

Mishler, G. E. (1999). **Storylines – Craftartists’ Narratives of Identity**. Harvard University Press.

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In recent years the method of narrative analysis, an umbrella term covering a large and diverse range of approaches has received a great deal of attention in the social sciences. Narrative research is a core in Mishlers’ work going back to initial studies on the stories elicited in studies of medical interviews.

This book on craftartists’ stories as identity performances uses narrative inquiry as an alternative to the traditional behavioral and cognitive models of identity in psychology. Central to the narrative inquiry are qualitative methods for studying discourse and a case study approach.

In this review of the book I will not go through a description of each chapter. Instead I would like to emphasize Mishlers’ work on 1. The concept of life-course trajectories and the process of adult identity formation. 2. The methods of narrative analysis and narrative studies of identity and 3. The romancing of the crafts.

### **The concept of life-course trajectories and the process of adult identity formation**

The core of the book is the analysis of 5 unstructured interviews with craftartists conducted by Mishler years before the writing of this book. The main force of the book is certainly the glance into the detailed analytic work on the interview transcripts. Central parts of the book are devoted to the empirical work on each of the five interviews with the concept of adult identity formation as the scaffolding of the report.

Mishler sees his work as a step toward a relational conception of identity that contrasts with a view of identity as an immanent property of the individual. One interesting part of the book is the many detailed analysis of how the respondents position themselves vis-à-vis others, align or contrast themselves with others and mark the boundaries of their relationships.

Mishler discusses problems concerning the concept of identity along the following dimensions:

- universality versus inter-individual variability in personal and career trajectories (chapter 2),
- intra-individual continuities versus discontinuities in the achievement of adult work identities (chapter 3)
- coherence versus tension and contradiction in life stories (chapter 4)
- and individual versus relational conceptions of identity (chapter 5).

As an important discussion in the book it is argued that diversity and change in lives and discontinuities in the career paths of the craftartists are typical rather than usual. Moves along a

career path are often set in motion by events not actually related to career demands such as divorce, depression or moves to another city.

One very interesting dimension that Mishler discusses concerning identity formation is the differences in cultural definitions and prescriptions about gender-appropriate roles and behaviors. While the woman craftartist often finds it difficult to combine her role as an artist, mother, woman, wife etc. and tends to experience conflicts between career demands and her often traditional upbringing as a supporting wife or caring mother, the male craftartist may run into trouble realizing his creative potential as an artist and at the same time make a living supporting his family. As Mishler argues the understanding of identity formation requires a critical stand that contextualizes the individual lifecourse culturally, socially and historically concerning for example how culturally available forms for representing oneself are both appropriated and resisted. It is not the case that every woman craftartist may experience the same type of conflict, but that images and representations of the larger sociocultural and political space of society are transformed in each type of identity performance.

As an important point Mishler makes the case that if our stories are to represent accurately our lives they have to leave room for the complex interplay of multiple and often competing plot lines. The "good" narrative may not be the coherent story marked by continuity and progressive change.

### **Narrative analysis and narrative studies of identity**

Mishler's main point choosing the narrative inquiry is the limitations of available methods for understanding variation in development. Although the work of Erikson, Freud and Piaget informing the understanding of the concept of identity were also based on a case study approach these studies have not been viewed as a "scientific" approach. Instead classification systems derived from these theories were adapted to fit the requirements of more acceptable experimental and quantitative research methods. Unfortunately the quantitative models for research has had difficulties retaining and respecting differences among individuals concerning trajectories of identity.

No specific part of the book are devoted to the central issues of a narrative methodology, but questions about the use of a narrative approach can be said to permeate the whole book. I find it worth mentioning a few central points concerning the empirical work made by Mishler.

First and foremost Mishler in an exemplary way draws attention to the structural dimensions of speech and texts from the interviews. No lines are drawn without a careful look at the specific sayings by the respondent and the interviewer seen as a whole. This points to the fact that Mishler views the verbal reports of the interview as negotiated meanings produced in the social relationship established during the course of the interview. Mishler sees narratives as socially situated actions and points to their location in the ongoing stream of social interaction in the interview. The craftartists' stories of their career trajectories must be viewed as co-produced through the dialogue in the interviews constructed in the on-going process of trying to make sense of each other. As I see it, this is certainly not a trivial point.

As recently argued by Kvale (2002) much research conducted in the qualitative research tradition misses the point of paying attention to the asymmetrical power relations of the research interview and the specific role played by the interviewer in producing the specific answers.

Mishler positions himself as a sceptic of a narrative mania in the human sciences emphasizing individual agency concerning the construction of personal narratives. He mentions in his reference to Atkinson & Silverman (1997) (Mishler, p. 17) the need for a critical analysis of macrostructural features such as power and oppression of our interview-society. Unfortunately he does not go very deep into this discussion on a general level, but keeps to his analysis of the specific social interactions of the interviews. We are told how the stories of the interview can be seen to be co-constructed in the dialogue between interviewer and respondent in the particular interview situation, but Mishler does not really discuss for example his own role and position as a researcher at a broader level. In chapter 2 of the book (p. 27) he points to the importance of the rhetorical function of statements and questions in interviews. As a reader I agree with Mishler when he mentions that while rhetorical strategies have recently become an important topic in anthropology, their role in the research interview merits more attention.

### **A romancing of the crafts?**

It is not only the approach of a narrative analysis of identity that concerns the author. There can be no doubt that Mishler has a love affair with the crafts that serves as the nerve of his work. He writes about his own experiences doing photography serving as an entrance door to the study of the lives of craftartists. As a reader working in a network of researchers often externally criticized for a too harmonic and romantic view of the communities of craftworkers I find the first part of the book concerning a romancing of the crafts very interesting.

Mishlers' choice of the practice of craftartists as a research area was inspired by a general interest in the crafts as a sort of nonalienated work. Mishler especially mentions the work of Morris and his romantic, redemptive and utopian view of the handicrafts. With Marx this points to a critique of the dehumanizing impact of industrialization and a valorization of the handicraft in the face of mass-industrialization and mass production.

The turning point in the study preparing this book came about as Mishler learned that the five persons interviewed in this study were not craftworkers learning their trade as apprentices but craftartists with advanced degrees from universities. They did not make a living either from mechanized industrial work or from handiwork but were struggling with the discrepancy between crafts and the fine arts. At the same time they were seeking to realize their creative potential while trying to make a living and support their families. Their reality challenged Mishlers' romancing image in that they placed their work in the current socioeconomic and cultural context.

Mishlers' example shows the force of an open-ended research method that allows the researcher to consider the respondents' actual context of living and follow up on the themes

important to them. The themes important to the respondent may in this respect challenge the theoretical background and the taken for granted concepts of the researcher, but I am curious why Mishler, when he mentions apprenticeship learning, does not refer to the huge field of research on learning in the crafts seen as a form of apprenticeship learning represented for example by (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Some sort of comment on this apprenticeship learning research could have made it clearer why Mishler sees an opposition between having advanced degrees from the university and engaging in some sort of apprenticeship learning?

### **The future of narrative research on identity formation**

As a reader I find that Mishlers' book on craftartists' narratives of identity represents an important step towards a relational conception of identity. The force of the book is certainly the use of a narrative approach that does not focus on the construction of a "good" and free-floating narrative of the personal life, but constantly refers to the influence of broader macrostructural dimensions on the story of a lifecourse. In a more critical reading of the book I find that the work on a narrative research on identity formation certainly must be seen as a work in progress. Much research is needed to fully argue for an abandonment of a huge psychological and experimental research tradition focusing on a concept of identity based on the individual subject. Some questions concerning the use of the term development still puzzle me after the reading of the book.

Mishler argues that no universality or fixed sequence can be claimed concerning identity development, but that variability and discontinuity are part of the lifecourse of the craftartist. Why then keep to the term development that in very much research on child development traditionally refers to some sort of maturing process - a term that implies an almost identical process in every individual case? Being critical of the use of the term development it may also carry the assumption of progression along a path to a (better) future, but what if the change of identity belonging to a certain community of practice involve some sort of phasing out of one's former understanding of oneself belonging to other communities of practice? Is the term development then the right term for the description of changes in for example a career path when identity change may involve phasing out aspects of one's understanding of oneself? I think these are some of the questions that still needs further consideration if the concept of identity is to account for variability and discontinuity as part of a lifecourse.

### **References:**

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