

# LIFE NARRATION AND SOCIAL WORK

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# 1. ABOUT THE CONCEPT

- LIFE NARRATION (= elämäkerronta)
  - here refers to the way people construct their lives and tell about it to themselves and others (life story = elämänkertomus)
  - can be concentrating to only one theme (e.g. unemployment, parenthood, homelessness...)
  - is usually fragmented
- OTHER CONCEPTS:
  - NARRATION OF LIFE
  - LIFE AS NARRATIVE (ELÄMÄ KERTOMUKSENA)
  - BIOGRAPHY
  - AUTOBIOGRAPHY

## 2. LIFE NARRATION AS A THOUGHT

### (AJATTELUTAPA)

- People construct their lives as stories
- People narrate constantly about their lives
- Irrelevant is whether the story is true or not
- Relevant is the way of telling the story and what is told
- People want to tell about their lives
- What seems to be irrelevant in the story may have significance and requires attention
- The story is connected to time and place and to whom it is told (inner reader)
- Every story is unique
- The story is the beginning of the change:
  - telling, interpretation, understanding and reinterpretation (uudelleentulkinta)
- Different means of working with clients (writing, interviewing, using pictures, videos, taping, memory work, individually or in groups)

### **3. USE OF LIFE NARRATION IN SOCIAL WORK**

- personal history:
    - temporal facts e.g. date of birth, history of events such as unemployment, sickness etc.
  - individual events of life as experiences:
    - what meanings the teller gives to her/his experiences
  - individuals in social and cultural settings:
    - how do social and cultural constructs and politics promote or prevent the possibilities of individuals, communities and groups
  - identity construction:
    - how does the teller identify her/him self
- empowerment

## **4. HOW TO WORK NARRATIVELY (1)**

- DIFFERENT MEANS OF PRODUCING THE STORY:
  - WRITING
  - INTERVIEWING
  - USING PICTURES
  - LIFE HISTORY LINE
  - VIDEOS
  - TAPING
  - MEMORY WORK
  - INDIVIDUALLY OR IN GROUPS

## 4. HOW TO WORK NARRATIVELY (2)

- DIFFERENT MEANS OF ANALYSING THE STORY

- CONTENTS

- themes (parenthood, childhood, employment, sickness etc.)
    - separate events (narratives are a combination of different stories in stories - events of life)
    - epiphanies (meaningful life events – turning points)
    - social relations – who are the people that appear in the story, how and what do the teller tell about these people and their relation to them)

- WAYS OF TELLING

- written life narration is usually constructed in a certain way
    - is the story “comedy”, “tragedy” or something else
    - oral story is always fragmented - what seems to be the red threads

- LANGUAGE

- what does it tell about the interaction
    - does the teller use metaphors, beliefs, normative expression etc.
    - parts of the story which are rich in description (detailed, consisting emotions) = tihentymä in finnish

- THERE IS NO RIGHT WAY OF READING OR ANALYSING THE STORY

# **SOCIAL WORKER AS AN ACTOR IN CLIENT' S LIFE NARRATION PROCESS**

- **THE SOCIAL WORKER HELPS THE CLIENT TO UNDERSTAND**
  - the significance of telling the life story
  - its relation to her/his identity
  - the decisions she/he has made in life and their relation to life course and identity
  - other peoples actions to the course of the clients life, the decisions she/he has made and her/his actions
  - the meaning of society, culture and moral values in the client's life and how they occur in the life story
  - how past, present and future is connected
  - how it is possible to reinterpret one's life story and how it can help to construct a different future
  - that a person can accept a broken identity and still have means to change one's future and live a satisfactory life
- **CLIENT DOES THE WORK – SOCIAL WORKER MAKES QUESTIONS THAT HELP THE CLIENT TO WORK**

## 5. IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

- SOCIAL WORK IS IDENTITY WORK
- WHAT IS IDENTITY?
  - different definitions in variety of academic disciplines: philosophy, psychology, cultural, history and social sciences
  - Zygmunt Bauman (2001): No other dimension of life has not received more attention than identity.
  - Most simply defined: Identity is a person's idea (käsitys) and experience of her/him self. Identity as a concept collects the answers to the question: Who am I? (Ojanen 2003).
  - According to Paul Ricoeur (1992) the answer to the question "who" is not enough. We also need answers to the questions "what" or "what kind" (mikä tai minkälainen).

(Translations from Finnis to English are Kirsi's.)

# Psychology versus Social Sciences in Defining Identity

- The main question concerning the ways psychology and social sciences define identity are: is identity stable, constant and invariable or is it constantly variable and fragmented
- psychology has had a significant role in seeing and defining people. (Rose N. 1999)
- Criticism from social sciences and feminist research:
  - The way psychology connects individual's problematic experiences to the individuals themselves is itself problematic.
  - Psychology gives only minor notice or ignores totally the social relations which causes e.g. oppression
  - Social and cultural context causes changes in psychological experience
  - Social constructionism and postmodern identity

# Social Constructionism and Postmodern Identity

- Postmodernists claim that fragmented identities are typical in contemporary times. Individuals move between different identities. Postmodern individuals choose a suitable identity for different contexts.
- Jane Flax (1992): Identity has a constructionist part but individuals still have a core self. Desirable qualities connected to the core self are independency, unity and rationality.
  - The core self is a self that has been constructed in relation to early care givers.
  - The core self makes the individuals to maintain the ability to create narrative self. Narrative self contains the past, present and the future at the same time.
- Postmodern identity represents our time which is ruled by individualism and superficial media and virtual worlds. (Kellner 1998).

# Social Psychology and Identity

- sees human beings as individuals in relations to other people as members in different groups and societies in a certain socio-cultural time and place
- brings forth such areas which sociology and psychology does not see (Saastamoinen 2001).
- Sociology: "seeing from distance". Every day practices are regarded too abstractically
- Difference between psychology and social psychology: in social psychology the idea of self is born in social processes in which the existence of language and meanings are emphasized through reflexivity.

# **Holistic Conception of Humankind And Identity**

- According to holistic conception of humankind a human being is seen as cognitive body and a part of a larger ecosystem. (Burkitt 1991; 1999, see also Rauhala 1982).
- Identity is constructed in interactive relations to other people and the whole living environment.

# Ian Burkitt on Identity (1999):

- the human being is an active actor in her/his environment.
- interaction between a human being and her/his environment is grounded in three relations:
  - 1) The relations which change reality. Relations in which the human being is related to material environment. E.g. working and means of work. Could be different every day practices at home or at work, the relation to physical and material home.
  - 2) The relations where we make use of symbolic communication. This reflects the individual's position in necessary interactive networks. Social interaction constructs identity through language and symbols in relation to other significant people. This means that linguistic communication is not the only way to communicate. Important are other symbolic ways to communicate – communication based on different senses, as sight, hearing, touch etc.
  - 3) The relations which consists of power. These are social constructions in which peoples' positions bring forth use of power. In these relations a human being can in her/his actions strive for maintaining or challenging the means of the use of power. Here the human being is in relation to society and culture.

# **Every Day and Social Practices as Means of Constructing Identity**

- Society, culture, nature (e.g. meaning of work, civic duties, how does the society support e.g. mothers, fathers, myths, beliefs, images, art, fairytales, urban environment/rural environment).
- Places and spaces: Home (different meanings of home: as a physical, material place, as an experienced space including the relations between people in home, as a symbol), Kidergarden, school, working place, place for exercising ones interests etc. (as above)
- Social relations: relations at home and to other significant people
- Moral views, emotions (good vs. bad, moral emotions e.g. guilt and shame)
- Visions about future and reflexivity
- ....?