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Introduction - Narrative, Memory & Knowledge: Representations, Aesthetics, Contexts

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Preface

This book is a collection of some of the papers presented at the fifth annual one-day conference hosted by the Narrative and Memory Research Group at the University of Huddersfield. The conference was held in April 2005 and was entitled 'Narrative, Memory and Knowledge: Representations, Aesthetics and Contexts'. The Narrative and Memory Research Group was set up several years ago by members of the Division of Psychology and Sociology to provide a supportive environment in which postgraduate students and staff with an interest in narrative inquiry and biographical research could meet to share ideas, encourage innovation and work collaboratively.

The six annual conferences we have organised to date have given us an opportunity to invite local, national and international researchers to join us in this enterprise. Over the last six years many researchers have taken us up on this invitation and the mix of new delegates and familiar faces at each conference means that it has remained an environment which is as welcoming to those who are new to narrative and biographical research as it is to those who have a great deal of experience. For those who are new to narrative approaches the conference provides an insight into the broad spectrum of approaches to narrative theory and research, whilst for those who have been attending the conference for a number of years it has become an annual opportunity to share the challenges, issues, debates and advances that they have encountered in the preceding twelve months.

As always, this collection of papers reflects the diversity of the backgrounds, experiences, interests and expertise of those who attend the conference and we believe that this means that no matter how experienced or inexperienced they may be as narrative or biographical researchers there is something here for everybody.

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our thanks to all of those who participated in making the 2005 conference such a success. As always, the biggest thanks for this has to go to Liz Senior in the Conference Office who, despite making it look effortless, works extremely hard behind the scenes of the conference to ensure that everything runs smoothly on the day. Her patience, good humour and efficiency are very much appreciated by those of us who work alongside her to organise the conference. However, we also recognise the contributions of all of those who attended and/or presented papers at the conference and in particular those who submitted a version of their paper for this book – thank you all.

We would also like to thank Susan Smith who is responsible for standardising, formatting and amending the submitted papers to produce a finished product. The demands of organising the conference and producing the book at the same time means that the editorial process can sometimes take longer than anticipated. This means that (through no fault of her own) Susan often has to work to short deadlines and under great pressure as the conference approaches. She always does so with a smile and her calmness and sublime organisational skills are crucial to the production of the book.

March 2006

Introduction

KATE MILNES, CHRISTINE HORROCKS, NANCY KELLY, BRIAN ROBERTS AND DAVID ROBINSON

The chapters contained in this book reflect the creativity, vibrancy and diversity of the papers presented at the fifth annual Narrative and Memory Group conference on the themes of narrative, memory and knowledge. The chapters are thought-provoking, challenging and stimulating and (as is so often the case with papers based on narrative research into lived human experience) are often moving, humorous and inspirational. In order to help to guide the reader through its contents, we have tried to impose some kind of organisation onto the chapters of the book by separating it into three sections. In grouping the chapters together in this way, a number of decisions had to be made about the best way to categorise the material and it is acknowledged that the decisions made were (at least to some extent) arbitrary. There is therefore (perhaps inevitably) some overlap across the different sections ('small stories' for example seem to reappear as a theme throughout). However we hope that you will find the conceptual distinctions made here a useful guide to the themes covered in each section. There are 18 chapters in this book which are organised into three sections. The first section comprises chapters that focus primarily on either autobiography and the relationship between life history and life story or stories in everyday life that we refer to here (borrowing Michael Bamberg, Alexandra Georgakopoulou and Luke Moissinac's term) as 'small stories'. The second section is made up of chapters that explore 'the self' as a narrative project and the emancipatory and subjugatory potential of narratives. The final section consists of chapters that focus upon a number of issues, innovations and developments in narrative methodologies.

Section 1: Autobiography and Stories in Everyday Life: Life History, Life Story and the Importance of 'Small Stories'

The chapters in this first section of the book are organised into two main themes: autobiography (life history and life story) and stories in everyday life (the importance of 'small stories'). The first five chapters focus upon the relationship between 'the lived life'/'life history' (the event or chain of events experienced in the past) and 'the told story'/'life story' (the recollection of the past event or chain of events in the present).

In the opening chapter, keynote speaker Gabriele Rosenthal explores the process of genesis (creation, reproduction and transformation) of life stories highlighting the interdependence of experience, memory and narration. Gabriele discusses the biographical case reconstruction (a method of analysis based upon a gestalt-theoretical phenomenological approach) which makes a distinction between life story and life history. She then illustrates, using the fascinating life-story of Sergey Wolf (who was interviewed as part of a study into the experiences of three-generation families of migrants from the former Soviet Union with German ethnic family background), how this method can provide insights into the experienced event of the past, the recollection of the event in the present and the narrative. In the subsequent chapter, Michael Corsten further discusses the extent to which life stories are 'representative' of life histories. More specifically, Michael uses Danto's work on the analytic philosophy of history and his counter arguments to the notions of 'instantaneous scepticism' (the notion that phenomena can only be called true if they are experienced as they are taking place), and the existence of an 'Ideal Chronicle' (an account which is 'perfectly isomorphic with an event') to defend biographical analysis from criticisms about the veracity of life stories.

In the first of two chapters that explore the production of narratives in a particular political and ideological context, Helen Dampier and Liz Stanley consider the relationship between the 'moment of writing' and the events being written about in a diary by Johanna Brandt-Van Warmelo. The diary is (perhaps unsurprisingly given the assumed temporal nature of diary-entries) widely treated by scholars as though it was written whilst Brandt-Van Warmelo was in the Irene Concentration Camp in South Africa where the events recounted took place. Yet there is strong evidence to suggest that the diary was actually written much later. Helen and Liz discuss the implications of (mis)representing events written about retrospectively as diary entries made at the time (particularly in the context of the South African War) and suggest that the diaries constitute a 'simulacrum' or 'representational doppelganger'. The theme of narrative manipulation is continued in a thought-provoking chapter by David Hiles which highlights the ways in which narrative is used as a tool of propaganda. David points out that with the advent of 24 hour news stations across the world it has become increasingly difficult to 'control' broadcast images. In this chapter he explains how instead, various steps (such as 'embedding' journalists within particular units and regular news briefings given by Central Command that provide the 'bigger picture') are being taken to 'narrativize' images of the Iraq war in a particular way or 'fix the meaning' of the images.

In the last chapter on the theme of autobiography, Eirini Papadaki explores the role of postcard images in narrating personal experiences from the past. Drawing upon the work of Barthes, Eirini discusses the dual significance of

postcards as social images and as personal mementoes which both authenticate and preserve past experiences.

The final two chapters of section one make the case for a re-evaluation of our understandings of what constitutes ‘a story’ and contest the privileged epistemological status awarded to ‘big stories’ or autobiographies since the ‘narrative turn’ in the social sciences. In a chapter based on his keynote address, Michael Bamberg makes a distinction between ‘big stories’ (life stories, autobiographies, or stories about important life events) and ‘small stories’ (stories told in interaction and in everyday settings often about quite humdrum or trivial things) and suggests that dominant ‘big story’ approaches have tended to focus on the referential and ideational functions of language at the expense of its action orientation or discursive functions. Michael argues that by privileging interviews as a means of accessing narratives (and neglecting naturally occurring narratives) we risk over-simplifying, reifying or essentializing people’s lives and overlooking the extent to which people concurrently occupy different (and often paradoxical) positions. Raya Jones’ chapter also makes a distinction between ‘small stories’ and ‘autobiography’ and calls for a recognition of the dialogic (social) and symbolic (personal/intrapsychic) functions of ‘small stories’. Raya suggests that narrative fiction plays a central role in self-understanding and illustrates (using data from an interview with three school girls and a short story written by a schoolboy) how ‘small stories’ that are clearly fictional and often seemingly absurd, outrageous or surreal can provide us with an insight into the narrator’s sense of self. She also argues that the interview should be seen as a ‘social act’ in which ‘small stories’ function to ‘fine-tune the speaker’s positioning’.

Section 2: Oppression, Empowerment and ‘the Self’ as a Narrative Project

The chapters in this section of the book explore issues relating to the emancipatory and transformatory potential of narratives but also their power to marginalise and subjugate. The chapters share a common interest in ‘the self’ as a reflexive narrative project and discuss the extent to which we are free to write or re-write our own stories and the extent to which our sense of self is shaped and constrained by the cultural resources available to us in making sense of our experiences.

Brendan Stone’s innovative chapter interrogates the complexities and limitations of self-narration using an autobiographical novel by schizophrenic author Ross David Burke. Burke’s protagonist, Sphere is writing an autobiography and is therefore both protagonist and narrator within the novel and Brendan argues that this multi-layering of the narrative draws attention to the disintegrating self of both Burke (who committed suicide as soon as he had completed the novel) and his central character. He argues that within the novel

Burke/Sphere attempts to 're-write' his distress but ultimately fails in his 'narrative project' to 'transform his existence' or 'maintain the narratively remade self'. Towards the end of the novel, it becomes increasingly difficult to recognise Sphere's writings as a coherent narrative grounded in any kind of reality as the narration descends into what Stone terms 'the outworking of a lonely pathology'. Clive Baldwin continues a number of the themes of Brendan's chapter in his discussion of the concept of 'narrative dispossession'. Clive begins by pointing out that there has been much discussion of the potential of narrative research to 'give voice' to marginalised groups. However, Clive argues that as we currently conceptualise it, the process of narration excludes certain individuals and groups creating a group that he refers to as the 'narratively dispossessed'. Clive's contention is that because emplotment is dependent upon consistency and coherence, the forgetting or mis-remembering that is characteristic of dementia may 'limit the possibility of engaging narratively with the world and with others' for those living with dementia.¹ He further asserts that reconfiguring narrative agency (eg. by seeking alternative means of expression such as art or dance), narrative consistency and coherence (eg. by placing less emphasis on linearity) and emplotment (by focusing on 'small stories' rather than a prolonged narrative trajectory) may enable us to narratively 're-possess' those living with dementia. In his chapter on the implications of former looked after young people accessing their Social Services care files, Jim Goddard explores the role of concepts such as 'belonging', family history, 'roots' and 'blood ties' in creating a coherent self image. Jim also considers the potential ethical repercussions of people being given access to files that were written at a time when those being written about did not have access to files and which may therefore contain pejorative/judgmental comments about the looked after young person and sensitive information about others.

Ruth Bridgens' chapter is the first of four chapters focusing on the cultural stories available to survivors of various kinds of trauma and women talking about their 'health identities'. Ruth identified a tendency amongst women who had experienced polio in childhood to adopt a cultural 'triumph over adversity' story characterised by a silent stoicism and a lack of emotion. Ruth discusses the notion of 'covert' or unspoken emotion where the teller doesn't outwardly appear to feel any emotion but the researcher feels it and uses it in her analysis. She suggests that the emotional aspects of the women's polio stories may be forbidden, forgotten or 'untellable' stories in the context of cultural stories of 'disability and/or survival after childhood trauma'. Ruth argues that 'small

¹ This is interesting in relation to the preceding chapter and Clive's arguments could perhaps also be applied to those living with schizophrenia such as Ross David Burke whose own narrative becomes increasingly incoherent and inconsistent (at least within our current understandings of what makes a consistent narrative).

stories' can be a form of resistance and highlights the need for 'disabled people to be seen as ordinary, not as heroes or victims' and to achieve a balance between stoicism and emotion in their stories. Like Ruth, Jacqueline Christodoulou also identified a shared 'stoicism in the face of adversity' narrative in her study of perimenopausal women's health narratives and health identities. In her chapter, Jacqueline discusses the fluid and flexible nature of identity construction and reconstruction, the emplotment of health identities and the importance of 'enabling the voices of previously unheard women to emerge' by taking a person-centred approach to understanding the construction of health identities. Continuing the discussion of cultural narratives, Jo Woodiwiss highlights how, in making sense of their experiences, women who were abused in childhood draw upon 'currently circulating narrative frameworks' that construct 'victims' of sexual abuse as inevitably damaged and in need of healing and which tend to blame them for their own unhappiness and dissatisfaction. Jo suggests that the 'harm story' has become so deeply ingrained that those who do not conform are silenced whilst those who conform are celebrated. She therefore warns us to remember that we can be 'imprisoned as well as liberated by the stories we tell'. Vladimír Chrz, Ivo Čermák and Veronika Plachá explore the impact of 'confrontation with the finiteness of life' amongst female breast cancer survivors on the narrative configuration of the women's lives. They identify three genres of life stories amongst breast cancer survivors (when you hit rock bottom you can only go up, tragic hero, and fearless fighter against the medical system) and discuss how these stories differ in terms of fulfilment (or 'reaching the desired') and control (or agency).

Section 3: Methodological Issues and Advances: Data Collection, Analysis, Representation and dissemination

As the title suggests, the chapters in this section of the book focus upon a number of issues, innovations and developments in narrative methodologies.

The first chapter by Sola Decker uses a study of how radiographers construct professional identities to illustrate the importance of reflexivity (both in terms of interrogating how the interview context might have impacted upon the narrative and in terms of being explicit about relevant characteristics of the researcher). She then considers how the researcher's status as an 'insider' or an 'outsider' to the group being researched can impact upon data collection and analysis. In addition to discussing the importance of gaining a narrative understanding of the 'revolving door' phenomenon amongst psychiatric patients, Everton Bolton discusses how narrative research can empower patients by giving them a voice. He then discusses the concept of analysing data in 'reflecting teams' and discusses the challenges and opportunities that

arise from an analytical process involving multiple interpretative voices. Zaheera Essat further discusses the use of 'reflective teams' in her chapter where she outlines how she used this method to ensure that her analysis of migrant women's birth stories was not limited by her own experience and perspectives. Zaheera then goes on to discuss the potential of 'performative social science' (the subject of the subsequent chapter by Kip Jones) as an 'accessible method of dissemination' of findings to practitioners and others. In the final chapter of the book, Kip Jones outlines his 'performative social science' an innovation in inquiry and dissemination which utilises visual images, colours, typefaces, films, song lyrics, poems and music. This approach to dissemination, he explains, is an attempt to capture the 'physical atmosphere, ambience, three-dimensional space and physical relationships' being recounted in narratives of life events in a way that words alone cannot. Kip argues that presenting the 'lived life' and the 'told story' in a 'raw' form (ie. without being 'academically analysed') allows the audience to 'become part of the interpretive process'.