

# NARRATING THE SELF

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**New Working Paper Series**

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# **NARRATING THE SELF**

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An interesting conjunction has emerged in theoretical, and particularly feminist scholarship between an interest in subjectivity and the self and in narratives. Narratives and the narration of identity are attracting increasing interest in these postmodern times. The interest signifies a move away from the search for essential, universal or even rational identities and instead stresses more uncertain and creative processes of construction and fabrication. For instance, Homi Bhabha is interested in how ‘certain traditions of writing have attempted to construct narratives of the imaginary of the nation-people’ (Bhabha 1990, p303). Narrative has also been considered productive as a vehicle for analysing individual subjectivities and the construction of the subject. As Sidonie Smith points out ‘However understood, the subject fascinates us and so the contemporary fascination with personal narrative’ (Smith 1993, p393). 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 paper draws on qualitative interviews with four women to explore both methodological and theoretical implications of using narrative to explore processes of subjectivity and the production of self.

It is clear that we are ‘post’ the Enlightenment subject. The conception of the subject as fixed, unique, and rational has been fatally undermined by a succession of challenging theories, including psychoanalysis, Saussurian linguistics, Foucauldian discourse analysis, and feminism.<sup>1</sup> However, the

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<sup>1</sup>See (Hall 1992) and (Weedon 1997) for a fuller account of the challenges to the Enlightenment subject.

question remains as to what subject and what model of subjectivity we are left with. Jane Flax, for example, cautions against restrictive theorising of subjectivity:

Some postmodernists confine all talk about subjectivity to critiques of the split Cartesian rationalistic subject or of the unitary, authentic 'true self'. On the other hand, critics of postmodernism and some postmodernists reduce all descriptions of a decentered subject to a fragmented one that lacks any agency or organisation. None of these constructs are appealing or plausible. Their juxtaposition and the limits of the arguments demonstrate how difficult it is to imagine subjectivity outside Enlightenment ideas of it. The unitary self and the fragmented one are simply mirror images; neither represents an alternative to the subjects Enlightenment discourses construct. (Flax 1993, pxii).

From a Foucaudian 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 1991, p41).

In his work on the 'care of the self', Foucault elaborated a genealogy of the self which traced different approaches to the self from classical Greek and Greco-Roman to 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?'

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<sup>2</sup>See below for consideration of the importance of the gendering evident here.

(Foucault 1991, p350). 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, p145). 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 1991, p369).

Approaching processes of subject construction through narrative allows for the acknowledgement of the constructed, flexible and fictionalised 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 are discursively available for individuals to occupy. 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 produce an account which 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 fictionalised self and accounts for her subjectivity. But she does it through accessing the available resources or techniques of the self.

Narratives have long been of interest in accessing individuals' 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 means to access women's voices (Smith 1993). This interest in narratives, and in the production of narratives in qualitative interviews has spawned 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. This is an emphasis on form and wholeness in narrative: 'the principle of *Gestalt* is based on the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts' (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, p68). This has implications for how the data is gathered - so for instance Wengraf's method follows 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:

No question can be asked which is not a story-eliciting one; no question can be raised about a topic not raised by the interviewee in the initial narration. Nor can a question about a 'raised topic' be put out of sequence. There is 'directionality' given by the interviewer in this subsession, but it is highly restricted. (Wengraf 2001, p120).

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<sup>3</sup>See (Thompson 1988; Gluck and Patai 1991; Polkinghorne 1991; Tonkin 1992; Chamberlain 1997; Chamberlain and Thompson 1998; Lawler 1999).

<sup>4</sup>Wengraf describes his approach as SQUIN-BNIM - or 'Single question aimed at inducing narrative and biography-narrative interpretation method') (Wengraf 2001).



For Hollway and Jefferson, the *Gestalt* approach is particularly important in the way it structures the analysis of the data. Rather than fragmenting data about an individual, all that is known is taken as a whole. Rather than use computer-aided analysis packages that tend to fragment the data, Hollway and Jefferson approached transcripts as a whole: ‘After a whole day working on the transcripts of a particular participant (a process we often referred to as “immersion”) we would feel inhabited by that person in the sense that our imagination was full of him or her’ (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, p69).

Whilst this work has important insights to offer on the interview process and analysis of data it also would be subject to critiques from feminist qualitative researchers who would caution against pseudo-clinical approaches to interviews (see (Oakley 1981 and Byrne, 2001 p95 for further discussion). In addition, I believe that it leaves processes of subjection under-theorised. Hollway and Jefferson acknowledge ‘that people cannot totally be known, much less that such can be elicited in two interviews’ (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, p69). They also draw on psychoanalytic (Kleinian) concept of the ‘defended subject’:

The idea of a defended subject shows how subjects invest in discourse when these offer positions which proved protections against anxiety and therefore supports to identity. (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, p23).

Yet, despite these qualifications, the notion of a ‘whole’ subject echoes through their work. Indeed narrative itself does, to a certain extent, depend on a notion of wholeness and completion. Producing a narrative of one’s life, representing one’s self, involves to a certain extent repeating processes of subjection. One must construct oneself as the subject of the story and in doing so claim intelligibility and agency. 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 p135).

The fiction of the whole coherent self is created, but it can also be undermined in the telling. This is an uncertain, and not necessarily easily achieved process:

Achieving narrative coherence of events and actions in our life stories is not a once-and-for-all feat. Rather, it is an ongoing task, sometimes a struggle, and success is a real accomplishment. Our adversary in the struggle is everything that opposes narrative integration: temporal disorder, confusion, incoherence, chaos. (Polkinghorne 1991, p145).

Thus we are left with the question of what is involved in constructing a ‘unified and understandable whole’ out of the diverse events of a life. Is this inevitable, or indeed 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 might narrative as a genre be enabling a ‘care of the self’ in Foucauldian terms and when might it be a repressive act of domination. Not all individuals are able to present themselves as coherent, whole subjects of a

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<sup>5</sup>This phrase is from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak quoted in (Butler 1993, p122).

narrative. Understanding why and how this is so will expand our understanding of processes of subjection.

This paper draws on interviews conducted for an exploration of white experience and identities. The research involved interviewing white mothers of young children living in South London.<sup>6</sup> I undertook a first interview with respondents which covered a range of issues concerned with parenting and mothering practices. The second interview took a more broadly life-history approach which was aimed at eliciting a more general life history or narrative. In the majority of cases, it was initiated through a question asking the interview to tell me about ‘turning points’ in their lives. In this paper, I want to focus on four accounts and to explore how, and why, not all the respondents produced narrative accounts of their selves in the interviews.

Through examining the production of narratives of the self, access is gained to some of the processes involved in taking up different subject positions and the impact on the sense of the self. I will argue that as much is to be learnt from those accounts which do *not* provide a linear or ‘whole’ narrative as those that do. Sally, the first interviewee 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 narrative do not conform with their experiences of subjection; either because they do not experience an easily retold sense of themselves, or because they wish to present themselves as so inevitable and conforming to dominant

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<sup>6</sup>For further details see (Byrne 2001).

norms that there is no story to tell. In particular, this paper will ask to what extent providing a narrative of the self involves individuals positioning themselves as raced, classed and gendered subjects. It will also consider methodological barriers to the production of narrative

### ***A story to tell:***

#### *Sally and the transformation of the self*

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.

In the above extract, Sally is beginning to tell me a version of her life story. This was a long and involved account and it largely unfolded without prompting. Her opening has all the drama of a well-crafted story, beginning with a powerful metaphor which 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 is drawing 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 eleven-plus, something that would have presumably been of significance to her at the time. Her vagueness about these events presents them as 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 presents 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 which tries to make sense of where she is now. This is achieved particularly through demonstrating her difference from her family from a young age.

In her account, Sally largely followed a chronological approach throughout a long account. This was not always the case in the interviews I undertook. Some interviewees would specifically say that they were not going to take a chronological approach or others would begin at a beginning, but then make links back and forth in time as the story unfolded. I think the chronological approach appealed to Sally as it enhanced particular aspects of the story that she was seeking to tell. The main thrust of her narrative was to establish her difference from her family and to account for the changes in her life and values. Sally's account charted, 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, p9). Both interviews with Sally were littered with phrases which emphasised 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 both her background and her current situation certain racialised, classed and gendered features. In this way, through the account, she occupies different subject positions governed by different norms and discourses. Class and 'race' in particular become tropes which mark or dramatise the ruptures in her life story.

As mentioned above, an important point of difference for Sally is that of her relationships with her family. She described her family as one that had problems, particularly in communication, many of which she associated 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 focused particularly 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 t.v. and he would come and turn the t.v. 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 it is notable how in the following extract 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 Bertaux-Wiame:<sup>7</sup>

the men consider the life they have lived as *their own* as a series of self-conscious acts, with well-defined goals; and in telling their story they use the active 'I', assuming themselves as the subject of their actions through their very forms of speech. Women, by contrast talk of their lives typically in terms of relationships, including parts of other life stories in their own. (quoted in Thompson 1988, p155-6).

Similarly, Lois McNay criticises 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, p149).

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<sup>7</sup>See also (Chamberlain 1997).



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

Sally's narrative swings between these 'male' and 'female' forms which mark in some ways a desire to stress a growing difference and independence from her sisters. Sally talks of 'taking on a different role' to 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 is also suggesting 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, heteronormativity 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. (emphasis added).

Sally sets up various differences between herself and her sisters. She suggests that her whiteness, her middle-classness and her gender mean very different things to her sisters and lead to the performance of different norms. She presents them 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 organisations (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, for Sally there is also the fear 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 which 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. (emphasis added).

In the narrative, Sally is presented as struggling to be a different subject, to find a way to reiterate different norms through a different set of 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.

Sally's narrative had established some of the ways in which her subjectivity had been formed in childhood. She had suggested ways in which her life was affected by class, gender as well as 'race'. For instance, she described 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 up-bringing. 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. (Emphasis Sally's).

The fact that she characterises 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 sister for a long time (although she has difficulty pinpointing exactly when or perhaps how). It is interesting that in the following extract the signifiers of difference are classed (classical music) and racialised (reggae)<sup>8</sup>:

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<sup>8</sup>See (Bourdieu 1994) for a discussion of class and music.

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 sister 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 ex-pats, watching Diana and Charles's wedding. 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 ‘ex-pats’ who are watching the ultimate celebration of white womanhood and Englishness, the ‘fairy-tale’ wedding of Diana and Charles.<sup>9</sup> 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 sister:

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’. There continues in the account to be an apparently unconscious parallel narrative of desire as the narrative follows the forms and conventions of a romance. The transgression of racialised norms is heightened by this echo of the transgression of heterosexual norms. This engagement with difference, or the other is clearly marked as liberatory for Sally. In her essay ‘Eating the other, desire and resistance’, bell hooks has written about 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

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<sup>9</sup>See (Davies and Smith 1999).

experience that alters one's place and participation in contemporary cultural politics' (hooks 1992). Within the narrative, Sally's friendship with Joy is indeed presented as a 'conversion experience' which offers her the possibilities of change and liberation. The sense of transgression of norms offered by Joy is underlined when Sally returns again in the narrative to their first meeting where she is able to reject an iconic representation of white womanhood and heterosexual love:

She breezed in that day at a time when I was thinking, oh God, am I really expected to pick up a Kleenex, you know, 'cos Lady Diana was getting married ... 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.

In comparison to these two descriptions of meeting Joy, the father of Sally's children (with whom she is no longer in a relationship) is presented as a marginal character who is barely described. In fact, in discussing their first year together with their first child, it is Joy who again provides the most vivid memory:

And I remember Joy coming to visit me there, as I should say, and this was the only time I could really remember, and I remember her walking ... I walked her down to the end of the track and she walked off to go and get on the bus, and I

remember thinking, suddenly feeling quite stuck. I had this baby kind of strapped to me and this kind of partner, and I was stuck up this little track in the country, and I was just thinking, what on earth am I doing here? But I think that was the only time I really questioned it that much.

Here again is another recognisable narrative - that of the abandoned lover, left holding the baby. However, although this was later what happened, at that moment the father is still around, and it is Joy who is leaving. 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 enables her to be something that she was not previously. Sally attributes 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 which 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 (hooks 1992; Dyer 1997). It is clear that part of the difference that Joy offered to Sally was not just racialised but also

classed. Through her influence, she decided to go back to studying and through Joy met a group of people who were involved in alternative squatter and anarchist culture in London and who had very different class positions from Sally's own and the friends she had had before. Sally contrasts her working-class background and the class trajectory taken by her sister and its 'narrowness' with that of her middle-class, public-school educated friends. She constructs a discourse of 'coming home', naturalising 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 or a different position feels for Sally like she has achieved naturalness or found her inner core. For Butler, the nature of the performative 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, p144). What is interesting in Sally's narrative is that she needs to account for how she only achieves this feeling of her inner core once she has undergone a transformation. This sense of rupture leads her to articulate her subject



position in a narrative which is framed around tropes of 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 narrative of the 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 story-teller 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 racialised. However, Sally's account was not 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 allowing the narrator's account free-flow. But Chanfrault-Duchet also notes that some interviewees

may be unable to present themselves as the subject and hero of a narrative aiming to communicate an experience laden with signification' (Chanfraut-Duchet 1991, fn.8). What does it mean to say that a person is unable to present themselves as the subject of 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 three examples, I suggest different reasons why 'classic' 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 a single subject position which is required, however momentarily, in order to present a coherent self. In the second, 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'. Finally Rosemary appears unable to construct herself as the active subject of a narrative.

### ***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, 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 to Sally's account. Most notably, her account lacks the narrative thrust of Sally's account. Whereas Sally produces a story which tells of her progressive development from one subject position to another, Madeleine does not have such a coherent story to tell. When I ask her what have been the significant turning

points in her life, while she is able to name some, they do not make much sense to her in terms of providing a linear narrative:

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 eleven 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 narrative progression is underlined by the fact that Madeleine does not provide an account which follows a chronological order. This is not to suggest, however, that Madeleine is in some sense inarticulate or confused, but that she does not view her own life experience in a way that enables the production of a narrative in this way. 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]. (Emphasis Madeleine's).

Her mother's attitude clearly fits into a liberal discourse of tolerance which retains white as the norm and subject which 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 racialised. 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, p13):

... 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 un-relaxed 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.

In terms of class, Madeleine 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 in a squat with her boyfriend. She had a child as a single mother and as such found herself placed in a politically problematised 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 which are required to perform middle classness, but also the sense of agency and in particular control of the future which 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, there 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 to being 'sensible' is underlined by her joke about her mother regretting sending her into 'temptation', where boys were present. She is explaining why she was sent to a public school:

My mum and dad really wanted me to go to a co-educational school, and there wasn't one in our area. Although, you know, we were living in the country side, so there were good schools, it was absolutely fine, they were just good girls

schools. So that was the main reason behind it [laugh]. I think my mum regretted that ever since, sending me where there might be boys [laugh].

Madeleine's relative lack of narrative does not come from a lack of events in her life which are significant to her. But the turning points in life serve as points of disjuncture which 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 a coherent self in a linear narrative. I do not wish to present Madeleine as a confused, incoherent or somehow dysfunctional individual. This would be a total mis-representation. She had a busy life in which she 'juggled' bringing up her daughter and working.

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 being positioned. 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, p155). Madeleine's account suggests how this can also be true for those positioned as white.

*Deborah: a natural progression*

Madeleine seems to lack a narrative flow in her interview because it is difficult for her to accommodate her sense of self into one linear story. In contrast, it appeared that 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 is one of inevitability and predictability. The events she mentioned tend to focus on her working life and the choices she makes are 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. This is signalled in the first thing which comes to mind when I ask a question about turning points:

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: 'It's 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 its 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 which might have been given importance in other people's accounts - such as the periods 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 which 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: 'I suppose one of the big turning points was when I went freelance, that was about 13/14 years ago now, and working from home. [...] 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.' (Emphasis added).

For Deborah, her subjectivity is something that she 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 emphasises her sense of coherence and completeness. But when I ask if this includes school friends, she realises 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 its 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 which 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 characterises what she has left behind as narrow and restricted and again emphasises her independence and freedom.

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

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 which 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.

*Rosemary: - 'going with the flow'*

In contrast to Deborah, Rosemary, a white working-class woman with four children who lives in Morely, presented herself as someone with very little agency. She has lived in the same area for all her life and the same block of

council flats since she was a young child. Rosemary has an extremely close relationship with her mother who lives in the same block of flats and who provides childcare for Rosemary every day. It is striking how, as with Deborah, the interviews do not provide a context where Rosemary produces a narrative of her self.

Part of the reason for the difference between the interview with Rosemary and with, for example Sally or Madeleine must surely lie in the ways in which they responded to me as an interviewer. It is likely that Sally related to me more or less as a peer, someone at least who had similar interests and whom she felt had broadly similar social position, in terms of gender, class, race and perhaps even economic status. She said that she enjoyed the interview and it was clearly a style of encounter - where you explore aspect of your life with an empathetic listener - which she was familiar with. Rosemary must have been conscious of the class difference between us. Here before her was a middle-class woman (who had been introduced to her by a middle-class parent at her daughter's school), who was in further education and wanted to ask her personal questions. It may be that Rosemary's reticence to talk came from an unwillingness to divulge personal details to me - as a form of resistance even. Certainly she may have felt slightly uncomfortable with me, and, conscious of these differences, I may also have been less at ease. Hollway and Jefferson point out that:

Eliciting stories from people is not always a simple matter, especially from those who feel their lives lack sufficient interest or worth to justify 'a story'. And, no doubt for a variety of different reasons, people's story-telling ability varies enormously. (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, p35).

This also raises the question about the use of narrative in different contexts. Use of, and therefore interpretation of narrative clearly needs to be culturally specific (see Tonkin 1992). But even as it is produced in a specific context, it also depends on the possession of specific cultural competences and experiences of particular practices which may often be raced, classed and gendered.

Opening questions to Rosemary do not elicit a narrative flow, but rather a continual pull to the present:

BB: 'So I was wondering if I could ask you a bit about, we talked a bit about being a parent, and I was wondering if I could ask you a bit about life before being a parent, your life?'

Rosemary: 'It was years ago! What before I had the children?'

BB: 'Yes, like one thing I ask is what would you way were the key turning points or crucial events in your life?'

Rosemary: 'My children [laugh] They're my life. But I didn't go out to having four. And I didn't really think, oh I want children now, before having children. It weren't like, "oh I'm 24, or 23, I want a child now". It just sort of happened.'

It is difficult to get a sense of Rosemary's subjectivity. She presents it as totally subsumed within being a mother and she stresses how she is the same as her mother - 'my mum tried to do everything for me and I try and do everything for them' (although, as we shall see later, she also presents them as having very different styles of mothering). Children are her 'life' and her only happiness is seeing them happy. Rosemary does not make her life the subject of a narrative. Rosemary did not lack the art of telling a good story. She told stories about her children and was interested in exploring their different personalities. But it is interesting that she does not suggest *why* they might behave in the ways they do, or why they are as they are. Rather the characteristics she describes are essential to each of them.

But, our Michele, is like so quiet and, well, not indoors, but at school. At first I had a real problem with her - crying every day and not wanting to go, used to be in class saying 'what time is it, what's the time, what time is it,' you know to the teachers. And throwing up outside the class. When we went to school the other morning we walked out and as we walked out she burst out crying. So, I'm, we've got to find a school that she feels comfortable with [...] This one [referring to another daughter who sat in on some of the interview] she pleases everyone - loves adults and loves children. Will look after a little baby, except her own sisters, and loves adults. Or anyone younger than her, she'll mummy them, or smaller. Put her arm round them. And very nosy! [directed to daughter, jokingly].

Rosemary also had recourse to other narratives - such as the way in which her local area had changed (for the worse) over her life time. 'How it's getting lately I'd like to move out ....It's just there's a load more crime and that going on round here. You just can't walk out. It's frightening to walk down the streets at night. So many people hanging about'.<sup>10</sup>

Rosemary was interested in presenting a particular portrayal of herself, that of the good mother who has her children at the centre of her life - she stressed that she only worked to be able to buy her children more things, that she never left them with anyone other than her mother, she kept them with her at all times - and joked that she would probably carry on doing so until they were forty. Yet Rosemary does not (cannot?) produce a narrative of her life in which she gives herself the role of the central subject. In contrast to Deborah, Rosemary presents herself as largely without agency - she is someone who simply 'goes with the flow'. This discourse has an echo of Sally's account of her former self as 'one of those little wish things that just blows through life'. She does not present herself as making active decisions.

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<sup>10</sup>See (Cohen 1996) for work on racialised narratives of local areas.

Just as the children ‘just sort of happened’, so leaving school was not a particularly significant event in her life and she found herself in a particular job by accident:

BB: ‘So, like, getting a job, was that a big event?’

Rosemary: ‘No, not really, it was sort of I was at school and I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I used to be into cameras, like I wanted to probably do photography’ [...] but I weren’t really bothered. It was just like go with the flow sort of thing. And a few of them went into the insurance company. And they said “why don’t you try for the company?”’

BB: ‘These were friends at school?’

Rosemary: ‘Yeah, and I said “all right then” But I loved it. I applied for it, went for an interview and they sent back and said I’d got in. But they was all young at the company. It was just like going to school again, doing your work, they was all the same age, they was all 16, except the managers of course, but we was all the same age - must have been about 18 of us - all the starting at the same age, well, roughly, over a couple of months, starting at the same time.’

Rosemary also describes herself as taking a passive role in finding a partner. A friend organised a blind date for Rosemary and she went along with it, eventually going out with and then marrying the man selected for her:

Rosemary: ‘And then one year he said “do you want to get engaged”. And I wasn’t really, I was really like going along with the flow, and I said “well,” and I was still young. He was six years older than me. So I think he must have thought time was getting on [laugh]’

BB: ‘How old were you when you got married?’

Rosemary: ‘I was 21 I think, 21 and he was 6 years older than me, 26, 27. It was about a year or so after that. I just went with the flow, “oh all right then, we’ll get married after that”. But I could’ve easily just left it as it was, you know, I weren’t into rushing into getting married.’

Not only does Rosemary lack agency, but other agents are left undefined. The major force in some of her accounts are unspecified and represented only by ‘they’. This imparts a sense of powerlessness. In the following extract Rosemary vividly presents a life that is not in control, which provides

a contrast to others such as Deborah. Rosemary does not just lack the freedom to do what she wants, she lacks the material means to control her physical environment:

But there does seem more crime round here. I mean what they're doing round here, I mean they're putting cameras up round. I mean it's a good thing but why are they having to put cameras in? [...] And they moved quite a few of them in here. And the last place I was living, they moved a child molester in. You know, and like the tenants found out about this and ended up burning him out and burning his car out. And that's only just across the road from here. I mean, I was nothing to do with it. It weren't till they had like the car going up in flames and the fire engines arrive, but I didn't know anything about it. But it's frightening, you don't know what's going on out there.

Rosemary's life has not been uneventful. She has grown up, left school, found a partner, married him, had children, left work (she was made redundant 'but I didn't blame them'), established her children in schools, taken up part-time work etc. But these events do not provide the hooks for Rosemary to produce a narrative of her life. Rosemary does not feel that she has much power and agency over her life, nor has she been able to change - except in the way she has mothered. The events in her life have followed a pattern of inevitability that, she feels, leaves little to tell. There are few highs and lows. In the account of her life in the interview, only one event is described in terms of her feelings, but here too it was one over which she had little control: Rosemary describes her first pregnancy:

But I had a lot of problems with the pregnancy, [...] So, I went through a lot with her, it was really emotional. But that was from about 20 weeks of pregnancy. That was an emotional time. When she was born, that was emotional, because she had to have an operation done. But it's all gone well, touch wood, since then.



Here we get a sense of emotional trauma, but little sense of how it affected Rosemary's sense of herself, except perhaps an understanding of the worry and vulnerability of being a mother. Indeed in the earlier interview, Rosemary had said that the way in which she had changed on becoming a mother was to become 'more of a worrier. I was never a worrier before I had them [laugh]'. When Rosemary compares herself with her own mother, there is for the first and practically only time a sense of the past and of Rosemary as an active subject. She presents a picture of herself as a child as a strong person, independent and even feisty and fearless. This is in many senses the impression that Rosemary continued to give me when I interviewed her, although it is not the way she speaks about herself.

Yeah, I mean at the age of 8, I was on the bus to the shopping centre, I was. I was so, do you know what I mean, I was really street road worthy. I mean from the age of 4, I don't know if I told you that on the last one, I walked from the park on me own. Because my mum thought I was mucking about. I said 'I'm going down Tracey's'. She said 'all right then'. Because me cousin, we was all up the park. She just thought I was mucking about. And I'm trolling down the park and these street markets. And that was what, I weren't even five then, I was crossing major roads and everything. I remember doing it. [...] I was more outgoing, I was, my mum was forever standing outside crying her eyeballs out [laugh] 'cos I was always out with my friends. She was out crying. But there wasn't that fear that there is now, you know, of being abducted and letting your kids out. But it's not only... it's the roads and that. I mean even with me crossing the road. I'm out crossing in front of one car and there's another one taking over. And with kids, if a car stops, they'll run. You know, but there's another car behind it taking over. And if they'd run, when I walked, they'd be up in the air. When I think of that... But they're as good as gold really. It's not *them*, it's the people out there. I mean I'd let them play outside downstairs. It's the people out there. (Emphasis Rosemary's).

The interviews with Rosemary left me with a sense of a gap or an untold story. It was difficult to get a sense of her subjectivity or own sense of her

self. Here was a cheerful, friendly and active woman who gave no sense of who she was or how she had come to be in the course of these conversations. This is not to suggest that Rosemary lacked a sense of self. But it may be that, through her strong identifications with others, particularly her mother and children, the interview and narrative form did not offer her the means to account for her self. She simply is as she *does* and there is little more for her to tell. Rosemary does not account for her subjectivity through a reflexive narrative. Rather she feels and understands her self through her actions and particularly her mothering. In some sense, her interviews do provide the sense of a narrative. It is contained in the transformation from 'street road worthy' four year old child 'trolling' around the streets to the mother who is concerned above all to protect her children and keep them away from 'people outside'.

## **Conclusion**

This 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 narrative of the self can involve 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 narrative. Gender, 'race' and class were clearly important in this account. Sally presents herself in processes of being 'girdled' and/or 'womaned'. Through this account, we see her struggling to change her class position and subjectivity. This transformation is framed within a story of how she naturally does not fit within that position. Within this narrative, Sally is not only 'raced', but also 'race' 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 has been transformed. As a result, she says that she has found a new way of being.

Whilst Sally's account provides a dramatic example of how narratives can illustrate processes of subject construction and subjection, the other three narratives in different ways show how this is not always the case. Some selves are not readily reproduced through narrative. The idea of 'turning points' within a life do not always prompt a narrative account of a life. Madeleine had turning points in her life, but she was not able to use them to construct a coherent narrative of the self. This was partially because she occupies too many different (classed, raced and gendered) positions to give a sense of wholeness and coherence to her self. The turning points 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. Therefore a narrative form of transformation has little to offer her as a genre for communicating her subjectivity. Finally, Rosemary lacks the sense of agency required to see any interest in telling a story of her self. Her subjectivity is framed by doing, not telling. Therefore she is not interested in looking to the past or exploring her sense of self.

These different accounts and their different use or non-use of different 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 particularly about the use of narratives as a means of accessing them. A narrative approach is only going to be appropriate in certain circumstances. In addition, the narrative genre may be restrictive for communicating subjectivity, demanding as it does 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 which are not so readily produced with this genre?

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