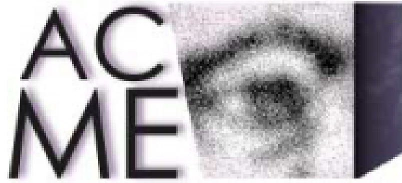

Using Narrativity as Methodological Tool

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Recently, scholars have begun to address the need for approaches through which to better understand the lived world, the actual practices and performativity of the political (Megoran, 2006; Kuus, 2007). When studying the politics of everyday life—the human experiences, emotions and 'little stories' in and through which political subjectivity is performed and lived out—we need methodological tools that are sensitive to the particular everyday situations and sites where discourses are negotiated. That is, the actual interaction between people, how they make sense of 'reality' (Shotter, 1993), and how they act and select positions (Ernste, 2005, 164). In my study of borderland identities and everyday bordering practices, based on fieldwork and interviews conducted in the Tornio River Valley region (Prokkola, 2008a, 2009), I found narrative methodology a valuable tool for understanding and interpreting the complex and often contradictory stories of the border inhabitants. Although scholars in social sciences and humanities partly disagree on what constitutes the narrative, they concur that all forms of narrative aim to make sense of experience and to construct meaning. In my study, the approach of Holstein and Gubrium (1995, 2000, Gubrium and Holstein 2009) to narrativity proved particularly useful because they lay emphasis on narrative activity and work in distinct 'narrative environments', rather than focusing merely on textual end-products.

Although it is common, following Newman and Paasi (1998), to approach borders as something more than simply an empirical (actual physical) context, and take into account wider societal and cultural practices and narratives of bordering,

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as a tool the narrative method has not been very popular in the study of political boundaries or political geography in general (see however, Meinhof et al., 2002; Doevenspeck, 2011). One reason for this unpopularity is perhaps that the narrative is often associated with non-theoretical forms of interpretation and representation (Sayer, 1989; Wiles et al., 2005). Narrative analysis has traditionally been developed for and applied in literary studies, and narrative methods have long represented the 'epistemological other', which critical writing in the social sciences has shunned (Somers, 1994, 606). However, in the 1970s scholars in the social sciences became interested in narratives as they noticed their central role in politics, psychology and economics, extending through all aspects of human social life. During the last two decades a 'narrative turn' has emerged in human and social sciences, and the method has been developed further to understand questions such as the relationship between individual and collective stories (Czarniawska 2004), and the narrative activity and work in particular places and environments (Gubrium and Holstein 2009). In the field of geography, narrative theory and 'technical vocabulary' are perhaps most often associated with literary geography (Ridanpää, 2010, 55-59; Hones, 2011), and linkages between narrative methodology and the geographical literature related to *memory politics* (Till, 2003, 2004) and *landscape narratives* (Tolia-Kelly, 2011; see also Tomaney, 2007) are often made. Scholars of critical geopolitics have addressed the methodology for studying popular collective narratives (Dittmer and Dodds 2008).

The analysis of incoherent interview narratives is not entirely dissimilar to literary ones. As with literary and popular border narratives, the stories told by an individual can be understood to be selective, as representations of a certain cultural and political point of view in which social power relations determine the supremacy or subordination of particular narratives (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; Chase, 1995). However, it is important to recognize that the stories people tell and retell rarely form a coherent and logical narrative plot or identity-speech; rather, individual people may perform and 'live with' rather contradictory and antithetical narratives. A particular challenge for researchers is thus finding the ways to collect and interpret interview materials in an ethically respectable manner, so that the interview stories are not (pre-)conceptualized by the interviewer and thereby subordinated.

Narrative theory and method provides helpful tools for designing and interpreting interviews. There are many ways to approach interviews in narrative terms: The interview transcript itself is a narrative, the researcher can write his or her narrative of the interview and the interview process, or the stories told by the interviewee can be narrativized (Czarniawska, 2004, 55). In my study of border identities, all of these approaches were employed, yet with different weight. The key challenge in the methodological section was narrativizing the interview process, whereas in the empirical sections the challenge was the narrativization of the interview stories vis-à-vis certain geographical concepts and theories. I also found narrative methodology helpful when designing the in-depth interviews, as

well as when struggling to avoid pre-conceptualization, and encourage people to speak about their own everyday practices and experiences (cf. Hyvärinen and Löyttyniemi, 2005). By listening to the stories in and through which people make sense of their everyday environments, activities, relations and attachments, it was possible to gain an understanding of the multiple and shifting meanings of borders in their lives and subjectivities, as opposed to just deconstructing border discourse or making generalized statements about borderland identity (cf. Megoran, 2006).

The narrative method focuses particularly on the inter-subjectivity and contextuality of 'being in the world', acknowledging the multidimensionality and multi-voicedness of the self (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005). It thus enables us to analyze and interpret the interview stories in a way that does not categorize identities, that is, to start with the question *who*, as Kallio (this issue) puts it. A story that came out in the interview with Leif provides a fitting example of the multidimensionality and multi-voicedness of personal narratives. In the interview, conducted in his office which is located in an old customs building on the Finnish-Swedish border, Leif told me about his experiences of cross-border interaction and cooperation. To confirm his argument concerning the triviality of border restrictions, Leif (re-)told a story (actually a local legend) about customs policies and made a statement about his own identity:

> Leif: There is one ridiculous story. It was in Kolari (on the Finnish side). There was one Swedish man who used to travel to the Finnish side to see his girlfriend and they (customs officers) documented how many days he spent in Finland. And when they listed 180 days, so that he is more than half of the year that he was driving to Finland, for he is not allowed to drive to Finland so often with his Swedish car, but he should have a car which is registered in Finland. So that he lives more in Finland than in Sweden.
>
> E-K: Oh no
>
> Leif: They counted that now he comes again and they caught him and took his car. (…) I come from such a smuggling family, damn it, I have never accepted that border.

This tragic story of a Swedish man with a girlfriend in Finland who loses his car because of the custom officials underlines how troublesome border restrictions can be, and how they cause harm to locals, even violating their most intimate relationships. Although the story does not tell how the romantic relationship ends or whether the man finds a way to date his girlfriend after he loses his car, it is obvious that the hero is the man with the girlfriend, whereas the officious customs officers have the role of the villain (cf. Prokkola, 2008b). The episode can also be contextualized as a story about Finnish–Swedish relations and the local tradition of cross-border marriage. It has been common for Finnish women to marry Swedish men and thereby achieve a new status and wealthier life. This tradition, however, has not appealed to all Finnish men (see Winsa, 2001). The account that Leif

makes concerning his own identification with his 'smuggling family' is also interesting when it is viewed against Leif's position as a municipal officer in Sweden. It complicates our understanding that authorities and 'common' people construct entirely different border narratives and identities (cf. Brambilla, 2007), and shows the contextual nature of borderland identities.

However, interview stories are always co-constructed by the interviewer and the interviewee in a particular time and place and, therefore, cannot be interpreted separately from the wider research narrative (Sin, 2003; Gubrium and Holstein, 2009). New layers of meaning come out when the story is retold as a researcher's story, involving the interpretation of the situational, inter-subjective and inter-textual elements of storytelling. As the citation shows, Leif's story was co-constructed via the interview dialogue where my intention was to encourage storytelling. It is also interesting to ponder whether the location of the interview, the old Swedish customs building which now serves as a joint Swedish-Finnish tourist information center and office, played a meaningful role in the selection of stories. The building can be described as an important (international) community site and a symbol of border removals. As Elwood and Martin (2000, 654) write: "the micro-geographies of locations construct participants' power and expertise".

Narrative plotting and practices can be understood as political actions in which particular social and cultural discourses are confirmed and others contested. For example Leif's story can be read as confirming the local discourse about the border as artificial. Moreover, although the narrative is often seen in a methodological sense as a mode of knowing and communicating, it does not merely transmit knowledge and 'reality' but also constructs them (Bruner, 1986). This aspect is especially interesting from the perspective of political geography. Researchers focusing on 'everyday narratives' in particular have come to view storytelling as performing, "imaging the space between teller and listener being filled in a physical, spatial and bodily fashion" (Hydén and Brockmeier, 2008, 10).

The performativity approach shifts the focus away from the investigation of narrative structures and representation, onto how the narrative is performed and what storytelling *does* (cf. Butler, 1993). This means that more attention is paid to the narrative 'speech acts' and the actual practices in and through which narratives materialize, rather than simply approaching narratives from the perspective of linguistic constructivism and hermeneutics. Narratives are understood to play an important role in the re- and co-construction of personal and collective identities (Somers, 1994; Hydén and Brockmeier, 2008), place-making, and in political struggles where they may entail justification/contestation of state borders, as the story told by Leif shows. The struggle over spatial narratives and memory plays an important role in the lives and shifting identities of people (Prokkola and Ridanpää, 2011). Yet the narrative method is not a direct route to the human experience. As Kuusisto-Arponen (this issue) explains, narratives are rooted as much in our bodies and 'silent narratives' as they are consciously expressed in our autobiographical narratives.

The examination of individual border narratives shows that border inhabitants often carry the borders within themselves, and that the border even affects the way they organize their private spaces and activities. It also reveals the diversity of understanding and living alongside borders where individuals do not merely adjust themselves with state governance, but invent new creative tactics to contest or make use of the border. In my study the interview narratives were co-constructed through different themes, sometimes suggesting that the border is simply an official barrier or deeply rooted in the mindscapes of the border inhabitants, hence showing that people are able to take different positions in relation to the border. The stories from the borderland cannot be detached from people's life experiences and ambitions or from the very material and legal conditions which enable/prevent them to cross boundaries, as is also emphasized by Burridge in the following section.

Moreover, it is important to be sensitive to our own research narratives. To write a book or an article on political and human geography is still a matter of writing a good story, a coherent and logical narrative that supports the argument. As Cameron (2012, 574) points out: "Geographers have become enthusiastic storytellers over the past decade or so, and often in an explicitly different register than the 'discursive', but the implications of this shift have not been thoroughly assessed or clarified". It is crucial to discuss where, what kind, and for whom political geographers create stories and whether some research stories and narrative genres are more legitimate than others. Along these lines, Ridanpää asks in the following section whether the humoristic genre is incompatible with the political. Secondly, the business of being critical should not lead to subordination and over-theorization of the voices of the individuals. It is not enough to repeat the importance of studying people's narratives; to avoid distancing the geographical scientific understanding of the political from the very reality and how people experience the political world, including the possibilities for action or the creation of new spaces for action and resistance. We also need more methodological sensitivity in the collection and analysis of individual's stories, for which the narrative method provides useful tools.

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