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Aunty Betty and the sunny day

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Abstract

Rodriguez (2002, p4) argues that no narrative is meant to be kept to oneself, it is for sharing with others and with this sharing comes a social infrastructure that bonds and binds each of us to others in a inimitable way, and furthermore, a concept which allows individuals to critically examine the repercussions and outcomes of their actions. If it is accepted that narratives are a means for the individual to address and share these issues, what are the underlying processes that may effect the reflection of these issues to form a narrative.
It is the intention here to question what may be one of the underpinning requirements of an individual to work within a narrative framework, the concept of self awareness, and in particular the ability to communicate this awareness to others.
Carson (2001, p199) states that 'all situations can be described in a number of ways which reflect not just an author's values, but also, more crucially, an authors' identity'. This paper will question whether there is a singular unified 'self', or as James (1892) maintains, the individual is a highly complex social entity and that we display 'as many different selves as people we interact with'
The concept of self awareness will be explored through relevant historical and contemporary literature in order to attempt to discover who in essence is writing the stories recounted in a narrative.

Introduction

What exactly are narratives? There are numerous theoretical, historical, and contemporary definitions about what constitutes a narrative across a diversity of disciplines. Although I appreciate these ideas express the usefulness of narratives in many different settings, I still had a difficulty in grasping the concept of the use of narratives as a valid methodology for my own work. Why, for instance employ a narrative methodology to explore an individual's experiences instead of asking them to compile a personal journal, or utilise an interview format and then scrutinise the information gleaned from the resulting transcripts. To me a narrative seemed to be a skewed way to look at an individual's experiences because the narrative is predominantly a product of the writer's individuality, and therefore constrained or distorted by this individualism within the zeitgeist. If it is conceded that as individuals develop and change over time, and they are also altered by their life experiences, surely the *'act'* of creating a narrative will be a part of this change process and therefore make the narrative obsolete by the time it is completed, in effect as useful as yesterdays newspaper. This raises the question of who then actually writes the narrative and to what extent and importance does the notion of self awareness impact on the resulting narrative. This article attempts to explain my journey into exploring what narratives mean to me, and how they may be used to further my own research.

Self awareness

Self awareness is a concept that has been debated across both the centuries and across disciplines. It is inextricably linked with the notion of the self concept, self esteem and self image. Although it is difficult to isolate these closely related areas, I do not want to concentrate here on the processes and developmental theories of self per se, but to contemplate in more detail on how we actually perceive ourselves as an individual and how these perceptions may impact upon our personal interpretation over time, recall of events or experiences, and how we ultimately communicate our experiences through the medium of narratives. According to Hergenhahn (1997, p18) the perception of self stays relatively stable over time even though we may dramatically physically change. This view however, is not universally accepted. Hampson (1995, p30) argues that the idea of a unified concept of self may be too simplistic an approach and is not substantiated. In effect we become a social chameleon, we have the ability to adapt to each social situation or social interaction and we exhibit a different/alternative/modified version of ourselves to meet the demands of that situation/interaction.

These roles it could be argued are social constructs (Hampson 1995, p32) and that the basis of these social constructs have their origins in language. Language could be considered to be a major constraining factor which not only limits the manner in which we perceive others; it also determines how we perceive ourselves. Rodriguez (2002, p4) argues as we are '*languaged*' beings, '*the nature of our language is the nature of our world'*. Furthermore can narratives be considered to be complete or *'perfect'* if language itself is neither perfect nor complete?

Historically the self has been seen as a separate entity and referred to in several different ways, as the soul, as the mind or the more contemporary view of some that the self is the *'organiser of experience'* (Hergenhahn 1997, p18). Tauber (2005, p49) argues that in the 17th century the rise in interest in self awareness was due in part to the desire to thwart the rise in skepticism by idealizing the *'knowing self'*. James (1892, p35) however is credited as being the first to question the concept of the self and to distinguish between the complexities of a multi faceted self and the notion of a singular self.

James made the differentiation between *'I'* as the knower, and '*me*' as the known. The *'me*' James further believed was an integral part of the self which consisted of a material self (our possessions), the social self (as seen by others) and the spiritual self (a state of consciousness). This concept was embraced in later years by post Kantian philosophers (Hegel, Emerson and Kierkegaard) who furthered the notions of self consciousness. From a structuralism point of view, however, (as Hergenhahn cites it) self awareness or introspection is not a true representation of an event or experience, but an interpretation of it based on the memory of that event, furthermore by revisiting the event it would be inevitably changed by this re-visitation (p247).
If the concept put forward by James is accepted, that we are as many selves as people we meet or situations we encounter, how can a narrative can be a valid representation of a person's experience for more than a fleeting speck of time, as soon as the experience is thought about, time will distort the experience based on new experiences. Therefore it could be argued that a narrative cannot accurately reflect experience and be a true representation of the self. Can this though only be a small indication of what narrative methodology can offer, what if narratives are more than a mirror to gain insight into beliefs and behaviours surrounding an event, are they possibly a far more complicated process than this? If looked at in a broader sense can narratives

be considered to be a method in which this reflective process allows a moment of *'clarity'* in which an individual can gain an insight into the enduring self?

At a family funeral recently I was speaking to my cousin and asking after the health of my aunty Betty. Aunty Betty is in her mid eighties and after having a couple of major strokes several years ago resides in a care home and requires 24 hour medical support. My cousin told me of a recent visit to the home in which she had a strange conversation with one of my aunties carers. It appears that one of the things the carers do to keep the client's mentally active is ask them who they are. The carer told my cousin that one morning when asked who my aunty Betty was she replied '*Elizabeth Sneddon'*.
No said the carer you are Betty Wynn, *'no I'm not I'm Elizabeth Sneddon'* came the reply. After this went on for a few minutes the carer dropped the subject as aunty Betty was getting quite upset and frustrated, but adamant she was Elizabeth Sneddon. My cousin thought for a moment and told the carer that yes in fact Aunty Betty and Elizabeth Sneddon were one and the same, as although for the last 70 years she was known as Betty Wynn, Elizabeth Sneddon was the name she was known as when child in Scotland. As a researcher, this event raised several questions about my auntie's behaviour, and one paramount to my area of study the concept of self awareness. Why had after a period of over 70 years had my aunty suddenly, and vehemently reverted to her childhood identity?

Can such a strong sense of identity be enduring throughout a lifetime? Brown (2000, p5) in a similar vein proposes that trauma and the connection between this trauma and memory in older people is of immense importance of how an event is remembered, could the trauma in this case be the leaving from Scotland at an early age to settle in Wales? Brown further argues that the affect of traumatic events alters how the individual stores and retrieves the memories associated with the trauma, maybe associated with age.

Without getting embroiled in the lifespan development of self awareness debates (see Bee 1989, p134), there is abundant research into the continued development of self awareness in adults. Gardner (2001, p27) in particular looked at the development of self awareness in social work students and found that the increased capacity and skill for self awareness in these students resulted in greater learning experience especially when a reflexive learning element was introduced. How though is this skill learned? Schneider (2002, p807) would argue that paramount to the learning of these reflexive skills is the relationship between self talk, self consciousness and self knowledge.
Dunning (2006, p600) argues that although individuals may be able to develop a highly tuned concept of self awareness, this self awareness is susceptible to a high degree of bias which can lead to an exaggerated overestimation of their own characteristics or personality. For example individuals may overestimate how kind they are to others, how good a leader they are and how charitable to others they are. Dunning points out that even though we tend to overestimate our own self characteristics, perversely we are excellent (accurate) judges of our peers and other people's characteristics (p601).
Does the reason for this over- confidence have its origin in our cultural norms and the need to be seen as a successful person to be deemed socially acceptable (see Taylor and Brown 1998, p200) or are there other factors to be considered. If it is accepted that we overestimate our abilities do sociological factors influence or pressurize individuals to distort reality to see themselves as a '*better*' person? Egan (2002, p179) argues that individuals may be well aware of these distortions attributed to their personalities but purposely develop *'blind spots'* about them.

These blind spots however might be something that we may or may not be consciously aware of. Carson (2001, p201) expresses surprise at how long students can maintain feelings of upset and anger (some ten or twenty years) but Individuals may through the process of self deception, decide not to confront certain issues in their lives because they are too painful or difficult to face, and they will in some cases utilize self defence mechanisms to manipulate their experiences by ignoring them or distorting them so they appear to be less intimidating and in a form that is more acceptable to them.

For Goleman (1998, p47) however, the use of these maladaptive defense mechanisms should not be a constraining factor in the search for self awareness, instead self awareness should be a part of, and enhance, the individual's ability to be free to experience their true feelings and our reflections on these feelings. To be self aware Goleman believes individuals have to have *'some sophistication about their emotional lives'* (p48). Where does this emotional sophistication come from however?
Goleman (1998, p54) maintains that the source of self awareness may have a neurological basis. Some individuals he argues may be more naturally attuned to introspection and self awareness and also be more effective at communicating their feelings and experiences. This communication of feelings may manifest itself in many ways, for example through music, through artistic works and through the creation of narratives. Astor (2005, p415) furthers this notion by claiming that novelists tend to take a problem from their own life and use the plot of the novel to address their own issues.
If as Goleman proposes certain individuals are more in tune to their feelings and more self aware than others, this poses the question, is this just a neurological function without any sociological input.

Although as previously mentioned, Schneider (2002, p807) claims that paramount to learning reflexive skills is the relationship between self talk, self consciousness and self knowledge, there is a view that suggests that to effectively know your own mind, it is imperative that the individual is able to understand the mind of others. Hobson et al (2006, p1) looked at the foundations of self awareness in relation to autism. In studies with autistic children it was found that the participants were limited in social and emotional self awareness. Hobson et al concluded that for children to develop a meaningful depth of self awareness they need also to identify with other people. This work reflects other mainstream studies by Robbins (2004, p129) who suggests that in order to fully understand ourselves we must first have the ability to understand how others think. Although this principle of empathy underpins humanistic psychology and counselling (predominantly Carl Rogers), it has over the years attracted considerable criticism (see Masson 1993, p229).

What constitutes a good narrative? If verbally communicated does it have to be articulate, if it is written does it have to be structured and grammatically correct or are these incidental to the individual and the story? According to Nelson (1989, p23) narratives are an integral part of how we learn about our world as children, and Mateas and Sengers (1998, p1) believe we continue this learning process into adulthood. There has been an increase in the study of narratives from different perspectives in recent years, in particular the growing body of research into gender and narratives. Bohanek et al (2004, p51) have enriched this gender based research by exploring the way in which the memory of emotional events differed by both valence and intensity in women. It was found that negative narratives contained more negative words, whilst positive narratives

contained more positive words; furthermore negative narratives were longer whilst positive narratives were more coherent, (see also studies by Ludvig (2006, p245) on gender and narratives, and Haines and Kray's (2005, p643) study on women's self identification and social power).

Narratives as a research methodology

The question arises of does the use a narrative require a level of empathic understanding to be displayed in order to see the other person's point of view? If we look at empathy from a Rogerian perspective it could be argued not. Are the goals of narratives and empathic research poles apart or do they have more in common than may be initially thought. Karinol (199, p147) claims that if the transformation rule approach to empathy is employed, it is an excellent heuristic method to make predictions about other's thoughts and feelings. Carson (2001, p201) would argue though narratives does not require the student to 'be' the other person, but instead to imagine it. So it may be that although empathy and narratives hold a common general view on researching individual differences and their experiences, there are fundamental differences in the methodologies of these two approaches. Schiff (2006, p19) however, argues that the use of narratives in psychology shows great potential and could play a prominent role into examining the meanings individuals attribute to their experiences, (see also Boudens (2005, p1285) on the use of narrative analysis on workplace emotions).

Can the use of narratives and in particular their use in my own research be influenced by Geertz (1993) and the *'thick description'* methodology, or by Ellis and Bochner (2000) and an autoethnographical approach, or as a psychologist am I looking for a more eclectic approach integrating some positivistic approaches as well. As yet I am undecided. Can however, these two factions be effectively used in conjunction. As Bond (2002, p137) points out *'natural science'* and narratives have little in common. In natural science the researcher remains outside the phenomenon as observer, be totally objective, generalizes findings and aims to show reliability and validity in their studies. In narratives the researcher is at the heart of the study, subjective, allows the reader to make their own judgments and examines the trustworthiness of the research.

Conclusions

If as James (1892) and Hampson (1995, p32) proposes, we accept that as individuals we are not one self but comprise as many selves as situations we encounter, are written versions of events as numerous as our 'many selves'. (To take this concept to an extreme, as this article has been compiled over several weeks, how many versions of my self have contributed to it as my experiences have changed? Does it really matter though, as Rodriguez (2002, p3) points out *'no interpretation or meaning is ever complete. There is always a new and different interpretation'*.

I have utilized several conceptual or experiential approaches to critique the use of narratives as a research tool, looking at the issues surrounding the processes associated with self awareness (or multiple selves) and the impact emotions have on the intensity of these reported emotions when retold at a later date and the use by individuals of defence mechanisms and *'blind spots'* to keep themselves safe. I am not suggesting the use of narratives is just another paradigm that is a

product of the Zeitgeist but that it does have its merits. One key area where I see narratives being of immense importance is how it attempts to humanize science and place paramount the individual, their unique life experiences and the way in which they make sense of these feelings and experiences. Rodriguez (2002, p4) argues that no narrative is meant to be kept to oneself, it is for sharing with others and with this sharing comes a social infrastructure that bonds and binds each of us to others in a inimitable way, and furthermore, a concept which allows individuals to critically examine the repercussions and outcomes of their actions. Because of, or in spite of these arguments surrounding the use of narratives as a methodology, it was only after sitting in the back garden of my house lying back on the lawn staring into the sky I realised how and why narratives may be beneficial to my work.

Watching the aeroplanes floating across a pure blue, cloud free sky I thought how busy it was up there today. I chastened myself almost immediately by noting it was probably always that busy up there amongst the numerous flight paths but because of cloud, rain or fog the planes were invisible to the eye. This made me think of our enduring self, is it part of us all but as we grow from childhood into adulthood it is suppressed by socialisation and societal norms? Can as we grow older like my aunty Betty, discard some of these socialised layers and get a glimpse of who we really are. It is a little unrealistic to think that to gain in insight into our enduring self we have to wait until our dotage. Can narratives play a part how individuals can '*access*' their enduring self earlier in their lifespan. Thinking of the analogy of the planes on a sunny day, can this be compared to how a narrative may be used to '*clear*' the '*mist'* and '*fog*' of everyday socialisations such as described by Taylor and Brown (1998,p200) and allow the individual an uninterrupted view of their enduring self.

I mentioned previously the empathic approaches to research and therapy, and one key area I see as common ground to both narratives and humanistic ideals is the concept that although the past and past experiences have their importance, the emphasis could be considered to focus on the present. Crites (1971, p241) sums this up most succinctly by observing that there is a *'present of things past, a present of things present and a present of things future'*.

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