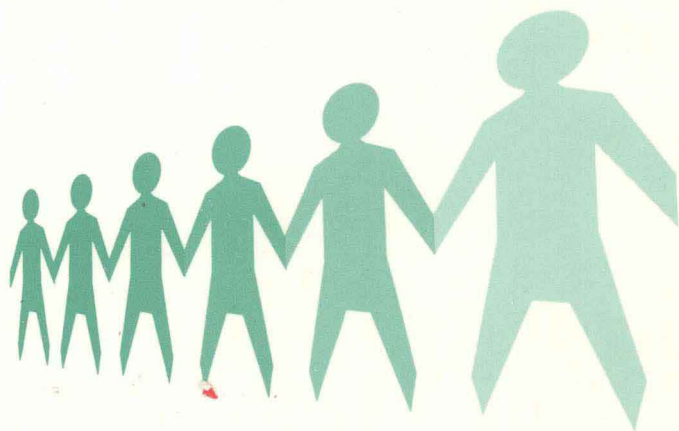


# *Exploring Identity and Gender*



## The Narrative Study of Lives



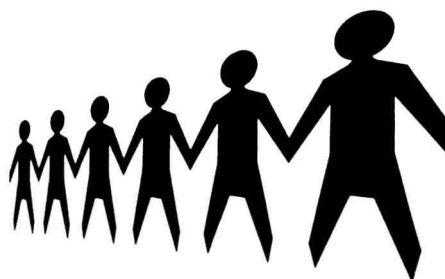
Amia Lieblich  
Ruthellen Josselson  
editors

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## The Narrative Study of Lives



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The Narrative Study of Lives ■ Volume 2



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# Introduction

As the concept of *narrative* finds its way into more areas in psychology and, generally, the social sciences, those of us who are professors begin to create courses to introduce advanced students to the field. I followed in the footsteps of Professor Yoram Bilu, who has been giving a seminar about life stories in anthropological studies (anthropologists have always been more adventurous than psychologists and sociologists!), and I offered last year, for the first time, a seminar on narratives and life stories in psychology. Fifteen graduate students participated in theoretical and empirical discussions, presenting papers based on life story interviews, biographies, and autobiographies.

At the end of the year, I asked my students to formulate the main lesson they drew from the seminar. Here is what they concluded:

1. Listening to life stories of normal or outstanding people (as distinguished from clinical case studies) is a new, powerful way to study people and therefore to do psychological research. But the way of the narrative is subtle, complex, and more difficult than we expected before trying it ourselves.
2. It is certainly true that there is no truth. Truth is evasive and multifaced and cannot be pinpointed in simple terms. Reality and personality are constructions of a subjective process, taking

place on several levels, within a certain context, in a certain language. We are often insecure in our own conclusions.

3. Yet, within this struggle and relativity, was usually a core of consensus, of a number of facts, traits, or processes about which different subjective accounts seemed to agree. The world, therefore, is not entirely chaotic: We can make some sense of it.

Generally speaking, these points reflect our own sense of the field of the narrative study of lives. In the year since the appearance of the first volume of the annual, Ruthellen Josselson and I E-mailed almost daily from Jerusalem to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and back, discussing manuscripts, reviews, and feedback we received for *The Narrative Study of Lives*. Our involvement with the yearly production of the series has become a major feature of our lives and our relationship. Mutual support flowed across the continents to sustain the constant effort needed for bringing up this infant by its two parents. At the same time, we were also encouraged by the explosion of new books, articles, and conferences, using the concept of the *narrative* in a wide variety of contexts, that people brought to our attention. This is a time of great creativity as people explore ways to tap the meaning of this concept via both theoretical and empirical work by using qualitative and/or quantitative approaches to the story.

But What is a narrative? we kept asking and being asked by our students and colleagues, as when we had prepared the first volume of *The Narrative Study of Lives*. Is it just any story, or history; does it have to conform to a certain structure or carry a message; how is it related to identity, culture, and language; does it differ, in any systematic way, from life-as-lived and constructed by women and men? What is important and what is marginal about a life story? And perhaps more than any other question: What is a good life story worth publishing? Looking at the published literature, as well as the manuscripts we reviewed during the year and the contributions to the present annual, there are a great many ways to use the term *narrative*. We might summarize this variety of voices under the construct of “creative ambiguity.” At this stage of the exploration for meaning, which

precedes theory building, determining the boundaries of the concept and its exact meaning can only be harmful to progress in the field. We are not yet at the stage of having a theory of the narrative in the social sciences. We are not after definition, but after intelligent applications of the use of narrative and its use for the understanding of human lives.

At the same time, we are attentive to the emergence of a core of consensus. If all chapters of the previous and present volumes of *The Narrative Study of Lives* are taken together, in all their variety, the common denominator that comes to the fore has to do with the contributors' awareness of subjectivity and reflexivity in their means of knowing. Our contributors were sensitive to the interactive linkage of researcher-writer and her or his field of study. They expressed concern about the nature of their data and methods and were aware of their personal relationship with their subject matter. They were open to alternative ways to approach their material and reflected on the choices they made. At present it seems to us that the importance of reflection in qualitative research and analysis, which has become the mark of *TNSL*, cannot be overemphasized.

Of the eight chapters in this volume, five are focused specifically on the lives of girls and women. One of the chapters (Reinharz, Chapter 2) deals with the ways feminist writers experience biographical research about other women. Three of the chapters (Bar-On and Gilad, Chapter 3; McRae, Chapter 7; Stewart, Chapter 8) describe and analyze lives of particular women. One chapter (Rogers, Brown, and Tappan, Chapter 1) presents a study about ego development in adolescent girls. This emphasis on the feminine experience is not incidental. To be sure, the editors of *TNSL* are two women, and although we did not deliberately search for contributions dealing with women's lives, that might be part of the explanation. But, more central, we think, is that feminist research and postmodern approaches to knowledge have developed hand in hand in the last decades. Women have been storytellers in many cultures, yet their different voices were not heard enough in the public sphere. We do not accept the simple notion that the narrative is a feminine

domain or research tool or that women speak in the language of stories. Rather we think that the subjective-reflective nature of the narrative coincides with the feminist ideology of compassionate, unauthoritarian understanding of the Other. Although more traditional theory and empirical work in the social sciences concentrated on men and used predominately positivistic, objective models, it is understandable that work by women investigators and/or about women's lives has been in the forefront of alternative research paradigms in the social sciences and the humanities.

Annie G. Rogers, Lyn Mikel Brown, and Mark B. Tappan (Chapter 1) illuminate the puzzle of the statistically significant loss in ego development in girls by counterposing clinical interviews, psychometric measures, and interpretive analyses. Listening to the individual voices of girls talking about their lives and relationships, the authors gain an understanding of the change in the girls' sense of themselves as they move into adolescence. Although a traditional measure of ego development indicates regression or loss at this age, the individual narratives of girls can be constructed and understood in terms of resistance against the debilitating conventions of female behavior.

Shulamit Reinharz (Chapter 2) writes about biographical work in which women constructed the lives of other women. She explores the dilemmas and emotional experience of such writings. The importance of the approach to biography that Reinharz proposes is in going behind the scenes of the writing process and the final product, exploring the experience of the biographer—a topic usually eliminated from the published biography. This focus puts in the foreground the researcher's involvement in her study and her relationship to the topic she writes about, which cannot be ignored anymore if modern epistemological conceptions are used.

Transitions, which are indeed the backbone of so many narratives, are the focus of two chapters of this volume. First, Dan Bar-On and Noga Gilad (Chapter 3) present a narrative analysis of three generations of women in an Israeli Holocaust survivor's family. They demonstrate how a narrative is trans-

ferred and reformulated between the generations of a certain family, thus expressing not only an individual identity but also a historical or familial heritage. In the case of Holocaust survivors, each generation has its own way of narrating the past, based on approach and avoidance of the traumatic memory, affected by the passage of time and the process of normalization. Second, Sherry L. Hatcher's (Chapter 6) work deals with the transition of youth, showing that in the absence of clearly prescribed rituals in modern culture, young people create personal rites of passage. Hatcher asked undergraduates what it was like to leave home for college and used their narratives to understand the transition. Coding these narrative data by themes, Hatcher produces a broad, vivid analysis of modern initiation rites.

Richard L. Ochberg (Chapter 4), who writes about the life and personality of a middle-aged man, uses this narrative to demonstrate that stories are not merely told by individuals, after the fact, once they have experienced their lives. On the contrary, people live out the events and affairs of their lives in a storied manner. Ochberg argues that there is no way to disentangle living a life from telling or performing a story: Individuals conduct their life episodes in patterns similar to the plots of stories. So is social science a story told in terms of the forces that shape human behavior. "Storied life" probably will become a core idea in the evolving field of narrative study.

Dalia Etzion and Amitai Niv (Chapter 5) present an innovative narrative study in the field of business administration and organizational behavior. They started from a larger project of studying inventions within organizations and discovered that certain styles of management could be accessed only by concentrating on individual cases over time. For the complex phenomenon of a manager in his organization, the narrative approach is highly illuminating and, in the present study, leads to the description of the "magician" style of management and its pitfalls.

Jill F. Kealey McRae (Chapter 7) starts her chapter with a narrative of her search for the women she writes about, embedded in her own personal-cultural quest as an Australian woman

who moved to the United States. Her chapter deals with the ways a story serves to uncover and construct a personal identity, which is a major interest of *The Narrative Study of Lives*. She uses both anecdote and folkhistory to reinforce the case that stories construct identity and life. However, according to McRae, this is not only the case for autobiographical stories, for the short stories that people tell about others and about their moral and social universe also reveal their own selves.

Abigail J. Stewart (Chapter 8) proposes a model of links between an individual's developmental stage and social events, arguing that the focus or impact of a social event will differ according to the life stage during which it is experienced. From dealing with the meanings of the women's movement for one cohort of 91 women, Stewart moves to the narratives of three women who all mentioned the women's movement as a significant event in their lives—in college, in early adulthood, or at midlife.

Thus the second volume of *The Narrative Study of Lives* samples and demonstrates different uses of the *narrative* concept and methodology in the study of women's and men's lives in society. Although the selection of chapters has overrepresented work of psychologists in the area, their work seems to us to include the thinking of other disciplines, merging into issues in history, philosophy, sociology, literature, and anthropology. Narrative work has a universalist core and embraces a wide range of perspectives.

—AMIA LIEBLICH

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# Interpreting Loss in Ego Development in Girls

## *Regression or Resistance?*

Annie G. Rogers  
Lyn Mikel Brown  
Mark B. Tappan

Janet is a 12-year-old seventh grader at Laurel School, a private girls' school in the Midwest. As a participant in a 5-year longitudinal study of girls' development, she is engaged in a 2-hour interview in the midst of the school day. Sitting in a small room with a woman interviewer, she begins to describe how she knows when she is being her true self and when she is not being herself, when she is "wearing a mask."

"When I'm with my really good friends, we're all ourselves, and if one of us is doing something that one of us doesn't like, then we'll tell them," Janet begins, describing what it means to be her true self in the vernacular of "being ourselves." She immediately adds, "The people I'm with, they're like part of who I am, we're such good friends," as if to explain to her interviewer

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AUTHORS' NOTE: An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the American Psychological Association 99th Annual Convention, San Francisco, August, 1991, as part of a panel entitled "Resisting Silence: Women Listening to Girls."

why this question about being her true self evokes her entire group of friends. We notice the sequence of Janet's ideas: Speaking openly about "something that one of us doesn't like" is followed by a chord of connection—"they're like part of who I am," so that Janet's capacity to disagree openly is linked to her sense of being herself in connection with others. Janet also draws clear distinctions between being herself and wearing a mask: "When some people are like in a clique or something like that," she says, "then I wouldn't really be myself. It would be kind of putting on a mask and not being myself because I wanted to be part of this group of people."

Two years later, when she is 14 and in ninth grade, Janet describes herself and her relationships differently: "A good relationship with the people around me means I'm not having conflicts with the other people." Avoiding conflict this year, however, means sometimes not "speaking up." Janet no longer clearly distinguishes when she is being herself and when she is wearing a mask, but instead protects herself from engaging in conflict by silencing herself and leaving relationships:

When you are in a big group of people and they are like saying something like about another person and you want to tell them to stop, but you are surrounded by a whole group, you really can't say, you just can't, because they would get mad at you, you know. And it is better if you don't speak up because you can just walk away and leave them alone and they can be with their ideas and you can still have your own thoughts. But, I don't know.

The content of Janet's narrative of relationships has shifted over the years, it seems, from a focus on open disagreement with close friends and a strong sense of connection with others at 12, to avoiding disagreement and leaving others in order to hold on to her own thoughts at 14. Moreover, even the grammar of Janet's speech has changed. Speaking in the general "you" instead of the personal "I," Janet seems to distance herself from

the immediacy of her thoughts and feelings. She stops and starts, unable to articulate fully the reason she silences herself, "You really can't say, you just can't."

We have been interested in studying the ways adolescent girls, like Janet, understand themselves and their relationships and how their understanding changes and develops over time. As a number of recent studies document, early adolescence is a time of psychological risk and vulnerability for girls (see Ebata, 1987; Elder, Nguyen, & Caspi, 1985; Petersen, 1988; Petersen & Ebata, 1987). In particular, the move into adolescence affects girls' self-conceptions and, for example, marks a sharp increase in episodes of depression among girls (Rutter, 1986) and a sharp drop in self-esteem and self-confidence, at least in white and Latina girls (American Association of University Women, 1991; Block, 1990). Girls begin to develop disparaging body images at this time (Langlois & Stephan, 1981) and to experience problems around eating (Dreizen, Spirakis, & Stone, 1967; Garner, 1981). In addition, girls tend to lose ground in their assessments of their academic achievement and in their aspirations during adolescence (Arnold, 1993; Bernardez, 1991). There is clearly a need to understand what is happening in the lives of girls and why adolescence is such a time of psychological distress and risk.

We have been exploring girls' changing self-conceptions by using both interpretive analyses of in-depth clinical interviews and a more traditional psychometric measure of "ego development." Listening to Janet talk about herself and her relationships, we notice that her voice seems to change over time, and we believe this shift in voice signals a change in Janet's sense of herself as she moves into adolescence. The changes from her seventh- to ninth-grade interviews reveal developmental strengths, as well as vulnerabilities or losses. In the first interview, for example, 12-year-old Janet reveals particular strengths: She sounds more honest in her relationships, more vital and alive, more consistently in contact with her own thoughts and feelings, and less conflicted about speaking of what she knows from experience. In contrast, 14-year-old Janet can more clearly distinguish and hold different perspectives, also a developmental strength.

She describes herself as someone who can act autonomously of the group, keeping her own thoughts to herself and leaving others when she believes she cannot speak and be heard.

It seems to us, however, that along with new strengths the older Janet is also vulnerable in new ways. At 14, Janet leaves the group to hold on to not only her "own thoughts" but also her feelings, her reality, her very self. The older Janet struggles to name her experience clearly, to hold on to the veracity of her perceptions. Again and again she stumbles into confusion during the course of this 2-hour interview. The phrases "I don't know" and "I can't explain it" now mark areas of her experience she cannot fully articulate. "But I don't know," Janet says after she talks about leaving her group of friends, and then her voice trails off into silence. In short, it appears to us that Janet's connection to herself is endangered when she is 14 years old in ways not manifest when she was 12: She seems to struggle at 14 to know what she knew so clearly about herself and her relationships at 12.

Our interpretation that something of importance was lost or endangered between ages 12 and 14 seems to be supported by Loevinger's (1976) Sentence Completion Test (SCT). When we traced changes in Janet's level of ego development, we found that she "regressed" from seventh to ninth grade—moving from Loevinger's conscientious-conformist stage to the conformist stage. In other words, according to Loevinger's theory, she moves from self-awareness edging toward a view of herself as differentiated, independent, and self-critical, to a retrenchment in a simpler and less differentiated conformity to the rules, maxims, and conventions of the group to which she belongs.

Interestingly enough, Janet is not alone in this pattern of "regression"—50% of our sample of 28 seventh-grade girls also regressed in ego development level as measured by the SCT between seventh and ninth grade. In addition, 45% of our sample of 56 10th-grade girls regressed in ego development level between 10th and 12th grade.

What are we to make of this unexpected phenomenon of regression in ego development in this sample of educationally advantaged adolescent girls? Is it possible that Janet and her

schoolmates really are moving from a more to a less “sophisticated” and differentiated self-understanding? Or might this phenomenon connect to, perhaps even be explained by, girls’ changing relationship to the culture in which they live as they move from childhood to adolescence?

Recent work following girls into adolescence (see Brown, 1989, 1991; Brown & Gilligan, 1992, 1993; Debold & Brown, 1991; Debold & Tolman, 1991; Gilligan, 1990a, 1990b; Gilligan, Brown, & Rogers, 1990; Rogers, 1993; Rogers & Gilligan, 1988) has explained such changes by suggesting that girls move from a rich relational world of childhood in which it is possible to express the full range of human feelings, into a culture of constraining conventions of femininity that pressures girls to narrow their feelings and to modulate their voices. Young girls tell psychologically astute stories of human relationships, rendering in exquisite detail their connections with themselves and with others. A struggle breaks out at the edge of adolescence, however, when these same girls are encouraged to disconnect from their knowledge, to see and hear the world largely as it has been seen and spoken about by men. What girls knew in childhood seems as if it cannot be known, and what girls want to say suddenly seems unspeakable. Facing into this crisis, many girls struggle to remain connected to their childhood knowledge, actively resisting repressive conventions of femininity and fighting openly for authentic relationships.

Yet if girls actively resist the cultural conventions of women’s lives—that is, if they engage in a “political resistance”—they are sure to cause trouble in school and in their families and to risk ostracism even in their own peer groups (see Gilligan, 1990a). But if girls cut themselves off from their own knowledge and enter the conventions of feminine goodness, their development from this time on will be marked by signs of what we have come to call “psychological resistance.” Capitulating to the culture by learning to muffle or silence their distinctive voices and to speak in another tongue—the voice of the culture—girls withdraw their real thoughts and feelings from relationships, they move “underground” to protect themselves, replacing real or genuine relationships with unauthentic or idealized relationships (Brown, 1989; Brown & Gilligan, 1992;

Gilligan, 1990a, 1990b; Rogers, 1993). In this way girls gradually forget and cover over what they knew as children and then may begin to speak through the bodily symptoms that plague women in this culture: depressive syndromes, anorexia, and bulimia (Steiner-Adair, 1991). Clearly whatever strategy or combination of strategies girls adopt has a psychic cost.

Interestingly enough, when Loevinger and her colleagues (1985) observed a significant loss in ego development among young women attending a private, academically competitive university (participants in her longitudinal college student study), she remarked, "A disturbing possibility is that for some significant fraction of students, particularly women, college is a regressive experience" (p. 960). Although Loevinger's finding of a pattern of regression in college women has not been further explored empirically or explained theoretically, she hints that moving into institutions of higher learning may affect dramatically and negatively young women's experiences of themselves.

Loevinger's theory (like other stage theories—e.g., Kohlberg 1984; Selman, 1980) revolves around the movement into, acceptance of, and movement out of conformity to conventions, ideally a progression toward a critical perspective on those conventions. We wondered whether the regression identified by the SCT might reflect girls' resistance to cultural conventions that negate or devalue girls' knowledge and experience. If this were the case, as girls begin to move into "conventional" stages of ego development, they necessarily would struggle with the distinction between their experiences and those conventions (also see Rogers & Gilligan, 1988). Furthermore girls' struggles with the culture's conventions would not necessarily be discerned through an analysis of ego development levels. The theory itself does not distinguish between the different ways boys and girls may enter conventions of modern Western culture. Rather, ego development theory, like most cognitive developmental theories, assumes a universal path of human development—assumes that development is unconstrained by culture and that all people move into and out of "conventional" ways of thinking and feeling with equal ease. In other words, all people are assumed to be in the same basic relationship to the dominant