

The threads of a narrative: An exploration of identity

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Grant Thomas Ryan, *Master of Narrative Therapy and Community Work, Master of Counselling and Applied Psychotherapy, Bachelor of Science (Psychology)*.

“Who are *you*?” said the Caterpillar. This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “I-I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.” “What do you mean by that?” said the Caterpillar sternly, “Explain yourself!” “I can’t explain *myself*, I’m afraid, sir,” said Alice, “because I’m not myself, you see.”

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

From Modern to Post-Modern Identity

Just like Alice, my identity is one that seems to change momentarily. I hardly even know myself, because, perhaps, I am not myself, you see. The term “identity”, or *identitie*, was first recorded in 1545 as a “quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness” (Identity, 2010). These utterances of early modernity still echo through till today, with the dominance of structuralist and romantic thought. Structuralist thinkers claim the presence of underlying “deep-structures” or “essential truths” of human nature such that “man is what he is made by structures beyond his control” (Russell & Carey, 2004, p. 96; Kearney, 1991, p. 256). Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991, p. 37) referred to this as “ontological security,” a belief in one’s psychic coherence and wholeness which depends on the process of keeping separate from experiences of chaos, anxiety, madness, sickness, and death. As a by-product of these beliefs the romantic notion of one’s identity has emerged as an inner impulse or conviction that confirms the presence of a *true* or *authentic* self and a responsibility to fulfil one’s natural destiny (Taylor, 1989, pp. 369-370). This is the identity I have been led to believe that I am supposed to have. I am me, and I persist through time, there are times when I, like Alice, am “not myself” or not being true to myself, but, I am still myself, aren’t I? How can I be both myself and not myself at the same time? Perhaps I am something different altogether?

Sociolinguist Anna De Fina (2011) outlines how an identity can be defined as either “a property of the individual” or as “relational,” that is, “as something that emerges through social interaction” (p. 265). With this concept in mind, social constructionists have argued that identity is a process of construction rather than a series of attributes, and that such construction is established and maintained through discursive practices (De Fina et al., 2006, pp. 266-267). This post-modern conception of identity disregards the notion of a “stable core of the self” and instead accepts that identities are “fragmented,” “ever changing,” “never unified,” and “multiply constructed” through differing, often intersecting and contradictory discourses and discursive practices (Hall, 2000, p. 17). Social scientists Benwell and Stokoe (2006) detail that such a view promotes a non-essentialist notion of identity such that meanings of identity are situated not within the essential part of an individual, but rather within a “series of representations constituted by semiotic systems” such as language and discourse (p. 31). So perhaps it is not so much of a question of “Who am I?” but rather, “Where am I?” I do not seem to have an essence of what makes up me inside myself, but rather I am present and differential in relation to others. “Who am I?” is only meaningful through discourse. Like Alice, the question of identity only comes to light when engaged with the caterpillar. Simply, “One cannot be a self on one’s own” (Taylor, 1989, p. 36).

Discourse, Narratives, and Identity

In relating to others, and in turn constructing my identity, I am nonetheless dependent on discourse to convey any sort of representation of who I am. Psychologist Ian Parker (1992) outlines a working definition of a discourse “as a system of statements which construct objects” (p. 5). More specifically, psychologist Vivien Burr (1995) claims that a discourse refers to a “set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, and statements that produces a particular version of events” (p. 32). Generally speaking, it appears quite clear that the world and our experience of it comprises more than just discourses. However, it is only through our use of language that we are able to make any of these things accountable at all (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 149). Discourses then are both *constructed* by people using them and *constructive* as people constitute social structures through descriptions (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 37). It is only through the fact that we have the noun “identity” or the pronoun “I” that I can even discuss these concepts presently. This, in-and-of-itself is subject to discourse; that is, my identity is not only created *through*, but also *within* discourses. As such, the things I say are not necessarily valid descriptions of my beliefs or opinions, and should not be taken as a “manifestation of some essential condition,” but rather as manifestations of culturally available discourses (Burr, 1995, pp. 33-34).

Sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2000) describes identity as a “meeting point” or the point of “suture” between the discourses that attempt to “interpellate” or “be called upon” to position us as social subjects, and the processes that construct us as subjects with subjectivities that can be spoken about at all (p. 19). Identities are thus “points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” (Hall, 2000, p. 19). As I will discuss subject positioning in the next section of this paper, I

would like to draw attention towards Hall's "suture" or the "thread metaphor" of identity. The construction of an identity on this account is a "subtle interweaving" of numerous "threads," "woven together to produce the fabric of identity" (Burr, 1995, p. 34). Each thread of our identity is a product of the "limited number of discourses" available, and surrounding each discourse is always a "variety of alternative discourses" offering different accounts of who we are (Burr, 1995, p. 35). Therefore, identity can be seen as a patchwork of available threads that have been sutured together in an attempt to represent some form of coherence, yet there is the possibility that each thread could be unpicked and new threads might be added.

If it is the threads that keep my identity together, it is narratives and stories that are the patches. Benwell and Stokoe (2006, p. 137) claim that if identities are constructed through and within discourses, then they are necessarily constructed through stories. It is through narratives that individuals "make sense of themselves" tell others "what they are or what they wish to be," and as such "become" or simply "are" their stories (Cortazzi, 2001, p. 388; Riessman, 2003, p. 7). Psychologist Roy Schafer (1992) asserts that an identity is a narrative construction, told through dialogue by a series of "tellings and retellings," continuously constructed and reconstructed over time (p. xvi). It is this notion of time or "temporality" that narratives bring to discourses, which adds a sense of "coherence and meaning" to the construction of identity (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 138). It is through my past positioning and identifications, discussed below, that I give any meaning to the things that I think are important or not important, both in the present moment and for the future. It is the coherent sequence of events that I string together, my patchwork and threads that make up who it is that I am, and who it is I appear to be to others. The truth-value of my narrative cannot, however, be dependent on objective facts, but rather only on "judgments and interpretations made by myself and others" (Vollmer, 2005, p. 194). As such, an inquiry into my identity is not attempting to discover an essential truth about who I am, but rather engage in an "exploration" of how I might go about "constructing truths" about myself and others (Monk, Winslade, Crocket & Epston, 1997, p. 85). Much like Alice, I find it difficult to adequately describe whom it is that I am, for "I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then." I am sure I knew who I was, but that is not who I am presently. I have an idea of who I would like to be, but that also is not who I am. What I am is a multitude of narratives, an incongruent and contradictory patchwork of fragmented stories that I can ascribe to be me, and, similarly, ascribe to others.

Positioning, Identification, Ideology, and Power

Although the patchwork is ascribed to be an identity, either my own, or someone else's, where did the threads come from? Why was this patch included and not another? Was I able to choose which patches were included, and were there even other options available? Family therapists Monk and colleagues (1997) state that nobody has "complete power" over themselves or their environment, and as such are "positioned" into a social context operated by dominant discourses (p. 36). Philosophers Davis and Harré (1990) define positioning as "the discursive production of a diversity of selves," such that

people “continuously position themselves, be positioned by others and position others” (p. 47). Positioning, then, can be described as a “subtle interplay” between cultural discourses and the position of the individual in relation to such discourses, which weave together to produce a justifiable identity in a specific context (Swan & Linehan, 2000, p. 406). Alice, for example, was who she thought she was this morning, in relation to her usual context, yet has appeared to lose herself in relation to the caterpillar who demands she state who she is. Similarly, I am who I am, generally, as a person in contexts, who needs to work, study, and engage in certain relations, but also I am subject to change in relation to each of these specific contexts. In this way, my identity is determined not just by dominant narratives or specific local discourses, but rather emerges from my relational positioning with regard to both (Swan & Linehan, 2000, p. 24). According to Benwell and Stokoe, (2004) people differ in terms of “their capacity to position themselves and others” through their “intention to position and be positioned” (p. 140). In this way, I am not completely helpless with regard to my positioning, but rather it is possible I have some form of control over where I am to be positioned. Identities can be “ascribed, rejected and assumed” by an individual in a “constant negotiation” with others through the flexibility and inflexibility of social power relations (De Fina et al., 2006, p. 273). It is through this connection between “subject positioning” and “social power relations” that my identity can be negotiated and modified through my own agency towards a less dominated and more preferred identity, which is often the place where psychotherapeutic work is undertaken.

The negotiation and development of such identities is a matter of *identification*, that is, what I intentionally or unintentionally identify as being. For Hall (2000), identification is constructed through the “recognition of some common or shared characteristic” with another, a group or ideal, establishing a sense of “closure of solidarity and allegiance” (p. 16). Such identification is achieved through a means of words and “expressions of language” that are associated with “qualities, ideas, situations, social representations and ideological systems” (De Fina et al., 2006, p. 269). For Alice, this identification is absent in Wonderland. She desperately attempts to hold onto that which she can identify with in order to maintain her self, but she is not herself, or rather, she does not identify with herself presently. Identification is a process of meaning making, continuously open for contestation, and, as such, the symbols, such as language, used to convey them are “indexical,” or “point to elements of social contexts and categories” (De Fina et al., 2006, p. 269). Family therapist Michael White (2007) called this process an “association of life,” which encompasses a “membership composed of significant figures and identities of one’s past, present and projected future,” with each influencing one’s construction of identity (p. 129). Similarly, Benwell and Stokoe (2006) discuss the process of “membership categorization analyses,” which investigates the “conventional expectations” about inclusion criteria for certain categories, what it means for the individual to be associated with such a category and its normative behaviours (pp. 38-39). In this way, the associations I choose knowingly or unknowingly to identify with, the categorical membership patches that are thread onto my identity, will shape the way I behave, the way I relate to others, and the way I construct my identity, in accordance with the expectation of how I am “supposed to be” under that category.

According to theorist and philosopher Judith Butler (1993) such “identification belongs to the imaginary,” that it is an ambiguous “phantasmatic efforts of alignment and loyalty” (p. 105). Hall (1982) remarks that the nature of discourses is “a way of representing the order of things” that gives them the appearance of being “universal, natural and coterminous with reality itself” (p. 65). Perhaps this appearance is what Butler was referring to as the imaginary, the phantasmatic, illusionary ideals, or ideologies that serve to construct an identity. Philosopher Louis Althusser (1970/1971) used the notions of “ideology” and “ideological state apparatus” to refer to the mechanisms used for control and manipulative purposes. For him, ideologies not only comprise ideas, but also material practices, and without such practices the ideas have no independent existence. Additionally, he states, “there is no practice except by and in an ideology” (p. 170). Sociologist Judith Howard (2000) describes this process as the “ideological construction of the self,” such that the development of an identity becomes a process of acquiring a particular ideological version of the world, quite often to the end of upholding or preserving the status quo or reproducing social inequalities (p. 385). As such, ideologies often serve as a means by which relatively powerful groups in society attempt to sustain their positioning (Burr, 1995, p. 56). French philosopher Michel Foucault (1988) adamantly expresses this concept in terms of knowledge and power. For Foucault, knowledge is intimately bound up with power, such that any version of events brings with it social practices, implicitly enforcing one way of constructing one’s identity, rather than another, and, ultimately, marginalizing alternative ways of being (p. 149). The construction of my identity then will perhaps necessarily be part of one ideology or another due to social power and positioning. The important point, however, is to be aware of and question the ways in which, social power and ideologies influence my positioning and identification. It is through this process that my identity is able to be constructed through intentional identifications based on personal choice, so that I may have the power to choose what I identify with, how certain ideologies influence this, and how I am to be positioned socially.

Derrida, Deconstruction, and Therapeutic Practice

From the moment there is meaning, there are nothing but signs.

Derrida (1967/1997, p. 50)

In further analysis of identity our exploration is directed towards the structure and use of signs and symbols to construct language. Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure stated that in using language there is a relationship between the “signifier,” the word itself (i.e. the word “identity”), and that which it “signifies,” the meaning associated to the signifier (i.e. what I ascribe to be my identity) (Burr, 1995, p. 72). Philosopher Jacques Derrida questioned whether meaning could ever be fixed to any signifier, as language is a “self-referent” system that is constantly changing through numerous contexts (Burr, 1995, p. 72). Post-structuralist author Madan Sarup (1998) describes this self-reference as an attempt at finding the meaning of a signifier, only to find more signifiers, in an infinite and circular process of turning signifiers into the signified and vice versa (p. 35). As such, every signifier, “every signal, verbal or otherwise, may be used...in configurations and functions which are never prescribed by its essence but emerge from a play of differences”

(Derrida, 1978, p. 220). In this way, Derrida's primary contention, what he calls *différance*, is that the "meaning associated" with a word is contingent on the words surrounding it; that meaning can only be attributed by "distinguishing the differences between it, and everything else in its context" (White, 2007, p. 210). Additionally, Winslade and Monk (2008) describe how a word's meaning is derived from its context comparative to other words, in particular its "binary opposite" (p. 9). As such, it is through the "relation to the other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks," to that which is absent, that any meaning or identity can be constructed (Hall, 2000, p. 17). An identity then, as expressed through words, is not only constituted by what it is, but also inherently bound to what it is not. It is only through the distinction of that which I am to that which I am not, that I have an identity at all. So too for Alice: she is herself, only in contrast to not being herself as she claims to be. In this way, it is only through the patches and threads that are not used on my identity that the patchwork itself even takes form.

In suggesting that "presence always contains absence," psychologist Edward Sampson (1989) insists that it should not be a matter of "either presence or absence," but rather that "there is both presence and absence" (p. 12). Derrida continues this line of thinking by claiming that we should reject or *deconstruct* this either/or logic as it leads to "one of the terms governing the other," always receiving privilege or greater value, and that we should instead adopt a both/and logic (Derrida, 1972/1981, p. 41). This notion of "deconstruction" is an integral part of Derrida's ideas, which refers to the process of "disassembling the taken-for-granted assumptions" about texts, circumstances, identities and so on, and to expose dominant discourses and their positioning outcomes (Monk et al, 1997, p. 95). Burr (1995) describes deconstruction as a matter of reveling "hidden internal contradictions" in order to make the "absent meaning present," as well as examining "power implications" associated with prevailing discourses and positions offered by others (pp. 113-115).

In applying to therapeutic practice Derrida's concepts of *différance* and deconstruction, White (2000) was able to develop the practice of describing the "absent but implicit" in order to "bring forth multi-storied experiences of life and of identity" (p. 36). "As people move through life the stories they tell...become multiple and complex – or rather, the complexity of experience produces multiple stories" (Payne, 2006, p.38). In his book *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, psychologist Jerome Bruner (1986, p. 25-26) outlines the crucial process of experiencing the world not as uni-vocal, but rather multi-vocal, with meanings from discourses and narratives being drawn out from "multiple perspectives." White (2000) details that it is through double- or multi-storied therapeutic conversations that people are able to not only find opportunities to express problematic narratives regarding their identity, but also provide the opportunity to explore and acknowledge "the unstated," that is, the implicit, preferred narratives and identity conclusions (p. 41). White (2007) asserts that within the process of "re-authoring" there is an "irreducible fact that any renegotiation of the stories of people's lives is also a renegotiation of identity" (p. 82; for further practical applications and lines of questioning using re-authoring and double storied development, see also: Epston & White, 1992, p. 126-135; White, 2007, p. 61-128; and, Ryan, 2018, p. 21-35).

What these ideas entail is that, firstly, an identity is constituted not only through that which is said, but also that which is excluded through the establishment of a “hierarchy” between “resultant poles” (Laclau, 1990, p. 33), and, secondly, that through the process of deconstruction and re-authoring we are not only able to uncover that which is absent but implicit, but develop multiple conclusions about who we are. I am able to contest the assumptions of who I am, and question this either/or logic with a more encompassing both/and framework. I can sew a specific patch with a specific thread, but I am also aware that I can unstitch a patch to a preferred extent, or perhaps I could turn the patch over to reveal the inherently bound absence, that is, another side, another story, an alternative perspective on who I am and who I can be.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, the notion of an identity can be shifted from a modern construct based on the ontological security that structuralism and romanticism have provided, towards a relational and contextually constructed post-modern understanding of a non-essential, fragmented and ever-changing identity. It is not only through, but also within discourses and narratives that identity is constructed. Using culturally available discourses as threads, these sets of meanings and representations are able to sew together the fragmented assortment of self-ascribed narratives in order to construct who it is that I think I am. I am also able to reflect on the influence of power and the positioning adopted in ascribing to such discourses and negotiate whether I would prefer to add, leave, or unpick often dominant and ideological associations and identifications. It is through the process of deconstruction that the absent but implicit assumptions embedded in discourses and narratives are able to be brought forward, along with the understanding that with every patch sewn, there is an inherent absence. This could be a disregarded patch or another side that can be observed, if only the time is taken to address and acknowledge these alternatives to the prevailing dominant discourses and narratives. Thus, the question asked of Alice, “Who are you?”, is one that addresses our ever-changing and contrary experience. It is a question that brings with it the ongoing revision of who I am and who I am not. It is a question that prompts a navigation through the arrangements of threads and patches that I am able to sew together to construct an identity.

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