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Narrative Identity, Meta-Narratives and Identities in Conflict

Abstract/Introduction

This paper is an exploration of two different problems facing a narrative theory of personal identity, as it is applied to gendered and raced identities. The first issue I will discuss problematizes the ability to construct personal narratives underneath, or within, a dominant meta-narrative. In an adapted-Ricoeurian theory of the narrative unity of life, under which narrative identity is found and becomes meaningful, the condition for the availability of concepts out of which we can create meaning is at the same time the condition for the possibility of human agency. What this means is that the concepts available to us, along with the given content of those concepts, are the given material out of which we create our ideas of who we are—our personal identities. These concepts along with their content, however, can already carry with them the repression of personal agency, or the inability to take up certain concepts to use in the creation of identity. If we understand meta-narratives as thoroughgoing cultural narratives that contain the concepts that we have to work with in the construction of personal narratives, meta-narratives can be oppressive to the extent that certain concepts, e.g., human, or dignified, are unavailable to an individual. Correspondingly, the content given in such concepts can be limiting as well, e.g., the expected social roles that accompany ideas of femininity. The solution I will posit here is that counter-narratives, those narratives that conflict with the expectations of dominant ideas and conceptions, can be constructed in order to oppose limiting meta-narratives.

The second problem I will address arises from my proposed solution to the first: the efficacy of counter-narratives, or those personal narratives that deny or defy a dominant cultural

conception of who or what one ought to be. If counter-narratives can work to overcome dominant and oppressive meta-narratives, does the “counter-” identity have an effect on the possibility of human agency in narrative construction? The problem is formulated thusly: The past and history of an individual are a necessary part of a person’s identity, whether assumed, accepted or rejected. Does the history of one’s identity as “counter to” or “in conflict with” dominant conceptions detrimentally affect the possibilities for human agency? In the narrative framework, agency is realized in the creation of the narrative self, not in a fundamental or essential self that lies behind the world of experience. This is to say, it is in the *act* of creating ourselves that we confront ourselves and our agency. If this identity-creating activity is one mired in conflict or oppression, is the possibility of agency to be realized also in conflict or even oppressed? I will argue that it is the case that the agency to be realized in counter-narratives does mirror the conflict out of which it arises or even embodies, but also that this does not necessarily mean that the corresponding agency is oppressed.

A note on methodology: This paper will begin with a short introduction to the narrative theory with which I am working, but it is not in itself a defense of narrative theory. I am concerned here with how narrative works in the construction of identities that may, and oftentimes do, run counter to traditionally, culturally or socially accepted ideas of who or what one ought to be. From this introduction to narrative theory, I will then take up the aforementioned problems as test-cases for a narrative theory of identity in turn.