

# Reciting the self

## *Narrative representations of the self in qualitative interviews<sup>1</sup>*



*Feminist Theory*  
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 SAGE Publications  
 (London,  
 Thousand Oaks, CA  
 and New Delhi)  
 vol. 4(1): 29–49.  
 [1464–7001  
 (200304) 4:1;  
 29–49; 031805]

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**Abstract** Drawing on accounts from interviews with white women, this article explores the production of narratives of the self. It suggests that the story produced of the self is not inevitable and may revolve around notions of sameness and difference that, in turn, depend on the positionality of individuals in terms of normative discourses of ‘race’, class and gender. Sally can be seen to be reciting the process of subjection in the way she creates herself as the subject of a narrative, using tropes of difference and sameness to explain who she is and who she is not. However, for the others, the norms and conventions of life-story do not conform with their experiences of subjection. This is because, in the case of Madeleine, she does not experience an easily retold sense of herself, while Deborah appears to want to present herself as so inevitable and conforming to dominant norms that there is no story to tell.

**keywords** *life-history, narrative, qualitative interviewing, subjectivity, whiteness*

We lived in a tiny little village with a dead end, you had to turn right to get to the village, and it had the river at the bottom, . . . so quite a few holidaymakers and things . . . And then there was just a little village school which only had about 50 children altogether, maybe. Which is actually closed down now. So we just went there, and I think probably all the time I was at school, you know, it was quite a sort of idyllic little set-up in a way, sort of playing with kids in the village, and we had a lot of freedom from when we were really, really young, and then out on bikes and things when we were eight for half the day, and stuff like that. And then I just, I don’t know, I presume I took the 11-plus and I obviously failed, I’m sure I must have taken the 11-plus at that time, so I just went on to my local high school. Which was just two miles away. So once again, that was sort of very local.

Here, Sally is beginning to tell me a version of her life story. This was a long and involved account and it unfolded largely without prompting. Her opening has all the drama of a well-crafted story, beginning with a powerful metaphor that sets up one of the major themes of her account, that of escape: ‘we lived in a tiny little village with a dead end’. She draws me into the story of how she managed the transportation from this ‘tiny little

village' to London, where the narration is taking place. Sally sets up a particular relationship to the past in this opening. She places the events firmly in the past – even the school no longer exists – and she takes the position of analysing and passing judgement on it: 'it was quite a sort of idyllic little set-up in a way'. The ambiguity of the qualification of 'in a way' again hints at a story to be told. At the same time, she shows how distanced she is from the events. She cannot remember whether or not she took or passed or failed her 11-plus, something that, presumably, would have been of significance to her at the time. Her vagueness about these events presents them as of little importance to the Sally of the present. She is separating herself from the child who took (or did not take) the exams. In the narrative, Sally depicts an ambiguous relationship between her present self and her past selves. On the one hand, she often distances herself from the events and the person who experienced them. For example, she continually speculates on what this character did or felt (for instance, seeing a man with pornographic magazines 'probably did scare us') but without claiming ownership of the memories. Yet, at the same time, Sally is constructing a narrative for her younger self that tries to make sense of where she is now.

This negotiation between the self of the present and the self/selves of the past is an inherent part of telling one's life story. To be asked about one's life is, to some extent, to be asked to give an account of one's self. It is also to be asked to produce an account that is, explicitly or implicitly, a story; an act of creation. In telling the story of her self, the narrator claims the position of the subject for her fictionalized self and thereby accounts for her subjectivity. An interesting conjunction has emerged in theoretical and particularly in feminist scholarship between a concern with subjectivity and the self and with narratives. The interest in narratives and the narration of identity signifies a move away from the search for essential, universal or even rational identities and a stress on the more uncertain and creative processes of construction and fabrication. As Sidonie Smith points out 'However understood, the subject fascinates us' (Smith, 1993: 393). Yet it is unclear exactly how this conjunction is to be explored in practice. How do these theoretical concerns relate to the everyday and how are they to be explored empirically? This article draws on qualitative interviews to explore both the methodological and theoretical implications of using narrative to explore processes of subjectivity and the production of self. It argues that producing a 'storied narrative' of the self in the context of an interview is an uncertain process and that there may be as much to be learnt from those instances where a storied narrative is not produced as where the story of the self is easily told.

### **Narrating the self**

Approaching processes of subject construction through narrative analysis has the advantage of acknowledging the constructed, flexible and fictionalized nature of the process of accounting for the self. The subject is understood as in process. Narrative approaches also enable the exploration of

processes of subjection – the ways in which certain subject positions (ways of being and ways of being recognized or acknowledged by others) – are discursively available for individuals to occupy. The fiction of a whole or coherent self may be created in the process of narrating the self, yet it can also be undermined in the telling. From a Foucauldian perspective, narratives are likely to offer a key entry point into the ‘techniques’ or ‘practices’ of the self. In his later work, Foucault was concerned to understand the subject less as the ‘docile body’ of his earlier writing and more as the outcome of processes of production and self-production through the interplay of discourse and practice. He argues that modernity ‘does not liberate man in his own being; it compels him to face the task of producing himself’<sup>2</sup> (Foucault, 1991b: 41).

In his work on the ‘care of the self’, Foucault elaborates a genealogy of the self that traces the different approaches to the self in classical Greek and in Greco-Roman and Christian philosophy. Foucault uses this genealogy to argue that the task for individuals in modernity should be to produce themselves as a work of art:

Art is something which is specialised or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life? (Foucault, 1991a: 350)

This is art, considered not as an elite practice, but at the level of the everyday. An ethics of the self, for Foucault, involves the reflexive examination of the process of subjection – the processes through which individuals come to understand themselves as subjects. As Lois McNay argues:

A Foucauldian ethics of the self is not based on an adherence to externally imposed moral obligations, but rather on an ethics of who we are said to be, and what, therefore, it is possible for us to become. (McNay, 1994: 145)

Nor is this ethics about discovering a true essence – there is no self waiting to be discovered – but it is a process of creation and re-invention out of available resources. One important resource is that of narrative:

It seems to me, that all the so-called literature of the self – private diaries, narratives of the self, etc. – cannot be understood unless it is put into the general and very rich framework of these practices of the self. (Foucault, 1991a: 369)

Narratives have long been of interest in accessing an individual's subjectivity, experience and reflections of the past. They have played a central role in the development of oral history as a practice and methodology.<sup>3</sup> Narratives have been particularly attractive to feminist researchers wishing to explore the experiences of women ‘hidden from history’ as well as a means of accessing women's voices (Smith, 1993). This interest in narratives and in the production of narratives in qualitative interviews has spawned a range of increasingly sophisticated (and, at times, prescriptive) methodological tools. Recent publications by Tom Wengraf (Wengraf, 2001) and Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) both draw inspiration from German sociologists who used narrative techniques in their research on Nazi soldiers and Holocaust survivors. These methods<sup>4</sup> are designed to uncover the *Gestalt* of the narrative. The *Gestalt* principle,

'based on the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 68), involves an emphasis on form and wholeness in narrative. However, the risk in these approaches is that processes of subjection remain under-theorized, particularly with the implicit reliance on the notion of a 'whole' subject. In addition, the relationship between narratives, or between narrativity and the self is also often under-explored.

Carolyn Steedman has examined these practices of the self and argues that taught and enforced narratives should be understood as having 'a history of expectations, orders and instructions rather than one of urges and desires' (Steedman, 2000: 28). She traces the history of the modern self through its relationship with techniques of writing and telling the self, focusing in particular on the enforced narratives produced in the recording of the life-stories of poor-relief applicants. Steedman's work draws attention to the need to understand the economic, political and institutional context in which narratives are produced as well as the need to distinguish between the story of the self that may be written or told and the life that is lived. It is also important to be aware of the slippery nature of the concept of narrative itself. Martin McQuillan points out that defining 'narrative' has always been a difficult and contentious process, particularly when it comes to the question of distinguishing 'narrative' from 'story' (McQuillan, 2000: 6). McQuillan offers a definition of narrative as 'any minimal linguistic (written or verbal) act' that, he then argues, can be understood only in its specific context (McQuillan, 2000: 7). In this definition of narrative, context is critical for giving meaning to the minimal linguistic act (see also de Lauretis, 2000). Nonetheless, I would argue that, in the ways in which the term 'narrative' has been taken up in much qualitative research, analysis has focused on what might be called 'storied narratives'. These are narratives that have a close relationship to genres of storytelling, with particular relationship to temporality and emplotment and with a cast of characters, or at least a central actor (see Ricoeur, 1991a).

Storied narratives have an ambivalent relationship to notions of wholeness and completion. Donald E. Polkinghorne describes 'self-narratives' as:

... the ways individuals construct private and personal stories linking diverse events of their lives into unified and understandable wholes. These are stories about the self. They are the basis of personal identity and self-understanding and they provide answers to the question 'Who am I?' (Polkinghorne, 1991: 135)

Yet he also points out how this is an uncertain and ongoing process (Polkinghorne, 1991: 145). Equally, Paul Ricoeur stresses the importance of an 'examined' or 'recounted' life:

We never cease to reinterpret the narrative identity that constitutes us, in the light of the narratives proposed to us by our culture. In this sense, our self-understanding presents the same features of traditionality as the understanding of a literary work. It is in this way that we learn to become the *narrator* and the hero of *our own story*, without actually becoming the *author of our own life*. (Ricoeur, 1991a: 32; original emphasis)

For Ricoeur this occurs through emplotment that draws multiple incidents

into a single story: ‘. . . the recounted story is always more than the enumeration in an order that would be merely serial or successive, of the incidents or events that it organizes into an intelligible whole’ (Ricoeur, 1991a: 21). Yet Ricoeur also argues that individuals may go through ‘dark nights of personal identity’ where they experience a sense of ‘nothingness of permanence-identity’ – or one might argue an absence of a narrative self (Ricoeur, 1991b: 199). This raises the question of what is involved in constructing a ‘unified and understandable whole’ out of the diverse events of a life. Is this inevitably achieved or, indeed, is it always possible to achieve? What is behind the posing, and answering of the question, ‘who am I?’ How does an individual come to occupy the site of the subject, implied by such a question? What ‘enabling violations’<sup>5</sup> does this involve? What is claimed and enabled by taking up this position as a speaking subject, and what is repressed? We need to ask when narrative, as a genre, might be enabling a ‘care of the self’ in Foucauldian terms and when it might be a repressive act of domination or an enforced narrative. Not all individuals are able to present themselves at all times as coherent, whole subjects of a storied narrative. Understanding why and how this is so will expand our understanding of processes of subjection. It also raises important questions about research practice and notions of the reflexive self (see Adkins, 2002 and Skeggs, 2002 for further discussion).

This article draws on interviews conducted for an exploration of white experiences and identities. It focuses on three accounts to explore how, and why, not all the respondents produced storied narratives of their lives in the interviews. It also examines how the production of different narratives depends on the respondent’s positionality in terms of normative discourses of ‘race’, class and gender. The research involved interviewing white mothers of young children living in South London.<sup>6</sup> I undertook a first interview with respondents that covered a range of issues concerned with parenting and mothering practices. The second interview took a broader life-history approach aimed at eliciting a more general life history or narrative. In the majority of cases, it was initiated through a question asking interviewees to tell me about ‘turning points’ in their lives. This, in itself, raises questions about the ways in which a certain form of narrative was being expected and elicited. Nonetheless, as the article shows, this initial starting point produced different responses. Clearly, the context of the interview may be very important in determining what kind of response is produced. This will include how the interviewer and interviewee relate to each other. In addition, storytelling and in particular, the narration of the self, depends on specific cultural competencies and the experience of certain practices that are also raced, classed and gendered. There is not sufficient space to consider these issues in full (see Byrne, 2001 for further discussion). Rather, this article is concerned with what different responses can tell us about processes of the formation of the self.

## A story to tell

### Sally and the transformation of the self

Sally, with whose account this article began, is a white woman in her 30s living in London with two daughters. The main thrust of Sally's narrative was to establish her difference from her family and to account for the changes in her life and values. Sally's account charts, in Raphael Samuel's words, '... progress from darkness to light. Here the past serves as a kind of negative benchmark by which later achievement is judged, and the narrative is one of achievement rather than loss' (Samuel and Thompson, 1990: 9). Both interviews with Sally were littered with phrases that emphasized transformation: '[I] forged my own identity'; '[I] grew up in a vacuum'; '[studying sociology] presented me with another side of things ... [and] was quite a big change for me, at that stage'; 'I looked back and thought that it was very narrow'; 'just going out into the big wide world, leaving my little tiny village'; 'I had different experiences and I had my eyes opened up in a different way'; 'I feel like having come from the other side'; 'I've gone beyond it'; 'I came from not knowing anything and being very sheltered'; 'it does feel like I've come from one world into another in a way'. In the account, Sally allocated to both her past and her current situation, certain racialized, classed and gendered features. Thus she occupied different subject positions governed by different norms and discourses in her account. Class and 'race', in particular, become tropes that mark or dramatize the ruptures in her life story. Her narrative suggests the social availability of certain accounts of classed and raced transformation (see Lawler, 2002).

An important point of difference for Sally is that of her relationships with her family. She describes her family as one that had problems, particularly in communication, many of which she associates with a working-class background:

I would say though that the kind of set-up I come from, I wouldn't ... for me personally, I wouldn't just say, oh that's quite a dysfunctional family. I would say, that's got lots of working-class stuff running through it, personally. Do you know what I mean, about things like education, not necessarily ... especially at that time maybe, not necessarily being a priority and seeing how one thing might lead on to another.

The problems with the family were particularly focused around Sally's father: '... my dad was just terribly restricted by this awful difficulty he had in just relating'. Her father is represented as at times domineering: '... he was really controlling, and he was the sort of person, you'd be watching something on TV and he would come and turn the TV over', but also as a protective figure, willing to drive long distances to pick her up, for instance, when she needed him to. In contrast to the domineering father, Sally's mother is presented as largely passive and lacking agency. Sally describes how her mother failed to intervene in the worsening dynamic between the father and children in an effort to protect her relationship with her father. Rather than describing her mother as a role model, or as someone

who played an active role in shaping her behaviour, Sally suggests that she and her sisters developed in opposition to her mother:

I think we're quite a force to be reckoned with, me and my sister. We're sort of strong-minded, quite loud and assertive, and my mum just isn't like that. You know, like now, she wouldn't dare do lots of things if my sisters were coming round.

The main protagonists in the earlier part of the narrative are Sally and her sisters. They are sometimes described (as above) as if they formed one unit. Again, the sisters act as one when they decide to leave home:

So, then things went really wrong, and one day there was an argument about something [...] and we put our viewpoint and we ended up getting into an argument with my dad, and he said, well, if you don't like it, get out or something. And we just looked at each other, the three of us, and we had absolutely nowhere to go and we just said, let's do it. [...] We were off.

At certain points there is no clear distinction between Sally's stories and her sisters. For instance, in the following extract it is notable how the protagonist in the narrative shifts, without need for explanation, from Sally to one of her sisters:

Yes, so school . . . I think I was quite good in primary school in terms of . . . it was really small and I was really happy there, and I used to quite get into it. [...] I just really loved going. My little sister used to run away out the garden to get to the village school. My mum . . . sometimes she'd go out and Susie would be gone, and then Susie would be found at the school, or the school would 'phone and say she's fine, she can sit at the back of the class, and that was because she was bored without us.

This accords with what has been identified as a 'female' form of narrative by Isabelle Bertraux-Wiame:<sup>7</sup>

. . . the men consider the life they have lived as *their own*: this is perhaps the key difference from women. Men present their lives as a series of self-conscious acts, a rational pursuit of well-defined goals. [...] They present themselves as the subjects of their own lives – as the actors. Women do not insist on this. Self-conscious acts are not their main interest. Instead, they will talk at length about their 'relationship' to such and such a person. Their own life stories will include parts of the life stories of others. (Bertraux-Wiame, 1982: 192–3)

Similarly, Lois McNay criticizes Foucault's notion of the ethics of the self for its stress on heroism and a 'mastery of the self':

By failing to problematize these themes of heroization and self-mastery, Foucault's theory of an ethics implicitly relies on a conventional notion of the sovereign self, which in turn rests on an unexamined fantasy of male agency. This considerably undermines the radical force that is imputed to the idea of an ethics of the self. (McNay, 1994: 149)

The stress on the artist as a free agent is not only criticized for potentially providing an unduly voluntaristic model, but also because it rests on an unacknowledged gendered model that fails to account sufficiently for social processes and particularly, intersubjectivity.

Sally's narrative swings between what Bertraux–Wiame would regard as 'male' and 'female' forms and they mark in some ways a desire to stress a growing difference and independence from her sisters. Sally talks of 'taking on a different role' from her sisters in her childhood and describes how she now has a very different outlook on life. In the following description, Sally gives herself and her sisters distinct subject positions and subjectivities. She also suggests that, as well as now living under different material conditions (Sally does not have the resources to do the travelling her sisters do or send her children to private school), she and her sisters have different identifications with normative constructions of 'race', class, sexuality and gender. It is notable that her sisters still function in this part of the narrative as a collective subject.

I was very . . . and in that way there was always something a bit different about me to my sisters, because my sisters now live a very . . . I mean, in a way, I wouldn't say they're kind of . . . they got together . . . the two that are closest to me have definitely got together with people who are from middle class backgrounds, with middle class aspirations, and they have very good lifestyles. They travel abroad a lot, they have private educations for their kids and things. So . . . but at the time, I . . . but within that they're very . . . they've still, I would say, got very narrow views about most things, sort of quite homophobic and underlying racist and quite a lot of sexist kind of stuff that to me seems unbelievable. They'll look at their watch and say I must get home to get so and so's tea, and yet they're only 30-year-old women. I mean, that to me just seems amazing that people would think like that at that age, but they just do. So . . . but I from a young age, was really quite different, I think, and then *the fact that I then went on to do what I did*, but I was always the sort of . . . I think from a young age I was the sort of [. . .] I would actually question quite a lot of what they'd said. (added emphasis)

Sally sets up various differences between herself and her sisters. She suggests that her own whiteness, her middle-classness and her gender mean very different things from that of her sisters and lead to the performance of different norms. She presents her sisters as having an unquestioning relationship to dominant norms and acting out racism, sexism and homophobia in their everyday lives.

The account is one of rupture. Sally always felt different and then 'went on to do what I did'. She does not explain what this was. The rest of her narrative suggests various possibilities. It might be because she went on to further education, or that she got involved with alternative and oppositional culture in the form of squatting organizations (mentioned but not elaborated on in her narrative), or her relationship with a 'non-white' man and the two children she had with him. In various ways she has established her difference from her sisters. At the same time, Sally also fears that this transformation has not been fully achieved. For instance, when she describes her decision to leave her college course because she had become pregnant, it is clear that she feared there was an inevitability in her situation that represented an inability to 'escape':

I don't think that sat very well with me because I was probably only the first person in my family that had ever done a degree, and it really felt when I was pregnant I'm sure there was part of me that just felt this is so kind of *predictable*



*and expected*, do you know what I mean? And yet I . . . I think there was part of me that wanted to kind of make it work and see how far I could take it. (added emphasis)

In the narrative, Sally is presented as struggling to be a different subject, expressed and established through different actions and ways of being. But the intervention of events, such as getting pregnant, means that she feels she is drawn into re-performing certain classed and gendered norms. The creation of subject-positions is not a free or voluntaristic process – it is produced through accessing available material and discursive resources.

Sally's narrative establishes some of the ways in which her subjectivity had been formed in childhood. She suggests ways in which her life was affected by class and gender as well as 'race'. For instance, she describes the way 'race' influenced her viewpoint as a child:

But I think I was brought up *really* looking at things through white eyes. I think it was quite, in some ways it was quite a racist kind of upbringing. There was a *lot of* suspicion, a lot of, in a way, yeah, there was kind of outright derogatory remarks. And it was very much seen as something which was *totally* alien to us. We were really *white* English, you know in terms of our food and everything I think. (Sally's emphasis)

The fact that she characterizes the outlook of her childhood in this way indicates that she has moved away from this position. This raises the question, which is set up in the narrative itself, of how Sally came to have such an altered outlook on life. On the one hand, Sally suggests, as already mentioned, that she has been different from her sisters for a long time (although she has difficulty pinpointing exactly when or perhaps how this happened). It is interesting that in the following extract the signifiers of difference are classed (classical music) and racialized (reggae):<sup>8</sup>

I can't remember when but there was some stage when I knew I probably felt a bit different to my sisters in a way. I remember sort of I'd spend a lot of time in my room. I did at some point, maybe around the age of 16 or so, I did develop an interest in sort of music and reading and stuff, which I've still got now. Classical, pop, reggae, I started to get into all that. Maybe more so a bit later actually.

Yet at the same time, Sally does not claim sole agency or essentialness for her difference. One of the things that sets Sally apart from her sisters is a very important friendship with a woman. She describes meeting this friend as a key turning point in her life. It occurred when she was working abroad:

I met somebody who just sort of really changed my life really, it was amazing. But she was . . . there I was in Spain working on my tan, and wearing my bikinis and thinking oh Spain, it's nice, but I'm off to Australia, then I'm going to America, [. . .] I was kind of, in a way, I was very kind of quite directional in terms of I wanted to travel, but I was so kind of . . . you know, I wanted to meet a rich man, to rescue me, you know, it was all that kind of stuff going on. And then I . . . then one day, Joy breezed in and I always remember 'cos I was sitting with all these expats [. . .]. And Joy breezed in. [. . .] I got on brilliantly with her and felt really close to her, and . . . but she just had completely different priorities in life. She'd come from something *so* different. And she'd just started to question some of the things that I was about, and some of the things that I wanted, do you know what

I mean? And she really influenced me. [. . .] And I definitely see meeting her as a real, real changing point in my life. Up until then I'd probably met people who were into quite similar things to me. And probably hadn't even really thought that much about direction and values and things like that really. I mean, it was just a case of, you know, you were a bit like one of those little wish things that just blows through life. Um . . .

There is little that Sally could do in this narrative to make the entrance of Joy more dramatic: 'I met somebody who just sort of really changed my life, really, it was amazing!' Instead of the hoped-for man 'rescuing' her, this woman 'breezed in' to her life and completely transformed it. In the narrative, Sally relinquishes a sense of her own agency to Joy who transforms her from 'one of those little wish things who blows through life' into someone with 'direction and values'. This could read like the beginning of a lesbian coming-out narrative but it is not sexuality or sexual orientation that marks Joy out. Yet Joy is clearly different – Sally says that she might have thought that Joy was 'a complete lunatic'. The clue is in the juxtaposition of Joy with the 'expats'. It is Joy's racial positioning and their friendship that prompted Sally to question her values and certain aspects of her life and to set a distinction between Joy and her sisters:

I think I'd started to have that questioning with Joy. And Joy wasn't white either. Her dad was African. So yeah, I was very . . . and in that way there was always something a bit different about me and my sisters.

Meeting Joy is presented as marking a distinct rupture from Sally's family: she offers a different way of being which Sally jumps at. When she returned to England some months later the change in her priorities is made clear: 'the day I flew back she actually picked me up from the airport and I went and stayed with her family for two weeks, I didn't even bother to go home'. In the account there continues to be an apparently unconscious parallel narrative of desire, as the narrative follows the forms and conventions of a romance. The transgression of racialized norms is heightened by this echo of the transgression of heterosexual norms. This engagement with difference, or the Other is clearly marked as liberating for Sally. As bell hooks argues:

. . . the idea that racial difference marks one as Other and the assumption that sexual agency expressed within the context of racialised sexual encounter is a conversion experience that alters one's place and participation in contemporary cultural politics. (hooks, 1992: 22)

Within the narrative, Sally's friendship with Joy is indeed presented as a 'conversion experience' which offers her the possibilities of change and liberation.

She breezed in that day [. . .] and she just came in like a bit of a breath of fresh air because she was my age and she was on a similar level, and then we just got chatting, and she had a similar thing with me. She just thought I was totally wonderful as well, I mean, it was very . . . for a while we were really stuck up each other's backsides . . . we just thought we were absolutely, you know, wonderful, I think in a way, or we couldn't quite believe either of us that we'd met this other person who we just thought was really great, you know. And it's probably

been like that ever since although it's really de-intensified as we've got older and, you know, got on with our own lives. But it was very intense, but nicely, I think. I think at one stage it wasn't nice; it was almost like I'd almost relied on Joy a little bit too much. It was like I wanted something from her, probably some direction with my . . . who I was, I'd say, more than where I was going. So that was quite interesting. For a time, I think we probably purposely needed a bit of space. But now we're just on a really, really nice . . . for the last few years, we've been on a really nice level again.

It is clear that the figure of Joy plays a key role in Sally's story of herself. By entering into Sally's life she enabled her to be something that she was not previously. Sally attributes to herself only very limited agency in this story. Her teenage desire for a man to rescue her appears to be merely replaced by the figure of Joy. The significance of Joy's racial positioning is ambiguous in Sally's account. On the one hand, as we have seen above, the fact that Joy 'wasn't white' is part of the reason why Sally begins to question the assumptions that she was brought up with. At other points, Sally herself denies that Joy's racial positioning meant anything to her:

. . . the thing that struck me that was really different about her was mainly her pace of life, and her self-confidence and the way that she did things. I can't ever remember being aware of the whole colour thing with that particular family. I mean, they're very, very London, quite Cockney sort of . . . you know, it's much more to do with London, it sort of feels like now than it did to be a total cultural difference. And it could have been that I was aware of the colour thing, of course it could, but no, it wasn't like that.

Sally presents the differences that excited her in Joy as being nothing to do with 'race'. Yet at the same time she mentions characteristics like energy ('pace of life'), spirit (self-confidence) that are often attributed to (and desired in) the racial other (Dyer, 1997; hooks, 1992). It is clear that part of the difference that Joy offered to Sally was not just racialized but also classed. Through her influence, she decided to go back to studying and, through Joy, she met a group of people who were involved in an alternative squatter and anarchist culture in London and who had very different class positions from Sally's own and her previous friends. Sally contrasts her working-class background and the class trajectory taken by her sisters and its 'narrowness' with that of her middle-class, public-school educated friends. She constructs a discourse of 'coming home', naturalizing the shifts she has undergone in her life along the line of having been a square peg in a round hole:

It's like a real coming-home feeling, that all of that narrowness just doesn't make sense. And actually to be very open to learning new things all the time and having different experience, I suppose, and not being shut off to things that are really important. So, after a while, yeah, it was a real . . . it felt really like the right place for me to be.

These different performances of class make Sally feel that she has achieved naturalness or found her inner core. For Butler, the nature of performativity is that it produces feelings of naturalness:

I argued that gender is performative, by which I meant that no gender is 'expressed' by actions, gestures, or speech, but that the performance of gender produces retroactively the illusion that there is an inner gender core. That is, the performance of gender retroactively produces the effect of some true or abiding feminine essence or disposition, so that one cannot use an expressive model for thinking about gender. (Butler, 1997: 144)

What is interesting in Sally's narrative is that she needs to account for how she achieves this feeling of her inner core only once she has undergone a transformation. This sense of rupture leads her to articulate her subject position in a narrative that is framed around sameness and difference. Through exposure to difference, of both class and 'race', she has found a 'home', a place where she can at least approximate sameness. This has enabled her to mark her differences from her family, in both who she is and what she does. She is 'doing' motherhood differently from her mother, and womanhood, whiteness and middle-classness differently from her sisters. One of the means by which this rupture and transformation is achieved is through the trope of the transforming encounter with the Other.

Sally is an example of someone who has a clear storied narrative of the self that tells of her development from a child to an adult self. She sets out this narrative in a largely chronological form and establishes its different geographic, social and political contexts. Her story has a cast of characters whose importance to herself and her development are made clear. Sally clearly enjoyed this narrative mode, was an accomplished storyteller and felt comfortable talking about her life with me. The account is interesting not only because it demonstrates how the story of a self can be told, but also because of the way in which the account is gendered, classed and racialized, Sally's account was not, however, typical of the interviews I undertook. Many of the interviewees did not provide a narrative of the self in such a straightforward manner as Sally. In different ways, other women did not have a story to tell.

Marie-François Chanfrault-Duchet points out that what she describes as 'real' narratives are rarely produced. This is partly due to interviewers refusing to give up control of the situation and allow the narrator's account free flow. But Chanfrault-Duchet also notes that some interviewees may be unable to present themselves as the subjects and heroes of a narrative aiming to communicate 'an experience laden with signification' (Chanfrault-Duchet, 1991, fn.8). What does it mean to say that a person is unable to present themselves as the subject of such a narrative? Clearly this is not to say that individuals do not have a subjectivity or even necessarily that they lack a position from which to speak. In the following examples, I suggest different reasons why storied narratives were not produced in some interviews. In the first, the case of Madeleine, I suggest that she finds it difficult to construct and occupy the single subject position that is required, however momentarily, in order to present a coherent self. In the second, the case of Deborah, I argue that she has constructed herself as a subject who is so normative that there is little sense in presenting 'an experience laden with signification'.

## Where there is no story

### Madeleine: 'Where do I fit in?'

Madeleine appeared on the face of it to be very similar to Sally. She is of a similar age and also a single mother of a mixed-race child. She was relaxed and articulate in the two extensive interviews she gave me and seemed happy to talk. Yet the way she talks about her life is very different from Sally's account. Most notably, her account lacks the emplotment of Sally's account. Where Sally produces a story that tells of her progressive development from one subject position to another, Madeleine does not have such a coherent story to tell. When I asked her what had been the significant turning points<sup>9</sup> in her life, she was able to name some, but they did not make much sense to her in terms of providing a story of her self:

The key turning points in my life? [laughing], ah, right. Um, key turning points? Well, having a child is probably the biggest thing that's ever happened to me and has changed my life really radically . . . and since I've had her, I don't think there were necessarily any key things since I've had her, just endless crises one after another [laugh]. I think probably when I was 11 and I went to public school which was different from everybody I knew, that has probably changed the course of my life slightly.

The lack of a clear plotted story is underlined by the fact that Madeleine does not provide an account that follows an even loose chronological order. This is not to suggest, however, that Madeleine is in some sense inarticulate or confused, but only that she does not view her own life experience in a way that enables the production of this kind of narrative. One way to understand this is to examine Madeleine's relationship to or experience of normative discourses. At one level, Madeleine's various positionings as white, middle class and heterosexual would seem to suggest privilege and recognition within normative discourses. Yet she does not feel that she can fit straightforwardly or easily into those positions. In her childhood, whiteness was a largely unquestioned norm, although the presence of others was acknowledged:

I mean when I grew up in a suburb in London, I didn't know anybody black at all and maybe there were a few Asian families, but there *certainly* weren't any Caribbean families kind of thing. So it was something I grew up, I didn't grow up around people of other colours. [. . .] So, but you know, my mum was always, she talked to me about race so it was always 'we will be terribly *nice* when we *meet* people of different colours' [laugh]. (Madeleine's emphasis)

Her mother's attitude clearly fits into a liberal discourse of tolerance that retains white as the norm and the subject that is defined by its tolerance and kindness to 'others' who are distinguished in gradations of otherness: 'there *certainly* weren't any Caribbean families'. Later in life, Madeleine has come to reflect on this position, particularly prompted by a relationship with a boyfriend who pointed out some of the ways in which her position was marked by whiteness, and therefore had a problematic relationship to blackness:

I had a boyfriend for a while who was Jamaican who lived with us for, oh, a year or so. And . . . he was very . . . active on all sorts of race issues [. . .] And he would point out to me . . . I think I really learnt from him that it's not about, . . . that you just have to listen to what other people, you might not think you're being racist, you might not think you have an attitude, but you really have to actually sit down and listen to what somebody says to you. [. . .] So that was quite, um, I don't know, I'd never thought of myself as a racist person, I'd always thought of myself as someone who was very open. And I think being with him I had to accept that just the way I'd been brought up and my culture there were things that I did that were actually very racist, without me intending them to be.

As a result, Madeleine is now much more aware of how the social world in which she operates is racialized. This is not always an easy awareness to have. Madeleine echoes Minne Bruce Pratt who has written of the 'amount of effort it takes me to walk these few blocks being conscious as I can of myself in relation to history, to race, to culture, to gender' (Pratt, 1984: 13):

I don't know, I suppose I'm more sensitive about it. I suppose because I've *had* to look at all those issues in such minute detail. I'm really aware that I might be being racist without intending to [laugh]. It's made me really unrelaxed about the whole thing [laugh]. Yeah um . . . I think that's definitely it, because I've had to . . . because it's been such an issues, I'm very, very aware of it now and I wouldn't have been so aware of it before, I'd have been more relaxed about it.

This sensitization towards her own racialized positioning does not perhaps fit so readily into a transformative story as Sally's account of classed transformation. Stories of 'becoming aware of one's whiteness' are not (yet?) so established as those of moving from a working-class to a middle-class position (see Lawler, 2002). In terms of class, Madeleine is also not able to draw on available discursive repertoires. She has the experience of confounding expectations, those of her parents and perhaps her own. She describes herself, and particularly some of the attitudes she passes on to her daughter, as middle class:

I always think that the thing that makes me middle class is the fact that, one, I had a good education, and two, I have that kind of belief that I might be poor at the moment, I won't always be poor, because I'm clever, because I can, because I never think 'I can't take that opportunity because that's not meant for me'. You know, anything is open to me . . . and I don't know whether that's necessarily . . . kind of a classic middle-class attitude, but I think that's probably something that, that's what she gets from me. That's the kind of class thing that she gets from me . . . . Not that she's got to break out of something, but that she deserves something that is hers to take . . .

So middle-classness for Madeleine, apart from education, means a state of mind where you are an active agent who is capable and confident of your abilities. All choices and opportunities are, and should be, available to you. Yet at the same time Madeleine has transgressed class norms by, perhaps inadvertently, closing off choices and opportunities. She decided at the last minute not to take up a place at university and went to live with her

boyfriend. She had a child as a single mother and as such found herself placed in a politically problematized social category:

There's definitely been times when it's been a problem and there's been times when I haven't necessarily wanted to volunteer that information. Which was really in the last three or four years of the Tories being in. And there was kind of Peter Lilley and Michael Portillo and everything is single mothers' fault [laugh]. And it's quite amazing in retrospect how much that affects your self esteem and how you value yourself. If the whole of society is just saying, you're useless.

Madeleine is now trying to understand just how and why she has transgressed class norms and now finds herself in a position where she lacks not only the material resources that are required to perform middle-classness, but also the sense of agency and in particular control of the future that she sees in her friends:

And I do wonder now actually . . . now that my, now that I'm kind of in my 30s and my friends are, some of them obviously, not all of them, but some of them have now bought flats and are in stable relationships and you know. I mean very few of my friends have *had* children. But you know that when they do, they'll make a decision to do it and they'll have it with the partner that they've had for a long time, and I just think, what happened to me then? [laugh] what is it about my, I don't know, I just don't really understand when I look back, why I didn't have that. You know there's meant to be that thing, isn't there, about how middle-class people are supposed to have, they're into long-term planning, they put money away for a rainy day and they make decisions based on long-term things. And I just think that I've never had that and I just think that it's so ridiculous. And yet I've really shaped, you know, my life now is quite tough because of that.

Madeleine does not interpret this altered class position, as Sally does, as an 'escape' from narrowness or a transformation of the self. Instead, Madeleine expresses a sense of regret at the way her life has developed. She is experiencing the loss of status and security involved in falling outside dominant class and gender norms. The discourse that Madeleine uses to describe this position, is that of 'sensibleness'. She repeatedly describes the lives of others as 'sensible', clearly implying that her life and particularly the choices she has made were, in some way, not sensible. The gendered aspect of being 'sensible' was underlined by a joke about her mother's choice of schooling for her: 'I think my mum regretted that ever since – sending me where there might be boys [laugh].'

For Madeleine, the events in her life serve as points of disjuncture that disrupt a sense of coherence in self, rather than pegs on which to hang a story. She appears set on one course, then jumps to another. She has experienced living outside normative discourses, but does not have a narrative of 'I was always different' as Sally has. In a situation where she has an ambiguous relationship to the nature of her subject position, it is difficult for Madeleine to present her self in a storied narrative.

Madeleine's example has shown some of the ways in which processes of subjection are seldom clear cut. An individual can be pulled in different directions and can feel a lack of 'fit' with the way she is positioned and with available discursive resources. This affects the ways in which they

can narrate their selves and understand their own lives. In a similar way, Sara Ahmed writes of:

. . . the impossibility of adequately naming myself for the demands of representation is symptomatic of the impossibility of the racially marked and gendered subject being addressed through a singular name. (Ahmed, 1997: 155)

Madeleine's account suggests how this can also be true for those positioned as white.

### **Deborah: a natural progression**

Madeleine seems to lack a storied narrative flow in her interview because it is difficult for her to accommodate her sense of self into one story. In contrast, others presented such coherent unified selves that there was no real story to tell. One example of this was Deborah, a middle-class journalist and writer. For her, the question of turning points did not strike a chord because, as she said: 'It's difficult to say what's just a natural progression and what's a turning point.' The version of her life and self that she presented to me in the interview was one of inevitability and predictability. The events she mentioned tended to focus on her working life and the choices she made were presented as natural within their particular context. Her wholly normative position may only be possible to maintain by remaining silent on other aspects of her life. To some extent the interview resembles a curriculum vitae, charting progress from college to work:

BB: So, one way I have started it off with other people is to say, other than perhaps becoming a parent, what are kind of key turning points in your life?

Deborah: Its really difficult to say. I guess, going right back would be college, because that was just a difference.

BB: And that involved leaving home?

Deborah: Yeah [questioning], but I mean I went to college in London, and I lived in London so it didn't really feel very much like that. I did leave home; I think it's more, I don't know, just the independence of the way you're taught and the way you're treated I guess is completely different. I guess, that was my turning point. And also learning so much more about a particular thing . . . oooh, what else?

From the outset, Deborah is clearly defining the life and the self that she is prepared to talk about. 'Going right back' means that she is marking the beginning as being adulthood – going to college, reaching independence and being treated with more respect. Her childhood is marked as off limits, or not significant. Events of her life that might have been given importance in other people's accounts – such as the periods she spent living abroad in her childhood, her parents' divorce when she was 13, her father subsequently leaving the country – are not given prominence in her account. By marking this separation between the child and adult, there is no narrative produced that might lead to an explanation of how she came to be the



person she is. Her subjecthood is presented as an unquestioned thing that *is*, rather than something that requires a story to explain it.

Deborah: Maybe I think maybe going freelance and buying my flat were probably turning points. Buying my flat was a big turning point, but it depends what you mean by turning points. Because, did it change things? No, it didn't. But it was a significant event.

BB: It didn't change things in? It didn't change your sense of yourself or . . . ?

Deborah: Not really because I don't think. *I think I'd always I expected to be . . . I'd never been anything other than independent, . . . I think turning points for me would have been being restricted.* Rather than those things happening, I don't mean by that that I took it for granted, I mean it was all very exciting and I was very pleased about it and I was worried about the mortgage all that kind of thing. But it wasn't the sort of be all and end all, I didn't think that when I am such and such an age I will have a mortgage, I will be doing this and this and then I am going to get married and all that kind of thing. Because I never ever felt like that about it, *I just wanted to do, you know, what I wanted to do really* and get a lot out of what I wanted to do: that was an ambition for me. So yeah, it was exciting but I wouldn't necessarily say that it changed my sense of myself. (added emphasis)

Her subjectivity is something that Deborah considers to be autonomous from outside forces, her desires are not shaped or produced, they just are: 'I just wanted to do what I wanted to do.' This contained circle of desire and action is also supported by the belief that she has, by and large, achieved what she has wanted to do. Later in the interview, there is again the suggestion that life for Deborah began at adulthood. She begins by saying 'I'm sort of in touch with most of the people I have met during various parts of my life really.' This again emphasizes her sense of coherence and completeness. But when I ask if this includes school friends, she realizes that she was not thinking of them:

Um, actually funnily enough, no not school friends. [. . .] I don't see anybody from school. I suppose I just think of my life as starting when I went to college really, maybe it's I'd rather forget school. I think perhaps people are like that. I guess I didn't have much in common with the others I went to school with.

Here we see that Deborah's sense of self as totally whole and coherent is constructed on some omissions and forgetting. It is not clear what Deborah would rather forget and in the interview I took the cue not to ask more about it. Some of what she is suggesting though, is the wish to move away from particular classed and gendered ways of being. In Deborah's account, the school treated its pupils as gendered subjects who should not have high ambitions:

Careers advice was just hilarious, it was: 'you can be a nurse': there was no: 'you can be a doctor or a surgeon'. 'You can be a nurse or a secretary' – and then if you asked about something, like, 'Well I want to be a brain surgeon or something': 'Oh dear, well you'll have to come back in a week when we've got the information'. I mean, they were very helpful but they didn't really set their sights very high for girls.

But fellow pupils also demonstrated by example the perils of other forms of gendered and class behaviour, such as early pregnancy that she wished to avoid: 'We'd see a lot of the girls who'd left after 'O' levels, walking around with, in some cases, babies and things, it was frightening. I mean we found it frightening.' This is also tied into locality. Moving away from the area signifies leaving certain gendered and classed positions behind. In a similar way to Sally, Deborah characterizes what she has left behind as narrow and restricted and again emphasizes her independence and freedom.

Apart from these suggestions from her school days, Deborah presents few struggles over her gendered, classed or raced identity. She has worked in a profession where the majority of her colleagues were women and where there was a good atmosphere for a woman. Nor does her relationship with her partner represent a possible event 'laden with signification':

But, yes turning points? I mean, even when I decided, well we decided to get married it was kind of a logical step really, and I didn't change my name: I still haven't changed my name, because it wasn't part and parcel of being me. You know, I didn't, I never thought of being married as anything terribly significant as far as the world was concerned, I mean obviously from an emotional point of view yes, as far as I was concerned but it didn't change my status or make me feel any different. I mean maybe if I had changed my name – maybe that's why I didn't change my name – because I didn't want it to change my sense of me. Because I got married when I was 33, so maybe if I'd done it earlier when I was in my 20s I would have changed my name or something, but it was never really a big deal.

For Deborah, normative discourses offer her a subject position that she inhabits with comparative ease. Her experiences of being positioned as a white, middle-class woman have confirmed her sense of her self as a normal and coherent person with agency, but appear to have left her without a story to tell.

## Conclusion

This article has been concerned with how the interviewees did, or did not, tell the story of their lives. I have argued that the process of producing a story of the self can provide a route into understanding processes of subjection. Telling a narrative about one's life involves making oneself the subject of the story, claiming both intelligibility and agency for oneself. It often involves taking a particular approach to the self – as experiencing transformation and change.

The first interviewee discussed in this chapter, Sally, demonstrated how narratives can enact processes of subjection. Sally produced her self as the subject of a coherent story. Gender, 'race' and class were clearly important in this account. Sally presented herself in processes of being 'girded' and/or 'womaned'. Through this account, we saw her struggling to change her class position and subjectivity. Within this narrative, not only is Sally 'raced', but 'race' also comes to signify her difference from others. Through her friend, who is not white, and who introduced her to new ways of

thinking about 'race' and herself, Sally says that her life was transformed. As a result, she says that she has found a new way of being.

While Sally's account provides a dramatic example of how storied narratives can illustrate processes of subject construction and subjection, the other narratives in different ways show how this is not always the case. Some selves are not readily reproduced through the life-story. Certainly, the idea of 'turning points' within a life do not always prompt a narrative account of a life. Madeleine had significant events in her life, but she was not able to use them to construct a coherent story of the self. This was partly because she occupies too many different (classed, raced and gendered) positions to give a sense of wholeness and coherence to her self. The events provide points of disruption to her narrative rather than giving direction and meaning to an unfolding story.

In contrast to Madeleine, Deborah does not have a story of her developing self because she constructs her experience as so normative that there is not really a story to tell. Her sense of self is built on suppressing notions of change or difference within her own life. Deborah presents herself as a subject with agency and subjectivity, but is not willing to explore ruptures or contradictions within this. A narrative form of transformation has therefore little to offer her as a genre for communicating her subjectivity.

These accounts and their different production of narrative forms have illustrated some of the complexities involved in understanding and analysing subjectivities and the self. They raise questions, not only about processes of subjection, but about the use of storied narratives as a means of accessing them. A narrative approach is going to be appropriate only in certain circumstances. In addition, the storied narrative genre may be restrictive for communicating subjectivity, as it appears to demand the production of a coherent and whole self. These questions are particularly important in the context of the growth of interest in narrative in qualitative research. What is involved in asking people to produce stories of their lives in interviews? How might this enable some, but also silence other accounts that are not so readily produced with this genre?

## Notes

1. I would like to thank the (anonymous) women who took the time to participate in the interviews, as well as Ann Whitehead for her long support on the research project from which this article is drawn. Niamh Moore, Charlotte Adcock and Andrea Hammel gave helpful comments on earlier drafts on this article and the anonymous reviewers have pushed me, I hope, to improve the final result.
2. See the discussion on McNay below for consideration of the importance of the gendering evident here.
3. See Chamberlain (1997); Chamberlain and Thompson (1998); Gluck and Patai (1991); Lawler (1999); Polkinghorne (1991); Thompson (1988); Tonkin (1992).
4. Wengraf describes his approach as SQUIN-BNIM – or 'Single question aimed at inducing narrative and biography-narrative interpretation method'. It involves a strict schedule of asking a single, open-ended

- question, such as 'tell me the whole story of your life' and then a follow-up session where topics are revisited, in the precise order in which they were raised by the respondent (Wengraf, 2001).
5. This phrase is from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, quoted in Butler (1993: 122).
  6. For further details see Byrne (2001).
  7. See also Chamberlain (1997).
  8. See Bourdieu (1994) for a discussion of class and music.
  9. As mentioned above in the discussion of the interview design, there is clearly a potential problem with over-direction in this opening question about 'turning points' which, in itself, sets up a particular notion of the account that is sought. However, the interview, which lasted for approximately an hour and a half, ranged far beyond this initial opening, still without producing what might be called a storied narrative.

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