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## Self-narration as rehearsal

### A discursive approach to the narrative formation of identity

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Commentary on Peter Redman's *The Narrative Formation of Identity Revisited: Narrative Construction, Agency and the Unconscious*; Volume 15(1), pp. 25–44.

Peter Redman's article employs both Lacanian and Kleinian accounts of the subject to consider a particular aspect of the 'narrative formation of identity': the meaning which the telling of a story has for the narrator. While agreeing with Redman that narrative analysts have paid too little attention to the pleasure speakers can take in positioning themselves within their own stories, I propose an alternative interpretation of this identity work, based on a discursive approach.

Peter Redman is one of a number of academics whose current work seeks to incorporate insights from psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theory into empirical research in the social sciences.<sup>1</sup> This 'psychoanalytic turn' could be seen as the next step on from the 'narrative', 'discourse' and 'linguistic' turns. It can also appear to offer a fuller or more complete analysis of talk data, sometimes implied, for example, through the use of the term 'psychosocial'<sup>2</sup>. This tends to suggest that research described as either psycho(logical) or social is inevitably partial rather than, as might be argued, differently focused because

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1. Others include Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson, who Redman cites (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) and Lynn Froggett (Froggett, 2002).

2. The term 'psychosocial' is also used for narrative work which is not psychoanalytic: see Andrews (2000).

derived from different traditions, albeit with considerable overlap of concerns and sources.

Redman refers to the ongoing 'dialogue' between discursive and psychoanalytic psychologists. It raises issues for other identity researchers, including narrative analysts. One debate concerns 'identities (as) ... points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us' (Hall, p. 6)<sup>3</sup>. The concept of a subject position derives from the work of Foucault and is employed by discourse theorists and many narrative theorists (e.g., Mishler, 1999). However, it has been suggested that without recourse to the work of (very different) writers in the psychoanalytic tradition, such as Lacan and Klein, no explanation is available for how and why people 'invest' in certain subject positions (Hall, p. 6). A related debate is around discourse and psychoanalytic accounts of the 'continuity of identity and repetition of patterns over the course of a life' (Wetherell, 2003, p. 100).

Some of the challenges from psychoanalytic and psychosocial analysts are similar to criticisms which narrative analysts working in other traditions have made of discourse and social constructionist approaches (e.g., Crossley, 2000). As Redman puts it, the debate is around "the claim that identities are, in some sense, *fabricated* by and in narratives" (or other talk) and, alternatively, "the claim that we have inherent capacities, such as a dynamic unconscious, that precede any identity-building work that narrative might do." (He equates this to a debate which I would see as slightly different, namely, "the extent to which we are 'spoken by' narratives" and "the extent to which we 'speak' them". The distinction will become clearer as I continue.)

Like other analysts who assume that talk is constitutive, I want to argue that a narrative-discursive account of identity work in talk is complete in itself, without recourse to psychoanalytic theorising to explain continuity and investment. I suggest that the debates I have mentioned derive in large part from a narrow, even distorted understanding of discursive and constructionist theories of identity. I will outline briefly how this may have arisen and offer a fuller account of identity work in talk, including the reflexive and rehearsed nature of talk and the nature of relevant context. In my view, this expanded account is also compatible with Redman's argument for an analysis to consider the special importance which 'first person narration' or 'self-narration' may have as part of identity work.

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3. See also Davies and Harré (1990).

In arguing that talk is the 'site' of identity work (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998), discursive psychologists challenge cognitive psychological theories which, like psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theories, treat talk as 'epi-phenomenal' (Edwards, 1997) assuming that the 'real' psychological work, including identity work, takes place elsewhere. A somewhat different debate given by Foucauldian theory concerns the extent to which identity is determined by the discursive formations in which a speaker is positioned. Wetherell (1998) addresses this in an influential article which calls for a 'synthetic approach' (p. 405) to the analysis of talk data. She argues that a 'technical' analysis based on Conversation Analysis and ethnomethodology can show how the taking up of available subject positions is negotiated by speakers, suggesting that they are more active in their identity work than Foucauldian theory would imply. In Redman's terms, she is arguing that they both 'speak' and are 'spoken by' discourse and available subject positions.

Wetherell's critical discursive analysis retains from Conversation Analysis a focus on a specific instance of talk as interaction. While focusing on the meanings given by the larger social and cultural contexts of the talk, it does not consider those which persist through multiple interactions within a single lifetime (the "continuity of identity and repetition of patterns" already mentioned: Wetherell, 2003, p. 100). I want to suggest that a narrative-discursive approach (e.g., Taylor, 2005) is able to encompass these without theorising the subject in psychoanalytic or psychodynamic terms. What is required, first, is a fuller understanding of positioning and also of the constraints which operate on a speaker's identity work in talk.

Wetherell's synthetic analytic approach (1998) looks at the subject positions made available to a speaker by the previous turns of conversation. In an analysis of young men's talk about a night out, she shows how some positions which are taken up by speakers are 'troubled' and require repair. There appear to me to be two rather different kinds of trouble implied by her analysis. The first derives from a social identity which is negatively valued (for example, "the identity of being intentionally or callously promiscuous" p. 400): this is recognizable as one of the subject positions "determined by discourses and in this sense ... prior (and) already constituted" (p. 401). A second kind of trouble appears to derive from the onus on a speaker to be consistent in his identity work: there is trouble when he takes up a position which cannot be reconciled with a previous positioning. Wetherell's analysis looks only at the identity work which takes place within the 'flow of interaction' (p. 400) of a single occasion of talk. This focus on turn-by-turn identity work seems to leave out the multi-

ple and complex nature of identity including the ways that speakers are *already* positioned at the outset of any occasion of talk. These would include the positionings given by previous tellings: what Davies and Harré call the “cumulative fragments of a lived autobiography” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 49), and also the ‘always already’ positionings given by any speaker’s appearance and by the preliminaries to talk, even in a first encounter, for example, by the context in which the speakers meet. I want to suggest that these prior positionings are a constraint on a speaker’s identity work because they trouble new positionings which can appear to be inconsistent with them. They establish limits to the range of identity work which can take place within any occasion of talk and thereby create continuity across occasions of talk and a likelihood that patterns will be repeated.<sup>4</sup>

This is not to say that a speaker constructs a single, unified identity across different situations and occasions of talk. Identities are multiple and complex. As Mishler (1999) points out, coherence is not attainable. So some contradictions and inconsistencies are accepted (for example, as differences between who someone is at work and at home), some pass unnoticed but some others, I would suggest, are recognised and require repair or are anticipated as part of reflexive and *rehearsed* identity work. I have mentioned the fragments of autobiography (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 49) which shape a speaker’s identity work on any occasion of talk. Narrative and discourse analysis of talk often neglects the rehearsed nature of the talk which is part of the extended process through which identities are constructed and taken up. Although identity work is situated and a new version of an ‘up to now’ life narrative is presented on a particular occasion as part of a particular interaction, it is a new *version* and not a wholly new creation. The speaker will almost inevitably be drawing on previous tellings of the same story. A speaker’s investment in certain subject positions can be understood as a consequence of some identity work becoming established through repetition and rehearsal.

These points lead me back to Redman’s article and, in particular, his discussion of the pleasure people can take in constructing stories and positioning themselves within those stories. I agree that this is a neglected aspect of ordinary talk. I want to suggest that such telling is a form of reflexive identity work which has a special function for speakers. A narrative-discursive approach assumes that identity work is both social and individual: a speaker employs estab-

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4. Wetherell (2003) discusses continuity in somewhat different terms.

lished and recognisable resources to construct an identity which also refers to the unique circumstances of a particular life. Part of that identity work may be the construction of an up-to-now life narrative, and part of *that* the telling of a story in which the speaker is a character in the sense Redman mentions, a type familiar from a book or film or the broader shared social and cultural context, but also personalised. This may be particularly important for younger people, such as the one Redman quotes, because they are still constructing identities. Of course identity work continues through a lifetime, as Mishler (1999) points out, but a younger person has almost certainly had less opportunity to “construct himself within an autobiographical self-narrative” (in Redman’s words) and establish stories of self through repeated tellings.

Finally, I want to suggest that a research interview may be a congenial performance context for such rehearsal. Atkinson and Silverman (1997) suggest that we belong to an interview culture and certainly the experience of being interviewed is not necessarily alien or uncomfortable and for most research participants appears to be enjoyable. One reason may be that it offers the speaker the opportunity to construct a story and position her- or himself as a character within it as Redman describes.

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