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My life as a pupil: The autobiographical memories of adolescents excluded from school



Shaalan Farouk*

School of Education, University of Roehampton, UK

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ABSTRACT

Narrative psychology is founded on the premise that substantial insight can be gained into individuals' self-understanding and behaviour by studying the content of their autobiographical memories. This article contributes to this field of inquiry by suggesting that our understanding of adolescents' exclusion from mainstream education can be enhanced by examining their recollections of school using a narrative dialogical approach. In a research project the autobiographical memories of fifteen female and twenty male students, aged 15–16 years, who had been excluded from secondary schools in London, England were collected and analysed. The aim was to examine how in their narrated depictions of the past, the adolescents explained and justified their position and behaviour at different times in their lives at school. The findings highlight how adolescents perceive themselves to have become positioned by the voices of significant others, schools as institutions and themselves at earlier or later stages in their lives.

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In England, 60% of permanent exclusions from schools take place in early adolescence (between the age of 12–14 years) and the number of pupils attending alternative provision centres, following exclusion, has more than doubled since the turn of the century from 8480 in 2000 to 20,503 in 2014 ([Department for Education, 2010; 2015](#)). Moreover, according to the [Department for Education \(2011\)](#) there is a strong correlation between permanent exclusion from school and the likelihood of not being in employment, education or training at the age of 16–19 years. Despite these concerns, and the knowledge and understanding that may be gained from the life stories of this marginalized group, no research has been conducted on the autobiographical memories of students permanently excluded from school.

The subject matter for the present study is excluded adolescents' autobiographical narratives for the insights they may provide into how home circumstances, social relationships, and schools as organisations may have contributed to their exclusion from school. The main concerns of the study are the socio-cultural influences which excluded adolescents recall in their memories of the past; to explain and justify their own position and behaviour at different times in their lives. The research question is how excluded adolescents, in their memories of lifetime periods and events, may perceive themselves to have become positioned not only by significant others and the school as an institution, but also by making the comparison to themselves at other times in their lives? To examine these socio-cultural influences in excluded adolescents' autobiographical memories the narrative dialogical approach was used in this investigation ([Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 2003; Hermans,](#)

* School of Education, University of Roehampton, Roehampton Lane, London, SW15 5PU, UK.

E-mail address: shaalan.farouk@roehampton.ac.uk.

Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992). Before describing this approach in detail, it is important to set this investigation within the context of current autobiographical research on adolescence.

1. Research on autobiographical memories in adolescence

From a narrative psychological perspective, the capacity to create an autobiographical life story in late adolescence is closely associated with the formation of a narrative identity, which enables the young person to take his/her place in an emerging adult world (McAdams, 2003). The principal concern of narrative research has therefore been to examine adolescents' life stories and memories for the insight they provide into the formation of a narrative identity. Research on autobiographical memories found that the ability to gain wider psychological insights in relation to oneself from the recollection of specific events does not become established until late adolescence (McLean & Breen, 2009; McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010). In addition, cross sectional and longitudinal research on adolescent life stories (Bohn & Berntsen, 2008; Grysmann & Hudson, 2010; Habermas & de Silveira, 2008; Köber, Schmiedek, & Habermas, 2015) has demonstrated that the ability to construct a coherent autobiography, and thus acquire a narrative identity, does not manifest itself until late adolescence and early adulthood. In these studies, while the importance of early experiences and socio-cultural influences are almost always acknowledged, priority is given to the study of adolescence as a development stage for the ability to make sense of past experiences and create a coherent autobiographical identity in early adulthood.

In acknowledgement of the need to also consider socio-cultural settings and the impact that autobiographical memories may have on the individual, research was conducted with at-risk African American adolescent females (Sales, Merrill, & Fivush, 2013) and Caucasian adolescents from low-income families attending alternative provision (McLean, Wood, & Breen, 2013) in the United States. Rather than investigating how autobiographical reasoning develops with age these studies examined the correlation between *narrative meaning making* (the ability to make sense of the past in relation to oneself) on the one hand and well-being and risk-taking behaviour on the other. The findings indicated that sophistication in narrative interpretation and meaning-making correlated positively with depressive symptoms in the African American females and negatively with the ability to desist from engaging in risk-taking behaviour in the case of the Caucasian adolescents.

In contrast, to research specifically focussed on adolescents who are from low income families and at-risk, psychologists have studied more extensively the relationship between narrative meaning making and well-being in adolescents attending high school (Tavernier & Willoughby, 2012), and private schools (McLean & Breen, 2009; McLean et al., 2010) in Canada and the United States. McLean et al. (2010) and Tavernier and Willoughby (2012) identified a positive correlation between meaning making and wellbeing in older adolescents, whereas McLean and Breen (2009) found no correlation between these two variables in 14–18 year old participants. Greenhoot and McLean (2013) later suggest that the findings from research in this area are inconclusive because narrative meaning making is complex and may have positive or negative psychological outcomes which do not simply depend on individuals' cognitive ability to recollect past events and engage in sophisticated forms of narrative meaning making. Instead the psychological outcomes from narrative meaning making also depend on how past events are interpreted within a socio-cultural context and the positive or negative nature of these interpretations.

For this study, it is understood that the benefits and potentially detrimental psychological outcomes associated with making sense of the past, depend more on how individuals interpret past events in relation to themselves within socio-cultural contexts than on how sophisticated they are in being able to interpret the past. Therefore, to examine in detail how individuals within a socio-cultural context may interpret past events and the possible psychological consequences of these interpretations, I adopted a qualitative approach suited for the study of interrelated relationships and multifaceted phenomena. In addition, since the focus of the study was the description of socio-cultural influences on the self in the interpretation of autobiographical events, rather than the acquisition of a narrative identity, the theoretical perspective adopted was the narrative dialogical approach, propose by Hermans et al. (1992).

2. Theoretical perspective: a narrative dialogical approach

The foundations of the narrative dialogical approach are in symbolic interactionism because of its concern with social influences on individual minds and the realization of a socially constructed self (Mead, 1934). To account for the creation of this socially constructed self, Mead identified a dialogical process in which the pronoun 'I' is the author of 'me' as the actor in the social world. As Sarbin (1986) has pointed out, by using the language of 'I' and 'me', where one is the author of the other, Mead is also employing a narrative framework for the creation of a dynamic and socially constructed self. More recent explorations of the self (for instance, Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 2003; Hermans et al., 1992; Valsiner, 2002) have developed this idea much further by arguing for a dialogically constructed self which "can be conceived of as a narrative construction and reconstruction of the meaning of events" (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 2003, p.535). In narrated memory, this dialogical self consists of an internalized dialogue set within an imaginary landscape in which the 'I' may take on a variety of characteristics and different positions vis-à-vis other imaginary figures that made up their socio-cultural world. Individuals therefore make sense of their subjective experiences and memories through internalized dialogues in which the "I" becomes positioned not only by views of significant individuals but also the collective voices of social groups and institutions within the dialogical self. In addition, since autobiographical memories are set within the temporal structure of a person's life story, the social landscapes which makes up the dialogical self are usually also remembered in relation to early or more recent periods in one's life.

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