Self-Narratives as Personal Structures of Meaning

Jeroen Jansz, Leiden University, The Netherlands

"The architectonic activity of authorship, which is the building of a text, parallels the activity of human existence which is the building of a self."

Mikhail Bakhtin (In: Clark & Holquist, 1984, p. 64).

The question of "self" is put on the psychological agenda as soon as people start reflecting upon themselves. Trying to find an answer to questions like "who am I?" or "what am I?" implies a cognitive operation which results in the attribution of meaning to oneself as a person. But answering the identity question is rather difficult for two reasons. The first one is concerned with the paradoxical aspects of "self." When individuals want to define who they are as a person, they are inevitably caught between a need to belong and a need to be distinct. Identities are partly determined by groups one does belong to, or wants to belong to. At the same time, however, individuals are more than group members. In order to sustain their individuality, they have to differentiate themselves from other people (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). This results in a complex negotiation between belonging and being unique, because the practical implications are in conflict more often than not (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). The "self" is further hindered by a paradox that appears diachronically. On the one hand, the "self" is assumed to provide personal stability across a variety of situations, but on the other hand, the "self" is assumed to be dynamic. The sense of stability may be put at risk when individuals start to develop, or actualize themselves. These two paradoxes demand a subtle conceptualization of "self" that can cope with the conflicting demands.

The second reason that complicates the identity question is concerned with the cultural embeddedness of "self." The "self" is inextricably linked to the cultural concept of the person, because one's personal experience of being a specific kind of person is located at

---

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the NATO workshop. Several participants shared their thoughtful comments with me. Thanks are expressed to Harke Bosma, Michael Chandler, Brigitte Pörzgen, Fred Strayer, Jerzy Trzebinski, and Anna Kwiatkowska. The editors are kindly acknowledged for their contribution to the final version. Ms. A.J.S. Fischer-Vahl is thanked for her work on the improvement of the author's English.

A. Oosterwegel and R. A. Wicklund (eds.),
the embodied person as the spatio-temporal center of experience. What we assume ourselves to be is largely derived from the public resources of personhood. In short: the person is the source model for the self (Harré, 1983, p. 26-27; Strawson, 1959, p. 102-103).

Cultures vary with respect to their public conception of the person (Shweder & Bourne, 1984). Western culture is dominated by a conception of the person that can be summarized by three features (Dennett, 1978; Harré, 1983; Jansz, 1991). Western personhood is first characterized by rationality. Persons are assumed to, and have to be able to account for their words and actions in ways that meet standards of rational explanation. The second feature is self-determination. Persons can distance themselves from their contexts, and from their immediate experiences. They are therefore able to consider alternative options, and to plan their actions according to their own preferences. Although they are influenced by others, they are assumed to be the ultimate determiner of what they think, say, or do. This self-determining feature is closely linked to the third characteristic: Responsibility. The organisation of Western societies is such that human beings are held individually responsible for what they say or do. The burden of responsibility may be a little alleviated because of the circumstances, or one's personal history, but in the end it is the individual person who has to account for his or her words and deeds. The public conception of the person is demanding in a moral sense: The individual has to come to terms with the cultural construction of the person as a rational, self-determining agent who is responsible for his words and actions. The next section is devoted to the structure that enables us to produce our personal construction of being a person.

The Narrative Nature of Self

The major instrument for the attribution of meaning to oneself as a person is the telling of an autobiographical story, called a self-narrative (Freeman, 1993; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Jansz, 1991). The nature of self-narratives will be described via four characteristics. A self-narrative is first characterized by the fact that it is authored. It is told from the perspective of its author, who generally employs a first person voice. In other words, the self-narrative functions as the author's I with respect to his or her Me, and it thus relates self-narrating to the self-determining feature of personhood. Authorship is a crucial characteristic because it relates the activity of telling the autobiographical story to the concept of "self." Consequently, self-narratives are seen as the production site of selves, which is underlined by Dennett who argues that the self is the product of our tales, and not their source (Dennett, 1991, p. 418). The second characteristic of self-narratives is that they are accounts of the relationships between a variety of self-relevant elements across time. It is a personal story about one's past and present. Most self-narratives also incorporate a prospect for the future. For example, by connecting prospective life goals with past experiences. The third characteristic stresses the ordered nature. The self-relevant elements are sequentially organized. In exceptional cases, the self-narrative results in a plot; in most cases, however, the story provides a sequence without resulting in a denouement. The fourth characteristic is rationality, which relates to the rational feature of Western personhood. Self-narratives have to conform to public standards of rationality in order to be intelligible for the audience. It is not impossible that a narrator develops his story according to his personal standard of