University as Narrative Therapy: The Reconstruction of Dominant Self-Narrative through Post-Secondary Education

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Abstract

This research investigates the ability of post-secondary education to play a role in the reconstruction of personal identity. Drawing on White and Epston's work in narrative therapy (1990), this reconstruction is understood by placing it within a narrative framework and is therefore seen as a process of re-authoring. An in-depth interview was conducted and the recollections that the participant offered were coded by drawing on the Innovative Moment Coding System (IMCS) developed by Gonçalves, Ribeiro, Mendes, Maros, and Santos (2011). This was used to identify contradictions to the participant's previously asserted dominant self-narrative. Analysis yielded the presence of consistent themes and *protonarratives*, defined by ambiguity and assertion. These protonarratives inserted themselves into the participant's new self-narrative, enabling her to situate herself and her relationship to her education in a new, more meaningful way.

Introduction

One of the most unexpected things that I have come across in University is how it provides opportunities to understand things of which we are already aware. It takes the phenomena of everyday life and dissects them, leaving them open to observation and vulnerable to interpretation. It is one of the most exhilarating things that I have been a part of through my development, but is also scary; it forces those who participate to re-evaluate how they have seen the world and the things within it. For me, this manifested itself as the re-evaluation of how I situate myself and my identity through the way I narrate my experiences. University did not show me things that I had never seen before. Rather, it showed me how to see and talk about things that I had been surrounded by my entire life in a different way. By offering alternative discourses and the ability to conceptualize old truths in new ways, post-secondary education provided, for me, the means to re-write my story. The present research investigated how other students, past and present, discovered this process of re-authoring as a function of their education.

What is Narrative?

An official definition of narrative is inherently difficult to identify because of its layered, interdisciplinary position in academia (Polkinghorne, 2007; Heinen and Sommer, 2009). The elusive nature of its abstraction and applicability is accepted and asserted by leading figures in the field of narrative research

(see Clandinin and Connelly, 1998; Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, and Orr, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1991; 2010) because it is believed that human experience can be expressed and understood only by acknowledging the place of tension between "fact" and subjectivity. This is not to say that there is no agreement among researchers as to what narrative is; rather, it is understood that, just like experience, narrative is shaped by context and its definition is dependent on the situations that precede, surround, and follow it. At the most basic level, a narrative is a plot structure that is established through a sequence of events that is reported coherently and in temporal order (Richert, 2006).

An English teacher could define narrative using literary terms and analogies, and with emphasis on plot structure, character development, and temporal ordering, the core qualities of literary narrative share many of the defining factors of the psychosocial concept of self-narrative, but with important distinctions. Self-narrative differs from literary narrative not only in the establishment (or rejection) of the concepts of "truth" or "fiction" but also in the sense of autobiographical contingency and the storied nature of our identity. To view ourselves as products of narrative means to see who we are as a direct result of the events that have taken place in our lives. We see these events temporally, as happening in the past, present, and/or future, and their significance to us is established and reinforced by our retelling of them. Therefore, these stories are representations of our experiences as they take place through time (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007). What events we choose to pay attention to and in what way we interpret them are reflective of how we have come to know ourselves and our surroundings. That is, narrative represents the way humans come to know the world (Bruner, 1986). The ability to connect our stories into a coherent self-narrative allows us to answer the question of who we are and establishes a dominant self-narrative that determines how we situate and talk about ourselves in the world. By looking at a person not as a bounded subject existing statically within itself, but as a product of narrative, enmeshed and inseparable from context and constructed by the cyclical relationship between internal evaluation and external events, one can begin to identify and understand the malleable, constructed nature of our identities.

White and Epston (1989; 1990), two of the founding researchers and practitioners in the field of narrative therapy, have drawn on some of the theories developed by French intellectual Michel Foucault to describe the role of power and knowledge in the formation and performance of narrative. Foucault (1980) defines power not as a limiting or repressive agent, but as a proxy by which truths are legitimized and certain ideas are normalized. This normalization governs how we come to know the world and ourselves through its production of "unitary" knowledges (White and Epston, 1990). These knowledges are not necessarily universal, but they constitute an "objective" reality. From a narrative perspective this means that in society there are cultural narratives available that people draw on to talk about their lives and identities. These cultural narratives often represent "objective" realities and draw upon unitary knowledges in their construction (White and Epston, 1990). Issues often arise when a person's experience cannot be defined or explained using these cultural narratives, leaving the person with a fragmented, incoherent, or constricted self-narrative (McLeod, 1996). For example, the idea that a "normal" succession of life events involves finding a partner, getting married, and having children can lead to unhappiness, frustration, or depression in those who do not have these experiences but have no other narratives to draw on to describe their life events. It is often a case such as this, with narratives

that are closed, incomplete, or confused, that leads to a person's decision to seek therapy (McLeod, 1996).

Narrative Therapy

Some argue that any type of "talking cure" is a form of narrative therapy (McLeod, 1997) in that story telling is inherent to many, if not all, therapeutic processes and therefore a common factor in the field of psychotherapy (Angus and McLeod, 2004). Post-structuralist (see Combs and Freedman, 2004), feminist (see Madigan and Law, 1998), and systemic (see Papadoupoulos and Byng-Hall, 1998) therapists have drawn upon White and Epston's (1990) approach to narrative therapy, which has led to different definitions of narrative therapy due to the different theories and philosophies that contribute to its application (Wallis, Burns and Capdevila, 2011). What is common and fundamental to all of these and other applications of narrative therapy is that it is constructivist: it assumes that people live in cultures and that a person is shaped by their interaction with their environment and often by the availability of the above mentioned "stock" narratives (McLeod, 1996).

Generally, the "presenting problem" in therapy, as conceptualized from a narrative perspective, is a life story that is self-defeating (McLeod, 1996). These stories could be defined as "closed" (Gustafson, 1992), "patchy" (Omer, 1993), or "silenced" (Lister, 1982), and the person is often left with an incoherent narrative and therefore experiences psychological distress (McLeod, 1996). This problem can manifest itself in themes perpetuating meaninglessness or stories that are repetitive, consistently ending in negative outcomes. Therapeutic interventions are varied and are applied only in certain circumstances (McLeod, 1996). Some include the use of metaphor to explain a story, while others use autobiographical writing or offer stories in which the client can situate themselves as characters (e.g., a folk tale; Gersie, 1991). Russel and Van den Broek (1992) suggest that the intervention strategies applied by the therapist can be categorized into three types: the differentiation of rival narratives, the judgment of one narrative to be superior in coherence and applicability over another, and the offering of the support to allow a weaker narrative to be inserted or incorporated by the dominant one. The intervention and overall goal of narrative therapy is to loosen the hold of a narrative that is too strong and work to decenter it (McLeod, 1996). This allows a more differentiated and therefore more flexible self-narrative to assert itself and describe, more powerfully and accurately, the unique reality of the client.

The present study posits that this reconstruction of dominant self-narrative can take place not only in a therapy context, but also within post-secondary spaces. In other words, university can act as narrative therapy. Three core capabilities of higher education, as identified by Nussbaum (1997; 2006), include critical self-examination, the development of a *narrative* imagination (italics added), and the desire to be an ideal world citizen. Drawing from these concepts, I engaged with this research under the assumption that higher education can work to deconstruct the dominant narratives of those who attend and offer the opportunity to decenter long-held assumptions about cultural, social, and therefore personal identity. Considering the increased attention in academia to the transformative potential of higher education (see Freire, 1998) and the importance of integrative learning (see Booth, McLean, and Walker,

2009), I propose that research that focuses on the lived experiences of those who attend post-secondary institutions is a vital avenue in realizing the multi-faceted and often unrealized potential of higher learning. The present research modestly attempts this endeavor by drawing on one woman's experience and transformation through University by identifying what are known in the narrative field of psychology as "innovative moments."

Self-Narrative and Innovative Moments (IMs)

Not only is narrative the expression of our realities, but a determinant of our actions (Gonçalves , Matos, and Santos, 2009). This idea has developed from the assertion that humans understand, perceive, and make choices based on how they have come to narrate their lives (Sarbin, 1986). This concept of narrative as a regulatory agent of action distinguishes the "I" and the "me" in the construction of life stories (James, 1890, as cited in Gonçalves et al, 2009). The "I" is a manifestation of the author and the "me" is the actor; the "I" writes the story while the "me" experiences it (James, 1890, as cited in Gonçalves et al, 2009). The authorship process is a result of constant tension and dialogical negotiation between different parts (or voices) of our selves (Hermans, 1996; Sarbin 1986). In other words, an individual is made up of many different authors, each representing different aspects of her identity and each gaining, losing, and sharing power depending on the situation she find herself in. It is in this negotiation that a person is given the freedom to realize potential, to open herself to change, and also to be vulnerable to what she does not understand. When they lose this complexity, individuals often find themselves being authored by one voice (Gonçalves et al, 2009), dominating their self-perception and blocking the ability of their "I" to take into account all of what happens to their "me."

This dominant self-narrative (Ribeiro and Gonçalves, 2011) can result in a story that is problem-saturated. In a therapy context, if a client narrates his story as one of depression, his identification with a depressed character can render invisible situations in which this narrative is contradicted (Ribeiro and Gonçalves, 2011). More simply, and less clinical: a person who narrates himself as clumsy may ignore all instances of his having shown coordination. Oblivious to contradiction, the person only sees confirmations of his problem and the "I" that is consistently reinforced influences the person to live a particular plot. It is impossible for a self-narrative to contain all the events that take place in one's life, so it is helpful to look at the domination of the problematic narrative as constantly trying to assert and maintain its power over contradictory evidence (other voices), rather than seeing the contradictions as struggling to be heard. These contradictions, or "innovative moments" (IMs), are possibilities for a new story to develop, and are the first step in the reconstruction of a new narrative (Ribeiro and Gonçalves, 2011)

White and Epston (1990) assert that IMs (what they term "unique outcomes") happen constantly but are ignored by the dominant, problem-saturated narrative. A key process of many forms of narrative therapy involves taking these innovative moments and transforming them into new stories (Freedman and Combs, 1996; Bruner, 1986). This is not a simple mission, and the therapist is tasked with the role of editor and encourages the client to not only identify these IMs and tell the story of what happened and

who was involved, but also describe the feelings and thoughts that surround the moment of contradiction. This emphasis on temporal ordering, action, and consciousness is vital in order to take an event and allow it to become important enough that it gets inserted into a new narrative (Gonçalves et al, 2009). This is the role of narrative therapy: to help identify these innovative moments and offer the support and knowledge needed to allow them to evolve to a point at which they can be inserted into a self-narrative, therefore changing the way a person talks about herself.

Heterogeneous IMs

Gonçalves et al (2009; 2011) assert that there are five different types of IMs that occur during the transformation of dominant self-narrative. These are categorized as action, reflection, protest, reconceptualization, and new experience. There is no "correct" order in which these IMs present themselves, and some actually take place at the same time (Gonçalves et al, 2009; Gonçalves and Ribeiro, 2012; Santos, Gonçalves, Matos and Salvatore, 2009; Santos, Gonçalves, Matos, 2011). It is important to note that though there is no correct order for these to occur, reconceptualization and performing change/new experience IMs are most commonly seen towards the end of therapy, once a significant change has begun to occur (Santos, Gonclaves, and Matos, 2011). Each represents an opportunity for change, with reconceptualization IMs being the most common in "successful" therapeutic contexts (Gonçalves and Ribeiro, 2012). The following are short descriptions of what each IM looks like, according to Santos et al (2009). These are short explanations and they will be expanded upon in the Results/Discussion section.

Action IMs: Involve a specific act that works against the problematic self-narrative and are different from what is traditionally observed. Examples: coping behaviours or exploration of solutions.

Reflection IMs: Manifest as a thought or feeling that challenges the problem or allows the person to think about the problem in a different way. Examples: a reconsideration of the cause of the problem, reflecting about cultural or social factors contributing to the problem.

Protest IMs: Can involve an action or a reflection but also allows the person to take an assertive stance against the problem or the effects that the problem has on him. Examples: firm attitude against the problem, placing oneself in an opposition to the problem and those that support it.

Reconceptualization IMs: Involve two elements: an identification of a difference between the past and present self, and also the ability to describe the processes that contributed to this change. Examples: reassessment of relationships, references to new identities.

New experience/Performing change: These appear as actions, plans, or new experiences that would not have been possible before the new narrative was established. Examples: plans for a new project, investment in new relationships.

Method

I recruited participants by displaying recruitment posters on university campuses in the city and via e-mail communication to faculty members of post-secondary graduate programs and members from the Women's Studies Departments of local universities. I hoped to recruit three to four participants with the intention of drawing on examples of unique lived experience and attributing change in the participants' identity to their interaction with post-secondary education. By conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews, I asked participants questions regarding educational background, family relationships, and personal growth/identity change, with the intent of eliciting stories of lived experiences from the participants about their time spent in places of higher education. I recorded, transcribed, and analyzed the interviews for evidence of innovative moments throughout their development in University.

By drawing on the Innovative Moment Coding System (IMCS) developed by Gonclaves, et al (2011), I identified the participants' past innovative moments through analysis of the interview transcriptions. This coding system was created as a tool to detect changes that take place in therapy sessions by analyzing audio recordings. This method is applied under the understanding that the interviews that took place were not metaphorically framed as "sessions"; rather the interview was an opportunity for the participant to recall what changes took place for her during her university career (i.e., the metaphorical "narrative therapy"). I used the differentiation theory of innovative moments to identify change in the participants' narratives by identifying times during which each of them took place over the course of her university career. I chose not to include an Action IM in my analysis because the interview offered the opportunity for the participant to talk about a process that had *already* taken place. Action IMs are simplistic innovative moments that are identifiable in therapy as part of an on-going process. The context of this research does not support the presence of this type of innovative moment because of the participant's awareness of how the action was influential in her identity change, thereby changing what would have been categorized as an Action IM in therapy into a more complex recollection (i.e., reconceptualization).

Traditionally, the innovative moments coding system (IMCS) developed by Gonçalves et al (2011) involves at least two judges who are trained to code for innovative moments and must agree on their existence and definition. This ensures a higher level of inter-judge reliability and therefore more "valid" results. I am aware that as the sole analyst, this level of reliability is non-existent in this study. I used the coding system as a structural template to enable participants' identity changes to be organized and reported understandably and coherently, and do not presume that this analysis would look the same if another person contributed. In saying this, I do not ask for my knowledge claims (my analyses) to be granted validity based on my level of certainty concerning my accuracy; rather, the reader is asked to make a judgment on whether or not the evidence presented is convincing enough to allow them to accept my interpretations (Polkinghorne, 2007).

As I used narrative therapy as a *metaphor* for what can happen in post-secondary spaces, and not as a literal interpretation, it was expected that not all concepts would transfer or relate directly from one

context to the other. This means that any transformation that takes place in University was not seen as *explicitly*psychotherapeutic during its development; rather it was an outcome of how an environment that fosters self-actualization actually works to produce therapeutic growth, *independent* of a clinical context. For example, it was not assumed that any of the participants would tell a story of arriving at university with a "presenting problem" that they wished to fix. What was expected was a manifestation of a new and preferred life narrative.

The gender and class criterion that were applied in this research were chosen because of their relevance to the researcher. This is to say that, though it was expected that each participant would bring a different and ungeneralizable identity to the interview process, I felt it necessary to establish and assert my vulnerability in falling under the categorization of the researched. In saying this, it is important to establish that I reject the titles, if not entire concepts, of both "authentic insider" (Narayan, 1993) and "researcher-as-detached-observer" (Lal, 1996), and assume that I, like any person who attempts research involving the interaction with others, constitute a fluid subject that occupies more than one position as a person and as a researcher.

Participants

Relying on research on the experience of economically disadvantaged and working and lower middle class students in higher education (e.g., Morrison, 2010; Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012; Marshall and Case, 2010), with particular emphasis on female experiences (Lucey, Melody, and Walkerdine, 2003; Evans, 2009; Reay, 2003), I recruited participants based on three primary criteria: (a) self-identification with the female gender, (b) being of the first generation in a family to attend a post-secondary institution, and (c) having felt that their university experience has, in some way, been transformative. Though more than one interview took place, one participant's narrative became the focal point of the research. The most significant reason for this was the time constraint put on the research project, as all of the interviews that took place after Ann's (pseudonym) were conducted at a much later date. Though the interviews were transcribed, the data was not able to be analyzed, and was therefore unable to be put into the final paper. Ann's interview evidenced a particularly rich narrative and therefore provided the ability to formulate her story as a case study.

Ann, a white woman in her mid-twenties coming from what she termed "a middle class, blue collar family," told a story of her transformation by identifying the struggles and tensions she experienced as a woman in what she described as a "very male-centred" university. In the process of completing her Women's Studies graduate degree at the time of the interview, she was able to conceptualize her identity change powerfully and coherently by asserting a self-narrative heavily influenced by her identification with feminist theory and methodology. Analysis of the interview revealed many instances of "reconceptualization IMs" (as defined by Santos et al, 2009; Gonçalves et al, 2009; Ribeiro, Bento, Gonçalves, and Salgado, 2010), the type of innovative moment most predictive of successful therapy outcomes (Santos et al, 2009). The following section identifies three things: (a) what I understood to be Ann's previously held dominant self-narrative, (b) the processes (IMs) that took place that prompted and

supported change in her self-concept and eventually promoted self-actualization, and (c) a new self-narrative asserted by Ann that dispels previously held assumptions concerning her identity and her relationship to education.

Results/Discussion

Evidence of a pre-existing dominant self-narrative

Ann (A): "My understanding of grad school (pause) -- when I applied for it I knew what it was but before that I never had any interest in it. I thought it was, you know, what my sister did. You know like, you take some courses, you do a big project and then you walk out with a job"

(A): "I have this personality of pleasing people and you know, doing – getting the highest grades in whatever way that means without cheating. If possible I will do that rather than be, like, questioning."

These two excerpts identify how Ann conceptualized the academic process early in her university career. The first represents a canonical narrative of seeing and talking of the role of education as solely a means to employment. Canonical narratives express how life should be lived, or how experiences should be interpreted in a certain culture (Bruner, 1990). People often draw upon a "stock" of canonical narratives when telling their stories, and in doing so situate themselves in a wider societal context (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2008). She presents a simplified narrative ("You know, you take some courses, you do a big project, and then you walk out with a job") "heteroglossically," meaning in someone else's words (Bakhtin, 1981). The lack of identification of the original author insinuates that it is some*thing*, rather than some*one* that exists in society that provides her with this narrative, of which she assumes I am already aware (by her use of "You know"). In doing so she situates herself as a person within a place that makes available narratives of academic achievement as a linear process (course work of increasing difficulty, final project) with a finite end (employment/economic security).

The second excerpt provides an example of what *could* be identified as a problem-saturated story if the quote was a response to a question like "what brought you to therapy?" or "what would you say is something you would like to change?". As it is, Ann's self-observation is only evidence of a previously-held dominant narrative in the context of a new and therefore contradictory self-narrative that becomes apparent at other times in the interview:

Liza (L): If you could go back in time and talk to yourself, like the younger you or the introductory year you, what would you tell her?

A: To not study so hard because you're going to be doing it for a long time… A. And B… it doesn't matter. Because what I thought mattered then – what matters is so subjective and I didn't realize that. I always measured myself back then against what I thought, against what […] like what I saw in society as what was important and how you were supposed to go about your university career. That's how I was doing it at first. So like, you go to class, you read everything, you memorize everything, you do like three extra

hours of work. That's what I would do… so that's what I would tell myself, because that stuff doesn't really matter. You learn for you. Learn from what you want to do."

The contrast between how Ann describes herself (and university) in the first and last excerpts provides the opportunity to not only ask, but to answer the question: what is the central *rule* of the problematic self-narrative? (Gonçalves et al, 2011). In Ann's case, the problem is conceptualized as a recurrent theme of rigidity and constriction, a result of what she, at one time, considered the prototype of an ideal student ("getting the highest grades possible without cheating") and also as the way that she saw academia as a bounded place, unable to permeate anything outside of traditional educational achievement. The primary effect that a problematic self-narrative has on someone is its ability to constrain the way meaning is constructed (Gonçalves et al, 2011). Ann's view of education and her role within it is defined by the *rule* of circumscription; figuratively speaking, she drew a line around what she saw as the limits of education.

The identification of this rule provides the framework for understanding the contradiction or exceptions (i.e., innovative moments) (Ribeiro et al, 2010, p 205). In this particular example, this is represented in the same sentence: "rather than be, like, questioning." Ann's awareness of "questioning" as an alternative method of learning shows her ability to identify the constrictive nature of the kind of education she once associated with academia. She now asserts her awareness of this alternative by the advice she would give to her younger self: "-- that stuff doesn't really matter. You learn for you. Learn from what you want to do."

Reflection IM

A: "I can't really recall the specific moment as to when I stopped memorizing and started thinking."

Gonçalves et al (2006, as cited in Santos et al, 2009) define a reflection IM as a process of thought that renders the problem illegitimate. This particular example provided by Ann when talking of "different ways of thinking" expresses a form of meta-thought; that is, she was communicating her thoughts about the change in her own cognition. Having established that the *rule* of Ann's previous dominant self-narrative was one of inflexibility stemming from pre-conceived and constrictive notions of educational success this innovative moment renders that notion illegitimate by identifying the difference between memorization and thinking.

The word "memorize" is defined as "to commit to memory; learn by heart," while the definition of the word "think" is "to have a conscious mind, to some extent of reasoning, remembering experiences, making rational decisions, etc." (dictionary.com, n.d.). Ann's reflection evidences dissent with her previous devotion to the memorization format of learning (the problematic narrative) and then a shift to an alternative method of interaction with information, one that promotes critical thinking and, one can assume, the opportunity for "questioning."

When IMs begin to provide alternative understandings of the "problem," these alternatives eventually group together, thematically, and are then represented by a protonarrative (Ribeiro and Gonçalves, 2010). These protonarratives exist beneath IMs and are identified by asking the question "If this IM grows into a new narrative, what will be the new rule that the narrative communicates?" (Ribeiro et al, 2010). For example, a person suffering from depression who narrates their experiences using a rule of "pessimism" will eventually be able to insert a protonarrative of "optimism" if enough IMs that represent this rule take place and are given a chance to be identified and developed (Ribeiro and Gonçalves, 2010).

Ann's identification with "thinking" rather than "memorizing" indicated her move from a safe, or at least understandable, place made up of "rights" and "wrongs" to one of uncertainty, made up of opinions and critical analyses. I believe this move can be attributed to the development of a protonarrative of *ambivalence.* When someone interacts with an unfamiliar person, institution, or society, the experience can offer the opportunity to question their ability to use previously held assumptions about themselves and their construction of reality to understand the new phenomenon (Ribeiro and Gonçalves, 2010). In other words, the way a person organizes or narrates their lives cannot always equip them with the means to understand new experiences. Ambivalence is inherent in this place of uncertainty. Instead of Ann being able to respond to a question with a "correct" answer, she acknowledged the importance of being able to think rationally and critically even if that means providing an answer that, by someone's definition, would be wrong.

Protest IM

A: "And I got it wrong but I went up afterwards and I know this prof really well and really enjoyed his classes… and he was like, 'Well, you're right, but you're not right for this test.' And I was like, 'But that's not how life works,' and he said, 'Yeah.' Like he completely understood what I meant… He gave it to me…because I had a logical argument."

This excerpt was taken from a story Ann told about a mark she received on a test in an introductory course she was required to take in her third year. As a recollection, the story can be defined as a reconceptualization, as Ann was aware of the significance of her past actions and their contribution to her present development, but if we attempt to remove the event from the context of the interview, it becomes clear that this action was one the first times that Ann thought *and* acted against the "problem." The phrase "but that's not how life works" represents a protonarrative of *assertion;* it is a manifestation of what a new voice allowed her to say. The above mentioned ambivalence innate in Ann's prescription to "thinking" rather than "memorizing" remains present in her assertion that there was more than one right answer to the question she apparently got wrong. I chose the word assertion because of its obvious contradiction to how Ann defined herself in her first years of post-secondary education:

A: "I think I spent a lot of time – too much time with my head down."

Ann's former actions were indicative of an educational environment that fostered conformity. At that time she performed a narrative that now no longer tells her truth. Her particular wording of "life" insinuates that she had begun to see her academic achievements not as evidence of "being the best student" but as tools that she could use in situating herself in a wider context (i.e., life outside of academia). This new voice of *assertion* represented confidence to place herself and her education in a position that uses ambivalence constructively by rejecting dichotomies of right or wrong and allowing space for uncertainty, thereby allowing her academic knowledge to occupy spaces in "real" life.

Reconceptualization IM

A: "But university did help me figure out who I am. I took on – not a whole new identity, a part of my identity. I believe in multiple identities so a new identity I guess that I've never identified with before. So I didn't identify as feminist before, even though I probably was and I had people tell me I was but I didn't know what that meant. So university didn't just teach me what feminism was, it actually allowed me to take it on and interpret it into like my actual life, not just – you know what I mean? Not just memorization – oh 'this is feminism, this is feminist theory, this is what feminists do.' No, it actually became a way of life for me and it has shaped and changed everything I've done since I've learned about it – so, in a great way, that's what university did for me."

In this excerpt Ann not only situated herself as a changed person, but described herself by drawing on her belief that she is composed of more than one identity, which is a central principle and credence in narrative therapy work (White and Epston, 1990). As stated above, reconceptualization IMs involve two things: a differentiation between a past and present self or identity, and the identification of the process that allowed that change to occur (Ribeiro et al, 2010). The new identity that Ann claimed to have incorporated (feminist) is presented as a way of life. This situates her narrative as a mechanism for action; by being able draw on her feminist identity to talk about herself, she allows it to influence the decisions she makes and therefore the things she does.

The process that Ann identified as the cause of her identity reconstruction is university itself ("…university didn't just teach me what feminism was, it actually allowed me to take it on and interpret it into like, my actual life…"). To equip students to engage with their surroundings and use their education as a means to interpret and understand their experiences is a function of education that enabled Ann to develop. When talking about her education it becomes impossible to separate the topic from herself. The dominant narrative ruled by circumscription has had to make room for the protonarratives that Ann's education provided for her. Ambivalence and assertiveness were introduced, changing her place within academia and also changing the role of academia within her. The new rule of her self-narrative can be described as one of *emancipation*. Signifying a release from constraint, this rule allowed her narrative to construct education as a tool that crosses borders and occupies more than one position in Anne's life. The fluidity that results from this new definition of academia breaks the boundedness that at one time defined Ann's notions about the potential of academia to affect her character.

<u>New Experience/Performing Change IM</u>

A: "I feel that University intellectually stimulated me, so now I will not settle in my life. I'm not going to settle for a job, or an experience that is easy or just because it's there to make money. I feel that university actually challenged me… to go higher, to go for more, because I have been challenged a lot here and it hasn't been easy at all and I know now after spending seven years in university that if you love it, then it's going to be fun no matter how hard it is and that's what – the last seven years were actually fun for me and I really enjoyed it. So now when I go out into the real world – insert air quotes – 'real world' umm, I'm not going to settle."

As an innovative moment that references potential change or generalizes the new narrative to future endeavours, I chose this excerpt to exemplify performing change because of how Ann drew attention to the limitations of economic success ("…a job, or an experience that is easy or just because it's there to make money…") in being able to give her what wants once she leaves school. In light of her desire to "go for more" she actually positions herself against the cultural narrative of education as a means to employment, and in doing so constructs and performs a personal narrative that enables her to reject money as a measure of worth; money is now the thing that she will not settle for. As mentioned previously, Ann had begun to see the knowledge she learned in school as applicable to many, if not all, aspects of her life and this applicability is evident in her blatant scepticism of the existence of a divide between academia and other spaces. Her phrase "insert air quotes – 'real world'" makes it clear that though there are very real socially-constructed borders around academia, she has stopped drawing on those grand narratives to explain her experience. Her new dominant narrative, defined by the rule of emancipation, allowed Ann to challenge what she termed "societal pressures" concerning the acquisition of wealth as a measure of success. Instead, Ann strives for intellectual stimulation and has accepted that though her path is not linear, the narration of the process will echo her sense of reality as opposed to being only a topical repetition of canonical plot lines.

Final Discussion

de Lauretis (1988) asserts that feminist theory is based in assumptions that are constantly questioned and critiqued by the very people that use them and that a theory begins when an analysis becomes conscious of itself and begins to question its own applicability. Those who engage in this process of deconstruction often need to renegotiate how they have understood the phenomenon that the theory was used to describe. From this, uncertainty arises and the person has to situate themselves differently in relation to their surroundings. Leaving safety, and embracing risk and ambiguity, borders are renegotiated and the thoughts and actions that result are left floating in displacement. I believe that it is this place of doubt in which Ann has found herself. The protonarratives of assertion and ambivalence allow her to take risks and be fully present in this place of uncertainty. In doing so, the dialogical negotiation of her self-narrative keeps her from becoming too comfortable with a theory, world view, or life-story, leaving her intellectually, linguistically, and epistemologically liberated. I believe that this has not left her feeling lost; rather, it has left her feeling free. I am not saying that Ann does not have strong opinions, or feel passionate about certain topics. I am saying that her opinions and her passions, as they are a part of her, will continue to be receptive of new information and will therefore continue to evolve.

When beginning work on this research, one of my expectations was to interact with women who felt a tension concerning their loyalty to their family and their new situation in a middle class environment. This was not a recurring theme in Ann's interview. This is not to say that she did not convey struggle in her recollections of her interactions with people from her home town, but my expectations of a complexity among the pride, sadness, anger, or shame concerning the acquisition of education were not realized. I believe that this may have had to do with her identification with the middle class ("I come from a pretty middle class, blue collar family"): a phrase I did not expect to come across in the interviews. What stories we tell and how we situate ourselves within them are most commonly representations of the social positions we occupy and as such, Ann's story was indicative of her positions as a young, white, able-bodied woman. Future research will endeavour to create more inclusive and safer spaces for those who do not occupy those social positions.

Conclusion

The "standard social scientific view" (Thomas, 2011, p 22) concerning the generalizability of the case study approach is often talked about by drawing on issues of reliability, validity, and accuracy that the narratives of empirical science make available. Vickers (1965) claimed that even a large number of case studies can be misleading, as they cannot be removed from the context in which they took place. The present research was not conducted to produce a product that refutes the idea of a case study as context dependent. Instead, the applied methodology of investigating the subjective truths and lived experiences of those who participate challenges the empirical and positivist concepts of universal truths and objective realities. In other words, I *assert* that the data collected in each interview are inherently unique and therefore unable to be generalized to any other person or population.

The concept of a "problematic self-narrative" can be interpreted in different ways depending on the lens that one looks through. Cognitive therapists may see it as a cognitive schema (see Beck, 1976; Padesky, 1994) while a psychodynamic therapist may define it as a core conflictual relationship theme (see Stirn, Overbeck, and Pokorny, 2005). I did not look at all of these different psychological paradigms and choose the metaphor of narrative therapy because I believed it to be the most applicable. Rather, I saw what happened to Ann as inherently narrative, and though other methods and psychological concepts can be used to explain her experience, I believe that at a fundamental level all of them are a different narration of the same phenomenon. In cognitive-behavioural therapy, a reflection innovative moment can be thought of as contradictory to a maladaptive thought while a protest innovative moment could be seen as the first step towards recovery. This research is not presented to argue that Ann's experience can *only* be described as a narrative reconstruction. Instead, it provides evidence that there is always more than one way to tell a story.

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