Check for updates

Article

QR

Qualitative Research
2015, Vol. 15(1) 22–38
© The Author(s) 2013
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1468794113509259
qrj.sagepub.com

'Strong multiplicity': an interpretive lens in the analysis of qualitative interview narratives

Tova Hartman
Bar Ilan University, Israel

Abstract
This article examines the responses to an exercise administered over a 10-year period to graduate-level psychology students in an advanced methodology seminar, to explore one of the central questions of qualitative research: What theories about identity do we bring to our analyses of first-person interview narratives? It suggests that researchers' interpretations of what appear to be inconsistent and/or conflicting statements by interview subjects about their experience within the course of an interview can serve as a conceptual touchstone reflecting core assumptions about identity. Students' responses to the exercise, which asked them to interpret two statements by an interview subject that seem to self-contradict, have consistently favored the type of dichotomous analytical paradigms associated with modernist conceptions of a unified self. This trend may be reflective of an insufficiently developed interpretive lexicon within postmodern narrative analysis. The author offers an interpretive approach termed 'strong multiplicity' to reflect the possibility of finding legitimate expressions of identity among seemingly inconsistent self-representations.

Keywords
identity theory, inconsistency, narrative analysis, qualitative research methodology, strong multiplicity

Introduction

One aspect of qualitative psychological research is based on interviews, listening to subjects talk about themselves and their lives and interpreting the stories they tell.[1] The more fully we can understand the potential meanings implicit in how people represent their experience, the better equipped we will be to understand the implications of their self-presentations, and the more resonant will be the theories we construct of those accounts.

Corresponding author:
Tova Hartman, Ed.D., Bar Ilan University, 39 Reuven St., Ramat Gan, 52900, Jerusalem, Israel.
Email: tovahartman@gmail.com

> When we listen carefully to the stories people tell, we learn how people as individuals and groups make sense of their experiences and construct meanings and selves. We also learn about the complexities and subtleties of the social worlds they inhabit. We gain deeper understandings of the social resources (cultural, ideological, historical, and so forth) that they draw on, resist, and transform as they tell their stories. (Chase, 1996: 45)

Thus, one of the central questions of narrative research is: how do we listen to the interviews we have recorded? How do we interpret and write about the narratives they generate?

Since any story is subject to multiple interpretations, the process of interpretation – the frameworks and methods qualitative researchers bring to bear upon the analysis of first-person interview accounts – is itself an important subject of reflection. What kinds of theories and assumptions about identity do we bring to our analyses of these first-person narratives? It stands to reason that our conceptions of identity and self play a significant role in shaping the parameters and possibilities of how we interpret subjects' accounts of their experience.

As a teacher of advanced research methods to graduate psychology students in Israel, I have long been interested in understanding the various theories students bring to bear in their analysis and interpretation of personal narratives. My students are well versed in a variety of theories of human development and personality, writing theses that draw heavily upon a variety of psychological paradigms and methods. In Israel, a place filled with people living at various cultural crossroads, there is a lot of research investigating people's experiences at these critical intersections.[2]

A central facet of my role as a teacher of methodology is to sensitize these students to listen to and interpret statements of identity by people who are part of cultures in flux. This focus emerged out of my own research into people standing at various crossroads of identity and culture, for example: gay Orthodox Jews strongly committed to these seemingly opposing aspects of their identity; teachers of sexual education in Israel's National-Religious school system, a community in which pre-marital sexuality of any kind is strictly forbidden but many students are nevertheless sexually active; Orthodox women's experience of the religious laws governing such intimate areas of life as modesty and the niddah/mikve ritual regulating marital sex according to the menstrual cycle through a normative schedule of ritual immersions.

One of the central interpretive struggles I have grappled with in this work is how to understand what appear to be inconsistent and/or conflicting statements by interview subjects about their experience within the course of an interview. I came to realize that how we interpret such seeming inconsistencies within first-person interview accounts can serve as a conceptual touchstone reflecting some of our core assumptions about identity. For example, a researcher operating within a modernist psychological paradigm of identity will likely have a different way of interpreting such seeming inconsistencies than one drawing primarily upon a postmodern orientation.

About 10 years ago, I began examining this question about inconsistency and identity with my methodology students, administering an exercise designed to illuminate some of the ways in which their notions of identity and self are structured upon entering the course. In the middle of each semester, I have presented them with two excerpts from an

interview I conducted in the course of my research into Orthodox women's subjective experience of the religious laws regulating marital sex according to the menstrual cycle. The two statements seem to reflect an inconsistency in the interview subject's feelings about the ritual – one appearing to reflect a positive feeling towards it, the other a negative feeling.

What I have found is that the vast majority of my students' interpretations have tended to reflect modernist assertions about identity and selfhood. (Significantly, their responses have reflected a high level of awareness of the ways in which their presence in the interview may have shaped certain aspects of the subject's self-presentation, an important pillar of postmodern qualitative research analysis.) Their narrative analysis of this seeming inconsistency has consistently favored the type of dichotomous (e.g. true/false, surface/depth) thinking associated with modernist conceptions of an essentially unified self.

There may be various ways to interpret this trend. One is that this is truly the students' interpretive intuition: between these two voices, one is more true to the subject's true identity. One reflects the 'good-girl' voice seeking to fulfill cultural expectations, the other a deeper voice of subjective seflhood.

Another possibility is that this trend seemingly privileging a modernist interpretation of the self is at least in part the result of an insufficiently developed interpretive lexicon within postmodern narrative analysis. How might postmodern theories of self shape the ways we interpret the self-presentations that constitute the raw material of narrative interpretation? In my teaching and research, I have coined the term 'strong multiplicity' to reflect the possibility of finding legitimate expressions of identity in personal narratives that seem to present inconsistent or conflicting presentations of self. The term alludes both to the postmodern understanding of identity as inherently multiple, and to a strategy of reading that is sensitive to multiple expressions of self.

Methodology

The exercise I administered to my students was designed to help me to hear how they listen to other people. More specifically, I sought to answer the question: what does their analysis of narratives reveal about how they – graduate students trained as educators and psychologists – interpret complex expressions of identity that may seem contradictory or inconsistent? Moreover, what concepts of identity appear to influence or inform these analyses? Without privileging one theoretical tradition over another, how might modern vs. postmodern concepts, for example, be distributed among their responses?

To explore these questions, since 2001 I have administered an exercise to my graduate seminar in advanced qualitative research methodology. I presented them with an example from my research about Orthodox women's experiences with the niddah/mikve ritual (see Hartman, 2007: 81–98), in which a woman, early in the interview, stated that she was 'not oppressed' by the ritual, and then later, with respect to the internal checks for blood, stated, 'I feel the hands of five hundred years of rabbis stuffed inside of me' – a striking image of patriarchal invasiveness and control.

I asked my students how they would write about a woman whose interview includes these two sentiments. I left the question open-ended – 'How would you describe her?'

– as a way of making the assumptions these students brought to their interpretive process more transparent. Thus far, I have culled over 300 responses.

Student responses

Across my students' responses I have identified four central explanatory motifs in their attempts to explain the shift between these two statements within the same interview: 1) influence of the interview context and/or relationship with the interviewer; 2) the first statement is false, the second true; 3) both statements are true, and were made with respect to different external contexts related to the niddah/mikve ritual (e.g. distinguishing between a religious law and a particular facet of it). These three categories account for the vast majority of my students' responses. A small minority expressed the interpretive possibility that, 4) both statements are true, and were made with respect to different *internal* contexts within the participant's identity. This is the interpretive approach I will refer to as 'strong multiplicity'.

Local context: interview/interviewer influence

As participants in an advanced methodology course, my students had read a good deal of material in their introductory courses about the influence of the interview context, and in particular the interviewer/interviewee relationship, on shaping the stories respondents tell in the qualitative interview setting. Many of the students' responses reflected a cognizance that this woman's statements did not take place in a social vacuum, and located them within an evolving dynamic vis-à-vis the interview context and relationship with the interviewer (see Daiute and Fine, 2003: 68).

The students' answers suggested a number of factors having the potential to influence how that context and relationship may affect the interviewee's account. For example, does the participant consider the interviewer as an insider or outsider relative to the story s/he wishes to tell? If s/he considers the interviewer to be an insider, s/he will speak one way; if an outsider, another way; and if s/he is initially not sure, and then it becomes clarified to him/her – e.g. if the interviewer asks a question that demonstrates intimate familiarity with the participant's world – then his/her attitude, and how and what s/he reveals, will change (see Lomsky-Feder, 1996; Ager, 1980; Hartman, 2002).

In the case under discussion, for example, if the participant understood the interviewer to be an outsider, she might have wanted to defend the virtues of religious life, viewing herself as a spokesperson for an embattled cause against a potentially hostile academic audience. For example: '*The woman sees the interviewer as not religious, and she needs to make her tradition look better*' (Student 113); '*She wanted to challenge the stereotypical preconceptions about the mikveh*' (Student 244). This motivation would account for her initial assertion that she is 'not oppressed'.

Alternatively, she may have viewed the interviewer as an authority figure, and attempted to ingratiate herself to her (i.e. the interviewer) and hold her interest by providing her with what she perceived she wanted: anti-religious material consonant with what she understood to be feminist critiques of the niddah/mikve ritual: '*The participant was unwittingly prompted by the researcher to give oppressive statements about, and images*

of, the rabbis' (Student 20); '*She doesn't want to make herself look primitive, and she suspects the interviewer thinks it is [primitive]*' (Student 57). Still again, if the participant perceived the interviewer as an insider, she may have allowed herself to let her guard down and be more honest, sharing aspects of religion that are painful to her: '*She agrees with the laws of niddah in general, but then when she realized that the interviewer was actually an insider, was able to speak more openly about her personal feelings*' (Student 14).

A further sub-category of the insider/outsider consideration involves dynamics specific to instances of women being interviewed by women, which can lead to a sense of evolving closeness that also may create a unique trajectory of what is shared, and how it is shared, over the course of an interview (see Grossman, Kruger and Moore, 1999; Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 1988; Kirsch, 1999; Lazreg, 1988; Oakley, 1981). Some students' responses reflected this insight as well: '*During the interview the woman opens up to another woman, she begins to think about things through the relationship with the interviewer, and begins to think of other levels of her experience*' (Student 66).

Methodology researchers also note a general interview trajectory, to which the above dynamics can be applied in varying permutations – an insight reflected in many of the students' responses. Interview participants often begin with a rigid perspective, making broad declarations that serve as personal topic-headings or slogans, a kind of shorthand for their relationship to the subject at hand. As the interview evolves, participants often become more relaxed, and find it easier not only to share, but to *reflect* about their own thoughts and experiences in ways that they may not take the time to do in their daily life. '*Initially she speaks the social norm, but the interview enabled her to speak deeper truths*' (Student 32); '*She became more comfortable with the interviewer and became more honest*' (Student 121); '*She says at first what her community/society wants her to say, she was initially closed, more introverted, and did not want to expose herself and her feelings ... and the atmosphere during the interview enabled her to break the unspoken rules of where she lives and to share her thoughts and feelings without fear and say what she really thinks*' (Student 94); '*At the beginning of the interviews we are not yet that open, later on we speak more openly and honestly*' (Student 282); '*Only when we really speak about it do we begin to allow our feelings to emerge, how difficult it really is*' (Student 100); '*First we say what is expected of us. We silence parts of ourselves in order to show that we are normal*' (Student 79).

In other words, the interview context, and the evolving relationship with the interviewer, actually may allow participants to expose to themselves a broader range of emotions and/or perspectives than they had been aware of before the interview began. Generally, earlier, declarative statements are viewed by researchers as more superficial, and thus less true, than the more nuanced expressions that often follow. Many of my students' responses echoed this tendency.

Interpreting vocal shifts

Another interpretation many students gave of the different perspectives voiced by this interview participant understood them as mapping a shift from a false voice – i.e. a perspective imposed upon her by the broader societal context, foreign and even opposed to

her personal intuition, which she had internalized through exposure and over the course of her life taken on as her own – to a voice closer and thus more authentic to her subjective experience of the niddah/mikve ritual: '*Her personal true voice is silenced under the culture's voice that says she has to say it is not oppressive*' (Student 127); '*The first sentence is what she wished she could believe, and the other is what she truly believes*' (Student 158); '*She believed that it wasn't oppressive but during the interview her silenced voice just broke out*' (Student 106); '*She wants to believe it is not oppressive but is not successful to really connect to that on an emotional level*' (Student 230); '*The first sentence is what she wants to believe, but innerly this is what she actually feels. One she believes in, the other she feels*' (Student 81); '*The way she survives is through disassociation. The first helps her stay within her community, but as an individual her internal self tells her something else*' (Student 255); '*She begins as the normative woman from her culture, and then speaks the silenced oppressed voice*' (Student 60).

This type of explanation echoes Dana Jack's (1991) 'I/Over-Eye' paradigm, which argues that, given that we live in a patriarchy with pervasive, rigidly imposed sets of norms, often we espouse these norms even though they do not represent the perspective of our true selves. (This discourse, of course, presumes the existence of such a true or core self.)

> The first-person voice is the self that speaks from personal experience and observation… the authentic self. The other voice in the dialogue speaks with a moralistic, 'objective,' judgmental tone that relentlessly condemns the authentic self… Like the object-relations notion of the false self, it conforms to outer imperatives and perceived expectations in order to gain approval and protect the true self. (Jack, 1991: 94)

Some students attributed the shift in voices to a shift in different external contexts of the niddah/mikve ritual itself, i.e. the participant was thinking of different aspects of the ritual when she made the two statements under scrutiny: '*She doesn't think it is a bad mitzvah on the whole; she feels upset about one part but she doesn't think the whole thing is wrong*' (Student 40); '*This woman is very connected to her religion, it is just the practicalities of every day doing the checking is very hard*' (Student 109). This interpretive lens still assumes the existence of a single coherent self, relating variably to different external facets of ritual (see Ochberg, 2003: 123).

Far fewer students suggested a shift in contexts internal to her identity: that when making the different statements the participant was relating to different parts of herself: *'For the woman who spoke, these things are not contradictory… different parts of her relate to the mitzvah in different ways' (*Student 272). What these students heard was that there is not one 'box' called identity into which experiences can be synthesized, homogenized, and neatly stacked. Identity itself is multiple, and a person's response to a given event can differ depending on the aspect of identity in which she currently dwells. Within different internal frameworks, then, one will feel genuinely, and potentially drastically, differently about the same event: '*Each time she feels different, it is not one experience…. Both the sentences are the way she deals with this mitzvah*' (Student 235).

The woman under discussion, for example, may feel a general sense of confidence and comfort, satisfaction and pride identifying as a 'religious person' or an 'observant Jew';

and under that broad rubric of identification may feel at peace with, or even supportive of, the niddah/mikve ritual. It may have been this aspect of her identity that she was relating to when she made her first statement about not feeling oppressed. There may be another aspect of this participant's identity, however, which recoils against the physical and psychological invasiveness of the niddah/mikve ritual. Her later remark may have been predicated by an internal shift towards stronger identification with this aspect of her identity.

Some students further developed this way of understanding shifts among identity contexts, while taking into account shifts in external contexts as well. A general discussion of niddah/mikve observance may spark identification with that part of her identity which feels proud of and happy with her religious commitment, while recalling specific rituals within that observance may evoke more vexed identity associations: '*She is really saying I belong to my culture even with the difficulties and I want to be a part of it even though it is oppressive' (*Student 61*).* One person may subdivide her identity into a number of coexisting categories – 'who I am,' for example (i.e. a religious person invested in, and experiencing and affirming of, Jewish ritual), versus 'what I do' (i.e. certain rituals that make me extremely uncomfortable) – none of which necessarily claim any particular status or privilege over the other. Some of the students' characterizations of these identity contexts do seem to privilege some over others; others carry no such connotation, at least not overtly, and can be read as regarding them simply as diverse elements in a broad field of identity, different but no more or less valid or 'true'.

One dimension of this woman's response, which is consonant with accounts of religious participants in other studies (see Hartman, 2002), is the distinction within their religious identities between 'religion', which she embraces and affirms, and religious (in this case rabbinic) authority, whom she associates with a profound sense of violation. Some of the students heard in her second response not merely a strong visceral metaphor of oppression, but a literal critique of the rabbinic establishment.

Discussion

Inconsistency and identity in qualitative research interviews: the modernist self

Researchers have long grappled with the question of how to interpret what appears to them as inconsistency within participant responses and/or narrative accounts. Quantitative research has conventionally taken a somewhat stark approach, for example discarding questionnaires that exhibit such apparent inconsistency. The classical quantitative approach applies the notion of scale reliability, defined as the consistency or stability of test scores, which means that instability reduces the scale's reliability. A scale with low reliability proves itself unusable. Thus, generally speaking, quantitative research has been inconsistency-averse.[3]

Qualitative researchers have been more open to grappling with the significance of inconsistency:

> In qualitative inquiry, it is now well-recognized that different methods produce different kinds of data; that participants – even from the same 'group' – vary enormously and that participants

> – *even within the same person within a single interview* – may contradict him/herself; and that participants do not all see the world as researchers do. These contradictions are the stuff of qualitative analysis and tough choices qualitative researchers need to explore. (Dauite and Fine, 2003: 68; emphasis added)

The literature of qualitative interview analysis has exhibited, broadly speaking, two approaches to interpreting inconsistency: one which attributes it to a phenomenon that might be categorized under the rubric of 'ambivalence'; and one which creates a hierarchy among conflicting responses, privileging some as 'true' or 'more true', and others as 'less true' or 'false'. These approaches both seem to assume the notion of a unified, underlying self in possession of a coherent stance, positing that inconsistency represents some kind of muddling or obscuring of that truth – some theorists describe it as a form of confusion, others designate it almost as a pathology – which must therefore either be discounted, pruned away, or interpreted into a synthetic whole, until the self's true disposition is discovered (see Ochberg, 2003: 121–2).

These interpretive approaches to seeming inconsistencies reflect an essentially modernist understanding of identity development and the nature of the self. Analyses that read inconsistencies as necessarily representing ambivalence or inner conflict implicitly posit a concept of individual identity as self-contained and self-sufficient, with the inherent potential, at least, to stand apart from its relationships to people and culture. Kvale notes that this version of the self has a distinctly modernist pedigree:

> The notion of a unique isolated individual is a cultural- and historical-specific way of conceiving man, which arose in Europe around the sixteenth century [...] to both anthropologists and historians this self-contained individualism belongs to a specific Western cultural and historical context. (1992: 43; see also Sampson, 1985)

Two of the most dominant trends in modern psychology, humanism and behaviorism, both emerged out of this Western cultural-historical tradition, rooted in modernist conceptions of the self-contained individual.

> Not only the subject of the psychological laboratory, but also the humanistic self, is ahistorical and asocial. The ideal self has freed itself from tradition and authority and dissociated itself from the society it inhabits [...] to Fromm and Maslow, man's individuality became an end in itself. (Kvale, 1992: 43)

It should perhaps not be surprising that a modernist-individualist conception of identity–

> [i.e.] The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of self-awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background. (Geertz, 1973; see also Baumeister, 1987 and Holland, 1997)

– might struggle to make sense of inconsistencies or seeming contradictions within an interview narrative. In a unitary conception of the self, the truth must be unitary as well.

In conflicting statements of self, one must necessarily be privileged. The binary relationship of self/other posited by modernist identity theories is reflected in interpretations that seek to resolve inconsistent expressions into either true/false binaries or ambivalence – both of which imply that the subject does not fully understand the meaning of his/her own utterances.

Inconsistency, multiplicity, and the postmodern self

The postmodern turn in psychology has led to the reconceptualization of many psychological categories and terms, including the nature of the self. As Kvale notes, 'both behaviorism and humanistic psychology have remained outside a postmodern discourse' (1992: 45). Postmodern identity theories have questioned modernist paradigms, deconstructing the notion of development in linear stages towards an integrated version of identity founded on what Erikson termed a 'sense of invigorating sameness and continuity' (Erikson, 1968: 19; see also Erikson, 1975; McAdams 1988, 1997). Some have sought to deconstruct the stability and essentialism of identities, master categories and gendered dichotomies (Butler, 1999); claim identifications are dynamic, multiple, often contradictory, contextual, contingent, constructed and discursively produced within modalities of power (see Gergen, 1991; Hall, 2000; Hermans, Kempen and Van Loon, 1992; Lifton, 1993); and offered a dynamic, multidimensional, reflective, situated and embodied view of self (Benhabib, 1992; Butler et al., 1995).

Gergen (1991), for example, argues that defining developmental maturity in terms of stability and self-consistency arbitrarily inhibits possibilities for personal freedom and growth (see, e.g. p. 178). Lifton (1993), arguing that a more open-ended concept of identity enhances identity resilience in an 'age of fragmentation', articulates a model of identity as a constant process of self-recreation, which, while not without its problematics and risks, potentially 'allows for an opening out of individual life, for a self of many possibilities' (1993: 4–5). Schachter further observes that 'sameness and continuity may actually necessitate suppressing or relinquishing certain identity elements', which in turn 'may hinder personality integration' itself (2005: 149). Hermans' (2001) 'dialogical self' views both self and culture as dynamic, decentralized multivocal systems, where one moves dynamically between embodied positions that develop dialogical relationships among themselves.

Building on this critique, some theorists have reconceptualized the self as decentralized among a network of relationships, proposing a non-hierarchical, 'ensembled individualism' (Sampson, 1985) with more fluid boundaries between self and other (see also Sampson, 1985). In this reconsideration of the self-concept, it is not difficult to sense the potential for new ways of interpreting seeming inconsistencies in narratives of self-presentation. Indeed, if identity is seen as multiple and relational – i.e. 'we are fragmented, conflicted, multiple, and protean and see ourselves as variable and relativist in our actions and beliefs, rather than as consistent actors in the world with a sure grasp of experience' (Weiland, 2003: 201) – inconsistency becomes a central and fertile site of analysis. Seeming tensions and contradictions between multiple identifications can be viewed as natural expressions of such multiple, relational selves and examined from a variety of constructive interpretive perspectives: e.g. as produced by competing social

and personal positions (Hermans, 2001), or competing social roles that are of equal salience to the self (Stryker and Burke, 2000). For Gergen (1991), identity is indeed most fully revealed in the form of 'dilemmas' rather than through consistency and synthesis.

As mentioned above, my students' responses to the subject's disparate statements have evinced a strong tendency to use modernist paradigms of self. Notwithstanding their training and discourse in postmodern identity theory, they have tended largely to privilege what they identify as the internal voice over what they identify the cultural voice as 'true' or 'real'. This may, again, simply be their interpretive instinct in the particular case to which they were asked to respond. It is also possible that it is based on a more modernist instinct about the nature of the self: the binary model simply seems more palpable or attractive instinctually, even if they might theoretically question or reject it. But it is also possible that, at least in part, this tendency reflects a lack of sufficient analytical tools to apply postmodern theory to first-person interview narratives.

Multiplicity and method

For theoretical insights to translate fruitfully into new possibilities of narrative analysis, new interpretive frameworks must be developed around them. Josselson (2004), discussing the distinctly hermeneutic quality of qualitative research, points out that while much methodological focus has been placed upon deconstructing the interview process, 'relatively less attention has been given to the theoretical concerns that underlie the process of analysis' (2004: 2; see also Polkinghorne, 1995).

Postmodern psychologists have called into question many modernist assumptions about the nature, goals, and parameters of psychological research (see, for example, Josselson, 2004). Some have gone so far as to question its essential validity, critical in particular of the interview method 'as a subjectivist, individualist method, with the interview questions seeking for the labyrinthine intentions of individuals' (Kvale, 1992: 13).

Minimally, the interview as a research method is approached with cautious self-scrutiny, no longer seen as an objective process yielding positive results, but as a negotiated practice that must take into account the partial perspective of the researcher and the concrete, local situation in which it takes place. Postmodernism entails a fundamentally

> changed conception of research – from a method-centeredness to a discursive practice. The research process is not a mapping of some objective social reality; research involves a co-constitution of the objects investigated, with a negotiation and interaction with the very objects studied. (Kvale, 1992: 13)

The prevalence of this type of methodological scrutiny within the literature of postmodern psychological research may help to explain its presence as a strong explanatory motif among my students' responses. Far less methodological theory has taken into account the implications of postmodern psychology's decentralized/dialogical models of identity for the process of narrative analysis.

Given that people often speak in multiple voices that seem conflictual, opposing, or even mutually exclusive, is it possible to listen in a way that does not privilege, to say nothing of invalidate, certain of these voices in favor of others?

Josselson (2004) suggests that our theories about culture and identity shape our basic interpretive stance towards narrative data, invoking a hermeneutic dichotomy of suspicion vs. restoration as two different types of lenses through which we approach interpretation. The former 'conceives the interpretive process as being one of distilling, elucidating, and illuminating the intended meanings of the informant', the latter 'of discovering meanings that lie hidden within a false consciousness', presuming that 'the narrative does not make sense on its own terms' (2004: 5).

Following Kvale (1992), a hermeneutics of demystification tends to reflect modernist claims about identity as a unified whole, or 'the modern quest for a unitary meaning, where there may be none [...] a continual search for an underlying order, constructing a deeper rationality where none is visible':

> This hermeneutics of suspicion, inherent in much modern thought, was carried to its extremes in some version of psychoanalytic and Marxist thought. An action may never be what it appears to be; rather it is an expression of some deeper, more real reality, a symptom of more basic sexual or economic forces. There is a continual hunt for the underlying plan or rationale, the hidden plot or curriculum, to explain the vicissitudes and disorder of what manifestly appears. (Kvale, 1992: 38)

By contrast, a hermeneutics of restoration reflects a more postmodern orientation – and thus has the capacity to generate and frame narrative analysis that reflects more postmodern conceptions of self:

> A postmodern attitude involves a suspicion of suspicion, and a refined sensibility to the surface, an openness to the differences and nuances of what appears. It relates to what is given, rather than what has been or what could be. (Kvale, 1992: 38)

One of the significant facets of Josselson's (2004) opposing categories is that while they have the potential to yield different interpretive results, this will not necessarily be the case. The contrast essentially 'refers not to a property of texts but to the stance of the interpreter' (2004: 5), the researcher's intention towards his/her subject. Similarly, I see strong multiplicity as not an inherent quality of all texts, but as an interpretive possibility arising from a theory of identity that does not assume the necessity of an underlying 'true' or 'core' self. I question the need to read seeming disparities in narrative accounts exclusively through the lens of a true/false dichotomy, or alternatively through the lens of a confused or muddled ambivalence. Rather, it is my claim that this kind of doubling can express a psychological reality, a fragmented quality of the self that cannot be teased into synthesis or resolution.

I would thus suggest a postmodern interpretive stance towards seeming inconsistencies within first-person interview accounts, which neither sets them in opposition nor sees them as reflecting uncertainty or muddled ambivalence. While there may indeed be varying valences of truth and falsehood to the statements interview subjects make, there is also a far higher degree of identity and selfhood implicit in each statement than has often been recognized. In order to understand the participant's identity in its full breadth and range, it is important to take all such statements seriously as expressions of self. It is this alternative analysis that I refer to as 'strong multiplicity'.

It is important to emphasize that I do not mean to suggest that *all* instances of narrative inconsistency must be read as examples of strong multiplicity; nor is it my claim that all voices are always equal. I acknowledge the possibility that some voices may express truer or more deeply resonant perspectives on the self than others. However, I also note the danger of assuming that one voice must always be dominant: in particular, the ways in which that kind of assumption tends to silence other voices, which, while perfectly authentic, may not, for different reasons, find such a strong or loud a place within the self. Strong multiplicity presents an interpretive technique that allows for the possibility of identity as an ongoing, dynamic process, and the correlate possibility that different voices may present themselves as genuinely compelling at different times – and that this chorus of shifting voices may represent not a problem to be solved, but a form of integrity unto itself that should be interpretively recognized and validated as such.

In this sense, strong multiplicity can be seen as participating in the trend that seeks to restore dignity to interview participants by taking their accounts as primary, and shaping theory to cohere with them, rather than attempting to fit the accounts into preexisting theory (see e.g. Brooks, 1988; Franz, 1994; Geertz, 1973; Gergen and Gergen, 1983; Gilligan, 1982; Gwyn, 2000; Habermas, 1993; Josselson, 2004; Kvale, 1996; McAdams, 1993, 1994; Miller, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1995; Tappan, 1997). Building upon the insights of these researchers and theorists, strong multiplicity offers another mechanism through which researchers might attune themselves to otherwise muted voices and experiences. Borrowing Josselson's terminology, strong multiplicity can be seen as a methodological technique serving the hermeneutics of restoration, founded on 'a privileging […] of the aim of grasping the subjectivity of others' (2004: 6), whose task is 'to try to understand the other as they understand themselves'; 'to decode the meanings [of interview participants] with as little distortion as possible' (2004: 9); and to honor 'the implied contract in the interview situation […] that the interviewer is interested in learning about and in some way presenting the lived experience of the participant' (2004: 12).

Josselson cites interviewers who generate analysis of the interviews in collaboration with their subjects as a technique that is aligned with the hermeneutic of restoration. In this sense, strong multiplicity can be seen as another concrete methodological expression of the restorative interpretive approach. Borland suggests this collaborative method 'might open up the exchange of ideas so that we do not simply gather data on others to fit into our own paradigms' (1991: 73), and I propose that strong multiplicity is another way of opening up such an exchange of ideas, so that we do not simply gather data that fits into a more limited paradigm about what identity can hold.

In the same vein, strong multiplicity serves as an alternative to trends of reading, including those employed by some feminist researchers (see e.g. Anderson and Jack, 1991; Bar-On, 1999; Chase, 1996; Giddens, 1976; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Johnson, 1999; Ochberg, 1996; Packer, 1985; Rogers et al., 1999; Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992), which use a hermeneutic of demystification in order to get at 'the more immediate realities of a women's personal experience' (Anderson and Jack, 1991: 11). This type of reading holds that women may inadvertently squelch or mute their unique experience as women when it runs against the grain of 'dominant meanings', opting instead 'to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions' (Anderson and Jack, 1991: 11). As a corrective to this self-muting tendency, the

researcher must stand at a certain distance, taking a 'skeptical attitude' (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992) toward personal accounts based on the understanding 'that cultures limit the range of discourse available to the narrator' (Josselson, 2004: 13). Only by taking this stance of skeptical distance do we make it possible to hear women's voices accurately, 'receiving both the dominant and muted channels clearly and tuning into them carefully to understand the relationship between them' (Josselson, 2004: 13). Anderson and Jack have dubbed this interpretive methodology 'listening in stereo' (1991; see also Anderson et al., 1990).

The methodology of multiplicity can be understood as a different kind of listening. It listens for voices that may appear to be at odds with each other, but does not assume that these inconsistent voices fit within a true/false, internal/external dichotomy, and thus does not label them as such. In fact, it does not limit vocal variance to a zero/one dialectic, but allows for the possibility of a chorus of shifting voices – to extend the aural metaphor, listening not in stereo but in a kind of 'surround sound'.

It is also important to emphasize that the theory of multiplicity does not assume that all voices are equally strong or equally true. It holds that multiple voices express deeply compelling multiple experiences that should not be assumed to fall within hierarchical dichotomies. Reinharz notes that 'the problem of "false consciousness" pervades feminist ethnography of non-feminist groups' (1992: 30; see Andrews, 2002 for a thorough survey of the discourse of false consciousness within feminist psychology). In listening for the muted channels within women's accounts, one runs the danger of overvoicing other channels that may actually represent vital expressions of self. Anderson and Jack speak of looking for a logic within narrative accounts, and seeing what appear to be logical breaks as potential sites of the dominant cultural voice speaking over or drowning out subjective experience; the cultural 'Over-Eye' casting its shadow over the personal 'I' (Anderson and Jack, 1991). I would only point out here the importance of examining our notions and standards for what constitutes logical, and caution that consistency and logic are not necessarily synonymous, i.e. that inconsistency may have a logic of its own.

Overall, strong multiplicity may help to serve as a corrective against these overvoicing pitfalls by extending validity or at least an initial gesture of good faith, to voices that others may be tempted to dismiss as false. Rather than viewing inner contradictions as red flags, symptoms of inner conflict requiring an account that synthesizes or resolves, I would like to suggest that multiple perspectives may in fact be the natural outgrowth of multiple experience – that people do not merely speak with a multiplicity of voices, but that they actually live within a multiplicity of self. By reducing identity to a schema in which the culture's voice is seen as external and the individual's voice as internal, we not only run the risk of overvoicing, but simply overlooking the ways in which the self voice may not oppose the culture voice but draw strength from it, and in which the culture voice may be infused with and uniquely stamped by the self voice. It may ultimately miss the ways and the areas in which these two voices cannot be teased apart, in which they mingle organically, mutually reinforce each other, and give each other meaning (see e.g. Hartman, 2002). As a methodology and a hermeneutic stance, then, strong multiplicity has the potential to open up narrative accounts to readings we otherwise might have missed, to highlight some of the nuances and hidden textures of experience, and give us a richer appreciation for people's lives.

Applied to the mikve article, for example, a reading of strong multiplicity allowed a multi-layered interpretation of participants' varied experience with and responses to the practice of niddah. It created the possibility that the women practicing niddah are not necessarily slaves of the patriarchy, living the father's law, but to some extent are living their own law; that the practice itself is not always experienced as an external, oppressive set of rules and regulations, from which the subjective self is inherently alienated, and which women practice in order to live out the 'good woman' syndrome. This insight into lived experience was only made possible by keeping both voices alive, seeing both as compelling expressions of self.

In the sense outlined above, the theory and methodology of multiplicity can be seen as restoring a measure of dignity to peoples' stories by positing a more expansive version of the self, and thus allowing for a broader range of expressions considered resonant with, rather than alienated from, that self. It should not be surprising, then, that a methodology of reading that includes strong multiplicity further holds the potential to uncover sites of selfhood within narratives that more linear theories of identity might miss. The case of my methodology students provides a small but salient illustration of this claim.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. See Denzin and Lincoln (1998), Introduction, for a salient discussion of the 'definitional issues' surrounding qualitative research, from both historical and theoretical perspectives.
2. Some examples of students doing this type of graduate work in the Israeli context include: an army officer examining constructions of masculinity in the Israeli military; a Muslim woman investigating how it happened that in her village, seemingly overnight, all the young girls started covering their hair; Christian Arabs teaching sex education in the Arab sector; lesbian single mothers in the Orthodox community.
3. Granted, sophisticated multivariate techniques (such as factor analysis, cluster analysis, or multidimensional scaling) would look into the 'internal structure' of the attitude and try to identify 'sub-attitudes' still pertaining to the same domain but not necessarily highly interrelated. Thanks to Gabriel Horenczyk for this clarification.

References

Ager MH (1980) *The Professional Stranger*. New York: Academic Press.

Anderson K, Armitage S, Jack D and Wittner J (1991) Beginning where we are: feminist methodology in oral history. In: Nielson JM (ed) *Feminist Research Methods: Exemplary Readings in the Social Sciences*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 94–114.

Anderson K and Jack DC (1991) Learning to listen: interview techniques and analyses. In: Berger Gluck S and Patai D (eds) *Women's Worlds: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. New York: Routledge, 11–26.

Andrews M (2002) Feminist research with non-feminist and anti-feminist women: meeting the challenge. *Feminism and Psychology* 12: 55–77.

Bar-On D (1999) *The Indescribable and the Undiscussable: Reconstructing Human Discourse After Trauma*. Budapest: Central European Universities Press.

Baumeister RF (1987) How the self became a problem: a psychological review of historical research. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52: 163–176.

Benhabib S (1992) *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. New York: Routledge.

Borland K (1991) 'That's not what I said': interpretive conflict in oral narrative research. In: Gluck SB and Patai D (eds) *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. London: Routledge.

Brooks A (1988) Feminist standpoint epistemology: building knowledge and empowerment through women's lived experience. In: Hesse-Biber SA and Leavy PL (eds) *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 53–82.

Butler J (1999) *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.

Butler J, Benhabib S, Cornell D and Fraser N (1995) *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Routledge.

Chase S (1996) Personal vulnerability and interpretive authority in narrative research. In: Josselson R (ed) *The Narrative Study of Lives Vol. 4: Ethics and Process in the Narrative Study of Lives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 45–59.

Daiute C and Fine M (2003) Researchers as protagonists in teaching and learning qualitative research. In: Josselson R et al. (eds) *Up Close and Personal: The Teaching and Learning of Narrative Research*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 61–77.

Denzin NK and Lincoln YS (1998) *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*. London: Sage.

Erikson EH (1968) *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton.

Erikson EH (1975) *Life History and the Historical Moment*. New York: Norton.

Franz C (1994) Reconstituting the self: the role of history, personality and loss in one woman's life. In: Franz CE and Stewart AJ (eds) *Women Creating Lives: Identities, Resilience, and Resistance*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 213–227.

Geertz C (1973) *The Interpretation of Culture*. New York: Basic Books.

Gergen KJ (1991) *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. New York: Basic Books.

Gergen K and Gergen M (1983) Narratives of the self. In: Sarbin TR and Scheibe KE (eds) *Studies in Social Identity*. New York: Praeger, 254–273.

Giddens A (1976) *New Rules of Sociological Method*. New York: Basic Books.

Gilligan C (1982) *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Grossman FK, Kruger LM and Moore RP (1999) Reflections on a feminist research project: subjectivity and the wish for intimacy and equality. In: Kimmel EB and Crawford M (eds) *Innovations in Feminist Psychological Research*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 117–137.

Gwyn R (2000) Really unreal: narrative evaluation and the objectification of experience. *Narrative Inquiry* 10: 313–340.

Habermas J (1993) *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hall S (2000) Who needs 'identity'? In: du Gay P, Evans J and Redman P (eds) *Identity: A Reader*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 15–30.

Hartman T (2002) *Appropriately Subversive: Modern Mothers in Traditional Religions*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.

Hartman T (2007) *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism: Resistance and Accommodation*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press.

Hermans HJ (2001) The dialogical self: toward a theory of personal and cultural positioning. *Culture & Psychology* 7: 243–281.

Hermans HJ, Kempen HJ and Van Loon RJ (1992) The dialogical self: beyond individualism and rationalism. *American Psychologist* 47, 23–33.

Hesse-Biber SA and Leavy PL (1988) *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Holland D (1997) Selves as cultured. In: Ashmore R and Jussim L (eds) *Self and Identity: Fundamental Issues*. New York: Oxford University Press, 160–190.

Hollway W and Jefferson T (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*. London: Sage.

Jack D (1991) *Silencing the Self: Depression and Women*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Johnson GC (1999) Telling tales: a complicated narrative about courtship. *Narrative Inquiry* 9: 1–23.

Josselson R (2004) The hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion. *Narrative Inquiry* 14: 1–28.

Kvale S (1992) Postmodern psychology: a contradiction in terms? In: Kvale S (ed) *Psychology and Postmodernism*. London: Sage, 31–57.

Kvale S (1996) *InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kirsch G (1999) *Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research: The Politics of Location, Interpretation, and Publication*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Lazreg M (1988) Feminism and difference: the perils of writing as a woman on women in Algeria. *Feminist Studies* 14: 81–107.

Lifton RJ (1993) *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*. New York: Basic Books.

Lomsky-Feder E (1996) A woman studies war: stranger in a man's world. In: Josselson R (ed) *The Narrative Study of Lives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

McAdams DP (1988) *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story: Personological Inquiries into Identity*. New York: Guilford Press.

McAdams DP (1993) *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*. New York: Morrow.

McAdams DP (1994) Image, theme and character in the life story of Karen Horney. In: Franz CE and Stewart AJ (eds) *Women Creating Lives: Identities, Resilience, and Resistance*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 157–171.

McAdams DP (1997) The case for unity in the (post)modern self: a modest proposal. In: Ashmore RD and Jussim LJ (eds) *Self and Identity: Fundamental Issues*. New York: Oxford University Press, 46–78.

Miller M (1996) Ethics and understanding through interrelationship: I and thou in dialogue. In: Josselson R (ed) *The Narrative Study of Lives: Vol. 4. Ethics and Process in the Narrative Study of Lives*. Thousand Oak, CA: Sage, 129–150.

Oakley A (1981) Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms. In: Roberts H (ed) *Doing Feminist Research*. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Ochberg R (1996) Interpreting life stories. In: Josselson R (ed) *The Narrative Study of Lives Vol. 4: Ethics and Process in the Narrative Study of Lives*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 97–113.

Ochberg R (2003) Teaching interpretation. In: Josselson R, Lieblich A and McCadams DP (eds) *Up Close and Personal: The Teaching and Learning of Narrative Research*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 113–133.

Packer MJ (1985) Hermeneutic inquiry in the study of human conduct. *American Psychologist* 10: 1081–1093.

Polkinghorne D (1995) Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *Qualitative Studies in Education* 8: 5–23.

Reinharz S (1992) *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Rogers A et al. (1999) An interpretive poetics of languages of the unsayable. In: Josselson R and Lieblich A (eds) *The Narrative Study of Lives Vol. 6: Making Meaning of Narratives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 77–106.
Rosenwald GC and Ochberg RL (1992) *Storied Lives*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Sampson EE (1985) The decentralization of identity: toward a revised concept of personal and social order. *American Psychologist* 40: 1203–1211.
Schachter EP (2005) Erikson meets the postmodern: can classic identity theory rise to the challenge? *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research* 5: 137–160.
Tappan M (1997) Analyzing stories of moral experience: narrative, voice, and the dialogical self. *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 7: 379–386.
Weiland S (2003) Writers as readers in narrative inquiry: learning from biography. In: Josselson R, Lieblich A and MacAdams DP (eds) *Up Close and Personal: The Teaching and Learning of Narrative Research*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 199–214.

Author biography

Tova Hartman is a Professor of Education at Ono Academic College. Her forthcoming book, *Are You Not a Man of God?: Devotion, Betrayal, and Social Criticism in Jewish Tradition* (Oxford University Press) will be published in February 2014.