such as speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986, cited in Maybin, 2001).

Discursive researchers such as Potter and Wetherell demonstrate that language is used to construct the self and this approach treats identity and masculinity as a discursive accomplishment, something that is 'done' in talk (Edley and Wetherell, 1997). This contradicts traditional approaches in psychology that view self-narration as stable and pre-existent. Masculinity is defined as relational, situated, highly variable and produced through everyday social practices (Edley and Wetherell, 1997). The value of combining

discursive and narrative approaches is in the consideration of subjectivity as a cultural phenomenon (Day Slater, 2000). My interest combines a narrative concern with how Cal invokes canonical discourses of hegemonic masculinity combined with a discursive explication of the rhetorical purposes that are achieved.

Nichols (1991, cited in Plummer, 2001) has identified various modes of video presentation and intertwined in this video diary are the interactive and performative modes. Firstly, a focus on the *interactive* mode of video, where the camera itself becomes a self-conscious presence, is linked to Bakhtin's discussion of the dialogical nature of interactions and to Gergen's 'social ghosts'. Secondly, the *performative* mode incorporates discursive notions of identity as a performance (Butler, 1990). These three strands form the basis of a consideration of how the imagined audience affects Cal's presentation of self in his video diary.

## **Background**

The data for this study consists of a video diary recorded by Cal (a pseudonym) at the time he had cancer (in 1994). Cal was twenty-six years old at the time the video was made. The video lasts approximately an hour and was transcribed using a simplified version of the scheme developed by Gail Jefferson (see Appendix for transcription notation). The investigation of this video diary is part of a larger project on gender and health (Seymour-Smith, 2002; Seymour-Smith, Wetherell and Phoenix, in press). Men have been found to use health services less often than women, they attend doctor's surgeries less frequently and delay seeking help when they are ill (Holroyd, 1997). Therefore, there has been a move to consider the impact of hegemonic masculinity on patterns of illness and on men's experiences and behaviours (see for example Sabo and Gordon, 1995). The project is concerned with the ways in which the social construction of masculinity acts as an important influence on health (Thomas, 1996). Within this framework, 'people's views of health and illness are best understood as accounts that they give to others' (Radley and Billig, 1996, p.220). The focus here is an explication of the cultural resources that Cal draws upon in presenting his illness story and how this has implications for his self-presentation.

### *Interactional Mode of Presentation: Bakhtin and the Dialogical*

Along with a growth in the use the video diary is the understanding that people produce videos (as they do all narratives) for particular audiences. Even though Cal was alone when he produced the video diary it can be demonstrated that he is always addressing an audience even though that audience might not be present and is unspecified. Analysis focuses on how external influences affect

identity construction through a consideration of this ‘unknown audience’. Most striking is the way that Cal has chosen to present his story and himself. Cal often addresses the video as if it is a real person that he is talking to, someone who exists as a solid identity yet at the same time is invisible. Consider the extract below, which is situated at the end of the first section of the diary. In this section Cal has been narrating what has happened to him so far in terms of his illness. He has been diagnosed with cancer and has had the operation to remove a diseased testicle. Now he is faced with the prospect of chemotherapy.

*Extract 1 Taken from Cal Video Diary*

The British comedy act Monty Python’s ironic song *Always look on the bright side of life* is playing simultaneously in the background

1. Cal: that’s it basically that’s erm (.) months of my life of 1995
2. sorted out (2) load of SHIT really bollocks er bollock sorry bollock and ball
3. (.) er lot of crap really (1) er everybody is bearing up I suppose as you
4. know what can you do (1) I’ve been told I’ll be cured at the end of it
5. so that’s the end of it so that’s it isn’t it em (2) I’d rather not have it (1) but
6. there you go so what can you say (2) not a lot really can you erm (1) so
7. tomorrow the er what did I say (1) oh its the thirteenth tomorrow unlucky
8. for some so I should be ok for that tomorrow and start then so erm (.) with
9. any luck (.) I should if I get (.) five minutes by myself because nobody
10. knows I’m doing this (.) er when I come out I’ll erm (1) tell you what it was
11. like (1) it should be really exciting and er I can’t wait
12. Rec: just before you draw your terminal breath (whistle) {lifes a piece of shit
13. Cal: {life’s a piece of SHIT
14. Rec: {when you look at it life’s a laugh and death’s a joke it’s true you’ll see it’s all
15. Cal: {when you look at it life’s a laugh and death’s a joke it’s true you’ll see it’s all
16. Rec: {a show keep em laughing as you go just remember that the last laugh is on
17. Cal: {a show keep em laughing as you go just remember that the last laugh is on
18. Rec: {you and always look on the bright side of life (whistles tune)
19. Cal: {you and always look on the bright side of life (whistles tune)
20. Rec: {always look on the bright side of life always look on the bright side
21. Cal: {always look on the bright side of life always look on the bright side
22. Rec: {of life (song fades)
23. Cal: {of life well I don’t know what this looks like ’cos I haven’t
24. looked at it yet but that want too difficult (1) I’ll probably do it again now
25. we’ll be able to have a good laugh at it and go a ha o ho ha hah ahahaha ha
26. that was really funny

(Rec: refers to the Monty Python song in the background)

In lines 9 to 10 Cal says that nobody knows that he is making the video diary, implying that it is being recorded in secret. However, he has already personified the video recorder in lines 3-4 when he says ‘I suppose as you

know'. He then goes on to make it clearer that his narrative is not a soliloquy but, rather, a monologue, with the video camera providing a dialogical framework or serving as a 'social ghost'. For example, in lines 10 to 11 he says 'when I come out I'll erm (.) tell you what it was like'. Cal thus addresses the video as if it was a real person. This mode of presentation is common to the diary genre and makes visible the inner dialogue identified by Bakhtin. This excerpt also demonstrates Gergen's (2001) suggestion that even private dialogues are rehearsed with a 'social ghost' in mind.

The interactional mode in the video diary is not confined to the 'imagined audience'. It is also evident in the narrative types of discourses adopted. An authoritative medical discourse is invoked in line 4, 'I've been told that I'll be cured at the end of it'. At this point in the extract Cal slips into the passive voice - perhaps distancing himself from this certainty and perhaps replaying the passive position in which he later indicates that doctors place him and from the treatment due to start the next day. The medical voice is presented in a very matter of fact way. At the same time the Monty Python song is continually playing in the background throughout the extract until 'terminal breath' is mentioned. Cal allows this phrase to be foregrounded and is silent until he joins in with it from 'life's a piece of SHIT' (line 13) while staring seriously and intensely at the camera. This suggests that he is perhaps contesting the medical pronouncement that he will be cured and using the song to face the otherwise unbearable prospect of death. The loud 'shit' emphasises his use of the song to convey his unhappiness with the situation. This is a neat rhetorical move that allows him to voice his viewpoint in a way that accepts that he will be 'cured' but allows for some contesting of the 'so that's the end of it' (line 5). So, while the song is apparently matter of fact, its intentional ironic pessimism serves powerfully to bolster Cal's own personal story.

### *Performative Masculinity*

Everyday cultural practices influence Cal's presentation of his illness narrative and this is made visible in the way that he personifies the video camera. However, unlike real conversations Cal is able to carefully edit his video diary. For example, in the above excerpt in lines 23 to 26 Cal discusses the impact of the video diary saying that he didn't know what it looked like but that it wasn't too difficult and that he would probably do it again. From a reflexive point of view this is intriguing. However, the tagged on ending of 'we'll all be able to have a good laugh at it and go a ha o ho ha hah ahahah ha that was really funny' is quite striking. When Cal says this he is staring seriously/bleakly at the video camera and the words are presented in an ironic and mirthless way. Throughout the video diary Cal uses this type of ironic humour to express his personal story and, in the Monty Python song, as a background to it. This use of an ironic genre is, as Bruner (1987) suggested, a resource from the cultural

toolkit and one that serves particular functions - one of which is to bolster his identity as masculine.

Gergen argues that narratives are gendered in that they contribute to 'cultural patterns that differentiate between the genders and prescribe what is likely and unlikely, desirable and undesirable during a lifetime' (Gergen, p.74). Ironic humour could arguably be one socially acceptable way of 'doing masculinity' and, hence, a resource allowing Cal to manage the presentation of the narrative of a potentially fatal illness without appearing unmasculine.

A further instance of the moves that Cal makes to protect his masculine identity is evident early on in the extract where he is swearing in relation to his illness. He says 'load of SHIT really bollocks er bollock sorry bollock and ball' (line 2). Here the comedy that Cal employs sets up a position for him as someone who, using Goffman's terminology, has a spoiled identity. Making light of the fact that he now only has one testicle may function to protect his masculine image and to resist any possible criticisms of his new body image from other people. The swearing both emphasises 'tough masculinity' whilst allowing him to think about his testicles and hence his illness. Similarly, in lines 7 to 8 Cal uses ironic humour when he says 'it's the thirteenth tomorrow unlucky for some' when narrating his forthcoming chemotherapy. The ironic humour works as a kind of bravado act that is familiar in the performance of hegemonic masculinity.

This notion of comedy as a resource for the performance of masculinity is fascinating as it represents a choice that Cal has made in his self-presentation. He could have chosen many other ways to position himself in his illness story and considering that the video was made in private for his own purposes this illustrates how powerful social influences such as the performance and maintenance of hegemonic masculinity are in the life of this man. Cal's video diary may be one of the ways he has of working through and making sense of his illness story. The comedy is a discursive move that he makes and it could be associated with masculine bravado to lighten the narrative. It also works rhetorically for him to position himself as strong and the hero of his story.

## **Conclusion**

The way that the video diary is presented reflects choices that Cal has made in presenting himself as the author of his story. He tells his illness story in one culturally acceptable way. Humour is used as a resource and can be speculatively associated with the performance of hegemonic masculinity. Mary Gergen argues that social ghosts often function to parallel real relationships. She makes the valid point that 'humans are forever connected to one another, both in "real time" existence and in imaginal relations' (Gergen, p.142).

In some way Cal may have used his video diary to come to terms with and practice his illness narrative. Gergen's notion of social ghosts is convincing

because, as she argues, they emphasise the social aspect of this phenomenon, as they are a result of prior social experiences. Hence, even though the interaction in Cal's video diary is private, it is also drawn upon familiar scripted scenarios. Furthermore, Bakhtin's notion of language as dialogical and as the site of social struggle is evident in how Cal narrates his personal story. Narratives have deeply embedded cultural underpinnings. In this video diary we have seen that although the video was made for personal reasons there is an assumed audience throughout. Personal stories employ cultural genres and use cultural resources and these have rhetorical functions. Here Cal discursively makes sense of his illness through employing these strategies and effectively manages his identity as an ill person.

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## Appendix

### *Conventions*

(.)	short pause
(2)	pause in seconds
{men	overlapping utterances
{yeah	
(word)/(unclear)	utterance difficult to discern
(laughs)	laughter in brackets, not transcribed phonetically yet
<u>sent</u>	underlining indicates added emphasis
anxious:	semi colon indicates drawn out letters

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