

## **Negotiating Stigmas: Contributions from a Narrative Approach**

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### **Abstract**

Through in-depth narrative analysis, this research examines how stigmatization can be negotiated through life-story telling. Several narrative coping strategies are presented and discussed under the Bakanian themes of *agency* and *communion*.

Keywords: narrative, stigma, consumption

# Negotiating Stigmas: Contributions from A Narrative Approach

## Introduction

We all have aspects of self that make us feel inferior, or somehow a lesser person than others. This phenomenon, as conceptualized by Goffman (1963), can be attributed to ‘stigmatization’ that devalues an individual “from a whole and usual person to a tainted discounted one” (ibid. 3) as a result of some physical or psychological attribute, which is perceived undesirable in a given context. This can lead to feelings of powerlessness and frustration, which, in turn, may have profound effects on an individual’s perception of life’s meaningfulness or even lead to negative outcomes such as resignation and mal-adaptation. Given these facts, however, it has been argued that stigma can also be *remedied* through a variety of self-empowerment and well-being practices (Henry and Caldwell 2006). While earlier studies on the topic have provided a solid foundation for understanding stigma and how it is managed psychologically (see for example Goffman 1963, Henry and Caldwell 2006), no study to date has examined how stigma is might be negotiated through biographical story-telling. To begin addressing this gap in knowledge, we analyze a single life-story hermeneutically (Polkinghorne 1995), using a range of concepts drawn from theories of narrative (McAdams 1996), stigma and psychological coping (Goffman, 1963; Miller & Kaiser 2001; Henry & Caldwell 2006). Our main finding suggests that stigma *can* be negotiated through the act of story-telling and that stigma-resolving narratives reflect this sense of healing through the higher-order themes of *communion* and *agency* (Bakan 1966; McAdams 1993). This finding is important insofar as story-telling as a coping method has been largely overlooked in the study of stigma. Accordingly, the main question we pose in this paper is ‘*How do individuals negotiate stigma through story-telling?*’

## Literature review

Based on the broad agenda of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), a stream of consumer research that addresses “the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption” (ibid. 868), this research seeks to understand the co-constructing dynamic between individuals’ sense-making and the broader landscape of meanings within which one lives in. Following this, consumption is understood to empower individuals in making up who they want to be, and consequently, construct their identities (Firat & Dholakia, 2006). Here, our possessions, things that can be described as “mine”, act as trajectories for our identity (Belk 1988). This can be observed as people actively construct, maintain, and communicate their identity by using the symbolic meanings of brands, leisure, and lifestyle pursuits (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

This research follows the principles of ‘narrative paradigm’ (Shankar, Elliott & Goulding, 2001) whereby identity is constructed through the telling of a life-story (McAdams 1996). According to this approach, identity is understood as a two-fold construct consisting of the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’ (Baumeister 1991). Here, construction of identity can be described as a process whereby the self-authoring subject ‘I’ harks back and forth, through past, present and future, (re)configuring all those aspects that the self-concept can call *mine* (James, 1890) into a relatively comprehensible and viable whole (Rosenberg 1986). As a purposive practice (Dreyfus 1991), life-story telling should be viewed as an edifice through which we may observe intentional and action-led behaviour of human-beings (Bruner 1986). As such, the study of life-story narratives allows us to understand how individuals use them for their personal pragmatic ends. In contrast to the postmodern view of the weak and fragmented

subject (e.g., Gergen 1992), the ontologically constitutive nature of life-story telling (Sarbin 1986) endows the individual the potential to achieve both self-coherence and self-mastery. Integration and continuity is attained through the sequencing of disparate events and experiences into meaningful wholes, while a sense of self-determination is sought through the interpersonal persuasion, regulation of self-concept and motivational guidance in life pursuits that story-telling facilitates (Singer 2001). To this end, the examination of consumer narratives enables us to gain insight into not only how consumers understand their consumption patterns or how consumption plays a role in self-creation (Escalas & Bettman, 2000) but also into how they strive to cope with psychological challenges.

In the current study, we aim to empirically demonstrate such coping practices by studying the life-story of one individual (Pete), and focusing on how consumption meanings are drawn on and configured so as to reconcile biographical tensions in this biographical account. Our brief analysis sheds some light on how a sense of stigmatization can be negotiated through the employment of a variety of narrative coping strategies. We find that the telling of these stigma-resolving stories can be interpreted as having narrative directionality (e.g., Gergen and Gergen, 1987; McAdams and Bowman, 2001) by way of either self-enlargement or self-incorporation through the opposing modalities of *agency* and *communion* (Bakan, 1966). Here, *agentic* coping responses arise from individual's need for self-actualization and control over self and environment, thus, depicting an expansion of the self, whereas *communal* coping reflects the themes of belonging and intimacy, implying a lessening of one's sphere of control and, hence, an integration of self with the Other (McAdams, 1993).

## Methodology

The main focus of this research is to examine the ways in which a relatively coherent and satisfactory identity can be negotiated in the face of stigma. In order to explore this query, we shall draw on the life-story method, which in broad strokes, belongs to the narrative paradigm (Fisher, 1985). This approach entails that the study of human lives is viewed as ontologically constitutive (Crossley, 2000; Sarbin, 1998). Through the *act* of telling of stories, we simultaneously *construct* our individual and shared realities (e.g., Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988). While objective life-history analysis concentrates on reconstructing past events as they have supposedly occurred, life-story telling constructs foregone experiences and events as they are perceived from the present, thus conforming to the 'perspectival' model of time (Fisher, 1985; Husserl, 1964; Mead, 1932). Consequentially, the objective of inquiry for a narrative study of life is not so much to impose concrete and verifiable structures on a person's life-account, but rather to understand *how* the individual makes sense of his or her present life experiences through a reflexive knowledge of his or her personal biography (Erben, 1998).

The data set consisted of six, life-story interviews (approximately two hours of length) of Finnish music enthusiasts aged 26-35. The data was analyzed by employing a hermeneutic method of 'narrative analysis' (Polkinghorne, 1995). This method implies 'abductive logic' (Polkinghorne, 1991), and the 'grasping of the whole' through anticipatory configuration of its 'lesser parts' (Ricoeur, 1984). Due to the nature of this method (and due to the lack of space), the general findings of this research as a whole will be demonstrated through a single ('best') biographical account.

## Discussion of Findings

Pete is a Finnish 26 year student, a music enthusiast, a DJ and member of a subculture known in techno-music circles as 'Dubstep'. He is also an individual who carries a very common stigma in today's western world: obesity, a physical trait that's social implications are reflected in his biographical account as a sense of alienation from his peers as well subsequent, almost chronic low self-esteem. Despite his later expression of self-confidence and change over time, these past experiences have left their mark on Pete and his life-story, as he explains: "Well, for a long time. Even since my first memories, I have had this feeling of being foreign, the experience of being left outside. The fancy expression could be 'weltangst', the tragedy of a modern human being".

Accordingly, the overarching tension produced by meanings of stigma and subsequently the main object of remedial story-telling for Pete is that of 'being the odd one out'. This theme runs through Pete's storied life and the manner in which he characterizes himself and his personality – as something 'flawed'. In the following, we present a selection of narrative coping strategies abstracted from Pete's life-story account. We propose these strategies serve to reconcile this above stated tension through the opposing modalities of 'agency' and 'communion' (Bakan, 1966). While the former refers to enlargement of self through self-actualization and control of one's environment, the latter reflects a more social and affective form of actualization that is driven by the desire to re-enact oneself through others and let others re-enact themselves through oneself (Hetherington, 1996; Kellner, 1992).

On the one hand, Pete seeks to resolve his sense of alienation through accentuated identification with the identity of 'outcast', a subject-position he believes to be assigned to by the majority of his 'mainstream' peers. In effect, he strives to self-actualize and demarcate his identity from the Other by telling remedial stories of 'journeying' and 'authenticity'. *Journeying* is a narrative strategy that reflects Pete's chameleon-like ability to adapt his identity through differing consumption meanings. In his life-story account, Pete narrates about engaging with various marginal social groups (defined largely by music derived life-style) and how he tries on strategically selected momentary 'possible selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1987) so as to associate with these groups in a meaningful manner. In Pete's case this refers to a 'provisional' testing of identities (Ibarra, 1999) through the enacting of different music preferences during different times in this life. As Pete journeys through his life (story), testing a variety of these identities (and lifestyles), this exploration, then, becomes a part of him. Instead of understanding this 'identity play' as demonstrative of a desire to merge with others, which would certainly be valid interpretation also, the higher-order meaning of 'journeying' nevertheless connotes primarily the expansion of self through temporally unfolding bricolage (Hetherington, 1996). In Pete's case, this bricolage involves travelling through the peripheries of his social world, trying on different roles and styles of habitus, whilst at the same time fortifying himself against the sense of exclusion he has suffered from.

The narrative strategy of *Authenticity* is closely related to the above tactic insofar as it reflects that which Pete seeks through 'journeying' and the accompanying provisional self-bricolage. Pete has been, we propose, searching for a music subculture through which he can attain a truer, 'authentic' sense of self that can be actualized without having to be subsumed utterly by the defining features of this social group. Hesitant to conform to an overtly prescribed style of engagement, Pete narrates how he has found a community that is still in the margins of techno-music, the dubstep community. This is a group of enthusiasts that still inhabit a space of liminality - an existence that is still relatively untouched by the commercial mainstream

and hence constituted by transient and ephemeral social markers— something that pleases Pete’s desires to also be an unmarked and ‘true’ individual.

On the other hand, Pete’s story also evidences how he seeks to resolve his sense of alienation through a communal merging with the Other. His narratives reflect such emotive notions as ‘blending in’, ‘finding comfort in community’ and ‘bonding’. The strategy of *‘Blending in’* represents an opposite narrative movement to the theme of agency as its objective is to help Pete ‘fit in’ and integrate with the ‘mainstream’ element in his account and to adjust to the expectations set before him by different authorities in his life (e.g., father, rest of family, university peers). This coping strategy focuses on gaining acceptance from non-stigmatized people in order to challenge the label of stigma (Henry & Caldwell, 2006). Whilst conforming to the over-arching values and beliefs of the social group of ‘higher-education students’, Pete seeks acceptance in his own terms, de-emphasizing meanings of certain social markers within this group while accentuating those meanings that might work in his favor. For instance while studying at a prestigious university, Pete narrates how he wants to do this ‘his way’, rarely partaking in ‘normal’ student-life activities but nevertheless involving himself to the degree that his aspiration of being ‘normal’ and blending in with the rest is satisfied.

While Pete is determined to be his ‘true self’, *‘finding comfort in community’* is also an important theme as he can momentarily give up his agency and lose his problematic self by being part of something bigger. This transcendent group camaraderie (Turner, 1969) he describes is a major source of positive feelings for him as he can let go of the problematic aspects of his self-concept and immerse himself into his chosen emotive community, albeit only temporarily (Cova, 1997). *‘Bonding’*, in turn, refers to the actual ‘doings’ that bring the members of community together (Schatzki, 1996; Wenger, 1998). By engaging in such practices as online discussions, concerts, and clubs, Pete enforces the theme of *communion* (Bakan, 1966) in his everyday life. By narrating about his participation in these group activities, Pete establishes himself as a part of this community, putting into effect these communal bonds in his narrative.

## Conclusion

While existing studies (e.g. Henry & Caldwell, 2006) have shown how stigmatization can be managed through different self-empowerment and well-being practices, no claims have been made in regards to a narrative rendering of this proposition. To address this short-falling, this paper analyses a single life-story account in-depth, identifying several narrative coping strategies that serve to remedy tensions caused by meanings of stigmatization.

Tensions caused by stigma are often related directly to the individual’s self-concept (Goffman, 1963). In the informant-case examined in this paper, these tensions have been broadly related to issues of association and disassociation of self to salient social group(s) (Hogg & Abrams, 1990). To represent how such tensions are appropriated through story-telling strategies, we have employed the two opposing modalities of agency and communion (Bakan, 1966). We propose that the narrative coping strategies assigned to these higher-order concepts are directional by nature (e.g., McAdams & Bowman, 2003), ensuing their healing power from the ability to project the self towards or away from that Otherness that is the root cause of the tension at hand. While the resulting account is only a momentary version told from the current perspective, its capacity to engender in its teller a sense of self-determination and self-mastery through reconfiguration of life’s salient meanings is, to say the least, a therapeutic exercise, and hence, also a valuable mechanism to be studied by those interested in stigmatization and its negotiation.

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