

British Sociological Association Annual Conference 2000, York

Stream: biography, history and memory

Panel title: Lines of Narrative

Increasingly, psychologists and sociologists are invoking 'narrative' in their theory and research. This concern is diverse, and its object difficult to define. For some, narrative is part of a linguistic turn in the social sciences associated with postmodernism, with an interest in the dispersion of subjectivity, the impossibility of reading off identities, politics and powers from social position, and the multiplicity of meanings. Others regard narratives as expressers and transformers of lives, a notion that has a strong affinity with modernism.

Each of the speakers on this panel are contributors to a forthcoming volume, *Lines of Narrative* (edited by Molly Andrews, Shelley Day Sclater, Corinne Squire and Amal Treacher) which provides an overview of sociologists' and psychologists' contemporary perspectives on narrative. Contributors draw on their own narrative data, while addressing important questions regarding its use: Is narrative work a method or a theory? How do you interpret what people say or write? To what extent is narrative language a reflection of social context? Do individuals ever speak 'for themselves'? Can texts do more than reflect context? What can we learn from the way people speak about themselves and others, and why might their stories matter to people who do not know them?

The speakers on this panel will offer a new take on the use of narrative, illuminating the psychosocial nature of experience, accounting for both the inner life of individuals and the social contexts in which they live.

Carol Wolkowitz, University of Warwick

'Papa's Bomb': The local and the global in women's Manhattan Project narratives

This paper is based on an examination of published autobiographical writing by white, middle class women who lived at Los Alamos, New Mexico during the Second World War, mainly women married to scientists working on the making of the first atomic bombs. Los Alamos was built from scratch, the women were very much the ones responsible for creating the wartime 'community' there and they recorded their memoirs as a way of writing their contribution into the picture. The paper is particularly concerned with how the construction of narratives entirely focused on localised, personal concerns and experiences suggests not only an understandable reluctance to take on board the effects of the bombs as an aspect of the story they want to tell, but also an underlying (and possibly denied) ambivalence about their own and their husbands' involvement in the Project.

Zdenek Konopasek, Charles University, Prague, with Molly Andrews, UEL

A cautious ethnography of socialism: Autobiographical narrative in the Czech Republic

This paper reports on a unique life history project conducted by eight Czech sociologists. In the aftermath of the changes of 1989, these men and women wrote a

series of autobiographical texts, which they shared amongst themselves, and which in turn led to more autobiographical reflections. This highly reflexive methodology simultaneously positioned the narrators of the texts as researchers and objects of study. What they found through the writing and close reading of their own life stories was an unexpected high level of continuity, closeness and temporal reversibility between the 'socialist then' and the 'transforming now.' The authors conclude that the much-touted break with the past, in the name of the Great Transformation in the East, has simply not occurred.

Michael Rustin, UEL
Sociology, time and narrative

This paper will argue that the dimensions of time (which are also the dimensions of change) in sociological analysis are most effectively captured through the socio-biographical method. This method achieves its objective in two ways. Firstly, because the first person narratives which are its primary source of data reveal individuals to be active agents and subjects, and demonstrate the process whereby individuals make their lives, within the conditions they face. And secondly, because giving sociological meaning to these narratives requires reference to changing contexts of structure and culture. This narrative method therefore not only illuminates changes achieved by individuals, but also the changes which are taking place in the societies within which they negotiate their life-journeys.

The argument will be supported by examples from socio-biographical studies of individual subjects from seven European countries, undertaken in the SOSTRIS (Social Strategies in Risk Societies) project, funded by the EU between 1996 and 1999, and conducted by a multi-national research team.

Discussants: Corinne Squire and Amal Treacher, UEL