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Mark Vicars
Victoria University

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Abstract

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Keywords

Queering practices, Narrative identity, Representation

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Mark Vicars

Victoria University

Mark.Vicars@vu.edu.au

Abstract: As folk taxonomies of contemporary sexual identities continue to proliferate, this paper positions narrative research as a productive methodology for troubling the coherence of the 'normal'. Re-presented from life-history interviews, conducted within a friendship group of gay men over a six month period, are reconstructed accounts of the '...processes, procedures, and apparatuses whereby [our] truth and knowledge are [became] produced (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003, p.4). Our endeavors attempt to show something of how we talked ourselves in and out of our scattered, obscure and partial stories of self. Throughout this paper, our disjointed and chaotic narrations aim to undo 'normalizing' narratives of educational research. In piecing together our adolescent queering experiences, our fragmented and incoherent voices mingle on the page to show something of the complexity of our narrative experience(s) of self.

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In 2004, I had assembled from amongst my middle-aged, middle-class, tertiary educated, gay friends and colleagues, a group of six men. We met twice a month for eight months to discuss, how in childhood and adolescence, our literacy practices had been intimately involved with, and inseparable from our tacit queer motivations, involvements and desires. As we referenced how our sexual desires had positioned us as readers in search of a particular knowledge and pleasures, we told stories of our 'messy' relationships with heteronormative texts of identity. Turning teenagers in a decade in which the global pandemic of AIDS had produced a zeitgeist of increasing moral panic and hysterical homophobia, we reflected on how we had invested in discourses of normalcy (Walkerdine, 1997), tactically performing 'I' to re-author and re-authorise ourselves.

If discursive practices situate and position subjectivity vis-a vis the normative, it is not that surprising how homosexuality can become a troubling presence to everyday narratives of normalcy as:

Daily practices developing from liminal spaces seem to be infused by a logic of more-than-oneness, a 'doing' of life that is inflected with multiple layers of narratives rather than any singular one. (Fisher, 2003: 174).

As we relinquished the necessary fictions of selves past, we retold how our queer yearnings had brought us to moments of biographical disruption (Sparkes, 1996). Living a doubled life can be a messy affair but illustrates how a gay identity is often experienced in a very different relationship to other identities (Dyer, 1992). Our narrating selves, recalled the conventions of everyday life through which we had

come to our particular knowledge(s) of self and we started by speaking of our adolescent endeavors 'to keep a particular narrative [of self] going' (Giddens, 1991: 54):

At 15, I tried to suppress and disavow my homosexual feelings through exercise and attempted to construct a body that would encase my desire in a hard protective shell. I began refusing meals, disposing of food and deliberately starving myself in what I now interpret as a crisis in my developing self-concept. (NR)

My life was already too different; I was saddled with an unpronounceable name that betrayed me and an ethnicity of a country and a culture to which I had no allegiance. I was desperately clinging to the idea, that somehow, one day I would fit in and be part of that which was considered 'normal'. I didn't have parents; I would fit in and be part of that which was considered 'normal'. Being gay was another level of not belonging; it was just one more brick in the wall. I was on my own with these bloody big bricks that were an impediment and a hindrance to my future aspirations. (D)

Living in that village was difficult not because I was being hit by visibly homosexual things but because I was being hit by the subliminal force of what heterosexual men are and of what they did. They went down the mine, they came home, their dinner was on the table, and they went out to the pub and came back at 11.30 pm smelling of beer and went to bed. That is what happened and it happened for everybody. That was life and it was something I didn't want to do. (A)

It wasn't something that ever got discussed at home but I did know that it was not the norm, that it wasn't acceptable. Amongst my peers it was something that was not talked about in a positive manner and I suppose I convinced myself that it was not a wise move to be candid about my sexual uncertainties. Of course I knew what homosexuality meant and that knowledge was gleaned from snippets of playground conversations and the clichéd, caricatured representations I was watching on TV. Much like any other child I conformed to the expectations of those around me. (DA)

I decided to have a party which was a disaster, things got broke, stuff got nicked and the lads that came from my school stole alcohol and I had mistakenly thought we were mates. Those experiences reinforced my feelings about myself how I felt I was always on my own and how I was constantly let down by my male friendships. I used to question my position in that friendship group and I can see now how clearly I wasn't considered as being one of their friends. When my wanting to be part of a group didn't happen I just got on being by myself and even now I am very much aware of being by myself. (I)

In the summer holidays I used to go round to my friend's house, we would spend our time watching old Flash Gordon and Buster Crab movies in his bedroom and we would both lay on the bed because at that time of the morning we were knackered. Sometimes we fell asleep and we used to wake up cuddling. Nothing was ever said but I got to the point where I didn't know

whether I used to go round to his house so I could wake up next to him and have a cuddle or because I liked watching Buster Crab. (A)

Anthony Jones' Dad was beautiful; I liked watching Anthony Jones' Dad I knew I was fancying somebody I shouldn't fancy. I knew 'cos when you are little you play games where you pretend to get married and you have girlfriends and you hold hands and you play kiss chase. (M)

It wasn't until I was twenty-two, and went to work in London that I began to get involved in the gay scene and started to have regular sexual relations with other men. To a certain extent I was living a double life and at weekends I would whiz off to the gay nightclub to meet men, it was rarely a relationship, just casual sex. (D)

I remember having a conversation with some sissy boy in the neighbourhood when I was six about who was the nicest looking out of all the dolls in Thunderbirds and it was in the different way I talked about comics, cartoons and played with my toys that was so unlike other boys, that is how I knew. (M)

I had quite a lot of female friends and I was much closer to them than lads of my own age- girls were safer. I came to recognise my Father's expression of concern and would get out of the way as I knew that what would come next. There would be the arguments over my behaviour. I was never a sporty boy. I

In my childhood I would hear men and women in the village talking about the queers, not that they were ever named but it was like
"Ey up! 'Av you heard 'bout ..."

It wasn't an everyday thing, at most it happened once, twice, three times a year but I would pick up on things like that and I inched back inside myself. It didn't take me long to work out that the weakest link of all is homosexuality. Homosexuals are outsiders, they don't fit in and they get watched because being different gets equated with being unsafe. (A)

Flowing in and out of each other's stories, we became attentive to how 'Truth is correctness of the gaze, not a feature of beings themselves.' (DuBois, 1991: 133). Our narrative axiology, constructed from out of our perspectival dispositions, draws upon the bricolage of our promiscuous ways of knowing and of doing the self. Our interpretive locations created by such friction, is, I suggest, productive for dislocating discourses that habitually construct normative rationales and methods for knowing as 'normal'.

Centering the Queer

Evoking the copious ways we came to our knowledge(s) of 'I' involved us grappling with the problematic presence and practices of normalcy. Throughout our conversations, we spoke of surveillance, of resisting the confessional impulse, of defamiliarising and queerly jolting the 'proper' orthodoxies and practices of self-representation. Working within the discontinuities that have affected how we come to author ourselves as 'Other', we refocused in on the blends of the emotional, psychic and cultural, in which subjectivity is formed. Becoming attentive to how we had positioned ourselves in our stories helped us to queerly consider how '...history

is a text composed of competing and conflicting representations does not tell the story they become the story' (Moses, 2000: 11). We came to realize that 'the more one interprets the more one finds not the fixed meaning the world, but only other interpretations' (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982: 107). Repositioning our re-remembering with a Queer positionality, we sought to interrupt, what was for us, those incoherent 'common sense' discourses that so often subjugate queer subjects in naturalising and pathologising heteronormative narratives. However, our task was not without problems and it has been noted how:

... to engage queer theories can be a difficult task, particularly when voice, visibility, the self and experience have inherently mediated forms and when knowledge and ignorance do not readily offer evidence of their workings. A difficulty is to discover how epistemologies that rely on seeing and hearing can be brought into dialogue with epistemologies that question what is seen and heard. (Talbut, 1999: 529).

Our narrating selves, throughout this text reside at the intersection of the real and the imaginary, and our illegitimate narrations productively illustrate that what we choose to name as the self; taken from the cacophony of lived experience is a constant renegotiation, an improvisation in which uncertainty plays a leading part. The narratives by which we came to know and represent our lives were, and continue to be, stories of supplementary meanings that work to fill absence with a necessary presence. The construction of subjectivity and the construction of a truth, conceptualised as an aesthetic and interactive process, draws on the concept of the 'ethnoscape' which is:

...not objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision but, rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors... (Appadurai, 1996: 33)

In the telling of stories about our lives we frequently blurred genres, crossed boundaries transgressed by supplementing and re-performing our preferred identities (Langellier 2001). As interventions to the disciplining regimes of the normal (Warner 1999), our storied selves were often amusing, highly dramatic, sometimes sad, ironic and camp: our voices refused to be constrained by convention and defied a model of operational logic. In wanting to show '...an ontological shift comprehensively resistant to dominant normativity', (Honeychurch, 1996: 342), I have moved away from using block quotations that present our voices as 'literal representations (Britzman, 1995) to show something on the page of our non-linear relationships and flows' of self (Law and Urry, 2004: 401). Our narratives are performative, they signify how 'Being marginal and flowing in and out text is... a construction from ...our being QUEER'. (Leck, 1994: 9)

I have at earlier points in my life felt shame about my sexuality, how can I be comfortable with a sexuality that for many years has caused me anguish? As you are growing up the more you realise your attraction is to the same sex the more alarming that knowledge becomes, there is always lurking the thought that you might be found out and that can have a paralysing effect. My homosexuality was never acted out in real terms, it was 1970's suburbia I couldn't, I wasn't visible, I couldn't, I didn't know. (D)

I tend not to say all of what I think; I hold a little back, it doesn't pay to be too candid about the full details of one's intimate life. If you keep your mouth shut then people don't know and they can't wade in with their opinions. It is much simpler to keep your mouth shut. I don't let much show anymore until I really trust that other person and that way nothing can't get at me. People no longer have the ability to touch me. (I)

Sexuality has been an absent colour on the palate I have used to paint my life canvas. Growing up I felt it just wasn't fair that that I couldn't have all these things that other people had, I felt like I had been short changed. I didn't want a girlfriend I wanted a boyfriend and I wanted one quite badly. (D)

I had repeatedly rehearsed my coming out speech but I hadn't consciously decided to come out it just happened because I had drunkenly misinterpreted my Mum's proposal to invite friends back from University. It was Christmas and possibly the worse coming out ever. I had come back for the holidays and my Mum was going on about bringing girls or boys back to visit. I said to myself well she knows and this is her way of letting me know that she knows. I managed to keep my mouth shut until New Years Eve and a couple of Bacardi and cokes later for Dutch courage I took her into my bedroom and said: *You know what you said earlier about bringing girls home... well... it's actually boys.* I thought great that is that sorted but the next day my Father came into my room and demanded to know what I had said to upset her. *Your Mother is in tears, she is really distressed what have you been saying?* He told me to think about my sister might feel and how other people might react. My sister got really upset and started crying and going on about her friends and that we had to keep it all a secret. I am not as close to my sister as I used to be and that is in part because of her reaction. I realised that despite everything we had been through there were some fundamental differences between us that would never be breached. I have come to a point in my life where I have decided I don't want to know her anymore. I have very little contact or involvement in her life apart from birthday and Christmas Cards and since 'coming out', I have learned not to share what is happening in any part of my life with any of my family. I could have had a massive row but instead I went very quiet and the very next day packed up my stuff and went back to University. I went back home the following Easter and she said she was feeling better about the situation. I have become accustomed to living by myself and I never want to have to go back to them and be in a position where I have got to ask them for anything. I think I have always wanted to make my own way in the world and whilst I have learnt that honesty is very important it is also something of a double-edge sword. With three little words I had undone the expectations that had been stored up for me; it was I who had shattered the familiarity of their future. I found myself being looked at as if I were a stranger. (I)

So often we get told and come to believe that what we see is not there but it is and it becomes embroidered in to everything else that you actually do and that absent way of being can become a shroud for a great many of our experiences. I was inconspicuous by perceived ability. I had to get through Sometimes the people who don't fit in don't get through; they are the teenagers you read about that are found dangling in their bedrooms. Now, twenty years on, being homosexual is not a big thing for any of us but if you spend a night thinking:

Oh God, this is what I have got for the rest of my life ...and you can't equate being yourself with having some kind of inner peace, then that is when you are found hanging the next day. A lot of young people are discovered that way because they can't get through that one bad night. We all have them, that one night when we think I have got to make a break. 'Do I do it or don't do it?' I can't remember exactly when mine was but it happened. (A)

I don't particularly enjoy opening up myself to scrutiny or being the source of other people's curiosity. I prefer being comfortable in my own skin as opposed to making a point for all to see. I would much rather make peace with my values as opposed to spending all my energies defending them. . I tend not to speak about or get drawn in to conversation about the intimate details of my life and throughout the years I suppose my reticence to discuss such matters has placed an embargo on entering in to those kinds of dialogue as that would involve giving too much of myself away. (Da)

There was this unknown sensation slowly worming a way through everything I had taken for granted. I was constantly appearing and disappearing and it was incredibly frightening having to face-up to becoming someone else. I didn't really know if I was getting turned-on by males or by females but there was a creeping realisation that if I was homosexual I would probably have to leave behind my whole way life. I think one's perceptions of being homosexual will every time shape the experiences we have of ourselves. So often we get told and come to believe that what we see is not there but it is and it becomes embroidered into everything else that you actually do and that can become a shroud for a great many of our experiences. You start by pulling a thread from the mantle of self and you spend a lot of time thinking carefully about what happened to make you become that person. (A)

Our narratives draw on the hetero-normal/ queer power-knowledge relations and locate our socio-cultural, classed, embodied heterogendered positioning(s) as the grey documents of genealogical endeavour. Tracing through our stories how normalcy and the Other emerge as the product of the perilous play of forces, our meaning making as intertextual and inter-temporal acts of invention, reinvigorated the past in the present in our on-going dis/ease with the incoherence of normalcy.

Don't You Believe It!

A genealogical perspective opposes a pursuit of origins and is skeptical of naming the moment of retrieved origin as a source of the development of knowledge. Resisting essentialist claims of historical truth by distributing the emergence of identity across a range of social practice, it usefully shows how the emergences of self become subject to the transforming forces of power that entwine subjects in a:

...series of subjugations...of dynamic relationships of struggle...genealogy embraces the confrontations, the conflicts and systems of subjection...no one is responsible for an emergence it is merely an effect of the play of dominations. (Smart, 1985: 57)

By reaffirming the insignificant, by reappraising everyday forgotten events to problematise and disrupt understandings of power, by viewing individuals as both subjects and objects of power resonates with an understanding of how 'There are no

moments of authenticity and points of origin except those which are retrospectively designated as origins' (Culler, 1981: 117). Genealogy poses problems for a linear way of knowing as it challenges the 'common sense' ground rules of orthodox method. However, within disciplining regimes of practice, questions, are inevitably asked about truth and the attendant positivistic totems of reliability and validity. Resisting a regulatory field of the 'normal' that legitimates prescribed ways of knowing involved us finding a position from which to articulate and defend our necessary fictions of self.

'To doubt any method of knowing or telling that can claim truth.' (Richardson, 1993: 706) I have willingly been seduced by the lure of the post-paradigmatic and relinquished epistemological certainties (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003). I sought out criteria for alternative ethnographic texts heeding the suggestion that they should have contained within them:

- Flesh and blood emotions of people coping with life's contingencies: not only facts but feelings'
- 'A measure of life's limitations'
- 'A demanding standard of ethical self consciousness'
- A story that moves ' heart and belly as well as head'
- Stories that offer ' a source of empowerment and a form of resistance to counter the domination of canonical discourses'
- * Stories that ' confirm and humanise tragic experience by bearing witness to what it means to live with shame....and to gain agency through testimony' (Bochner, 2000: 270-271)

Our narratives, will inevitably, be read relationally, evaluated by some for verisimilitude and rigour. I hope that they are also read as scripts that connect with presence of the hermeneutic imagination in lives, one that '...works from a commitment to generativity and rejuvenation and to the question of how it is possible to go on ...in the midst of constraints and difficulties' (Smith, 199: 188-189).

And....not so finally...

Productively incoherent, our collective conversations provided us with a space from which to start to spin Other stories. Our inauthentic tales, as mobile imaginaries, helped to locate and narrativise the incoherence of self that we have experienced over time (Munt, 2002). Throughout our many discussions, we stumbled into resonating moments, collectively reworking the past, we came to knowledge, realizing that which we choose to name as our history is not always necessarily apparent. Suppressions exist alongside expressions and we '...must dig, scratch, analyse from different angles and employ multiple research methods and interpretative strategies to examine different aspects of the situation' (Kincheloe, 2004: 29). The narratives that we chose to tell and the stories we now choose to live by, are how we are, have become and make ourselves known to ourselves and Others. Reiterated by the performative practices of normalcy (Butler 1993), we, as gay/queer men continue to many, to not make sense. However, it has been suggested how:

Stories are interpretive acts ...they are never single voiced but instead are dialogical, shaped by previous history, by present emotional and rhetorical context, by the potential listener as well as the teller. (Ritchie & Wilson, 2000: 171)

Speaking, not to confess but to invite' the reader in to textual ventriloquism' (Bakhtin, 1981), our narratives have purposefully played on the page to eschew textual unity or coherence. They do not attempt to tell a singular story. Rather, they endeavour to ask 'what if?' 'What are the possibilities or potential for another way of storytelling self and therefore remain partial and incomplete.

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