Stories of Sexual risk: myth as a framework for expressions of narrative identity

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Abstract:
This paper outlines key theoretical approaches to identity to demonstrate the utility of the notion that self-identity is constructed via stories and storytelling. It focuses on how tellers use stories to portray morally reputable identities as they reconstruct their sexual pasts. A narrative analysis of young rural people’s stories of sexual risk reveals how narrators organise their sexual experiences in terms of broader mythic forms (Frye 1957) while employing particular subject positions (Tuffin et al 2001): outsider, recalcitrant, hedonist, victim and hero. Examining how young men and women traverse these subject positions through their accounts can help to better understand the way sexual risk behaviour is interpreted in terms of the reflexive project of self-identity (Giddens 1991). I argue that exploration of how young people view, and make sense of, their self-identities could usefully inform health promotion approaches to sex and risk.

Introduction
Much of what we know about young people and sex is derived from large-scale research like Knowledge, Attitudes, Practise and Behaviour surveys that cannot reveal the meanings people attach to their behaviour (Jones and Candlin 2003). Researchers have begun to elicit more in-depth accounts that move beyond specific sex encounters to examine sexual ‘careers’ (see Dowsett 1996; Turner 1997). However, most studies continue to treat sexual risk reports as ‘unproblematic reflections of the events themselves’ (Jones and Candlin 2003:200). The dominant approach to youth and risk is located within epidemiological studies that take the individual as the unit of analysis and attempt to find correlates between factors that ‘predict’ and ‘protect’ young people from risk (see Vesely et al 2004).

Recently, researchers have highlighted the inability of individualist approaches to capture the ways young people themselves understand and experience risk (Lupton
This has led to examination of the ways risk perceptions and behaviours are related to social, political and ideological factors and negotiated within social relationships where balance of power is unequal (Rhodes and Quirk 1997; Lupton 1999). This paper extends understandings of risk as related to the process of identity formation, by considering the ways young people interpret their risk behaviours as they narrate their stories of self and sexual risk.

The Narrative Approach

The reflexive construction of identity is important in late modernity. Because of the destructuring of traditional forms and associated individualisation, Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) argue identity is now individually constructed via the ‘reflexive project of the self’ (Giddens 1991). These authors highlight the way risk is a central feature of life and help us understand the ongoing nature of identity formation. However they do not fully engage with the way risk has become ‘moralised’ via directives to avoid risk and blaming of those who do not (see Lupton and Tulloch 2003; Ferudi 1997). This is particularly true for sexual risk although sex has always been inextricable from questions of morality (Hawkes 1996).

Increasingly, social research and theory is highlighting the way identity is constructed through story telling (Ezzy 1998; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Self-narratives are formed from recognisable, universal and locally available ‘tales’ or ‘plots’ (Gergen and Gergen 1988). Narrators nevertheless have much agency as they ‘artfully pick and choose from what is experientially available…the storytelling process is both actively constructive and locally constrained’ (Holstein and Gubrium 2000:103). Narrators may also challenge and reinterpret hegemonic storylines and appropriate subversive stories (see Ewick and Silbey 1995).

Stories inform us as to how we should live and why certain identities are valuable (Barbieri 1998; Frank 2000). These values penetrate the narrativised identity. The young people in my study seek to makes sense of their risk behaviours present a ‘proper or desirable self’ (Goffman 1959; 1975) although this is understood differently. Stella orders her story to narrate an identity in line with dominant stories of male sexual privilege. Charlotte’s sense of a ‘proper self’ is embedded in subordinate stories of female sexual empowerment.
Thirty-one sexual stories collected through in depth interviews with young people between eighteen and twenty-six from rural areas have been narratively analysed. This revealed four main storylines drawn on by participants to interpret their sexual risk activities. Two are the focus of this paper. Both stories are case studies that are representative of a larger group of approximately eight participants within the study. I chose these tales as they detail greater sexual risk participation than the remaining two storylines which focus more on the meanings of safe sex.

Within epidemiological discourses, and popular ideology, these participants would be constructed and problematised as young risk-takers. However, these two narratives demonstrate that the way young people themselves understand their behaviours differs from common constructions. Their stories inform us of the important relationship between risk and self-identity. From these findings we can extrapolate that a more holistic approach to sexual risk that focuses on the ways young people construct their sense of self, at particular times, is needed.

Analysis of these narratives is based on the work of Tuffin et al (2001:58) who draw on Labov’s (1972) model of structural analysis of narrative clauses and ‘sets of clauses’. The different tales presented reflect the universal ‘myths’ (Frye 1957) of comedy and romance. They demonstrate the contrasting ways similar sexual risk activities and associated health outcomes are interpreted by young people in light of their narrated identities. According to Murray’s (1985) account of Frye’s mythic forms, comedy is characterised by success, a ‘happy go lucky’ persona and the belittling of authority figures. The romance narrative comprises of the protagonist enduring adverse circumstances. These ‘evil forces’ are ultimately transcended via the ‘quest for good’. The romance myth shares features of the tragedy myth, namely misfortune or adversity.

While the key elements of narrative are sequentiality and plot (Ricoeur 1981) stories also involve subject positioning. Throughout the narrative trajectory people may employ multiple positions that are ‘not necessarily consistent’ (Tuffin et al 2002:57). Both narratives discussed adopt the position of outsider. The comic story entails the positions of recalcitrant and hedonist. The romantic story moves through victim and hero.
I utilise Labov’s (1972) six elements of a ‘fully formed’ narrative. Narrators may start their story with a summary - the *abstract*. The *orientation* explains the time, and/or place, characters and activities being discussed. The *complicating action* involves the emplotment of clauses (Ricoeur 1981) to create the meaning presented. The means tellers employ to convey the point of the story is the *evaluation*. The *resolution* is the way the complicating action is resolved and the *coda* ends the sequence, returning to the present time (Labov 1972; Labov and Waletsky 1967).

**Charlotte’s Story: the comic myth**

> When I started my ‘sexual exploration’, um it was risky, risky because I wasn’t allowed to have boyfriends, like at all, because my parents were, um, really full-on Christians… like, I never fitted in there.

Charlotte begins with an orientation clause. She introduces the topic she will speak about and the place these activities took place. Via the rhetorical device used to emphasise that her parents were devout Christians and stating she chose to behave differently and did not ‘fit in’, she positions herself as an *outsider*.

> Because I rejected my parents beliefs, like from a young age, I had to sort of build up my own ideas about sexuality…I would like, sneak down to the dam and meet up with my boyfriend.

This clause extends the orientation and provides an evaluation - the hegemonic tales of sexual morality locally dominant were worthy of rejection. This demonstrates how storylines may be challenged, but stories of the self are always mediated by and understood in relation to available plots (Barbieri 1998:371). Charlotte adopts the comic myth, citing rebellion against authority figures and positions herself as *recalcitrant*.

> I was rejecting the idea of slut, I was rejecting the idea of virgin until marriage, I was rejecting the idea of woman being the sort of passive…

This evaluation of her sex practises provides a background for the complicating action to come. Charlotte’s comments reflect an interactionally achieved understanding of our shared interest in feminist theory, enabling the listener to appreciate the significance of her challenge to feminine norms. Her *recalcitrant* position is maintained. This phrase signals an appropriation of subversive storylines (Silbey 1995). Echoing Reissman’s (1990) narrative study, this demonstrates the way private
stories can reflect alternative public storylines, namely those opposing the dominant gender order of female sexual oppression.

   And then just decided to be a complete sexual predator, you know, I could walk into a room and go, oh yeah you’re hot, I wanna root you, I mean that is really when I just didn’t even think about it [risk].

This is a further evaluation clause of her prior decision to have casual sex. To avoid positioning herself as a victim or coerced into sex she creates the predator metaphor. Presenting a scenario where she exerted complete agency and fulfilled her sexual desires, she moves to the hedonist subject position. Via the rhetoric ‘when’ Charlotte specifies a temporal episode in the past which allows her to form a contrasting period in the future of her narrative where she does begin to ‘think about’ sexual risks (but does not practice safer sex.).

   And then, like I got Chlamydia, and that’s when I went, ‘oh my god, what the hell am I doing? Like, oh what? People have germs?…eeeew…(much laughter).

This introduces the complicating action. The clause is emplotted and made meaningful via the phrases ‘and then’ and ‘and that’s when’. Onset of illness is usually understood as a ‘turning point’ and stimulant for change within the reflexive self-project (Frank 1993). Rather than presenting the STD diagnosis in line with common myths of tragedy and as an opportunity for self-change, she maintains her overall presentation of the ‘happy go lucky’ comedy myth. To do this she highlights the comic value of her previous lack of realisation that sex can be complicated by ‘germs’.

   It was a few years back now but it was during the ‘Grim Reaper’ days, so you would think that would have had an effect, but no....

This clause is an evaluation, signifying the resolution of the complication action. The reference to ‘Grim Reaper’ is made intelligible via our shared local knowledge of the advertisements in the late 1980’s warning of the deadly outcome of HIV/AIDS. What she is ‘getting at’ (Labov 1972:366) by telling this story, is that no, despite the safe sex knowledge imparted (and presumably understood) these adverts did not influence her risk perception or risk practices and she engaged in frequent unprotected sex.

   I’ve always been the traveller, wild child, yeah, drug fucked hippy, you know, (much laughter)...I guess I am one of those statistics too you know, but like, I didn’t let it stop me.
The coda has firm convictions. Rather than drawing a distinction between former and current ‘selves’ she attempts to create narrative coherence via fictional ‘talk’. She claims she has ‘always’ traversed the positions of travelling outsider, recalcitrant ‘wild child’ and hedonistic pursuer of the pleasures of drugs (and sex). Charlotte then shifts temporally to the present. In her final statement she recognises that becoming pregnant at a young age (twice, to different fathers), she would likely be constructed in lay and expert discourse as a teenage ‘statistic’. But she does not view her sexual practices and their outcomes in this way. In line with the comic myth she is a ‘success’, particularly as she continued to pursue her ambitions.

This narrative approach shines new light on what would normally be characterised and problematised as irresponsible, even deviant risky behaviour (Lupton and Tulloch 2002:114). This knowledge contributes to sociological understanding of why young people engage in sexual risk and what these practices mean to them. Charlotte does not position herself as an active risk taker or victim of circumstance, or view her behaviour and its outcomes as a ‘problem’. Rather she retrospectively reinterprets her behaviour in terms of what she understands to be a ‘good and desirable self’ – her assertive, empowered sexual identity. She demonstrates the way that via the reflexive construction of the narrative self, hegemonic storylines may be resisted and subordinate, subversive storylines appropriated, and somewhat reinterpreted.

Stella’s Story: the romantic myth

Growing up there, you’re boxed in so early into what people think you are, and how you act, and being a dancer, and being relative smart, like very quickly put me into some very strict boxes during high school…just not having the freedom to be yourself.

Stella also begins with an orientation clause which identifies the specific time in her life history that she begins her sexual self-narrative. She positions herself as an outsider in her community by juxtaposing her intelligence and interest in the arts against the ‘typical’ rural teenager. By stating her struggle to ‘be herself’ and contend with the ‘evil forces’ of the small town folk she draws on the romantic myth.

The things that people in my community wanted to be and do at that age just weren’t things that I was proud of, like wanting to be naughty in class, or a rebel, or chucking blockies, or losing your virginity, or drinking alcohol.
This clause extends the orientation by introducing the activities that will be discussed, namely sexual and other risks. She also continues her outsider positioning and concretises her appropriation of the romantic plot via the rhetoric of referring vaguely to the ‘people in my community’. This is made meaningful via an awareness of the shared knowledge between teller and listener that the risky behaviours she lists are more common in rural than urban areas.

I would get myself in situations where I didn’t really want to be having sex at all…foremost in your mind is enjoyment for the males, you don’t want to be a stick in the mud which is what you are made to feel like.

This evaluation clause depicting unsafe sexual ‘situations’ in the plural begins Stella’s adoption of the victim subject position. She states she did not even ‘want to’ or desire the sex. Stella positions her past self as powerless to overcome the storylines where male sexual gratification is privileged (see Holland et al 2000). This clause shows Stella’s desire to construct a ‘good and desirable’ self-identity – someone who does not willingly ignore directives to avoid risk (Lupton and Tulloch 2003).

Well, I got pregnant without an ejaculation inside me, so it was just pre-cum.

The complicating action is established. Stella presents this outcome, ending in abortion as a turning point for self-change (Frank 1993). She emphasises ‘without’ and ‘just’ to ‘remoralise’ herself and maintain the position of victim, as someone who became pregnant unfairly, as she had practiced caution via not allowing ejaculation. In line with Jones and Candlin (2002) this illustrates how narrators put a ‘spin’ on a story to construct a version of the past. Stella then draws on this story of the past to inform her present narrated identity. By stating she did not risk the full ejaculation, she attempts to align this pregnant self with her former self, both whom do not ‘voluntarily’ seek risks for the pleasure and excitement (see Lupton and Tulloch 2002).

Now, I’m completely paranoid. I see the risk as one in a million, but I am afraid, that that one person is going to be me…since the abortion if I forget one pill, I really torture myself all month, I never want to have another abortion.

This clause evaluates and resolves the complication action. Beginning the sentence with ‘now’ shifts us to the present time and begins the coda. Stella articulates the ‘point’ of her myth (Tuffin et al 2001) - she has transcended the forces that worked to
prevent her from achieving safe sex and ‘now’ is paranoid and so vigilantly regulates
sexual risk, namely pregnancy. She exemplifies the self-change and moves to the
position of hero who has conquered in her quest for the good (the self-evident good of
risk avoidance – see Ferudi 2001), over the evils of gender norms and risk outcomes
like abortion. However she presents ‘fear’ as driving her sexual safety as she narrates
her belief that the likelihood of pregnancy is statistically low.

Well, now, in my life, sex is absolutely about love and
affection, and a sharing, and yeah, I guess a way to be on a
spiritual journey for me and I believe in sex like that...I
wouldn’t give this relationship up for anything.

Again beginning the clause with ‘now’ means the coda maintains the earlier temporal
shift to the current storytelling time. Such emphasised rhetoric works to ‘convince’
Stella of her current identity, as much as it does the listener. She describes another
form of transcendence, reaffirming her hero subject position and romance myth. This
transcendence refers her newfound realisation that not all men will prioritise their
pleasure over hers, some are willing to engage in a process of ‘sharing’. Her present
sexual scenario, interpreted in light of her narrated past with selfish, domineering
males becomes constructed as particularly meaningful - part of her ‘spiritual journey’.

Stella’s story is also able to enhance our knowledge of the particular meanings people
can attribute to their behaviour at particular points in their life-projects. This provides
further insight into the way people can narrate their past to present themselves to the
listener and view themselves in what they consider the best possible light. Rather than
accepting responsibility for her frequent participation in unprotected sex as teenager,
Stella reinterprets these experiences to fit within the romantic myth of her current self.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of these storylines demonstrates the way sexual events in the past are
made meaningful via their temporal emplottment and use of subject positions within
an overarching mythic narrative form. This research is useful as it shows that our
cultural myths and storylines remain replete with messages about how to live a ‘good’
life and within self-narratives ‘typically, the moral character of the protagonist is
maintained’ (Riessman 1990a:1995). However, how this is interpreted individually,
relates in part to the available storylines within which the subject is embedded (see
Somers and Gibson 1998; Gergen and Gergen 1988).
The findings from this approach are also useful as they raise questions about the way sexual risk is commonly approached from a positivist, epidemiological framework that cannot contribute to the sociological aims of discovering not only what people do, but understanding what sense they make of this (Lin 1998). Approaching sexual risk from a holistic, narrative perspective that recognises the link between sex, risk and identity enables further insight into the different and variable meanings people attribute to their behaviours and how in turn these influence their practices in the present. Identifying the universal or cultural myths that may provide the framework for narrative identities is useful as ‘myth may take us closer to past meanings and certainly to subjectivity than thick description and the painstaking accumulation of fact’ (Samuel and Thompson 1990:13).

At a practice level, this knowledge opens up opportunities for intervention. In their efforts to help young people avoid unwanted sex outcomes workers may focus on the way that young people’s biographical stories, including their sexual narratives can ‘shape possible action in the future’ (Ezzy 2000:121). Listening carefully to how young people narrate their self-identity, recognising that the co-constructed, reflexively constituted self is subject to change and open for reconfiguration, may be valuable. Health promotion can be informed by an increased emphasis on the way young people subjectively interpret whether an expertly defined ‘risky’ practise is a risk for them, through the lens of their narratively achieved identity.

References
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