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'Born-free' narratives: life stories and identity construction of South African township youth

Howard, Kim

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Abstract

Within a narrative paradigm, this research project had two elements. Firstly, the project aimed to enable the researcher to gain an understanding of the construction of adolescent identity from the perspective of a cohort of first-generation, post-Apartheid adolescents as members of an NGO's after-school support programme. Secondly, a participatory action element aimed to provide the participants with an opportunity to reflect upon their own lives in a positive, empowering way thereby providing an understanding of their past lives, strengthening a realistic power of agency for their future lives, balanced between self-identity and self transcendence in the present (Crites, 1986). Within this research, the self is theorised psychosocially, presented as both a narrated and narrating subject in which identity construction is consolidated through story-telling and the adaption of these stories to different audiences and cultural contexts.

12 volunteer participants were provided with disposable cameras and asked to take photographs of people and objects that were important to them. Using these photographs, the participants then constructed art timelines of their lives in the narrative format of 'past', 'present', and 'future'. Each participant was then narratively interviewed twice, four months apart. The two datasets (the art timelines and the interview transcripts) were subject to three levels of analysis. Firstly, the construction of each participant's descriptive narrative portrait was analysed across the time zones of 'past life', 'present life', and 'future life'; secondly, thematic analysis was horizontally conducted across the narrative portraits identifying the similarities and differences between the participants, extending the specific experiences discussed by the participants into generalised themes; and thirdly, the vertical analysis of portraiture was re-invoked in greater depth, examining how the different theoretical dimensions of narrative identity identified, coalesce in one case history.

The first level of analysis focused specifically on the imagoes, or personified concepts of the self, identified within the narrative portraits of three participants. It was found that these imagoes had significant effects on the identity construction of these young people, specifically on those whose parents had died. In the second phase of analysis three different dimensions of, or ways of thinking about, narrative identity were distinguished: relationality and the sense of belonging or alienation experienced by the participants in their interaction with others; the consolidation of life stories at adolescence and the participants' social positioning within the systems of structural identity markers of race, class, gender and sexuality; and lastly the participants' hopes and dreams, their narrative imaginations and future-orientated lives. In the third level of analysis, one participant's narrative was selected to illustrate the theoretical concepts that underpin the construction of narrative identity, particularly constructionist intersectionality (Prins, 2006) and cultural creolisation (Glissant, 1989).

These young people's narratives indicate a patent tension between their lives to date, the histories of their families marked by insecurity and feelings of being unsafe as the effects of racism, disease and poverty, and their future imagined lives characterised by the promise of freedom and agency, education, employment and health. Through listening to and analysing these young people's past, present and future stories, this study gained an insight into the ambivalence that exists in their lives, the contradictions they face between their moments of belonging and their moments of alienation, and how all these experiences inform and contribute to their identity constructions.

Keywords: Narratives, youth identity, South African township youth, belonging and alienation, constructionist intersectionality, creolisation