"I feel that I get by with what I do" - Using narrative as a conceptual tool for understanding social identity

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Abstract

Drawing on a qualitative study of a cohort of final year preprimary teacher college students, this paper motivates for narrative analysis as a suitable tool for accessing 'insider accounts' of social reality. Through an analysis of the voices of these young people, I make the argument that narrative analysis allows us to develop an explanation of *how* people interpret their social locations and personal histories through the discourses and material contexts to which they have access. I commence by presenting the narrative of academic performance of one of the social groupings within the cohort. The material and discursive parameters that framed their narrative account are outlined. Similarities and differences between individual accounts are highlighted, and explanations for these similarities and differences posited. The ways in which multiple social locations nuance identity as nested are explicated. The paper concludes with a discussion of the potential contribution of narrative analysis as a conceptual tool for understanding social identity.

Introduction

Highlighting the tension between theories of agency and structure, Appiah (1991, p. 74) argues that the relationship between structural explanation and the logic of the subject is one of competition for *narrative* space rather than over causal space. Narrative analysis offers potential conceptual tools for understanding how social identity is constructed. Drawing on a qualitative

study of a cohort of preprimary[1] teacher education students at Table Mountain College of Education[2] in Cape Town, South Africa in the late 1990s, this paper seeks to develop an understanding of narrative analysis as a suitable tool for accessing 'insider accounts' of social reality. Through an examination of the narrative of academic performance of one of the social grouping within the cohort, I make the argument that narrative analysis allows us to develop an explanation of *how* people interpret their social locations and personal histories through the discourses and material contexts to which they have access. In presenting 'identity' as the site where structure and agency are played out, I argue for narrative analysis as a tool for examining the ways in which identity, power and discourse articulate.

Narratives, according to McLaren (1993), are the stories that people tell themselves about themselves. They represent individual's or groups of individuals' explanations or theories of social reality. As such they signal what people believe about themselves and others (McLaren, 1993). Narratives reflect identity. They are crafted at the point where agency is engaged in the act of interpretation – what Raissiguier (1994, p. 26) refers to as:

> the product of an individual or a group of individuals' interpretation and reconstruction of her\ their personal history and particular social location, as mediated through the cultural and discursive context to which she\ they has\ have access.

Thus, although human agents engage in making meaning of social reality as an active process, these meanings are not totally 'free' – meanings are necessarily constructed within discursive and material boundaries, which themselves result from specific relations of domination (McLaren, 1993; Raissiguier, 1994; Patton, 1986). Premised on the assumption that identity shapes but does not determine the way that people draw on the discourses to which they have access, this paper argues that race, class, and gender are significant to the construction of narrative understandings of social reality in general, and of academic performance in particular.

I commence by briefly discussing sources of data and methods of data collection. The selection and composition of the research cohort will be explained. Thereafter the narrative of the Cools – one of the social groupings

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[1]   The use in this paper of the term 'preprimary' signals the discourse of teacher training that was privileged at Table Mountain College. The institution was specifically committed to the *formal* training of teachers for the three years before formal schooling.

[2]   This is not the real name of the site. A pseudonym was selected to provide a certain degree of anonymity.

within the cohort – will be explicated. The material and discursive parameters that framed their narrative understanding will be outlined. Similarities and differences between individual accounts are highlighted, and explanations for these similarities and differences posited. The ways in which multiple social locations nuance identity as nested are explicated. The paper concludes with a discussion of the potential contribution of narrative analysis as a conceptual tool for understanding social identity.

Sources of data and methods of data collection

The cohort was a class of pre-service teacher education students enrolled at Table Mountain College of Education, and training to work with very young preschool children between the ages of three and six. The study upon which this paper draws set out to examine the relationship between narratives of academic performance and actual performance as recorded on year-end mark schedules. A prerequisite in selecting students for the cohort was the need to be able to 'track' potential relationships between narratives and actual performance. Therefore, although the majority of the cohort – fifteen students – were registered in their third and final year of study, I defined the cohort as all nineteen students who had registered for the Preprimary course in their first academic year. All nineteen students were interviewed using a semi-structured protocol. The interview was designed to elicit broad understandings of race, class, gender, and academic performance. Personal narratives of academic performance were constructed from these interviews.

Setting out to understand the narratives of academic performance of these students, I divided the cohort into three sub-groupings, or narrative clusters. In selecting students to constitute each of these clusters, I began with my observation that there were three social groupings in the final year class. Assuming that students socialise with peers who share common values and interests, I argued that these groupings had the potential to reflect broad narrative commonalties. Theoretically this perspective was substantiated by the work of Lloyd and Duveen (1992) who, drawing on Habermas, argue that the social structure of educational institutions results in peers playing a significant role in the different representations that learners construct of the world, and particularly the way in which learners represent themselves.

Distinctive and distinguishing narrative trends emerged from each of the social groupings. The students' narratives of academic performance were

clustered around three broad explanations of academic performance. The Cools, a socially and academically confident group, presented a narrative centred on the theme, "I get by with what I do, so I don't do more than that". The Academics – middle class, white, academically weak, and serious about successful performance – explained that: "You have to try and get the best qualification you possibly can". The narrative understanding of the coloured, working class Clan students argued that, "I just feel that I am coloured, and coloureds is average". The discussion that follows focuses on the perspective of one of these social groupings – the Cools.

"I feel that I get by with what I do" - the Cool narrative of academic performance

Race, class, and gender serve as contexts that shape the ways in which discourse is appropriated (Raissiguier, 1994) and narratives are constructed (McLaren, 1993). This signals that who the cohort students were as people is significant. Their identities provided contextual resources for their engagement in the acts of interpretation and reconstruction of circulating discourses. There were eight Cool students – Dolphine, Peter, Emily, Elizabeth, Sky, Anastasia, Miki, and Wytaya. Except for Wytaya who was coloured[3], all these students were white. Peter was the only male in the group. The 'mixed' nature of the Cool grouping was distinctive. Neither the Clan nor Academic groupings included male students. The Clan group comprised only coloured students, and all the Academic students were white.

Socially, the Cools were confident. They socialised together out of college hours. Their testimony suggests that unlike the academically serious Academics, the Cools gave some priority to partying and clubbing. While the Clan students argued that they were in a culturally alien environment, the Cools, coming from homes that valued middle class deportments, shared the dominant middle class values privileged at Table Mountain College. The Cools' sense of 'shared culture' with their educational institution is central to the argument in this paper. I will argue that this sense of 'shared culture'

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[3]   Following, Erasmus and Pieterse (1997), I use the term 'black' to refer to all people who have suffered under white domination. The terms 'white' and 'coloured' are part of the nomenclature of the apartheid system, and to some extent continue to shape post-apartheid understandings. I argue for their use in sociological description of the South African reality of that era. However, along with Carrim and Soudien (1999), I reject the racism and racial essentialism implicit in the use of racial labels.

significantly shaped the narratives of academic performance of all the Cools, and was a common thread in all their accounts.

While each Cool student nuanced his or her narrative as personal, there were significant common themes to their narrative account. These are exemplified in the perspective offered by Dolphine, and summarised as the narrative title of the Cools, "I feel that I get by with what I do, so I don't do any more than that". Dolphine's narrative of academic performance, and the discursive and material contexts upon which she drew in framing it, provide a lens for understanding the Cool perspective. In initially foregrounding a single perspective, I offer a tool through which the narrative of performance of this group might be described. Later in the discussion, attention will focus on the personal narratives of the other members of this group and the extent to which their narratives were similar to and different from Dolphine's.

Explaining academic performance - Dolphine's account

"I get by with that I do, so I don't do any more than that", said Dolphine, describing her academic performance. Dolphine understood that she had the potential to perform well academically but that she did not achieve as well as she might have done:

> I don't think that I have ever achieved my potential. And it has been said in every report that "Dolphine is diligent, but she does not achieve her potential".

This, she explained, was because she made choices – she did well when she chose to, and she 'got by' when she chose to:

> In the subjects that I enjoy at College, I achieve higher marks than in the subjects that I don't. So again it is just what I put my mind to and what I enjoy doing and what I give more attention towards, and then getting by with the minimum requirements.

'Enjoyment' and not academic ability, Dolphine implied, was the criterion that determined whether she did well or not. Implicit in Dolphine's explanation that she only worked when she enjoyed something and 'coasted' the rest of the time, was her belief that she knew how much was enough to 'get by' and that certain things were necessary for academic success and other things were not. She understood that hard work was associated with high achievement:

> When I do achieve I know I have put in effort and when I only get sort of an average mark, then I know that I did not put in as much as I could.

She used this as a yardstick for measuring what constituted 'enough'.

How might Dolphine have come to this particular understanding of academic performance? How was it that she believed that 'getting by' was an appropriate response to the academic tasks that dominant discourse frames as essential for successful employment opportunities?

Understanding Dolphine's narrative of academic performance

Dolphine's narrative was framed by her belief that *she* was in control of her academic performance – she was not at the mercy of an academic system over which she had no control and which arbitrarily allocated marks to her performance. She signalled that she understood the education system that attributed marks to her academic performance: "College and I do have the same standards". Consequently she believed that she was able to gauge how much work was enough to 'get by'. This implies a sophisticated level of insight into what the system requires for the various levels of academic reward, and was possible because the dominant values at Table Mountain College were familiar to Dolphine.

In framing her narrative of academic performance, Dolphine drew on her experiences as a member of the dominant race and social class. The social dominance of the deportments and values implicit in 'whiteness' and 'middle class-ness' (for example, competitiveness, individualism), as well as the privileges that accrue with these, she assumed at the level of the taken for granted. Thus she came to the college already skilled in the ways of the system that would be used to allocate marks to her academic performance. Familiar with the rules of the game (see Hodkinson, 2000), she was able to work out how much effort was necessary so as to 'get by'.

'Getting by' – a narrative perspective shaped by social class

Social class played a significant role in Dolphine's narrative understanding. As a member of the middle class, Dolphine experienced that the values and deportments that she took for granted as the 'norm' were also the benchmarks against which academic performance was measured. Consequently what she did 'naturally' and with ease was rewarded. These experiences, and the way in which she drew on meritocratic discourse, shaped Dolphine's narrative understanding as complex and potentially contradictory. Dolphine associated hard work with academic achievement, but did not assume that it was necessary for *her* to perform successfully in order to gain employment.

Drawing on her life experiences and observations, she presumed that she would gain employment through the system of social and economic networking prevalent amongst middle class people (through people whom she or her parents knew), rather than on the 'open market'.

Meritocratic discourse and discourses of entitlement shaped the way in which Dolphine cast achievement as the result of individual effort rather than as privilege (see Wildman, 1995). Consequently the 'rewards' for successful academic performance, including satisfactory employment, were assumed as rights. This assumption – the right to employment – was so much implicit in Dolphine's narrative that she never overtly stated it. Observations of her social world had reinforced for her the belief that future employment was a guaranteed reality. And should the traditional sources of employment not prove successful, Dolphine assumed that she could always open her own preschool:

> I can imagine this huge property with my home on it and a preschool on one side and (a) dance studio on the other.

Entitlement, framed by her classed social location, shaped what Dolphine took for granted. The 'raced' location of whiteness presents a similarly privileged perspective.

'Getting by' – a narrative perspective shaped by race

Dolphine drew on whiteness as a standpoint from which to frame her identity, and to construct explanations of social reality (see Frankenberg, 1993; Fine, 1997; McLaren, 1993; Wildman, 1995). According to Frankenberg (1993), what is significant to the discourse of whiteness is the way in which whiteness remains unnamed while simultaneously being presented as the cultural referent against which 'others' are measured.

While never directly commenting on her identity as a white person, it was implicit in Dolphine's assumption of whiteness as a referent, her assimilationist perspective, and her failure fully to acknowledge the privileges that accrue with belonging to a dominant group. Race, for her, was something that delineated a difference that referred to other people, rather than to herself as a white person. Race, she believed, separated people:

> The most obvious (groupings in the class) would be the coloured girls and then the white girls who tend to stick together a bit more.

Constructing her understanding in the discourse of a 'liberal power evasive, colour blind perspective' (see May, 1999), Dolphine understood that it was inappropriate and potentially racist to perceive race as a signifier of difference. She drew on two different strategies to avoid being labelled as 'racist'. Firstly, resourcing a colour blind discourse, Dolphine argued that although she perceived coloured students as 'different', she was not racist:

> Personally I don't have – I can't explain it – like the coloured girls in our class, I don't have a problem – not a – you can't even call it a 'problem' – I don't have any feelings towards them other than that they are fellow students.

Explaining that she perceived 'difference' for a number of reasons other than race, she asserted that seeing 'difference' was not in itself racist:

> I think it is the same for any student. If you take Louise, for example, with her very religious background, she and I are so different that we don't really get on and so for me I feel the same way about everybody.

Dolphine's second strategy drew on the shift in liberal race discourse from 'race' as 'biological' to 'ethnicity' as 'cultural' (see Brah, 1992). She 'translated' perceptions of race difference into the discourse of cultural difference while continuing to conceive of differently raced people as 'other':

> We have different cultures and beliefs and feelings and whatever and it does make us different in some way.

Dolphine's move to disclaim noticing race difference in case it was perceived as an act of racism suggests that, for her, racism was an individual vice rather than systemic. The construction of racism as 'personal prejudice' rather than the consequence of wider structural inequality makes possible a denial of the ways in which racism operates as a complex and multifaceted aspect of social life (Gillborn, 1995). Constructing racism as 'individual acts of prejudice' fails to acknowledge how privilege accrues with whiteness (Fine, 1997).

Yet, this is not to claim that Dolphine held a wholly traditional opinion around issues of race. In a series of insights startlingly in contrast with the incident described above, Dolphine evinced a sensitivity to the ways in which race might serve as a source of disempowerment for black people. Although she seemed unable to make the connections between raced identity, privilege, and wider structural inequality, she had an insight into how symbolic power worked. Framing her understanding in the context of the 'New South Africa', Dolphine drew on threads of counter-hegemonic discourse that emerged in the South African news media during the 1990s, and which were echoed by a minority of

predominantly coloured staff at Table Mountain College. Premised on the assumption that apartheid had unfairly privileged white perspectives, she argued that the legacy of this policy continued to create the conditions for oppression:

> I suppose being a white person I don't have to worry as much about racism … because of the way our country is and has been, it has been easier to be a white person, and it is still easier at the moment … So white people don't have a problem with race because they don't have the problems. … And so it is easy for me to say, "There is no racism. There is no problem." because I don't experience it.

She implied a recognition that implicit in whiteness is the privilege of choice – to recognise or ignore oppression (see Wildman, 1995, p. 575). She also indicated that she understood that denial was one of many strategies that powerful groups of people use so as not to have to engage with change, "maybe they were keeping their eyes closed".

Dolphine presented a perspective on race that was complex and potentially contradictory. This was evident in the way in which she drew simultaneously on power evasive colour blind discourse and the alternative perspective outlined above:

> I don't have a problem with race because I don't feel that I separate race. I do feel everybody is whoever they are. But I know that it exists and that it does happen and it is easy for me to shut my eyes and say it does not happen.

Dolphine's perspective signals how ideology and hegemony shape people's understandings of their experiences in ways that prevent them from recognising that privilege is associated with power.

'Being in control' - a position shaped by dominance

Four of Dolphine's Cool peers explicitly shared her emphasis on 'getting by'. Drawing on meritocratic discourse, they argued that their performance was less successful than their actual potential because they failed to 'work hard'. Miki explained that:

> I am very lazy …it is a case of as long as I pass it is fine … I am not putting in as much effort as what I know I should be putting in.

This was echoed by Sky. While Elizabeth and Wytaya argued similarly, they attributed their lack of 'effort' to low academic expectations and the consequent lack of stimulation at Table Mountain College – as Elizabeth expressed it:

> I am lazy. I get unmotivated quickly. … I almost feel like I need more than what I am getting … I am really frustrated now and very unmotivated.

The remaining three Cools – Emily, Peter, and Anastasia – did not appear on initial analysis to share an understanding that 'getting by' was appropriate. Emily, Anastasia, and Peter each emphasised that working hard was a significant component of their attitude towards academic performance. Personal histories shaped how these students worked with dominant material and discursive contexts. For Emily, a remedial candidate with spelling, reading, and handwriting difficulties, this meant that she had to stay focused throughout the year. Anastasia, a student of extremely constrained means owing to the death of her mother and estrangement from her father, emphasised the importance of working hard in order successfully to gain employment. Peter's emphasis on hard work was framed by his understanding of himself as an inquiring academic, "I was not coming here to get a degree. I was coming for the education".

Yet it was the way in which the sense of 'being in control' was woven into each of their narratives that 'getting by' took on a common significance. For Peter, the significance of 'being in control' was overt:

> I don't regret anything from College *because I was in control.*

Emily drew on successful life experiences in assuming that she was 'in control'. She recounted how, after repeating Grade Three, she had discovered a strategy that helped her to become a successful speller. Emily emphasised her resultant sense of empowerment:

> I discovered how to help myself … from that day I have been in charge of myself instead of worrying about people being in charge of me … I did it on my own so if I can do that I can do almost everything.

'Being in control' framed the understandings of all the Cools. Discourse of entitlement shaped their assurance not only that they understood the system but also that they knew how to play it. However the personal ambitions of individual Cools differed, this remained true – whether they were considering how best to achieve their goals at Table Mountain College, or how to get on in life. These students gave the impression that they did not worry about the future – that it would sort itself out. This belief framed the assertion of many Cool students that there was no hurry to become employed. Miki assumed that her parents would continue to support her while she travelled overseas, and that on her return employment would be available to her. Dolphine and Sky shared a similar belief.

It was in echoing this assurance about the future, that Anastasia, too, signalled her sense of being 'in control' and of sharing the Cool narrative of 'getting by'. The only Cool with an emphasis on a direct relationship between successful academic performance and satisfactory employment, she did not present herself as a victim of a system over which she had no control. Assuming that employment was her right if she worked hard, she argued that it was not necessary to worry about the future, or really to plan for it:

> I think I live day by day. I never actually sit down and think about the future … I don't like, "Tomorrow I am going to do this!" … I think in my mind I just want to live it – not, "Next week I am going to … do this and that". I think I take my life one day at a time.

Entitlement framed by social locations of dominance shaped the way in which Anastasia assumed that the future would sort itself in a way that was to her benefit.

"In the disadvantaged areas …" – social class and race as lenses for viewing the world

McLaren (1993) argues that narratives "determine our social action as agents of history and the constraints we place on the identities of others". The dual contexts of white privilege and middle class privilege shaped the way in which the Cools anticipated their life chances. They provided contexts for constructing those perceived as 'other', and simultaneously framed the academic expectations that the Cools had for the 'other'.

Framing their own epistemological access to the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1973) rewarded at Table Mountain College in meritocratic discourse allowed Cools to present successful performance as reward for hard work. This assumption framed how they understood students who were not successful. It also shaped their expectations for students who were considered to be 'different' – those who did not exhibit the deportments that the Cools associated with academic success and socio-economic access.

Understandings constructed within meritocratic discourse apportion blame to the unsuccessful candidates. This discursive position shaped the way in which Cool students worked with the social location of class. Drawing on meritocratic discourse, many Cools argued that working class parents behaved in ways that prevented working class children from being successful. According to Emily, working class parents were abusive and neglectful:

> in the disadvantaged areas … Imagine if I sent a child home that I knew the parents were hurting them, or I knew that they were not going to have supper or anything.

Wytaya and Anastasia echoed her assumptions about neglect. Elizabeth presented working class children as deficient in the knowledge valued by schools:

> The biggest difference at the moment is what they have been exposed to. You can't say, "March like a soldier" because they don't know … what a soldier is … Just simple things like that.

Peter drew on understandings shaped by his multiple social locations of privilege – race, class, and gender – in framing expectations for peers. While Peter *experienced* the empowerment of social privilege, he understood it as meritorious – something for which he had worked. He argued that he made use of the empowerment that was equally available to all, "I as a student felt that I had the power". Since Peter associated this power with 'taking responsibility', he blamed unsuccessful candidates for not being empowered – "the power and responsibility must rest solely with them". Because Peter assumed that working class peers did not take responsibility for their learning, he did not expect them to be successful. He highlighted his belief that they did not themselves expect to be successful, "they did not believe that they could". Significantly, because dominant meritocratic discourse casts academic achievement as the result of individual effort rather than as a privilege (see Wildman, 1995), it masks the ways in which experiences and perceptions of the dominant system are less empowering for some people than for others.

The Cools lacked the discourse with which to think specifically about social class. Conflating race and class, they signalled that what they argued for differently classed 'others' implicitly described differently raced 'others' as well. All the Cools, except Wytaya, had previously been classified white. Caught in the conceptual tensions between traditional apartheid discourse that defines people in terms of race, liberal power evasive colour blind discourse that denies acknowledgement of the social significance of race, and colonial discourse that constructs racial difference as 'other-ness', the white Cools presented potentially contradictory explanations of race, racism, and their raced identities. While they *perceived* race as a marker that defined the 'other' rather than their white selves, they *experienced* race as a set of privileges that accrued as a result of being a member of a dominant group.

Drawing on the assimilationist assumption that their values and deportments were both 'universal' and 'superior', Cools presented 'whiteness' as the

cultural referent against which 'others' were measured (see Frankenberg, 1993). Central to assimilationist discourse is the demand that cultural others 'fit in'. A discourse of 'upliftment' defines the relationship between white and black people in this perspective. Implicit is the assumption that those who fail to be 'uplifted' and do not perform successfully are to blame for their own failure. The consequence of the way in which Cools drew simultaneously on meritocratic discourse and power evasive colour blind discourse led them to assume that peers who performed badly were personally responsible – either 'lazy' or 'stupid'. This was clearly evident in the way in which Peter blamed coloured peers for what he understood to be a lack of personal learning:

> In the first year … a lot of the coloured students – they did not believe – I felt that they were not there. They were doing something not because they wanted to, they did not believe that they could. It did not matter to them if they understood or not. Whereas I perceived that the white girls to actually be confident in asking questions, in their approach, in taking hold of the situation, and even within the groups and subgroups, designing the roles. They were taking on power roles and leadership roles.

While Peter overtly cast coloured students as victims and the worthy targets of blame, this was more implicit for the other white Cools. However, transforming the privileges that accrue with whiteness into individual merit allowed white Cools to construct peers of colour as academically less able.

Yet, this is not to claim that Cool students held only dominant perspectives around issues of race. Their understandings of race were complex and potentially contradictory – shaped as much by interpretation and reconstruction of personal histories as by prevailing dominant discourses and social locations. Echoing Dolphine, Sky and Elizabeth offered insights that challenged hegemonic understandings, and were at times at variance with other more dominant understandings that they held about race.

Sky drew on insights informed by her life experiences to construct her understanding of how race operated. Distinctive at Table Mountain College for her long platinum blonde hair, the rings through her eyebrows, and her platform boots (long before they were a fashionable accessory), Sky drew on understandings of the nature of racism in order to explain why she was treated differently:

> Well, people judge me by the way I look. So they see the way I look and they think of the stereotype of that person, and immediately think … that I do drugs … They sort of put me in that category and it is quite annoying. It is like a racial thing.

Sky argued that discrimination shaped academic performance in self-fulfilling ways:

> Lecturers who … from the beginning – sometimes they treat me differently … and then I feel, "But you treat me like that … Why should I show you that I am any different?" You act what they think you are.

Elizabeth's perspective, although less explicit, challenged the dominant framing of encounters with African people in terms of 'upliftment'. While continuing to perceive African people as cultural others, she believed that there was a need to experience other worldviews from within the alternative culture. She argued that to teach African children successfully, she needed to value their cultural ways of doing things rather than merely imposing Western values and deportments as the only 'right' way. Consequently she assumed that there would be useful things that she might learn from African children and teachers. Responding to her belief that 'insider' experiences would make her a better teacher for all her future learners, she arranged to teach in a community centre in an informal settlement as part of her Practical Teaching experience so that she could:

> be part of it for a few weeks and try and learn as much as I could from them, and see what is different and what is similar – to be able to help.

The way in which Elizabeth, Sky, and Dolphine presented alternative perspectives alongside dominant perceptions resulted in a contradictory account.

Contradictory, too, were the assumptions that the white Cool students held about their coloured Cool friend, Wytaya. While they constructed black peers as 'other' and implicitly less academically able, this was not their expectation of Wytaya. At no point in their interviews did any of the white Cools comment on her raced identity. It appears that they did not experience Wytaya as sufficiently 'different' to classify her as coloured. In effect, because she behaved in middle class ways, she ceased to be constructed as coloured. Recognising her as 'one of us', and sharing with her a common narrative understanding, the white Cools expected – and experienced – her to have the same potential for success as themselves. This suggests that white Cools *experienced* that social class, rather than race, framed the values and deportments that made people familiar or 'different'.

"Who am I?" – on being coloured and middle class

Wytaya shared a common class location with the other Cools – and shared their entitled narrative of 'getting by'. Yet she had grown up classified coloured – living within a coloured (albeit middle class) community in a 'mixed' working class suburb. Race and class were nested for her in ways that nuanced her narrative account as particular.

In a written portrait, Wytaya explained:

> Who am I? … I am totally confused about who I am … I would have to say that I was a 'coloured' female growing up in a 'white' world and trying my best to adapt and fit in. I've referred to myself as a 'chameleon' because I can change who I am to suit the situation I'm in. This is not the ideal situation, I should just be myself BUT I DON'T KNOW WHO THAT IS!! I understand that a person can change but normally that means that you try to change for the better. I am a good person but I'm a confused person.

Wytaya's 'confusion' centred around the difficulty of claiming and constructing a personal identity that was both coloured *and* middle class. In conflating race and class, dominant South African discourse makes it difficult to think about the two locations of identity separately. More so, in implicitly equating black and working class, and white and middle class, this discourse fails to offer a conceptual framework for thinking 'across' the two categories of difference – for example, for talking about identity that is simultaneously middle class *and* coloured.

That Wytaya constructed herself as both 'middle class' and 'coloured' was clear from her testimony. She tended to conflate whiteness and middle class-ness, often using the terms "white ways" to describe middle class cultural practice. Explaining that her school and recreational sports (for example, hockey, karate, horse riding) were those practised by middle class people, Wytaya believed that she "dipped into" white cultural practice. This contact with 'whiteness', she argued, shaped her identity. It had been amplified, she believed, because she also 'looked white' – "and because I'm fair". It was apparent that associating herself with the culture of whiteness was not a strategy to deny her identity as a coloured person. Rather, she struggled to explain how and why she was 'different' from the working class coloured students in her class. "We weren't part of that community", she explained, referring implicitly to coloured working class culture.

In claiming her identity as both coloured and middle class, Wytaya experienced personal ambivalence – and ambivalent responses from both

white and coloured peers. She described the inevitable misunderstandings that occur in a society that interprets people through the racial labels that it allocates to them:

> (M)ost of my friends are white … if I am going out with any of them then we are meeting their friends. And it is a whole evening you('re) socialising and whatever, and somehow something is mentioned and I would say, "Of course I like that. I am coloured" – maybe, let's say we are talking about music. And they go, "No ways you coloured … You can't be coloured". "What do you mean, I can't be coloured?" … I am twenty four years old, and you would think that it would not bother me anymore, but it does.

Wytaya tried to resolve the tensions created by the expectations of her different groups of friends by being a "chameleon":

> I can adapt myself to different situations … When you are with your coloured friends, you can be very coloured. I don't know what that really means, but – … I promise you, you sometimes don't notice the things you do when you are with a different group of people. I don't know – it is like having a phone voice. … you are totally different because that is what is expected of you. So when you are out with, like your white friends, you obviously want to act the way that they are acting so that you are not out of it. So they don't go like, "Ja, you must be – ", or whatever. The same when you are with you coloured friends. You don't want to do anything that you might have done with 'Them (white friends)'.

This adaptive strategy was inevitably not without its difficulties, as when:

> you are with both of them because – it is not because you don't know what to do, but one of them is going to say something like, "You would not normally do that." "But of course she would!"

Consequently, Wytaya chose to "avoid mixed kinds of circles. Maybe it is easier".

For Wytata, whether in coloured or white company, she *experienced* the potential to be constructed as 'other'. White people had the power to choose whether or not they accepted her. She was powerless to negotiate their interpretation of her identity in these instances. At times she experienced the response of white people as offensive:

> depending on how they react … But someone's tone of voice, "Oh you are coloured" or "Oh! You are coloured!" – there is a difference … (Y)ou would think that it would not bother me anymore, but sometimes it does, depending on how it comes out.

Wytaya believed that it was only white people who exercised the right to choose whether they accepted her. Coloured people, she implied, accepted her unconditionally because they knew that she was 'one of them':

> I would not say that coloured people don't know that I am coloured. It is more white people that don't know that I am coloured.

For Wytaya, there was a reified identity called 'coloured' or 'white' and, like a family, one was born into it and members had to accept you unconditionally. This is an interesting perception since the coloured working class students in her class did not accept her unconditionally as a 'coloured' person – she was "in her own category", "she is very different from us". Wytaya's privileged class position and her practice of middle class cultural modes led her working class peers to *experience* her, and hence to construct her, as 'other'.

The potential therefore existed for Wytaya to be constructed as 'other' from two different locations – by white people in terms of race, and by coloured people in terms of class. Yet while it was clear from her testimony that she found negotiating her *own* identity within these parameters difficult and stressful, her comment that "a person can change" indicates her awareness of herself as an active agent. Her difficulty, she implied, was not that she was at the mercy of structural forces that pre-determined her identity for her. Rather she didn't know what to do with her agency – she didn't know what it was that she wanted to become. Central to her identity dilemma was Wytaya's assumption that there were real choices available to her, and that *she* was in control of making those choices. Thus Wytaya shared the sense of 'being in control' that was common to all the Cool accounts. How might this be explained?

'Middle class-ness' presents a lens of empowerment. The entitlement implicit in white identity extends into middle class identity – to be white and middle class is to have the definitive position on social reality. It is to be *au fait* with privileged knowledge, deportments, and values (see Figueroa, 1992). Wytaya experienced that being middle class was to have the culture of whiteness and consequently to share many of its privileges.

Soudien (1998, p. 132) argues for a theoretical construct of multiple social locations as "nested and interpenetrative". The interface between race and class shaped Wytaya's narrative account – especially her assumptions about employment – as potentially contradictory. On the one hand, sharing the middle class theme of 'getting by' and the associated sense of being in control, Wytaya assumed employment as a right:

> Everyone says that you are not going to find a post … but I don't really believe that. I mean, they're advertising jobs all the time.

On the other hand, as a young coloured person growing up in a coloured community during the apartheid era, Wytaya had observed unemployment as a social reality. Consequently although her middle class lens framed access to employment in the discourse of entitlement, her experiences as a coloured person led her to be more cautious than her white peers. Unsure whether she wished to register for a fourth year, Wytaya began to make plans around employment for her future:

> I will think about au pairing – but locally … if I stayed here I could still keep my finger on what is happening, you know, trends and that type of thing and just job situation wise. I could apply in the mean time –

While insights framed by Wytaya's identity as a middle class person shaped common narrative understandings with her Cool peers, differing locations in terms of race explain the differences.

"We are like the joke sector" – gender, social reality, and perceptions of power

Gender nuanced narrative accounts in similar ways. While dominance framed raced and classed identities, and shaped narratives in particular ways, nuances of subordination were implicit in the gendered identities of the Cool women. This shaped their understanding of academic potential, and consequently of women's life chances.

The female Cools simultaneously drew on, and challenged, dominant assumptions about gender. The potential contradictions that framed Dolphine's gendered identity are illustrative. She believed both that a woman's primary role was parenting:

> for a child the best thing is to have a wonderful open preschool until one o'clock, and then go home and be with their mum … and relax

and that women should be allowed to have a significant career outside the home:

> The thing is … if a mother wants a career, why should she not be able to have one? Why should she have to spend the afternoons with her children?

Life experiences, and her interpretation of them, presented further tensions. On the one hand, she experienced her mother as economically supported by a husband, staying at home and looking after her children. On the other, Dolphine believed that she had the academic *potential* to secure for herself a

career of status and generous remuneration. This belief, she implied, was reinforced by her father's opinion:

> I think my dad secretly thinks that I should be doing more with my life … he does not want me ever to be dependent on a man. And I think that he feels through teaching, I cannot be totally supportive of myself. So I think that he has always hoped that I would be something more than *just* a teacher.

These discursive tensions shaped her career choice. It is likely that Dolphine chose preprimary school teaching as a 'compromise' career – an opportunity to be employed outside the home but with working conditions that to some extent dovetailed with motherhood (for example, eight-to-one employment, and leave during school holidays.)

Believing herself academically capable of higher status employment than working with young children, and understanding her future career as a pragmatic compromise, Dolphine expressed anger at the way in which people – especially men – patronised her as a result of her chosen employment:

> I don't think men take it seriously. They don't take it as a job because it is just playing with children – as far as they are concerned … They do belittle it.

Put together as a whole, Dolphine's narrative of academic performance takes on a complex form. As a postmodern subject, Dolphine experienced herself as living in "many narrated worlds" (McLaren, 1993, p. 227) – those framed by her lenses of race, class, and gender (amongst others). McLaren (1993, p. 211) suggests that narratives are best understood as "assemblages" – as multiple lines of force "crisscrossing, cutting through, freezing, trapping, and repressing power". The resultant potential contradictions were evident in Dolphine's explanation of the relationship between identity, academic performance, and life chances. Raced and classed identity led Dolphine to assume the right to education, academic success, and satisfactory employment. Understandings constructed within the context of her gendered identity 'refined' this understanding. The right to education, academic success, and satisfactory employment got redefined and specified. These rights were not to be played out in the broad field of a wide selection of high status, well remunerated careers. Rather, she was expecting the 'best' of a compromise – satisfactory employment that would allow her to put motherhood first.

Other female Cools echoed Dolphine's potentially contradictory perspective. On the one hand, in implying that nurturing came naturally to women, many suggested that preschool teaching was suitable employment for women. A common theme was the association of their career choice with a love for

children and an implicit desire for motherhood – as Anastasia put it:

> I have always loved small, little children … I have always been like a little mother around them.

For these young women, 'loving' and nurturing were associated concepts. It is evident that they assumed nurturing to be a necessary quality for an educator of young children. Significantly Peter, the lone male in a predominantly female training and employment environment, also drew on an understanding that associated female roles, nurturing, and effective early childhood education:

> I still find that I am not good with children unless a relationship has been set up between me and the child … And this is due to my upbringing – of a man with a child.

On the other hand, the female Cools drew simultaneously on the counter-hegemonic perspective privileged by academic staff in the Preprimary Sector at Table Mountain College. This alternative discourse challenged the common sense assumption that work with young children is insignificant. Strong voices emphasised the contribution that appropriate early childhood education makes to the future academic success of learners. Thus many of the female Cools were critical of the way in which low status was attributed to preschool teaching. This was evident in the way in which they argued that their work as preschool teachers was not taken seriously at Table Mountain College as an institution. Emily explained:

> The actual College believes that we are inferior because we are doing preprimary … They don't actually say it, but I feel it. When the Rector even speaks about it, he doesn't say it, but he still thinks, "They are only playing and things".

This was echoed by Wytaya: "We are like the joke sector."

It was within the discursive tensions between employment with young children as 'natural' work for women and a resentment of the low status of their proposed career choice that the female Cools constructed understandings of themselves and their academic potential. Although I argued earlier that these students were confident in the academic setting at Table Mountain College and expected – in fact, assumed – to do well, this understanding must be placed in the context of the larger social picture. These students did expect to do well – as preschool teachers – a career that has low status in society, is presumed to require little formal training since it is constructed as coming naturally to women, and is understood to be supplementary both to motherhood and to a husband's primary income.

Significantly Peter also drew on the way in which dominant assumptions frame the relationship between gender and preschool teaching. However, as a young man, he constructed his identity within a gendered discourse of dominance and consequently worked with the implicit assumptions differently. Although Peter was critical that work with young children was not usually an option for men, he assumed that 'real' men – breadwinners – would not be able to teach in preschools because of the poor remuneration:

> Issues such as if they find that they are attracted to young children and they like playing with young children and they feel that they would love to know what is going on, is there the means for them to do that – financial means, as perceived as a breadwinner and that.

Peter explained that he himself, without the presumed responsibility of a wife and family, was only able to engage in preschool teaching because he had supplementary income from an inheritance. His failure to criticise the poor remuneration of preprimary teachers suggests that Peter assumed, however implicitly, that working with young children was not 'real' work. Certainly he did not intend spending the rest of his life working in a preprimary classroom, as did the majority of the Cools. He aspired to further post-graduate education and employment in teacher training – a career that, significantly, has better status.

Narrative as a conceptual tool for understanding social identity

'Getting by', as a narrative of academic performance, is thus a nuanced understanding. An examination of the ways in which Cool students interpreted their personal histories and social locations through the material and discursive contexts to which they had access has highlighted differences between and similarities within their accounts of 'getting by'. Drawing on raced, classed, and gendered identities, the Cool students constructed narratives of academic performance framed by their expectations of what they considered possible for people of their particular identity. This was a complex and 'messy' process, and resulted often in potentially contradictory accounts.

Informing the sense of entitlement and empowerment at the heart of the Cool narrative – and accounting for commonalities in the Cool perspective – was the dominant social location and discursive context of class. However, less empowering social locations of race and gender were woven with social class in "inextricable webs" (Harris, 1990, cited in McLaren, 1993, p. 211) in ways

which unsettled this confidence. Thus differences *between* Peter's narrative and that of the female Cools reflects their differing gendered social locations. Similarly, differences between Wytaya's account and that of her white peers signals the way in which raced discourses, and race as a social location, shape narrative accounts.

Locations of identity as sources of narrative threads also operated in ways that were nested. Thus the nesting of multiple sites of entitlement led Peter to assume a particularly empowered narrative account. While the dominance of social class framed an empowered account for the female Cools, the subordinate location of gender was nested in a way that was in tension – thus framing less enabled expectations. For Wytaya, race *and* gender as subordinate locations nested with the dominant social location of class in particular ways.

However, while this paper presents evidence in support of McLaren's (1993, p. 206) suggestion that "the identities of certain groups share a common narrative finality based on relations of race, gender, (and) class", this is not to claim that the Cools were unproblematically reproduced as classed, gendered, and raced subjects. Differing narrative accounts also reflect acts of *interpretation* – each Cool *worked with* his or her personal history, particular social locations, and the material contexts and discourses to which she or he had access. As active agents, the Cool students produced themselves within existing, and often potentially contradictory, material and discursive contexts.

Social locations of race, class, and gender, and the dominant discourses that frame these locations, were significant material and discursive resources for the narratives of academic performance of this group of students. However, each student also resourced a variety of counter-hegemonic discourses in order to challenge common sense understandings, and to negotiate where dominant constructs were perceived as personally limiting. It was evident that these young people were not 'free' to attribute meaning to social reality – they were clearly limited to the material and discursive contexts to which they had access. However, evidence signals that alternative discourses to those that were dominant had emancipatory potential – both for the students themselves and in relation to the constraints that they placed on the identities of 'others'.

Narrative analysis as a conceptual tool has the potential to make a significant contribution to our understanding of social identity. In highlighting 'identity' as the site where structure and agency are played out, narrative analysis provides a framework for examining and explaining the ways in which

identity, power, and discourse articulate. It serves as a tool for understanding 'insider accounts' – for examining the way in which relations of power shape people's understandings of their experiences, and for understanding *how* subjects as active agents interpret their social locations and personal histories through the discourses and material contexts to which they have access.

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