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Ann K. Brooks

Kathleen Edwards

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Narratives of women's sexual identity development: A collaborative inquiry with implications for rewriting transformative learning theory.

Ann K. Brooks and Kathleen Edwards

Abstract: Transformative learning theory has attended primarily to cognition and our capacity to understand experience in terms of increasingly inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). However, it does not allow for an understanding of the intersubjective nature of meaningmaking, nor does it address the workings of oppression or how learning occurs in relation to oppression. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to rewrite transformative learning to allow us to theorize the integration of the individual with the sociohistorical and to enable the understanding of the relationship between individuals and social change.

In what follows, we examine women's development of sexual identity as a site of transformation. As researchers, we asked ourselves, how is it that we construct ourselves? To what extent do we construct ourselves in accordance with dominant narratives? Where do we find the leverage to break open those narratives and construct alternatives? We ground our analysis in the sexual life histories of ten women, looking not only at how social narratives organized and gave meaning to our experiences of sexual identity development, but also at the feelings and lived experiences that were not fully encompassed by dominant social narratives. We also revisit transformative learning theory, rewriting it to reflect an understanding of our lives as structured by narrative. Finally, we look at how a collaborative research methodology provided a context for articulating knowledge that was not consistent with these discourses and served as a methodology for cultural change.

POWER, KNOWLEDGE AND LANGUAGE

Transformative learning theory highlights the understanding that it is not possible to know objective reality and so it is through systems of interpretation (meaning schemes or meaning perspectives) that we give meaning to our experiences. However, the "map" metaphor implicit in the terms "schemes" or "perspectives" does not include the dimension of time or movement through time, and so provides us no way of understanding human change. Edward Bruner (1986) makes this point when he writes that "narrative structure has an advantage over such related concepts as a metaphor or paradigm in that narrative emphasizes order and sequence ... and is more appropriate for the study of change, the life cycle, or any developmental process" (p. 153). The analogy of narrative also implies both a writer and a reader and gives us a way to think about transformation as an intersubjective rather than an individual process.

We can externalize the narratives that structure our lives through writing or telling our autobiographies or life histories. The telling of our lives to others allows us to make sense of and integrate the multiple fragments of our lives. However, none of us can tell the whole of our lives. We necessarily weave in some experiences and exclude others. In describing this process, Michael White and David Epston (1990) write:

The structuring of narrative requires recourse to a selective process in which we prune, from our experience, those events that do not fit with the dominant evolving stories that we and others have about us. Thus, over time and of necessity, much of our stock of lived experience goes unstoried and is never of told" or expressed. It remains amorphous, without organization and without shape (p. 12).

The knowledge that remains unstoried can be understood to be a knowledge without language. Foucault (1980) tells us that the process by which we select the experiences we tell is a power saturated one. Our unstoried knowledges can be

understood as subjugated in that they have been erased or silenced through the colonization of space by language that stories the dominant knowledges. Foucault names as subjugated knowledges those that have been written out of history such as the ideas and knowledge of women and those that are "indigenous" or "naive" and are located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.

WOMEN'S SEXUALITY

Women's sexuality is codified by multiple mythologies and modes of discourse. These can be understood to not only structure how we think about sexuality, but the decisions we make and what we do about our sexuality as well. Barthes (1972) writes that such mythologies are types of speech chosen by history that have moved from the realm of innocent speech to a "naturalized discourse" that maintains power through "the pretension of transcending into a factual system" (pp.131-134). Butler (1993) suggests that such mythologies are "sediment" through the "reiteration of a norm or set of norms" which form "regulatory schemas" (p.14). This process of "performativity as citationality" (p.12) has the material consequence of establishing "normative conditions under which the materiality of the body is framed and formed" (p.17).

D'Emillio and Freedman (1988) have chronicled the historical shifts in the dominant discourse of the sexual narratives in this country. In colonial culture, for example, the clergy and community monitored sexuality, and sex was privileged only within marriage and then only as reproduction. Over the last century and a half the cultural control over sexuality shifted from the purview of the clergy to the medical community. In what Katz (1996) has described as the "doctor discourse," early serologists dominated scientific discourse with extensive categorizations of sexual behavior. They were ultimately overshadowed by Freud's provocative psychoanalytic tales of infantile sexuality, Oedipal complexes, etc. A second generation of sex researchers appeared in the mid-twentieth century led by Alfred Quinsy. Even today the medical implications of sexually related issues such as birth control and AIDS keep us ensconced in scientific sexual discourse.

Nevertheless, a number of counter narratives have evolved over the last quarter of a century to challenge the dominant moral and medical discourses. Feminist have led debates challenging the patriarchal hierarchy of sex discrimination, reproductive rights, and sex roles. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual voices have been added to those of feminists to critique the hegemony of heterosexuality. Postmodern and post-structuralism thought have further disrupted the dominant discourse with the deconstruction of such subjects as the heterosexual/homosexual binary, the performance of sexual identities, and gender.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted as a collaborative inquiry in which the primary data were women's sexual life histories. Integral to collaborative inquiry is that all participants (or researchers as they are referred to here) hold approximately the same positional power in relationship to each other and the topic being addressed. The topic of inquiry is jointly agreed upon, and data are gathered from and belong to all participants. Although not all participants are interested in doing the work of the research such as transcribing, coding, and writing, all members participate in interpretation and dissemination of the inquiry results.

Structuring the initial data collection around sexual life histories was important in several ways: it emphasized narrative in an organized and consistent way; it allowed the participants to think about how they might address the topic in advance; it allowed participants to make meaning of their lives at the moment of the inquiry; it placed events in each woman's life in a larger socio-historical context; it provided the forum for a level of intimacy to develop that enabled laughter, empathy, refraining, questioning, and acceptance through more complete understanding of individual experiences to develop. We shared our sexual life histories over a period of two days with a follow-up day a year later in which we updated each other on our histories, reflected on the collaborative inquiry experience, and examined the coding and elaborated on and contested tentative interpretations of the data.

The study included ten women in two separate groups. Our ages range from 41 to 51. Ethnically, the two groups included Hispanics and eight Anglo women. Religious identity included Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, agnostic, and independently spiritual. Seven of the ten had been married to men. At the time of the first round of data collection, three remained married to men, five were in long-term relationships with women, and two were celibate.

The analysis has focused in two areas: (1) identification of the cultural myths and socio-historical discourses or narratives that appeared to have structured the decisions, actions, and meanings women gave to their lives, and (2) the transformative learning process, both within the women's lives and as a part of the collaborative inquiry process.

MYTHS, DISCOURSES, AND NARRATIVES

Two of the researchers analyzed each story for narratives structure. We identified four classes of narrative by which we had structured and limited our lives: dominant, shadow, silent, and counter. Gender and sexuality were interdependent aspects of all of these narratives.

The dominant gender narrative was that girls aren't/shouldn't be too bright, big, tall, good at sports, as free to run around or do as many interesting things as boys, wear functional clothes, or go without a shirt. Women described feeling these limitations as part of their childhood and adolescent socialization. Failure to conform to these narratives carried with it the threat of failure at living out the dominant sexual narrative.

The dominant sexual narrative was that women get married and have kids. No other "successful" options exist. Women are sexual with men. Women use their sexuality to establish and maintain this relationship. Problems with conforming with this narrative are viewed as medical problems requiring either physical or mental health remediation. Successful enactment of this narrative is synonymous with health. Sexuality is either straight or lesbian. This straight/lesbian duality is read in the society as a behavioral narrative, but is in fact a political narrative resulting in the polarization of our understanding of our own sexuality and the silencing and making invisible of any but polarized behavior.

We called the "dark" side of the dominant narrative the shadow narrative. The shadow narrative is a silent narrative; it is a private narrative with public expression only in the dark spaces of the public domain. The shadow side of the "get married and have kids" narrative is abuse - child physical and sexual abuse, spousal abuse, and rape. The shadow narrative is usually only whispered if spoken at all. It often does not even exist as a narrative for those who enact or are enacted by it.

We called our unstoried (often even to ourselves) experiences the silent narrative. In our group, "too smart, too big," "sex is boring," "attraction to women," and "marriage is the end of life," were all silent. The silent narrative may be accompanied by shame, anger, fear or disappointment. The silent narrative is necessarily a private narrative since it exists as a truncated story line with only the most rudimentary language to express it. Since the dominant narrative does not story its enactment, the silent narrative remains formless. When given public expression through language and storying, silent narratives are profoundly subversive in that they tell of lived experience that undermines the universality claimed by the dominant narrative.

The counter narrative is a public narrative that is placed in opposition to the dominant narrative. It is a well-storied narrative with adequate language and storyline to enable people to story their lives within its boundaries. As an oppositional narrative, it derives its main storyline as a direct counter to the limiting scripts of the dominant narrative. Counter-narratives are produced as the collective effort of groups of people. The major counter-narrative we identified was the gay/lesbian identity narrative.

Each of the women in our groups described perceiving herself as not fitting in with what we later identified as the dominant gender or sexual narrative. Attraction to women, being too big or too smart, finding gender roles too constraining or "boring", being disappointed with initial sexual experiences with men, being "poor white trash", and being Mexican were the kinds of experiences that made us see ourselves as "misfits." However, the power of the dominant narrative to "write" the choices we made in our lives was apparent in our attempts to either "fit", subvert, or escape the narrative.

SEXUAL IDENTITY, TRANSFORMATION AND COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

Sexual identity was described as a public claim that was only sometimes correlated with actual sexual practices. Sexual identity claims such as "lesbian" or "straight" referred to an affinity with a cultural or social group rather than a description of actual sexual behavior. Sexual identity claims were cultural signifiers rather than descriptions of static core constructs of self. In fact, for those who came to lesbian relationships in their late thirties or later, the claim to a lesbian identity held little meaning. As one woman said, "Lesbian as an identity came into my life too late to be an identity. I already had my identity and it didn't have to do with being with a man or a woman."

It is in the process of restorying our lives so as to recover unstoried experience that we transform ourselves. Thus, individual transformation can be understood from this study as occurring when we become aware that the narratives by which we have storied our life are inadequate to our lived experience. This seems to occur over time through a process of increasing awareness of our own experience and the discovery that others have had that experience, as well. These others provide a model for how the experience can be understood and enacted within a social context, or in other words, provide us with the outline of a social narrative within which we can construct our own story. For example, several of the researchers in our study described affirming their own lesbian sexuality by finding other lesbians in books, movies, and public spaces like bars or universities.

The context of collaborative inquiry seems to provide a context for developing the language to tell our unstoried experience. The collaborative inquiry group shares or witnesses our shadow and silent narratives, finding personal "truths" in each others' stories. We narrate our lives in the presence of a real or imagined audience. The collaborative inquiry group provides safe space to venture into unstoried areas of our experience. As one researcher explained, "I think I couldn't have talked about it without the group because I had never talked about it before. I just didn't know I had a story. I had to hear what other stories were about before I could see if I had one, too." Participants in a collaborative inquiry group bear witness to each person's construction and reconstruction of herself. Collaborative inquiry is not about participants' relationship to ideas as much as their relation to themselves and each other.

But collaborative inquiry is not only personally, but socially transformative, as well. Bruner (1986) writes, "It is in the performance of an expression that we re-experience, relive, re-create, re-tell, re-construct, and re-fashion our culture. The performance does not release a pre-existing meaning that lies dormant in the text. Rather the performance itself is constitutive" (p.11). Researchers in a collaborative inquiry group are rewriting culture and this reauthoring affects not only their lives, but lives outside the group. For example, one researcher in the group, a psychologist, explained, "Many times in my work with women bringing up different kinds of issues, something we talked about or one of you said somehow comes back to me. And I'm able somehow to make that useful to a client." The group becomes a cultural space in itself and researchers carry the new narratives and power of those with whom they created them into the larger world.

SUMMARY

This study, by addressing sexual identity development among women, transgresses the boundaries between private and public knowledge by moving private knowledge into the public realm and thereby placing it as one among other public narratives on women's sexuality. Women's lives, like those of all people, can be understood as narratively structured. Since narrative can be understood as a social construction we write our lives within the broad pattern of dominant social discourse. Nevertheless, as in the stories these women told, we do not just write our lives according to the dominant discourse, we weave our lives around it in a myriad of variations and subversions. Although our thoughts and actions appear to be structured by dominant social narratives, we can disrupt the power of those narratives within our lives when we begin to become aware of experience that exceeds or falls outside of the dominant narratives and begin to narrate that experience.

Thus, transformative learning as understood through the analogy of narrative seems to occur when personal experience

exceeds the narratives by which we have storied our lives. Others provide us with language, confirm its public meaningfulness, and adopt the language and bits of narrative we produce and begin to use them to story their own and others' experiences. The essence of transformation is the production and/or adoption of a publicly acknowledged narrative that seems to more adequately story our experience. Narratives cannot be constructed without an audience. Without an audience, they fold in on themselves and finally disappear. The creation of narrative is an intersubjective process. We weave our lives together with the lives of others and through the emotional engagement of lives interwoven,, we are transformed.

Collaborative inquiry groups provide a fertile context for this kind of transformation. However, these groups take us beyond individual and into cultural transformation by providing a social context within which we can develop a collective language for narrating shadow and silent discourses. Developing a collective narrative constitutes one step toward moving oppressed narratives out of silence and into the public realm. Collaborative inquiry as a form of research dignifies newly narrated experience as formal knowledge and moves it out of the position of subjugated knowledge and into the position of one of multiple possible narratives in which others can find their own unstoried experience expressed.

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