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Class and Narrative Accrual: Personal Troubles and Public Issues in Five Vignettes

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Abstract

This paper develops Bruner's (1991) notion of narrative accrual, in conjunction with 'life-stories' and 'event-stories', to focus on the accumulation of experiences as a contributor to working-class identity. Situated between Mills' (1959) personal troubles and public issues, and framed by Nouri and Helterline (1998) argument that identity is framed by social interaction with signification systems and other people, the author's own experiences as an early-career academic in two different British Universities – one more research-oriented with a predominantly middle-class student body, the other more teaching-oriented with a more class diverse student body – are utilized to forward 'personal narrative accrual' as a way of both conceptualizing and unpacking class associations, reflecting on Warnock's (2016) fivefold typology of alienation, cultural capital, stereotyping/microaggression, survivor guilt/impostor syndrome and middle class networking. Ultimately, this paper considers the interrelated problems of working-class identity, career development, and 'playing the game' through autobiographical vignettes, and suggests the potential application of personal narrative accrual in decreasing feelings of isolation in academia by working-class academics.

Keywords

Personal narrative accrual, working-class academic, life-stories, event-stories

Introduction

In this paper I would like to put forward the idea of 'personal narrative accrual' as a way of thinking through the development of working-classness through individual experiences, particularly in relation to life-stories and event-stories - or what Giele and Elder (1998) call 'event histories' - that contribute to our sense of identity, to what constitutes the 'self'. I say that 'I would like to put forward' because I am not entirely convinced that I can: the reason for this is a combination of second-guessing (in this case, whether or not it is acceptable for me to use my observations about differing treatments of early career staff at different academic institutions in the United Kingdom as a form of analysis about working-class identity) and the ongoing anxiety that accompanies impostor syndrome, an affliction that numerous academics have unpacked in more detail than I am going to offer here (see Long, Jenkins & Bracken 2000; Parkman 2016; Chapman 2017). My tentative approach is compounded by other concerns, including the personal – should I be sharing details about my experiences with strangers in this way? – and the public, namely how best to format and

structure the piece so as to appear suitably ‘academic’ to a wider audience. These worries echo pieces by other working-class academics, on blogs and in national newspapers (Anonymous Academic 2017).

This opening reflection neatly encapsulates not only the sorts of ongoing worries that early career academics (henceforth ECAs) have but also the constantly negotiated intersection between work, the private lives of individuals, and the internal narratives that shape and reshape the working-class academic. Issues around who is considered working-class in academia and the ways in which class is enacted, practiced and reproduced has of course been covered in considerable detail (Brook & Mitchel 2012; Reay 1997; Warnock 2016), so my offering is primarily around situating class experience as a gradual accumulation of individual life-course and event-stories, building on Warnock’s assertion that ‘storytelling can help to reduce the sense of alienation and fears of inferiority which plague many from the working-class’ (2016, p. 37).

Crucially, I see the forwarding of personal stories from working-class academics as resting between what Mills (1959) calls personal troubles and public issues. Mills argues that to be able to resolve troubles we need to understand the relationship between the social circumstances of the individual – ‘the social setting that is directly open to his personal experience and to some extent his willful [sic] activity’ (1967, p. 395-6) – and the individual’s biography. Public issues are, as Mills explains, ‘matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the limited range of his life’ (1959, p. 8), so my intention in this short piece is to consider the potential implications of considering intersections and relationships between personal troubles and public issues, namely how individual experiences can be used to think through broader issues of class in academic life.

That is not to suggest this is entirely new territory, as recent interjections by Skeggs (2017) in relation to her role as an academic and a de facto carer have demonstrated, as well as Fletcher’s (2015) reflections on the uprooted nature of early career academics. But I want to suggest that, in adapting Bruner’s (1991) notion of ‘narrative accrual’, class can be understood as the stories we tell ourselves, particularly in connecting ‘life-stories’ and ‘event-stories’. As such, my contention is that the class identity of early career academics is forged in relation to experiential narrative accrual in the academy, and that this accumulation of events and stories reinforces predominant notions of impostor syndrome and alienation. Aside from the catharsis of writing this article and reflecting on my own experiences, I also feel that part of my motivation echoes Mazzei and Jacksons (2009) suggestion that by sharing narratives (of success or suffering) there is an opportunity to give voice to a wider set of concerns about the perpetuation of class anxiety in academia.

But how working-class am I? Am I a fake, my lectureship the result of an ongoing clerical error? Can I make myself feel like less of a charlatan by telling stories about how I got where I am today? These sorts of questions, some possibly rhetorical, lie at the heart of the nagging anxiety that accompanies many of my activities as an early career academic: is my anxiety caused by the feeling that my identity is bound up in my class position – that this differs from the class position of my contemporaries – or is this in and of itself a fictional construction?

Part of the confusion here is bound up with the problem that, in a narrative sense at the very least, the ‘me’ that I refer to is an agglomeration of different stories. Stories, as Warnock (2016) suggests, are powerful and significant, especially in relation to constructing and understanding the self as a working-class academic. The self, as Nouri and Helterline (1998,

p. 37) argue, (developing Mills), is “located” between the personal and the social by the two fundamental parts of social interaction – other persons and signification systems’. To appreciate and disentangle my ‘self’ as a working-class ECA I should consider the interconnections between my social relations with others (family, other academics, students, administrators, and so forth) and my relationship with types of signification system (career progression paths, the structure of the academy, different structures within different institutions and the like): these social interactions inform and reciprocate class relations. It is useful to consider then how stories about my experience of academia – my social interactions - can be understood. In terms of literature on narratives, there are a variety of approaches to conceptualizing experiences that become stories, including (but not limited to) life-stories, and event-stories and histories.

Life-stories and event-stories

Life-stories – that is ‘a series of events and circumstance that are drawn from a well of archetypal experiences common to all’ (Atkinson 1998, p. 121) – are important because of their ability to reaffirm our own experiences in the context of others, thereby situating the individual within a social milieu. Atkinson continues that to fully get to grips with our own lives and identity, to understand the meaning behind our experiences, we need to put stories together: the reason for this is not solely a kind of therapy, though arguably this piece has that function in part for me, but as a way of moving towards clarification and to facilitate reflection that has not previously been possible (1998, p.125-8).

Atkinson’s reading is mirrored by McAdams (2001, p.100) who describes the life story as how individuals ‘provide their lives with unity and purpose by constructing internalized and evolving narratives of the self’. This approach, it is argued, comes as a response to observations by psychologists and others about the ways in which patients tended to frame their experiences in a narrative fashion, implying the underlying value of a life-story approach to understanding individual experiences. This is further emphasized by Thorne (2000) who posits that the individuality of a person is reflected in their narratives they construct. But how can these individual narratives be connected to broader social issues around class?

Event-stories, by contrast, operate at a level of abstraction from the individual, in the sense that whilst the individual is obviously present, the focus is on the social context of the event. Sandberg (2016) suggests that ‘the unit of analysis (the story) is concrete stories about particular events, not summarizing attempts to go to the core of all the different stories told by an individual. (p. 155). Furthermore, it is ‘one way of recounting past events, in which the order of narrative clauses matches the order of events as they occurred’ (Labov, 2010, p. 546). What we have then are individualized, temporalized life-stories, combined with the contextual information provided by event-stories.

To return to Mills, this confluence of life and event-stories – personal troubles and public issues - is akin to the broader project of the sociological imagination, that to comprehend the ‘problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society’ (1959, p. 111) enables us to think through the problems of class, in this case, in an institutional sense. In essence, the working-class identity of ECAs can be viewed as the relationship between life-stories (the individual or personal level) and event-stories (the social/contextual level). What I want to suggest is that the working-class identity of ECAs is a cumulative thing, a gradual

collecting of individual experiences of social interactions across the life course, what I am calling personal narrative accrual.

Narrative accrual

Simply put, to paraphrase Baker (2006), narrative accrual means that our experience of the world is shaped by our repeated exposure to sets of related narratives that accrue over time, ultimately defining what we understand by a culture, tradition, or history. More specifically, returning to Bruner's (1991) defining work on the narrative construction of reality, we see that,

‘narratives do accrue, and, as anthropologists insist, the accruals eventually create something variously called a "culture" or a "history" or, more loosely, a "tradition." Even our own homely accounts of happenings in our own lives are eventually converted into more or less coherent autobiographies centered around a Self acting more or less purposefully in a social world’ (1991, p. 18).

Narrative accrual works at a level removed from the individual (history, tradition), but the individual is situated in relation to the accumulated narratives, so even our everyday experiences come into contact with the social, reflecting and refracting our life-stories with event-stories: narrative accrual describes, to an extent, this process. As with the interrelationship between the self, and signification systems, life-stories and event-stories overlap, unintentionally conspire and generally misinform in a way which can lead to biographical destabilization (Verd and Lopez 2011). This is important because it suggests that part of the anxiety experienced by working-class academics can be considered in relation to the separation between the individual and contextual levels of narrative. For instance, how are our life-stories influenced by event-stories or the other way around? To offer some level of stability, I am suggesting that tweaking the concept of narrative accrual – whereby culture and tradition reflects *both* individual histories and collectivised cultures (such as the University as an institution) - would accommodate the intersection of life and event-stories. This creates a cumulative, overarching narrative - the collection of stories we tell ourselves within a particular context - that effectively becomes the self. Simply put, my working-class identity involves my individual experiences in relation to broader institutional frameworks and interactions, and the accumulation of these two factors over time – the personal narrative accrual – no matter how disjointed, is what constitutes a working-class identity. To demonstrate how this might produce particular types of class anxiety, I am going to offer five vignettes related to Warnock's (2016) typology of working-class academic experience (alienation; cultural capital; stereotypes/microaggressions; survivor guilt/impostor syndrome, ego and networking in middle-class culture). These vignettes will thereby foreground individual experience in the broader context of social interaction over time.

Personal narrative accrual from the perspective of an early career academic

Bearing in mind Busk and Goehring's (2014) methodological caveat about seeing the working-class intellectual through self-disclosure not as aloof but as something viewed from the inside out, I will proceed by considering instances in which my experiences with the academy have impacted my own class awareness. Here I am thinking these events through autoethnographically, writing down that which has hitherto only been part of the internal

stories I tell myself about who I am and how I arrived at my present location. In doing so I am conforming to Atkinson's (1998, p. 123) idea of narratives 'read as mostly the researchers own description of what was said, done or intimated'. In the introduction to their edited collection, Muzzatti and Samarco (2006, p. 3), identify autoethnography, or the use of personal narratives to explore social systems, as an 'outsider's methodology' appropriate for interrogating the working-class academic's outsider position. The stories I am going to reflect on will be unpacked as they happened, or rather how I have constructed them as happening.

To assist in framing, I am going to first offer a brief autobiographical sketch to demonstrate my progression from unemployed potential PhD student through to a permanent position as a lecturer, a process which has taken eight years. I am going to follow this by illustrating examples of life-stories in an effort to demonstrate the accrual of a 'working-class' identity or sensibility that constitutes my 'self'. These life-stories will be reinforced in juxtaposition to event-stories, but rather than ordering these temporally, they will be offered in relation to Warnock's typology.

Both my Master's degree and my PhD were self-funded; in the case of the former, this involved a year of working night-shifts unloading lorries for a supermarket, and in the case of the latter two years of the same, alongside three jobs whilst studying, including a stint as a security guard and zero hours-style contracts as an exams invigilator and seminar tutor. The University I studied and worked at was a research-intensive institution, and following three years of part-time employment, I was successful in applying for an academic teaching post. This involved teaching across two years of undergraduate courses and a Master's degree course. This position, under the auspices of giving me a 'leg-up', also enabled more senior academics to spend more of their time on research: additionally, the contract I was on was fixed-term. I raise this because the precarious nature of these contracts not only implies the impossibility of a tenured position but can, in some cases, be used as a way to circumvent incremental service payments, so staff who have not given 'continuous service' remain at the same level of entry earnings. This is potentially an example of institutional practice structuring the academic development of ECAs systematically. Similarly, my heavy teaching load made research more difficult, thereby blocking one of the traditional routes to permanent employment through publication history. As part of the role I was involved in a variety of committees, though most often as a bystander baffled by the technicalities of the talk or the apparent codes in which decisions about research grants were made. Following the completion of my PhD, I secured a lectureship at a less research-intensive University which was in the process of developing social science courses, where I am presently employed. Using examples from my time as a fledgling academic, I will now expand on the process of personal narrative accrual in relation to how working-class identifiers are reinforced institutionally and internalized individually.

1. Alienation

The first reflection to make, as Grimes and Morris do (1997), is that working-class graduate students often find difficulties – cultural as well as financial – when studying in comparison with their middle-class peers; my initial experience of becoming a PhD student echoes this. I was assigned an office which, for reasons of personal insecurity, I occupied only once in my first year. I met with a number of fellow postgraduates, all of whom had obtained funding for their studies, many of whom had been privately educated. This simple distinction between my State education and theirs, their stipends and my lack of money, was telling: social events

where I could have potentially developed my cultural capital were hampered by my need to work to pay my fees and my rent. As Busk and Goehring (2014) suggest, class operates as a differential relationship, the divisions between people determined by particular practices and material conditions, so my introduction into the academy – an event-story - was framed from the offset by class distinctions which reinforced my extant anxiety that I was in the wrong place, a view echoed recently by others from a working-class background (Anonymous Academic 2017, Cathandpavs2013 2017).

It is worth noting that it would be disingenuous to describe my experience as related to ‘third space’ ambivalence (LeCourt 2006) or DuBois’s double consciousness (1903). I am a young white British man, so whilst my alienation is embodied in this particular life-story, my experiences of class are framed without the additional complications of race, gender or ethnicity. However, incidents like the one outlined above (and there were many others) push the individual towards the sort of internalization of class hierarchies that Ryan and Sackrey (1984) discuss. Furthermore, it demonstrates what Warnock calls ‘the cognitive dissonance of upward mobility’ (2016, p. 30), whereby my anxiety is reinforced by simultaneously trying to be *of* the institution whilst working separately for it, an example of the distorted biography created by the confluence of life and event-stories.

2. Cultural capital

Warnock (2016) considers some of the ways in which cultural capital, or lack thereof, manifests itself in the working-class academic, outlining Arner’s (2014) study of class coding and ‘bodily hexis’, whereby class position is highlighted in relation to dress, comportment, hairstyle and the like. When I arrived for my morning interview for my current tenured position, I was wearing the clothes I was subsequently going to work in that afternoon owing to the fact that there would be no time for me to change before teaching six hours of research methods. I realized my error as soon as I was seated with the other candidates, all of whom were formally dressed. Now perhaps this bleeds in to a wider argument about my misunderstanding of interview expectations, but it also underscores a feeling of out-of-placeness, this time embodied stylistically. I was successful in my interview, but my boss does routinely remind me of how ‘scruffy’ I looked. Worse still, as part of my assimilation and adapting to a ‘higher’ class status, I have internalized these complaints – despite being given in jest – and apply them myself when involved in recruitment of staff. I project my own issues onto others in this regard, an absurdity of cultural capital where performing the role, looking like an academic, is more important than actual competency. What this incident emphasizes is an issue with working-class academics not understanding the rules of the game, as in Rothe’s (2006, p. 56) anecdote about not knowing how to fill in a receipt for expenses.

Similar in its symbolic function is the use of technical language to confer status, or reinforce the feeling that you do not possess status. As Bruner (1991) notes, institutions tend to invent traditions so as to bestow a type of privilege to proceedings that may have otherwise been an ordinary part of organizational affairs. In my previous role as a teaching fellow, the plethora of departmental meetings I attended were frequently couched in a type of language that I did not fully understand, where there was no real opportunity to enquire without further outing myself as somehow inauthentic. Not knowing what ‘triage’, or ‘pump priming’ seems foolish now, but only because my personal narrative accrual has equipped me with either sufficient cultural capital to understand or enough practical intelligence to bluff.

3. Stereotyping/Microaggression

Stereotyping and microaggression have the potential to emphasize differences between both staff and students and, as Warnock identifies (2016, p. 32), it is often down to the individual to decide whether or not to engage in conversations about class in relation to perceived differences; this is especially pronounced in the context of social science disciplines where a level of reflexivity is frequently an assumed trait. Two particular instances neatly underline the effect of stereotyping and microaggressions in the academy in relation to personal experiences, social interactions and signification systems.

At the beginning of each academic year, with the intake of another cohort of first-year undergraduate students (an event-story), I would make my introduction as to who I was and what I did and the way in which I pronounced my name would routinely result in class assumptions being made: 'Matt', but owing to my regional accent and a t-glottalization (which I had to Google, just to reinforce my lack of cultural capital in knowing the technical terms for my own mode of speech!) comes out as 'Ma'. I would subsequently be called Max, or in a few cases, Ma. In addition, I was often asked by the students, who were predominantly middle-class, to pronounce other words as a way of assessing difference, reinforcing modes of speech as part of my working-class identity. Now whilst there are a number of cogent explanations for this, including an inherent fascination with regional differences in speech, the emphasis on ways of speaking contributed to other extant experiences and class markers including during the early stages of my PhD - my personal narrative accrual.

With regard to microaggressions, this is evidenced in a succession of everyday occurrences that gradually undermined my position, or at the very least the accrual of these experiences constructed that impression. I was given responsibilities for a large course, and was required to liaise with senior academics about content and structure. On paper, I was in charge, but I was vetoed every step of the way, including an elongated period of time in which sorting out the removal of one textbook took three committee meetings and a fortuitous period of research leave by senior staff. This sort of microaggression through institutional signification systems was also present in increasingly fractious email exchanges where my ideas or proposals were shouted down in a snide and insidious manner: a real dose of 'know your place', which reinforced the ego of those responsible whilst diminishing my position further. My experience demonstrates that despite the artifice of control, I had no agency in actual decision making, a factor that Sackey and Ryan (1996, p. 184) suggest is part of the ordinary functioning of the academy, which does 'more to keeping in place the distribution of power and privilege and the ideas that legitimate these distributions, than it does to change or weaken them.'

4. Survivor Guilt/Impostor Syndrome

The microaggressions previously noted also play into the interrelationship between survivor guilt and impostor syndrome. With regards to the former, my move into academia had the potential to alienate me from friendship groups outside University – people whom I had grown up with - which in turn led to a sense of guilt about my position. As a result of earning considerably more money than I did when I was unloading lorries for a living, I was financially able to move towards increasingly middle-class cultural pursuits (as a way of fitting in), thereby strengthening my cultural capital in one sense, but undermining my class identity in the process. In this, Warnock's claim that upward mobility and associated guilt of

those left behind appears apt (2016, p. 33). Aware of this, I felt the need to ‘double-down’, to make my working-class identity a badge of honour, which I would mention as often as possible. Reflecting on this, I feel that my approach was a form of deflection, that my inability to fully assimilate as middle class – noticeable in my lack of stereotypical markers of middle class ‘achievement’ such as home ownership – could be used as a weapon to differentiate or protect myself. The issue here is as part of broader personal narrative accrual, that my outward facing identity still did not mirror what I believed about myself internally, where the much-discussed impostor syndrome was a lingering concern: was I just performing the role of ‘working-class academic’ in an unconvincing way?

Impostor syndrome can operate in a number of ways (see Parkman 2016; Chapman 2017), and in my case I responded to my implicit ideas about my inferiority ‘with silence and a paralyzing fear’ that they didn’t ‘have anything valuable to contribute to the academic discourse’ (Warnock 2016, p. 34). One particular example came at a drinks event when I mentioned a famous (dead) theorist whom I thought was alive, and was laughed at. This resulted in reluctance on my part to offer my thoughts in the future for fear of demonstrating my lack of appropriate knowledge. It was only when I moved to a more class-diverse job and I became more confident in my abilities that this concern subsequently waned, an example of the ongoing destabilization of biography posited by Verd and Lopez (2011).

5. Ego/Networking in middle class cultures

In a research-intensive institution, such as the one where I completed my PhD, the role of networking and ego was especially important, alongside self-promotion. As Warnock (2016) identifies in her meta-analysis, particular types of intellectual attributes are championed in middle-class academia. Already in a position where I was convinced I had been employed as the result of a clerical error, my ability to effectively ‘sell myself’ was limited, even to the extent that when I finished my PhD and continued in my teaching role, I did not adopt ‘Dr.’ in the classroom (as in Muzzatti & Samarco 2006, p. 76). As a part of the event-stories of my route through academy, this meant that my move into academia as a recognized academic through the completion of a thesis was impacted by my class position, or the way in which I had constructed class around me through the accrual of the sort of life-stories I have outlined here.

It is worth stating though that there has been a positive effect in the emphasis on class throughout my academic career and that involves how I teach class today, in a University with a more inclusive student and staff base. Fortunately, I have had a much more substantial say in curriculum design at my present institution, so have been able to foreground class by drawing on my experiences and the experiences of my students to demonstrate both the relationship between hierarchies of class in a variety of institutions (as well as the academy) and the ways in which class is constructed through personal experience, social interaction and signification systems. This, I feel, is particularly important at an institution where widening participation actually makes a tangible difference in the lives of students. In this sense I am moving towards Rennels’ (2014) call for scholars to avoid denying their culture but instead embrace it. Crucially, it is worth underscoring that my personal narrative accrual is of course different from others, and that the more recent shift towards increasing reliance and exploitation of adjunct labour across the sector, both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, means that these sorts of stories will become more prevalent and more detrimental to future academics currently experiencing similar event-stories.

Conclusions

‘Lives, like stories, are the way we fashion ourselves: encountering and temporarily surmounting the projected demons that would diminish us. This is what a narrative perspective allows us to notice: not only about the way we talk, but also about the way we live.’
(Ochberg 1994, p. 143)

So where do these stories take us more broadly? In this piece I have attempted to demonstrate how the personal - those everyday instances and moments individuals experience (life-stories) - combine with typical or archetypal events to use Atkinsons’ (1998) terminology (event-stories), such as the completion of a PhD, or finding employment. These overlapping narratives feed into a broader, overarching narrative of personal accrual which becomes who we are, our ‘self’. In relation to class, I have outlined, in an asynchronous sense, a number of vignettes that underline Warnock’s typology and show the ways in which individual narratives meet social interactions, and the signification systems of the academy work.

However, alongside the aforementioned notion of biographical distortion, the nature of personal narrative accrual means that class is always ongoing and framed by all sorts of external factors including family. Is my Mum working-class? Was my Grandad? How about where I live (if I buy a house am I a class traitor?). And even how I bring up my daughter; what sort of nursery do I send her to and what does that say about her class position? Do these sorts of concerns demarcate me as middle rather than working class? As Dews’ states, ‘though I may never find a true home in another world, telling our stories helps at times to reconcile some of the painful ambivalence’ (1995, p. 355). Storytelling, as I have tried to offer here, allows us to address alienation and inferiority by showing that working-class academics are not alone in their experiences (Warnock 2016, p. 37). Those experiences, and the working-class identity of scholars, are a cumulative thing, the confluence of individual actions and remembrances in the context of particular meaningful events throughout the life course. Where narrative accrual sees history and tradition as the end point, *personal narrative accrual* sees the constituted self - as far as the self ever becomes entirely constituted – as a liminal construction between the personal and the social.

Accrual is, of course, a double-edged sword. In addition to reflexivity on the part of the individual it also allows you to emphasize and relive all the acts and exchanges that contribute to working-class identity, which in turn can make alienation through class worse. Personal narrative accrual may result in stories about our identities becoming self-actualizing. An example: writing this article, and whether or not I should actually commit to it. Is it okay to write about personal concerns and potential exploitation by institutions or will this result in some sort of contractual issue? I do not know the answer to this question. But personal narrative accrual can also be used as a form of reflective praxis to assist working-class academics, particularly ECAs who are under considerable pressure to publish or perish (without class compounding things). In considering their varying trajectories, unpacking the relationship between life and event-stories, between personal troubles and public issues can perhaps address the process - or at least mitigate the effects of - impostor syndrome its other associated challenges, in much the same way that this article has had a cathartic function for me.

Author Bio

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