

# Telling Diaspora Stories: theoretical and methodological reflections on narratives of migrancy and belongingness in the second generation

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## Abstract

This article explores the theoretical and methodological implications of the study of second generation migration through the use of life stories, a narrative and biographical approach. It presents a theoretical contextualisation of life history research in addressing the direction it has taken in the study of migration and identity in order to problematise how the subject and subjectivities in narrative research have been framed by social categorisations such as gender, ethnicity, class as well as social experiences such as trauma, exile, memory and imagination. The paper develops the analytical contribution of researching the biographicity of everyday migrant lives.

**Keywords:** diaspora; second generation; return migration; identity; Greece; life stories; narrative

## Stories of the self: narratives of identity and migration

We have been told that the 20th century marked the end of many things and we did bear witness to the demise of some including the collapse of grand narratives. However, this era is characterised by the emergence of new paradigms and the “rise of the life narrative” in the “age of small narratives” as the narrative paradigm is penetrating most domains of private and public life in our individualised societies, as it is finding its way in art, culture, politics, in the macro and micro spheres of sociality (Goodson, 2006).

Biographies are shaped by life decisions and trajectories such as migration which may offer or may deprive individuals of certain alternatives. Migration often becomes the centre of one’s biography as a self-referential point of awareness of one’s potential for autonomous action but also of limitations, often structural that become control mechanisms. Migration as a social phenomenon produces and is produced through multiple biographies that may be expressive of pain and joy, optimism and depression, instability and development and so on. Migrant stories are not only binaries of life events but the pieces that put together the fabric of mobility of memories, territories and people.

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Narrative theorisation argues that narratives are the central device of identification processes and hence the crux of how we construct the self and how we give meaning to our lives (Bruner, 1990; Mishler, 1991; 2000). However, in reaching meaning we also need to scrutinise the wider social context of life narratives (Goodson, 2006) as we cannot ignore social context because we will then deprive ourselves and our collaborators of meaning and understanding (Andrews, 1991). In this respect, the *storied life* transforms into a catalyst that initiates the reassessment of a *lived life* in the exploration of meanings directed by constructions of culture, nation, ethnicity and place, in other words, where the *ethnos* meets the *topos* and where the stories are constructed around a perception of *self*, contextualised in past and present constructions of *home* and leading, in response, to a re-evaluation of the future (Christou, 2006).

Life stories have a “heuristic potential” (Chanfrault-Duchet, 1991: 79) which underscores the “hermeneutic potential” of the narrative approach (meanings as understandings that emerge when ‘thinking through’ and ‘with’ others to exemplify intersubjectivity). The driving force, as Plummer says, is that “we can see life stories working their way through a series of circles: self, others, community, the whole society” (2001: 243). The bridge between personal biography and cultural history connects the internal world to the external world, the subjective and the objective, while establishing boundaries of identities and collectivities as links across life phases and historical shifts in a culture (Plummer, 2001). Life stories illuminate lives and in doing so are very powerful because they capture the multi-dimensionality, richness and complexities of individual experiences, in particular socio-cultural contexts (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman-Davis, 1997).

### **The subject and (inter)subjectivities in life stories: gender, ethnicity and class**

Life stories are constructed, negotiated and articulated subjectivities. They are contextually defined, socially situated and culturally mediated enactments of certain fragments of a life and of particular glimpses of time while they are saturated by social categorisations and marked by cultural experiences. Stories of the self cannot be anything but stories of a *gendered*, *ethnicised* and *classed* self.

Stories are not articulated in a vacuum but they are (re)constructed, recalled, (re)told, modified, expressed and narrated in a particular context which is also a space of collectives: events, past and shared memories, interrelationships of characters, configurations of experiences in specific temporal and spatial circumstances and intricate processes of identifications throughout. Hence, stories cannot stand in isolation but they are shaped by the very socio-cultural and politico-historical conditions that penetrate their narrative construction.

Here, we must see the subject as relationally, psycho-biographically, historically and culturally constituted (Chodorow, 1999). The individual, as a

subject but also an active-actor, forms and develops the 'self' in response to specific 'others'. The life course of the individual takes place during social time and within social space as it is inscribed in and mediated by the subjectivity of the individual. This connection between individual and society is fundamental insofar as the individual and society cannot be understood other than intertwined in how people create personal meaning. Such meanings are subjective and they are grounded on the psychic realm, the biographical container, the historical context and the cultural platform of everyday life. These meanings are constructed but also acquired by the individual in a discursive and habitual manner.

### **The narrative discourse of trauma, exile, memory and imagination**

The narrativisation of many deeply felt life experiences is most likely to be (re)constructed and expressed through the very filtering device of memory and imagination, notwithstanding the shaped outcome of time but also extreme conditions such as trauma and the feeling of alienation, exclusion and exile. That is because people "live their lives and tell their stories within socially constituted conditions but their actions and stories also have a potentially transformative impact on society" (Moriarty, 3.1: 2005) and this exemplifies a "sociology of stories" (Plummer, 1995).

The mnemonic distillation of stories is a process that occurs in everyday life but it usually requires external stimulation. As Passerini explains, "when someone is asked for his (sic) life-story, his memory draws on pre-existing story-lines and ways of telling stories, even if these are part modified by the circumstances" (1987: 28), which becomes meaningful when we realise that "we often narrate our lives according to a 'prior script', a script written elsewhere, by others, for other purposes" (Goodson, 1995: 97).

Memory is also a path of (re)discovery of the past through the present. Thus, it can be influenced by a variety of different factors and the past can be altered (Lowenthal, 1985: 193–210). In (re)constructing the past, the social arena acts as a context to unfold memories while inhabiting particular spaces.

Nevertheless, narratives are a testimony to the multiple interactive layers of subjectivity (Christou, 2006) or double subjectivity (Lentin, 2000) of people's lived experiences and offer the plurality of history, experience and perception as a small segment of interpretation of a complex social reality (Lentin, 2000). To illustrate then the counter-diasporic experience of second generation migrants and return migrants (Christou, 2006) we need to make sense of counter-narratives and auto/biographical accounts as acts of reckoning (Lentin, 2000) but also as transformative performative possibilities of the *self* in constructing the *other* and finally making sense of the collective. The varied ways in which migrants remember and tell their life stories are quite often illuminating about the very meanings of the migration experience and this raises questions about why some memories are more valuable than

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others and if specific memories serve particular purposes for migrants (Thomson, 2003).

### **The transformative power of biography**

Only by embedding narratives in the unprecedented changes that have historically occurred on a global scale do we understand what Bauman (1991; 1995; 2000) means when he suggests that globalisation and post-modernity have exacerbated fragmentation, dislocation and uncertainty resulting in identity crises, fear and an ontological loss of security that comes with the fixity of identity and belonging. Hence, when one is narrating feelings of homeness and belongingness this unfolds in the temporal and spatial cultural redefinition of our era on a global scale. No matter how scripted the past is or how deep the structural limitations are of pre-scripted experiences, only living lives that are biographically explored and resisted can utilise this power of biography to its transformative and agential extent. These processes of transformation however, require social actors, active agents who can relate to their lifeworlds in a self-reflexive way in order to shape their social contexts and this is precisely the scope of *biographicity*.

But storytelling is a contingent process, a narrativisation of potential stories open to alteration and adaptation according to life stages, life circumstances and events that may have a profound effect on the life space, that particular insulated sense of personal space within the personal lifeworld which is open to self-interpretation, self-dispute, revision, exploration and finally self-coping. The more reflexively aware the individual is, the more critically evaluated the script becomes as the person delves into the depths of the self and the other. Inner dialogues in one's personal psychological space through reflexive acts of (re)membering are a doorway into the constitution of the self.

### **Methodological reflections on the biographicity of everyday (diaspora) returnee lives**

The core empirical method of our research project entitled, "Cultural Geographies of Counter-Diasporic Migration: The Second Generation Returns 'Home'" – the collection of life narratives – is aimed at generating creative insights into the linked meanings of 'migration', 'diaspora', 'return' and 'home'. The narratives, 'authored' and 'authorised' by the migrants themselves, enable both 'authenticity' and great richness in the research material gathered. Part of this richness derives from the way that narratives of home, return and belonging will interplay between discourses of ethnicity, identity, race, class and gender (cf. Ahmed *et al.* 2003; Christou, 2006) in various diasporic spaces, each located within a particular social model of an evolving immigrant/multicultural society – the US, UK, Germany, Greece and Cyprus.

We appreciate that, in a world of accelerating mobility, individuals' narratives are complex and epicentred; movement is both real, across physical space, and imagined, across spaces of meaning and identification. We explore this idea that migrants develop *narrative capital* as they construct and author their accounts. In contrast to cultural capital, usually related to national social orders, narrative capital is both more personal and flexible, and related to the new global order (Goodson, 2006). If it is true that, in our current individualised society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), we live in an age of 'small' (as opposed to 'grand') narratives, the personal life-story emerges as a new socially-constructed genre providing the researcher with new scripts for analysis. In our case, the danger of a fragmenting individualisation of such life narratives is countered by their being anchored within the wider social scripts of the group (on migration, return, homeland, religion etc.) and within the cultural location and 'cohort time' of second-generation returnees to Greece and Cyprus. Furthermore, this methodological path in researching mobility and the varying expressions of migrants as agents of change and transformation, we also theoretically move from the otherwise stagnation of cultural capital to the intersectionality of *gender capital* through narrative capital in unveiling expressions of gendered embodied capital and the institutionalisation of power. Here, it is important to consider contemporary feminist analyses of the family and home life (Pratt, 2008) and their significance for a renewed theory of cultural capital. As the metaphor "capital" implies, it does not facilitate or cause action just because it exists but it must be mobilised and transacted in order to be utilised. This is a crucial theoretical point in how to problematise the very politics of our research.

Subsequently, the best methodological design to address our research questions is a multi-method approach built around our primary research technique, the life narrative. Personal narratives offer 'unique glimpses of the lived interior of migration processes' (Benmayor and Skotnes, 1994: 14); in more ways than one, they are *moving stories* (Thomson, 1999).

The choice of participants<sup>1</sup> for the life narratives is certainly crucial. Whilst in most cases the researcher's personal network offered one entry into the sampling process, we resisted the temptation of easy snowballing and aimed to ensure a diversity of participants by careful use of intermediaries and other access strategies such as digital ethnography.

In confirming our commitment to the production and excavation of personal narratives as realist social texts we are also aware of the dangerous syndrome of the ethnographer-voyeur "who comes back from the field with

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<sup>1</sup> The participants in our study are second-generation returnees. Usage of the term 'second generation' poses challenges both as a descriptive notion and as an analytic category. Researchers and others are rather free with their use of the term to connote a specific collective of people, but their definitions are blurred and often inadequate. In focusing on this rather intriguing term, we note the variable definitions used to circumscribe this population cohort, as well as the multiple understandings of the more general term 'generations'. For a detailed discussion on how we define the 'second generation', 'ancestral homeland return migrants' and 'diasporic subjects', refer to King and Christou, 2008.

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moving tales of the dispossessed” (Denzin, 1991: 2). But, on the other hand, second-generation returnees who have returned voluntarily (as opposed to being taken back as part of a family return) have considerable agency and control over their lives.

In the interview process the aspiration was personal elaboration and ‘flow’ with minimal interrogation in the first instance. It was as almost as if we tried to keep to a ‘vow of silence’ in the initial phases of the interview as we set these up. This is not to say that the interviews were unstructured, there was a narrative guide which was used in two ways, first as a ‘fall-back’ mechanism if the ‘vow of silence’ method did not work, and secondly even when the life story teller is in full flow there will be aspects of coverage which have not been fully explored. The aspiration is to have the life story teller in more control of the ordering and sequencing of data. This gives more insight into the *narrative map* of the life story teller. Letting the life story teller order and sequence the narrative tells us more important things about the narrative map. It creates appropriate context and space for flow to occur. This seeks to reduce issues of power (whilst we are aware that these can never be completely suspended).

We realise that people have different kinds of narrative intensity. By and large we feel that we lock into an eternal narrative flow when we have subjects who have high internal reflection. Conversely when that internal narrative activity is, for whatever reason, less frequent it is more difficult to achieve narrative flow in the interview. The interview process is highly contingent on the narrative intensity of each participant which in turn depends to a considerable extent on the degree of internal reflective activity.

We transcribe the interviews and then meet as an interdisciplinary team to discuss the themes. This in a sense is a first layer of analysis<sup>2</sup> but we bring in different disciplinary approaches to the analysis.

In terms of numbers, our target samples were to collect thirty life story narratives from second-generation Greek-American as well as thirty narratives from Greek-German (and British-born Greek-Cypriots as part of an ongoing PhD thesis) returnees along with written narratives plus focus-group and other ethnographic and visual material from a multi-sited field research period in urban, rural and seaside locations in Greece (Athens, Thessaloniki, Volos, Mytilene) with a pilot phase in Berlin and New York. We exceeded our target samples and achieved a grand total of 163 narrative voices, including 122 single narratives (all taped with a few self-written narratives). Specifically, as regards the samples of returnees we have collected thirty-two narratives of second-generation Greek-Americans of which twenty-four are females and eight are males and thirty-two narratives of second-generation Greek-Germans of which twenty are female and twelve are male. Their ages range from mid-twenties to mid-seventies while their

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the preliminary results are presented in King and Christou, 2008; Christou and King, 2009; King and Christou, 2009a; King and Christou, 2009b.

lengthy of return stay in Greece varies from a few years to approximately forty-years. The fact that these particular groups are understudied underscored our interest in researching the lives of these particular returnees.

Some of the major analytic themes we are pursuing are:

- Time / periodicity
- Parental relationships
- Narrativity / types of narration
- Personal identity projects
- Racism / Multiculturalism
- Gender Relations

More specifically, as regards periodicity, we have begun to delineate three historical periods with regard to migrants' narratives:

**Collective / Group Belongingness:**

A) 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s

This is largely modernist narratives with somewhat essentialised visions of the social order and Greek identity.

**Transitional / Hybrid:**

B) 1970s-1990s

Some of the essentialised metanarratives seem to be breaking down in the face of the transformation with the economic world order and its associated narrative landscapes.

**Flexible / Individualised:**

C) mid 1990s-present day

Here narratives seem to be much more flexible and individualised. Instead of externally available metanarratives a good deal of self-scripting or internal narration seems to predominate in the presentation of narratives.

As well as social-structural influences to individual narratives a major component of refraction is the nature of relationships with parents. This is a micro-force that shapes narrative reflection in combination with the macro-forces of structural elements. For instance, the journey to the homeland can be seen as an act of reconciliation, redemption or rebellion depending on the nature of the parental relationship. Furthermore, parents' class origins and participants' conceptualisations of class are important parameters in the narrative analysis.

We are finding clusters of narrativity dependent not only on historical periods but also on personal identity projects. We have developed narrative

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portrayals of participants to define different kinds of narrativity. In the analytic process we follow one binary from essentialised scripted narrative to more flexible autonomy seeking narratives.

Personal identity projects are learning journeys into selfhood as classed, gendered and embodied experiences. The personal identity project is a point of arbitration between externally produced scripts and internally generated visions of selfhood. The space of selfhood is subject to appropriation by the forces we talk about, i.e. enforced gender dynamics, economic changes etc. but the personal identity project becomes a site of externally generated appropriation as well as self-generated re-appropriation.

The theme of racism / multiculturalism is an important factor in the analysis of portrayals. For one, it is interesting to view how participants from 'multicultural' societies view the changing homeland from a sending to a receiving society and on the other how they themselves (inter)act within this space. We seek to expose how racialised views and experiences shape the life narrative and how 'race' is embedded in the life story. In both the German and American (but also British context) case many participants had been brought up in an insulated micro-family environment of a Greek 'bubble' situated within the macro-social environment of a multicultural-multiracial context of the 'host' country. While it can be argued that the 'host' country surroundings do not represent an authentic multiculturalist space with all the racist ideologies (and practices) that exemplify this, there is a question of how racist ideologies embedded in everyday life in the diaspora find a more openly acceptable space of expression in the 'home' country or whether participants critically react to xenophobic discourses of ethnic purity, pride and superiority against the backdrop of issues of immigration in Greece and Cyprus. This will further illuminate the degree to which the family story of socio-cultural and moral values of essentialised Greekness is rejected by the participants or whether the homeland relocation strengthens the family narrative and xenophobic ideology.

Another theme that is emerging in the data is that of gender relations. We seek to move theoretically from cultural capital to *gender capital* through narrative capital and hence to extend the discussion of gendered embodied capital and the institutionalisation of power. Here, it is important to consider the narrativisation of family and home life and their significance for a renewed theory of gender capital. We therefore see femininities and masculinities not as single entities but as expressions of negotiated acts lodged in the structure of relationships among actors; i.e. the role of social structures in creating or maintaining inequality, exclusion, and hierarchy. We aim to interrogate the boundaries of gender relationships as fluid yet dynamic and lodged into the life narrative but also as a mediating force shaping the life narrative. We view migrant women and men as agents of change and resistance and their collective sense of belonging as not simply a community of fixedness but as multiple communities of gendered mobilities. We view migrant groups as collectivities of agency in order to understand gendered identities. We appreciate that migrancy is both a form and a forum of gen-



dered cultural citizenship as women and men reflect on their identities as cultural citizens. For instance, women in migrant life are often regarded as the guardians and custodians of socio-cultural ties and traditions. Women migrants have been conventionally understood to be embedded in the cultural private world of the 'home' rather than the political public social world. Here we focus also on a third space that is emerging in the data which is around the psychic selfhood that is potentially agentic in new ways. It is against this conflating notion of gendered roles that we seek to question the lines between public and private drawn in migrant life, that is, where the boundaries are and who defines them. Furthermore, we investigate the ways in which the interplay between social networks and gender relationships might become a resource for migrant engagement and hence, unveil the types of gender relationships that potentially become sources of agency for migrants but also to uncover what may limit them. Finally, in the new flexible work order we seek to find out if there is a new emergent life politics space which is located around issues of identity and selfhood.

Our choice of portrayals is based on the 'thematic density' that participant narratives exemplify. Here, saturation is an important element in the selection of thematic density. We select portrayals that will elucidate as many as possible of these themes. We therefore select the core 'exemplary' portrayals to substantiate the discussion of themes listed previously but for reasons of writing limitations will not be able to present exemplifications on this occasion. Our narrative selections cover different regional relocation spaces as well as diverse generational biographies through which we illustrate dominant forms of second-generation storied lives but within each of these there are multiple layers of subjectivities and hence multifaceted layers of migrant narrativity, as we do not want to essentialise the very process of narration.

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