

## **Towards a more playful and politicized practice of guidance counselling**

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## Summary

This paper is in the form of a short narrative trail through my developing ideas about identity and my increasing understanding of the power of discourse and language in constructing what we take to be real. It is part of a larger study which began with a curiosity about how young people in ‘late adolescence’ construct their identities (O’ Grady, 2012). I draw on some of that work in this article to provide a rationale for the need to develop a politicized practice of guidance counselling. A creative approach to research and counselling encourages the expression of multiple truths exposing knowledge as socially constructed (Eisner, 1988) and therefore open to reconstruction. In this way the approach is both playful and political. The second part of the paper attempts to offer some assistance in applying a critical psychology that is artful and politicized to the practice of guidance counselling.

## Key Words

*Politicized, playful, pluralism, discourse*

## Introduction

Dialogical, narrative and cultural psychologies...triumph the return of the social, the contextual and the historical to the conceptual realm of the autonomous individual.

(Bekerman and Tatar, 2005, p.411)

If we acknowledge that one of the aims of Irish Education is “to nurture [in our students] a sense of personal identity” (*Charting our Education Future*, 1995, p.10.), then it challenges us to consider what we mean by the term ‘identity’ and how that understanding affects our approach to counselling young people in schools. This paper is part of a larger study which began with a curiosity about how adolescents construct their identities (O’ Grady, 2012). For the purpose of this short article I would like to draw on some of that work and invite the reader to critically/reflectively accompany me in the unfolding narrative. Firstly, I present a vignette of my own personal/professional story to contextualise my developing ideas about identity being a political enterprise and consequently the need to develop a **politicized** practice of school guidance counselling. The second part of the paper attempts to offer some assistance in applying a critical psychological approach to the practice of counselling. While the counselling competency of individual counsellors differs from school to school, with most guidance counsellors now involved in continuous professional development and therapeutic training (Hayes & Morgan, 2011), the limits to practice must clearly be upheld as counsellors integrate varied counselling strategies and processes into their practice.

The **playful**, performative aspect of identity is underscored in the way in which the narrative is told. The personal story is framed in ‘justified’ page space alongside the theoretical writing which spills over the right margin, pushing at the boundary of the text. Selected memories are written in verse using century font, and indented. The play with format and language is deliberate, rendering problematic traditional inherited unified structure: so that my developing position on identity construction and how I’m articulating it are somewhat in sync. As a ‘performance text’ employing a variety of writing styles and thematic shifts, it challenges the reader to make associations across categorical, discursive, and stylistic boundaries (Ellsworth, 1997, p.13).

I include multiple references to the relevant literature for those who wish to read further.

## The story begins

Twelve years ago I worked as a guidance counsellor in a large Community School in the West of Ireland. Part of my job was to facilitate students in preparation for entry into third level courses. Increasingly, the process of listing courses in order of preference on a Central Applications Office (CAO) form became for the students concerned, random and stressful. I began to wonder about this practice and the inherited psychological knowledge that was informing and validating it. I wondered about stage developments and the idea of ‘late-adolescence’ being the opportune time to develop a unified sense of self as espoused by people like Erikson (1968, 1980), Marcia (1980) Harter (1990, 1993, 1999), Kroger (2004), among others. I wondered if the notion of an integrated self had not more to do with

social/cultural requirements than a cognitive/developmental achievement. The small proportion of young people I spoke to, who had crystallized their vocational choice told stories of family influence; carrying on the family farm, business, profession; going for a good qualification that would leave them secure. So, positioning myself alongside students, the big story of Development did not appear to speak to their lived experience.

In highlighting pluralism (multiplicity) as a feature of selfhood in a technologically advanced, rapidly changing world, contemporary researchers in adolescent identity construction such as Moissinac and Bamberg (2004) and Georgakopoulou (2002) appear to challenge the Developmental notion of a cognitive push in the young person to form a unified, integrated identity by the end of adolescence.

At this time, I also began to feel caught in a 'bind' with regard to the personal counselling strand of my guidance role. Students experiencing 'personal difficulties' were being sent to me to prepare them to adapt more effectively to school life. Drawing on my humanistic/transpersonal counselling training, and employing cognitive behavioural strategies, I focused my energies on helping the young people to take responsibility for their actions and to make changes to their behaviour. Increasingly, however, I was feeling uncomfortable with my approach and feeling squeezed by an education system that I was in turn supporting. Problems were being personalized/pathologized. Young people were being sent back to an unchanged system only to fall foul of it again.

I left second level teaching, having completed an M.Sc. in Educational Guidance and Counselling and took up a lecturing post in NUI Maynooth. Towards the end of that degree I came upon the work of Kenneth Gergen (1991, 1992, 1996, 2001) and other social constructionist researchers like John Shotter (1993, 1998, 1999a, 1999b) and Rom Harre (1998). This led me into a deep engagement with the idea of identity as a narrative/discursive construction. It shook at the 'roots' of all of my humanist essentialist understanding of the person as having a 'core', 'true', 'inner' self, bothering the taken-for-granted assumptions and practices that formally guided my work with young people.

Social Constructionism makes the assumption that people construct their lives and identities socially and culturally, through language and communication. Drawing on the work of soviet theorists such as Bakhtin and Vygotsky, social constructionists see meaning-making and identity construction as a collaborative activity and 'reality' as the space between people engaged in conversation (Speedy, 2008, p.16). Shotter calls this 'social poetics'.

Conversations with colleagues in the Department of Adult Education led me, during my PhD research, into the dense but liberating ideas of poststructuralism as espoused by feminists such as Walkerdine (1993), Davies (1993, 1994, 1999, 2000, 2006) and the French feminist writers: Kristeva (1986), Cixous (1993, 1997) and Irigaray (1996, 2002, 2004).

Adult Education is marked by the word 'Adult'. When we inhabit a marked category, we have a unique view of the unmarked category i.e. Education. Fe/male

is marked in the same way. According to feminist poststructuralist writers it is in language that we become a subject. That is we articulate ourselves and construct our identities in the language available to us in our culture and are both constrained and enabled within that order of meaning: the order into which all human beings have to insert themselves (Irigaray, 1996). From this perspective identities are acutely attuned to the interactional order but also to the larger ideological social structures/dominant discourses. The word 'discourse' can be used to describe the taken-for-granted cultural ideas and practices with which we shape, and are shaped by our world and which can be made visible in the language we use. This Irigaray calls the world of the 'symbolic' and insists that in the West, the feminine has been excluded from it, a masculine domain which valorises rationality and reason. A political stance attempts to make visible the effects of colonizing discourses on us, on who we take ourselves to be – as persons, male/female, teachers/students, young/old, parent/child etc. For Kristeva, poetic language disrupts the relationship between words and "that which is already known" (in Speedy, 2005, p.289). It is possible imagining locating ourselves, not in a dualistic way – as one thing or another - but as people "capable of developing new storylines, new metaphors, new images through which we can live our lives" (Davies, 2000, p.42). Language as a 'field of play' (Richardson, 2004) becomes an exciting idea. When the late Irish poet, Seamus Heaney was asked why he concluded his book, *Station Island* with a quotation from Joyce rather than Yeats, he responded: "Because Joyce qualifies as a poet more than most writers of verse. He enters, explores and exceeds himself by entering, exploring and exceeding the language" (*The Irish Times*, October 25, 2008).

At times in these conversations, I re-connected with stories from earlier years in my professional life. For much of that time I worked as visiting teacher for travellers and as special needs teacher. Remembering two incidents ('poetically' documented) creates movement towards a 'logic of sense' (Deleuze, 1990, p.23) for a playful, politicized stance in education.

We have shifted the emphasis of what we do away from the logic of rationality and reason toward...a 'logic of sense'...We have a sense of what this writing is but we are unsure of what it *means*".

(Gale & Wyatt, 2008, p.8)

#### The Teddy Bear's Picnic

The squeals of delight pierced the sky as the children chased the wicked witch through the ruins of the 12th Century church on the Hill of Slane, above Mell Halting site. Mothers and teacher hopped around in our heavy beige pelts masquerading as mama bears at the end-of-year picnic. Identities were concealed in the pageantry of the moment. The air was light.

The piercing siren of the white and blue Garda<sup>1</sup> Ford mondeo echoed through the valley below, becoming louder. "Was there somebody in trouble in the village?" I wondered. A mama bear turned to me and said,

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<sup>1</sup> Garda is the Irish word for Guard.

“This is how it is. You can go nowhere that they’re not on your tail.” Standing in disguise, I glimpsed what it was to be positioned as other, stranger, outside the fold, visibly under surveillance, ‘Traveller’.

#### School Assembly

The children filed into the general-purpose area and took up their positions for the morning assembly. The Principal began to greet the students and welcomed the new ‘special needs’ children. In response, Anne<sup>2</sup>, who had a speech impediment and physical disability, flailed her arms and laughed. The wheelchair squeaked with the child’s delight.

Sr. Nora<sup>3</sup> refined her welcome and announced, “The special needs children will only be attending for the first two minutes and then we will proceed with the day’s work.” Laura<sup>4</sup>, the special needs assistant and I escorted the children to their classroom. Walking alongside our students, the centre of the room seemed very large.

These stories emerged in my conversations with colleagues. Following Barthe, “We give birth to ourselves in our writing *and speaking*” (in Davies *et al*, 2004, p.365). Having not spoken these stories for many years, they began to unfold in the in-between space of speaking and writing, as I pondered over questions of identity and young people. They continue to lodge in the folds of my body where the ‘blow’ first registered. Following St. Pierre (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p.973), “It may seem that I am not writing about them in this essay, but I assure you they are speaking to you in every word you read.” All the previous stories (personal/poetic/theoretic) speak to my concerns about: developmental psychology and its fixed stages of identity formation; the personalization of student ‘problems’ in a humanist discourse; the invisibility of powerful social, cultural, familial discourses that at least shape, if not constitute us as persons; the positioning of people as *this* or *that* or *other*.

### Critical Psychological approach to Guidance and Counselling

Collecting his third Oscar for Best Actor at the 85th *Academy Awards* in February 2013, Daniel Day Lewis told the audience, “Since we got married 16 years ago, my wife Rebecca has lived with some very strange men, strange as individuals and probably stranger taken as a group.” He continued, “Luckily she’s the versatile one of the family and she’s been the perfect companion to all of them.” Although Daniel Day was referring to the varied cast of characters he needed to inhabit and portray as an actor, there is a sense in this statement that they also inhabited him.

The branch of psychology referred to as critical psychology (supported by the previous references in this text) challenges many of the assumptions of mainstream theories of the person and development. In brief, orthodox psychology takes for granted that the self is the centre of experience, a coherent whole, a synthesis of former/earlier identifications with other people. Adjectives such as unified, integrated, consistent, are used liberally to describe the

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonym

self of the 'mature person'. The critical movement challenges this and argues that we are culturally defined; in a world characterised by communication technology, diversity and change people need to adapt to a wider circle of social relations. It is argued that this has profound implications for self-development in that people have to create multiple 'selves' across different social contexts (Gergen, 2001). Identity from a postmodern perspective<sup>5</sup> is seen as something that is constructed and reconstructed through the stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (Riessman, 2008), continuously taking shape in and through speaking narratives about the narratives just told (Sermijn, *et al*, 2008). These narratives are stitched into the ways of seeing, knowing and being that are made available to us in our culture: discourses that are often invisible.

If we take on board the idea that we speak in a plurality of voices, some of which are contradictory, then it makes sense to develop a practice that helps the individual to become aware of the different voices and the effects of these discourses on the person (physically, emotionally, cognitively) . From this perspective the guidance counselor is challenged to take a **playful and politicized** stance towards her work as she attempts to make visible the often invisible cultural/family/institutional threads in the conversations that unfold. People can be assisted in discerning the factors that have shaped their ideas of who they take themselves to be. They can be helped to critically stand outside those discourses/voices and live life in creative dialogue with them as opposed to being captivated by them.

## Vocational Guidance

In a vocational guidance interview the guidance counsellor might explore with the individual the voices that are informing his/her direction: 'It's crucial to have a job where you can have a car and good expenses', 'I'm not bright enough to do pharmacy', 'I'm good at maths and biology so I should do science', 'I'm artistic but that won't get me a job'. It is important that people are made aware of as many voices as possible and helped to discern what nurtures and what is disempowering. Far from integrating the different voices, individuals need to create enough distance to be able to dialogue with these 'multiple partials'. Critical psychology challenges the assumption of an integrated, unified self, viewing it as a dominant discourse. It sees Developmental Psychology as a normalizing dominant narrative in our schools bolstering school structures and practices and positioning students in certain categories. If we are to embrace this insight then we need to ask ourselves why we expect our young people to integrate the self sufficiently to crystallize vocational choice to a first preference on a CAO form. The high levels of attrition at third level might well be construed as a resistance, however unconscious, to the dominant discourse on identity. In this context psychometric testing may also need to be reviewed since this is a traditional technology that attempts to integrate aspects of self into a statement about the self, which may be interpreted as the scientific and therefore *valid* one.

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<sup>5</sup> The move from an inherited humanistic way of viewing the world which conceptualizes self as an 'entity', to taking the 'postmodern turn' with its focus on the self as a discursive construction, was one with which I struggled for a long time. Modernity is based on enlightenment ideas (the search for truth and the true nature of reality dated from the mid-eighteenth century) and postmodernism is seen as involving the realization that all knowledge is produced, that there is no fundamental truth.

## Personal Counselling

In the context of personal counselling, it is often the conflicting/contradictory ideas about the self that cause much of the pain i.e. “When I’m with my sister I seem to be one type of person and in the group or with my teachers/boss/parents I am completely different. Which one is the real me?” “When I want to be kind I find myself being distant and cool” etc. Helping the individual to become aware of the different *positions* they take up and are taken into (which can often be experienced as fixed categories) and to dialogue with these may allow for more freedom of choice in one’s life. It is so critically important to help the young person to articulate their stories, to explore the limiting and enabling effects of those stories on their lives and to try to hold open a space for them to imagine/articulate themselves beyond essentialist notions of self. Cognisant of the limits to counselling practice (see pp. 20-21 + CD ROM *National Guidance Forum Report* (2007) and also refer to *Counselling Competencies for Guidance Counselling Education Programmes: Interim Guidelines* (2011) and *Research on the Practice of Counselling by Guidance Counsellors in Post Primary Schools* (2011)), the guidance counsellor can remain within her professional boundaries while usefully employing creative strategies to assist this process.

Visual image-making adds to the narrative process by engaging people holistically, creatively and practically in an activity that connects them with the imagination (Leitch (2008), citing Anning & Ring) and in so doing loosens the idea of a fixed self/identity. Until recently, little attention has been paid to the synergy between the visual and verbal and how visual methods can act as stimuli to young people’s narrativization (Leitch, 2008, p.39). Thompson (2008) documents a variety of ways researchers have been using both verbal and visual creative methods with young people. Painting, clay moulding, using symbols are all safe ways of expressing these multiple stories of self. People can be helped to become aware of how they are positioned and how they position themselves in different contexts and situations. Using cut-outs from teen magazines to create a self-portrait collage/drawing can give the young person a clearer view of the social discourses that shape who they take themselves to be. Stories about popular masculinity and femininity, heteronormative romantic love and so on often feature in these creations and allow the young person to see how they position themselves in relation to these hegemonic cultural discourses. This type of creative approach might just as usefully be employed in a vocational or educational interview; inviting the student to create self-portraits and encouraging them to make visible the storylines they are living – always within the boundaries of professional/ethical practice (*Code of Ethics of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors*, 2012) and guidance counsellor competency. The types of questions I have found useful to ask when exploring an individual’s creative artefact are the following:

- What do you see? What story is the image telling?*
- Where did you hear that story? (raising awareness of inherited family stories, cultural/institutional discourses).*
- What is it like to be in that image – body, feelings, thoughts? (awareness of effects of discourse).*
- How does that story serve you? (encouraging reflexivity/distance).*
- How does that image/story limit you? Does it exclude others? (making visible the discursive construction of power).*

-What image/s, if any, have been blocked out or erased? (making visible abject/silenced categories).

-Why did you choose that image and not another? (raising awareness of audience/context and the fluidity of narrative identity).

-What changes, if any, would you like to make to the image/s? (underscoring non-fixity of identity)

(O'Grady, 2012)

This type of discursive approach to exploring identity issues allows people to make links between the multiple personal stands they are taking and the wider politics of meaning-making in their school/family/ social worlds. It creates room for changes to be possible on both personal and social levels. The following extract from my research illustrates, to some extent, the approach I am advocating. I worked with Martin (aged 16 when I first met him) over a two-year period exploring his creative identity narratives both in a group situation and one-to-one conversations. During that time he identified very strongly with a 'helper' identity, viewing it as his core self. We explored the effects on him of being positioned in this way and de-essentialized the position which he was finding problematic, by locating it in the family narrative not in himself. Because he consistently took himself up in this way, he found it difficult to imagine being any other way without feeling lost. Here, he chooses to work with two of his self-portraits which he has titled 'The Helper' and 'The Lost'.

***(Final Creative Conversation with Martin) March 22<sup>nd</sup> 2009***

Martin: [Pointing to the portrait of 'The Helper' and 'The Lost'] Like it kind of freaked me that I see myself as either one thing or the other. The Helper looks so pulled and torn and lots of conflict.

*What was the story he was telling himself again?*

Martin: I have to be there for everybody.

*And if he's not...*

Martin: He's lost, cut out.

*Can you remind me, where did you hear that story first Martin*

Martin: Well like I said, when dad died I was the only one around with my grandmother and mum. So I was expected to be there for them. Mum used to say 'where would we be without you!' I was useless at fixing stuff, like dad used to do all that... so I just listen to them and do messages and stuff.

*As you said before, you are the 'go to' guy.*

Martin: Yeah...

*And when you need to do stuff for yourself and cannot be there for your mum?*

Martin: Well I get the cold treatment.

*Emm...Ok... When you look at the portraits again Martin, is there anything that strikes you? Or is there anything you would like to change? Add? Move?*

[Pause... Martin stands out of his seat and, hunching down, begins to move the images around. He takes the portrait of 'The Lost' and 'The Helper' to the table and sits down]

Martin: The lost person is floating in the air but at least nobody is pulling out of him... just struck me!

*So there are some advantages to this position?*

Martin: He looks kind of frightened with a stupid smile though.

*What does it feel like being in that position?*

Martin: Very mixed, weird.

*Physically?*

Martin: Kind of light headed.

*Emotionally?*

Martin: I want someone to be there kind of to mind me...stupid!

*Emm...Not at all stupid Martin.*

Martin: Yeah I know it's the male story but it's very real.

*The effects are real.*

Martin: Yeah because there is a thing in your head which keeps saying you shouldn't need to be minded...like men do the minding.

*And that keeps you in the position of minder even though it hurts.*

Martin: Well The Helper seems to follow me everywhere [looking at the portrait]

[Laughter. Pause...Martin begins to move the portraits]

*Hmm!*

[He then positions the two portraits alongside each other with 'The Helper's hands reaching out to 'The Lost'...Pause...]



**Martin's alignment of images**

*Wow Martin, that softens something in me when I look at it. Would you like to create a dialogue between the images?*

[Smile...Pause...]

Martin: They're both minding each other... It makes sense. It really makes sense... a kind of new feeling.

## Brief Analysis of conversation

### *Reclaiming an abject category: 'The Helper's embrace of the Lost'*

Martin is able to experience the effects of being discursively positioned as 'Lost' and to simultaneously understand how this constitutive process works – “There's a thing in your head which keeps saying you shouldn't need to be minded...like men do the minding.” When he returns to the 'Helper' again, he appears to have loosened his identification with this position in that he is able to create critical reflective distance and see that the *position* is not *essentially* him: “The Helper seems to follow me everywhere.” Having experienced the effects of being positioned in conflicting discourses of what it is to be male/son he moves to creating a new identity image that punctures the dualistic way he has been viewing himself as either one thing or another: 'Helper' or 'Lost'. He now views these positions as connected and interdependent. Although he doesn't take up the invitation to dialogue between the imaged identity positions, the moment gives him a sense of being stronger as he glimpses “...a kind of new feeling.” All of this movement was initiated in previous creative conversations with Martin, and while it will rupture and flow in other directions again, here we glimpse a tiny movement, a 'line of flight' out of an entrenched position.

## Conclusion

This paper is in the form of a short narrative trail through my developing ideas about identity and my increasing understanding of the power of discourse in constructing what we take to be real. The possibilities for integrating a critical psychological perspective playfully into the practice of guidance counselling are proffered not as exemplary but as an invitation to connect with other emancipatory ideas and practices in our work with young people. At this point I am reminded of James Conroy's reference to the age-old *Trickster* as a 'liminal' figure which has been called on through the ages to “combat hubris and recuperate that which is playful and surprising about our being” (2004, p.10).. As both a traditional figure and a postmodern figure, the Trickster punctures the way we dualistically construct our world, as either one thing or another. If we want the insights of critical psychology and postmodern theory to inform guidance policy and practice, it seems to me we need to open up a creative space to critically evaluate the merits or otherwise of incorporating a playful and politicized (Trickster?) stance to our work. Such a stance opens up possibilities and keeps us close to Blake's liberating dictum, 'The mind altering alters all'. In a rapidly changing, fluid, diverse world, it might be argued that neglecting such an approach would be unjust.

## Check list

It may be useful for us to reflect on the following questions to bring a critical awareness to practice:

- What are the assumptions I make about what it is to be a person?
- How do I view student 'problems'? As residing in the person? Systemically?
- How do these assumptions and views influence my practice of guidance counselling?
- What are some of the powerful social, cultural, familial, institutional storylines in our lives? Think maybe of gender, age, sexuality, body size, place in family, guidance counsellor status in schools, intelligence etc.
- What are the effects of these discourses on my life? How do they constrain me and enable me? When I identify a discourse that I am positioned in, can I experience the effects of it on me emotionally and physically? My thoughts and behaviour?
- Do I think creative image work would assist me in making visible the sometimes invisible cultural discourses I may be living?
- How do I view the role of 'art' making and creative strategies in the guidance counselling process; How comfortable am I working with art material and engaging in the creative process with students?

## **Further Information**

For those who may wish to train further in Narrative and Art Therapy the following links may be useful.

### ***Narrative Therapy:***

Dulwich Narrative Therapy Centre in Australia offer on-line training

<http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/narrative-therapy-online.html>

The Institute of Narrative Therapy/UK Narrative Network offer short training courses

<http://www.theinstituteofnarrativetherapy.com/>

### ***Art Therapy:***

Marino Institute of Education, Dublin offer training at Foundation, Certificate and Diploma level

<http://www.dublinarttherapy.com/index.html>

## Biography

Dr Grace O'Grady is lecturer in Education and Director of the Postgraduate Diploma in School Guidance Counselling and Master of Education in Guidance Counselling. She teaches on all programmes in the Education Department, NUIM in the curricular areas of Human Development, Developmental Psychology, Child Protection and Social, Personal and Health Education. On the Educational Guidance programmes, she teaches Adolescent Psychology and Counselling Theory and Practice and supervises student guidance counsellors in school placement. Her research interests are in the area of identity construction, especially in adolescence, and performative curriculum using feminist poststructuralist methodology and creative narrative inquiry. She teaches and supervises narrative research on the Masters and Doctoral programmes in the Department. She is Co-Leader of the Structured PhD programme.

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