**Work, hierarchy and the social imaginary in dreams of escape and recognition**

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## Introduction

My research on the British honours System (Maile forthcoming, 2009) makes extensive use of narrative methods. The advantages of these methods are not only that they allow us to tease out the 'stories within the story' as it were, they also allow us to get at what Castoriadis (l995) has referred to as the 'social imaginary', the creative parts of the psyche that dream of alternatives and which may adapt to as well as modify symbols, structures and discourses. This short article deploys this approach in the context of narratives of employment and hierarchies of workplaces. Such narratives often occur through free association (Hollway and Jefferson 2000) as a response to invitations to interviewees to 'tell me about your life'. In the telling of their lives, interviewees may refer to places and times of birth, families of origin; they may focus on the experience of schooling, or more often than not, stories of employment. Workplace hierarchies as these impinge upon issues of recognition for certain types of work and not others, for example, resonate with an institution that, in the awarding of honours, symbolises and endorses particular hierarchies.

## Background

Narrative research has been one of the standard methodological tools of ethnographic inquiry used by social scientists for many years (Atkinson *et al.* l999). The narrative may represent any number of genres, although the standard story often involves the rational ordering of material; a veiling of more immediate and often chaotic levels of knowing, that feel contradictory or too painful to recount. The something veiled might be thought of as the unconscious. One way of attempting to access that which is veiled is by paying close attention to ambiguous phrasing, choice of words, uncomfortable pauses, or stories as metaphors for something else, associated perhaps with other stories and experiences.

The charge has been made (Brockmeier l997) that the notion of an authentic self has been challenged by those who link identity to a certain genre of narrative and textual treatment. Freud himself, combined an interest in the mind as both a physical and cultural entity, favouring, ultimately *verstehen* or understanding, over the predictions of human behaviour that might ensue from scientific explanation. As a hermeneutic, non-positivistic approach, psychoanalytic interpretation of narratives is subject to the biases and assumptions not only of the respondent, but also of the analyst or social researcher – involving material that is 'constructed rather than collected'.  Moreover, the idea that identities and experiences are always emergent as a consequence of the availability of discourses and genres of storytelling has prompted some to question the relative usefulness of psycho-social methodologies whose analytical tools might add little more than those supplied by, say, discourse analysis (see Frosh and Emerson 2005).

Having written on managerial and stakeholding discourses (Maile l995; Maile and Braddon 2003) I can see the continuing relevance of exploring the impact of dominant discourses and their relationship to material and structural processes. I like to think of the interpretative potential of psycho-social research as compatible with ethnographic research (see Atkinson *et al.* l999) and reflexive interviewing where the interview itself 'functions as a narrative device which allows persons who are so inclined to tell stories about themselves…and to participate in an experience which reveals (the teller's and listeners') shared sameness (Denzin 2001:25). However, what is of greater interest to me in listening to work stories, is what Castoriadis (1995) has referred to as the 'social imaginary', the creative parts of the psyche that dream of alternatives and which may adapt to as well as modify symbols, structures and discourses.

The social imaginary is desirous, and dreams beyond the status quo; it is also active in the very creation of symbols and their interpretation. Sometimes symbols themselves may be tools to dream with; conjured up in the imagination for use in otherwise difficult circumstances. Not all symbols in the unconscious are referential, they may express a desire, a fantasy but not in any straightforward way. Similarly, in the social imaginary, there is rarely a clear- cut relationship between broader culture and the symbols which are part of that and rational structures and processes:

> *"…They can be grasped only indirectly and obliquely: as the gap, at once obvious and impossible to de-limit precisely, between a first term-the life and the actual organization of society- and the second term, likewise impossible to define- this same life and organization conceived in a strictly 'functional-rational' manner; as a 'coherent deformation' of the system of subjects, objects and their relations; …as the invisible cement holding together this endless collection of real, rational and symbolic odds and ends that constitute every society, and as the principle that selects and shapes the bits and pieces that will be accepted there…"*
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> (Castoriadis l995:123)

Elliott has critiqued the ideas of Castoriadis (*ibid.*) for assuming a monadic and, therefore, undynamic, pleasure seeking *id*. In this, Castoriadis (*ibid.*) follows some of the tendencies of the Frankfurt School. As Elliot argues, the creativity of the human psyche, the unconscious included, emerges in dynamic relation between different parts of the psyche as these, in turn, are influenced by real relationships with significant others. A monadic conception of the unconscious cannot conceive of the social at all, it is as if it is an intact, sealed off chamber – when as many writing in the psycho-analytic tradition would argue that it is not. To highlight the ways in which people engage, in fantasy with workplaces and ideas of working, is not to adopt a post-modernist perspective, as if somehow, workplaces and the broader cultures of which they are a part, are a ravenously libidinous free-for all, characterised by proliferating identities and liberated by declining traditions, institutions and organizational structures and strategies that marked modernity. It is rather to explore the desires and dreams that are evoked in, and by, the sustained losses and injuries which performances or prevailing representations of specific hierarchies within workplaces and experiences of work, attempt to disguise or elude. In this, the role of dominant discourses and cultures are important, as is the role of significant others as friends, workmates and family members, both in terms of the kinds of human connections which are yearned for, (but denied by workplace hierarchies) and in terms of sources of support and identification.

Coming back to the broader culture and hierarchies that frame ideas of work, Cuilla (2000) suggests, controversially, that in the United States, "Cultural values such as independence, freedom and equality, make the idea of working for others, almost un-American…Most workers leave their constitutional rights in the parking lot or on the bus when they go to work…" (2000:73). In the UK, the picture is more complicated with research pointing to, at the very least, a great deal of ambivalence towards entrepreneurial or managerial ideals on the part of workers (Gospel and Palmer l993; Adams 2008) – such attitudes being influenced partly by the social and political culture left by an unfinished revolution (Meiksins-Wood l991). The British honours system reflects the historical compromises made between parliament and crown, nobility, landed aristocracy (with their concomitant discourses of noblesse oblige and manners) along with enobled industrial, commercial and later financial elites and their associated business, entrepreneurial and communitarian discourses (although in practice, networks of influence often blur the distinctions).

If we are simply to take the surface information of stories presented to us we might only hear the marks of neo liberalism or the discourses of tradition that are part of nostalgia. Yet the story within the story, acting as metaphor, may reveal more. So, for example – a man of 36 originally from Pakistan, a corporate high-flyer – is able to narrate a story of gargantuan managerial achievement. But attention to body language, feelings and associations (for a discussion of the ethical implications of such an approach see Kvale l999) conveys a sense that a history of utilising managerial discourses in getting resources and redirecting resources, speaks for the sister so badly treated and the family of his formative years who as migrants lived in one room; a father who suffered the humiliations of racism and casualised work.

Breaking through a dominant managerialist vision of the world, is something more humane, a desire to make good the losses of friends and brothers – a constant striving to manage and redirect, albeit, in this case, through managerial techniques, latched onto as a symbol for the management of his own personal anguish and a vehicle for redirecting resources to those in poor communities with whom he identifies. His own narcissistic wounds, along with more concrete battle scars, had served to orient him, ironically, along a highly individualised path of achievement, through being a hero for others. It was boyhood heroes that captured his imagination, and the investment of his unconscious imaginary identifications in the role of manager – not as an implementer of policy, or an administrator of funds, but as leader of those who are unrecognised. Managerialism became the vehicle for his personal campaign to put social wrongs right as well as reflecting, perhaps, a narcissistic desire for recognition and fulfilment. Although the latter is at odds with the aims of say, deliberative democracy, the desire to redress injustice still tells us something of the desire for another way of being and the creative ways in which the imagination is involved in such desire. The question of course is how to provide the space for the reverie to explore other, less individualised approaches – a way of thinking about alternative, more humane values which would not require such driven strategies.

Moreover, to argue that discourse dominates the psyche fails to capture the ways in which people will attempt to accommodate a discourse to fulfil something more profoundly desired than the often superficial careerist aims that are often experienced as futile, dead or alienating. The same may also be said for the more traditional hierarchies and discourses which are associated with the British Honours System and which are alluded to in an interviewees' recounting of somebody else's tale.

One woman, Shirley, told a story which could be interpreted as revealing of her own subliminal feelings of not being treated fairly in the workplace – of a male relative who,

having made his way up to the level of Sergeant in the army during the l940s, decided to take a 'step or two down again' on discovering how unfair the officer class was. They blamed the rank and file for vandalising the mess room and had their allowances cut to make good the damage when it wasn't them at all. It was actually the officers themselves.

Her uncle had really thought such people would act honourably and was appalled to discover that they did not. When he returned from the war he became a socialist. He told his family to vote Labour and never vote for what he regarded as the 'officer class'. Shirley, who is now in her fifties, described her uncle's story of the l940s, as if it were yesterday. Out of all the stories she might have told, this one seemed to resonate strongly with Shirley's own values and feelings; capturing her imagination in the development of her own ideals. In a similar way to her uncle, she regards herself as a champion of those who might not otherwise be treated fairly. She works in an educational unit, set up by the government - to provide school leavers with practical life and vocational skills and she described the thankless task of trying to get resources and facilities for those who do not succeed academically, and who get a raw deal in terms of opportunities to develop themselves or be recognised. At the same time, reference was made to the undervalued and unrecognised efforts of public service workers like Shirley. The military metaphor supplied by her uncle's story might have been making elliptical reference to the highly pressured nature of front line of public service work.

For another, the rationalities of the workplace could not overcome his interest in the craft of *his* work, the doing it well being about him and his control over his skill as part of his integrity. Nor could the workplace contain his desire for something else, beyond it, connection with others through the music of John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers, Led Zeppelin and Otis Redding and the feeling of a mini, like a go-cart, so close to the ground, needing jump leads to start it and loaned to him as part payment for sawing and priming stolen timber – a job he performed so painstakingly in clothes that were sweaty, dusty and covered in pink paint, the crooks who owned the yard would call him Picasso.

Stories within the story may reference idealised figures who come to stand for social justice or fairness at work, or symbols that represent play, rather than work, freedom, rather than constraint. Arguably, such metaphors are felt to be of greater necessity in the context of a culture that, outside of trade union representation, limits possibilities for speaking more directly about the finer sensibilities brought into the work-place which often remain unrecognised or undervalued by employers and government officials alike.

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