Speaking silence: The social construction of silence in autobiographical and cultural narratives

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Voice and silence are socially constructed in conversational interactions between speakers and listeners that are influenced by canonical cultural narratives which define lives and selves. Arguing from feminist and sociocultural theories, I make a distinction between being silenced and being silent; when being silenced is contrasted with voice, it is conceptualised as imposed, and it signifies a loss of power and self. But silence can also be conceptualised as being silent, a shared understanding that need not be voiced. More specifically, culturally dominant narratives provide for shared understandings that can remain silent; deviations from the norm call for voice, and thus in this case silence is power and voice expresses loss of power. At both the cultural and the individual level, there are tensions between culturally dominant and prescriptive narratives and narratives of resistance and deviation, leading to an ongoing dialectic between voice and silence. I end with a discussion of why, ultimately, it matters what is voiced and what is silenced for memory, identity and well-being.

Keywords: Memory; Autobiography; Voice and Silence.

To a large extent, we are the stories we tell about ourselves (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 2001). As we narrate experienced events to ourselves and to others, we simultaneously create structure and meaning in our lives (Fivush, 2008; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Through autobiographical narratives rich with explanatory and evaluative frameworks that weave together people, places, and events imbued with psychological states, intentions, and motivations, we create stories that define who we are in time and place and in relation to others. But what about what is not said? Narrating our experiences by very definition implies a process of editing and selecting, voicing some aspects of what occurred and therefore silencing other aspects. How does voice inform silence and, just as important, how does silence inform voice? As Jean Braham (1995, p. 45) states, “We see the past... in something of the same way we see a Henry Moore sculpture. The ‘holes’ define the ‘shape.’ What is left repressed, or what cannot be uttered, is often as significant to the whole shape of the life as what is said.”

In this paper I provide a framework for a more nuanced understanding of voice and silence. More specifically, I make a distinction between being silenced and being silent; when being silenced is contrasted with voice, it is conceptualised as imposed, and it signifies a loss of power...
and self. But silence can also be conceptualised as being silent, a shared understanding that need not be voiced, and in this sense silence can be a form of power, and the need to speak, to voice, represents a loss of power.

In developing these arguments I posit that both voice and silence are socially constructed in conversational interactions between speakers and listeners, in which voice and silence are negotiated, imposed, contested, and provided. Further, these local conversational interactions must be understood within cultural frameworks that define the shape of a life. Cultures provide canonical narratives that are both normative and prescriptive about lives and about selves, and the ways in which specific experiences conform or deviate from these narratives create spaces for voice and silence. As we talk about our past in everyday interactions, what is said and what remains unsaid between speakers and listeners helps us form and re-form our personal memories that are the base of our individual identity.

To place these arguments in context, I first describe autobiographical memory and autobiographical narratives, and the role that language plays in intertwining the two. I then turn to feminist conceptions of power, voice, and silence, and discuss ways in which conceptualisations of voice as power and silence as oppression may not be adequate. In particular, I argue that silence can lead to power through providing the space for the creation of narratives of resistance and healing. The concept of resistance narratives calls for a more detailed discussion of culturally canonical narratives, which I turn to in the third section. I argue that shared narratives provide for shared understanding, which does not necessarily have to be voiced; rather deviations from the norm call for voice, and thus, in this case, silence is power and voice is loss of power. Finally, in the concluding section I address why, ultimately, voice and silence matter: for memory, for individual identity, and for a sense of well-being in the world.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES**

Obviously, autobiographical memory and autobiographical narratives are not the same; memories are multi-modal, and include information encoded and stored at multiple levels (e.g., implicit and explicit, episodic and semantic); recent models of autobiographical memories suggest that autobiographical memories are highly dynamic; each time a memory is brought to mind, it is reconstructed in the moment to serve the goals of the current situation (see, e.g., Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Rubin, 2006). Importantly, these reconstructions are based on bits and pieces of accurately recalled information (see Rubin, 1996, for an overview), but these bits and pieces must be integrated into a meaningful whole to form an autobiographical memory (as opposed to a fragment or an image), and this meaningful whole most often takes the form of a narrative (Nelson & Fivush, 2004).

Narratives are culturally canonical linguistic forms that modulate the organisation of experienced events. Narratives provide a sequential organisation that specifies the unfolding of an event along temporal lines, but even more so, narratives provide an explanatory and evaluative framework for understanding how and why events unfold as they do (Bruner, 1990; Fivush & Haden, 1997; Fivush & Nelson, 2006; Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Peterson & McCabe, 1994). Narratives move beyond a simple script or chronology to imbue a sequence of actions with causal links that explain why one action follows another, and, critically, does so within a folk psychology that interweaves actions in the world with human thoughts, motivations, and emotions. Thus a narrative provides an account of what happened that is dense with interpersonal meaning and evaluation.

Clearly, language is a critical tool for organising and expressing the past through narratives. Following from a sociocultural perspective (Nelson, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978), language allows both for social transmission of culturally constructed ideas and ideals, and for providing new ways of organising and representing personal experience (Fivush & Nelson, 2004; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). It is through language that we share our past, and it is through language that we construct socially mediated interpretations and evaluations of the past (Fivush, 2001; Fivush & Nelson, 2006). It is as we share the past with others through language that events of the past take on different meanings and different evaluations. Thus there is a dialectical relation between memory and narrative, in that the ways in which the past is shared in social interaction will change the way in which the past is subsequently understood and remembered by the individual. Although memories are not simply linguistically represented, linguistically based narratives become a critical filter through which our memories evolve.
VOICE AND SILENCE

The role of language as a tool in the formation of both autobiographical narratives and evolving autobiographical memories suggests that how and what is narrated about the past is pivotal for what is remembered. Narratives emerge in social interactions, in which certain events, and especially certain interpretations and evaluations of events, will be validated. Through multiple tellings, narratives become accepted (or contested, as I argue in more detail below) evaluative versions of the past. In this way, narratives take on a moral perspective, explicating not just what happened and what it means, but what it should mean, essentially getting to the “truth” of the matter (Freeman, 2007; Sclater, 2003). Thus the question becomes: Who has the right to say what “really” happened?

Feminist theorists of autobiography struggle with the question of who has the authority to author the autobiography by placing arguments about voice and silence within concepts of place and power (Braham, 1995; Fivush, 2000, 2004; Rosser & Miller, 2000; Yoder & Kahn, 1992). Each individual is situated in a particular place in cultural and historical time, in which specific enduring aspects of the individual are valued in particular ways, e.g., race, gender, class. Being an individual of a particular race, gender, and class provides and denies access to particular aspects of experience (Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Harding, 1993). For example, a female in modern industrialised society has access to very different experiences from a female in a traditional culture 200 years ago. One’s place in the world partly determines the types of experiences one might have and how one might be allowed to communicate these experiences to others (Fivush & Marin, 2007). Thus power emerges from place, and voice emerges from power. Societal roles that are imbued with power have the opportunity to shape the culturally shared narrative that is both normative and prescriptive. Culturally canonical, or dominant, narratives provide a culturally shared understanding of the shape of a life and how a life is to be understood, and in this way cultural narratives provide authority to define a culturally appropriate narrative of a life, and the power to validate certain narratives over others. From this perspective, power gives voice.

However, power is a relational construct (Yoder & Kahn, 1992); who has power in any given situation and culture is always in process; power is negotiated, imposed, taken, and given, and speakers and listeners navigate voice and silence in an ongoing dialectic in everyday interactions, as I discuss in more detail below. Thus there are multiple levels of accepted and contested narratives that co-exist and mutually influence each other at all points. The culturally dominant narratives provide the most powerful narrative for the group and this is the narrative that must be constantly negotiated. Marginalised groups that may be silenced at one level by the dominant cultural narrative may develop narratives within the group, often called resistance narratives, that challenges the explanations and moral imperatives imposed by the dominant narrative, as discussed in more detail below. Importantly, it may be whole events that are contested, or parts of events, or specific interpretations (Fivush, 2004). Thus voice and silence must always be conceptualised within evolving power structures at multiple levels of social organisation, creating multiple narratives that may be in tension with each other.

THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF “SILENCE”

In feminist conceptualisations of voice and silence, silence is seen as an absence or a gap (Belenky, Clinchey, Goldberg, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; for a review, see Simpson & Lewis, 2005; see Fivush, 2004, for a model of voice and silence as it pertains specifically to autobiographical memory). In the words of E. Annie Proulx, “It didn’t seem like the kind of story that would gather with time, but instead would retract, condense, and turn into one of those things that nobody talked about, and in a year or so it would all be forgotten” (1992, p. 21). At its most simple, what is given voice will be recalled and what is silenced will be forgotten. Marginalised experiences or oppressed groups are not given credibility and therefore their voices are silenced.

But this is only one, albeit critical, conceptualisation of silence, that of being silenced. Silence can also be conceptualised as quiet, restful, reflective, that of being silent. Silence can be a form of intimacy, being silent together, or a form of privacy, being silent alone. Silence can be a form of respect. One can even be silent in the midst of speaking; by voicing some aspects of experience, one may be silencing other aspects of experience; talk does not always imply voice.
Moreover, silence can be intentional or unintentional, momentary or enduring (for various definitions and typologies of silence, see Elson, 2001; Kurzon, 2007; Scott, 1993). More to the point of my arguments here, being silent can also be a form of power; by not speaking one is claiming that one need not explain or justify. Further, by being silent, one can impose silence on others. Clearly, the construct of silence, and therefore voice, is multidimensional and needs to be explicited if it is to serve as an explanatory construct in psychological research. Here, I focus on two theoretically critical aspects of silence: silence as imposed, i.e., being silenced, and silence as shared, i.e., the background of shared knowledge and understanding that need not be voiced.

**Silence as imposed: Being silenced**

Being silenced is almost always conceptualised as negative. Examples of this type of silencing include the silencing of trauma in general and violent trauma in particular. For instance, survivors of sexual violence are implicitly or explicitly told not to talk about their experiences, and when they do, they are either not believed or belittled, or blamed for what happened (Enns, McNeilly, Corkery, & Gilbert, 1995). Similarly, survivors of horrific war trauma come home to families that do not want to hear their experiences, tell them to forget them, that it would be better not to remember (Shay, 1996). The dominant cultural narrative cannot absorb these stories; we cannot live in a world where women are brutalised and brave soldiers commit atrocities to ensure our safety. Trauma survivors describe a “conspiracy of silence” where they feel a need to testify to their experiences, to make them real and to make themselves whole again, but society will not let them speak, leading to a fragmented or shattered sense of self (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). As Susan Brison (2002, p. 16) writes of her experiences coping with a violent rape, “…it’s essential to talk about it again and again. It’s a way of remastering the trauma, although it can be retraumatizing when people refuse to listen. In my case, each time someone failed to respond I felt as if I were alone again in the ravine, dying, screaming. And still no one could hear me. Or, worse, they heard me, but refused to help.” This concept of silence is essentially a loss of voice and a loss of power, and can lead to loss of a coherent identity (Brison, 2002; Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Silencing occurs at the cultural level for experiences that do not fit the culturally dominant narrative, and it also occurs at the conversational level with specific others who cannot hear what the speaker is trying to say. This can take the form of actually silencing, as in not allowing the speaker to talk, or it can be silencing through refusing to believe (Butler, 1999), deliberately misunderstanding or re-interpreting the event in ways that do not validate the speakers experiences (Brison, 2002; Janoff-Bulman, 1992), or simply by being distracted and inattentive (e.g., Pasupathi, 2001; Pasupathi, Stallworth & Murdoch, 1998). Importantly, when speakers and listeners accept one version of the story, by focusing on one set of facts and not speaking of or listening to another set of facts, the ignored aspects of the story are subsequently more difficult to retrieve from memory (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, in press; Cue, Koppel, & Hirst, 2007); thus in the very act of voicing some aspects of an event and silencing other aspects, individuals create narratives in which what is voiced becomes privileged in memory and what is silenced becomes more and more difficult to recall.

It is also possible for speakers to deliberately silence themselves. Sometimes this may be simple impression management (Snell, Belk, Flowers, & Warren, 1988). But sometimes this can be a deliberate decision not to share certain experiences with others because the speaker thinks the listener will not understand or care, or because the speaker believes the experience is simply too hard to hear. In my own interviews with women who had been severely sexually abused by family members as children (Fivush & Edwards, 2004), many women began the conversation asking me if I was sure I wanted to hear their stories, that the stories were hard to hear and there were things I may not want to know. These kinds of concerns...
indicate the extent to which these women understand both that they are being silenced by others who cannot bear to hear their stories, as well as silencing themselves in order to maintain social contact with others.

Finally, self-silencing can also occur defensively, when individuals cannot even tell these stories to themselves (Elson, 2001). Individuals may engage in active forgetting of experiences that are too painful or disturbing to remember (Brewin, 2003; Freyd, 1996), leading to an inability to voice these experiences even if a sympathetic listener was available. In the words of a survivor of childhood sexual abuse (Fivush & Edwards, 2004, p. 11), “It’s still hard for me to accept . . . there are occasions, even, I guess it’s called denial, even knowing all of it. Once in a while, I mean, it goes through my head, like, oh, you know I must be nuts or I’m making all this up. I mean fathers, how could they do this?” In these cases, silencing leads to an inability or unwillingness to remember, creating a gap in one’s understanding of the world and of one’s self (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

When silence is imposed, by self or by others, it can lead to a loss of memory and a loss of part of the self. Silence as loss of voice and loss of power is virtually always seen as negative. In fact, this kind of silencing can lead to both psychological and physical problems. The ability to speak and to be heard, on the other hand, is associated with psychological and physical well-being (for reviews see Frattaroli, 2006; Pennebaker, 1997). But silence need not always be imposed; silence can be shared, and in sharing silence a very different conceptualisation of silence emerges.

**Silence as shared: Being silent**

In contrast to being silenced, being silent can have positive benefits. Here I focus on being silent with others, where silence is shared—although obviously being silent alone can also have positive benefits, as in meditation or quiet reflection. In social interactions a listener can silence the speaker through distraction and inattention, and in this sense, silence can be punitive and judgemental (Kurzon, 2007). But an attentive albeit silent listener may be an invitation to speak, and to be heard (Alerby & Elídottir, 2003; Scott, 1993). Similarly, when a speaker and listener are silent together it may signal a breakdown of communication, but it may also be a silent attunement, a sense of simply being together in the moment, that may actually promote healing (Elson, 2001).

We also see this at the cultural level in “moments of silence” to commemorate great losses, and the use of “sacred spaces” to create quiet reflection; these moments bring people together and help create a shared history and an emotional bond (Kurzon, 2007). In these situations, where being silent together creates a shared space where the speaker and listener are emotionally attuned, silence may promote a sense of belonging. Whereas high levels of emotional distress may lead to feelings of separation and alienation from others, a sense of difference or “otherness” (Brison, 2002; Harding, 1993), creating shared silence may promote a sense of pulling together, of sharing great emotions, and thus may facilitate identification and affiliation with others.

**TRANSFORMING SILENCE: CREATING NARRATIVES OF RESISTANCE**

Moments of shared silence can also provide the space for the creation of a new narrative, a narrative of resistance. When dominant groups impose silence on marginalised groups, these individuals experience a loss of voice and a loss of power within the dominant culture. But when marginalised groups come together, the narratives they tell among themselves may begin to take shape. Resistance narratives use the dominant narrative as a starting point, agreeing on many of the main facts, but the subjective perspective changes, and the moral stance slips from the dominant to the marginalised narrative perspective. Recent US resistance narratives that have over time been able to modulate the culturally dominant narrative include narratives of the civil rights movement and the second wave of the women’s movement. Critically, it is by claiming the moral truth that resistance narratives gain their power. Through claiming the authority to author the narrative, and especially the evaluative moral stance conveyed in the narrative, resistance narratives can create chinks in the

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2 It should be noted that some recent research on repressive coping styles, in which individuals direct attention away from highly negative experiences, may actually promote resilience in the face of adversity (Coifman, Bonnano, Ray, & Gross, 2007). Thus self-silencing in this sense may provide some positive benefits.
dominant narrative and begin to allow for the construction of new, more nuanced cultural narratives to emerge.

Marginalised groups that are able to create and maintain narratives of resistance that provide them with a sense of shared history may be able to maintain better psychological and physical health than marginalised groups who are unable to create and maintain a resistance narrative. For example, Chandler and Proulx (2008) have examined cultural narratives among native tribes in northwest Canada, and find that adolescents living in tribes without a shared narrative of their own history have substantially higher suicide rates than adolescents living in tribes that have maintained their own history in resistance to the culturally dominant narrative. Thus, speaking through silence by creating narratives of resistance that are shared among members of a marginalised group questions the moral authority of the culturally dominant narrative, and in this way can be healing.

SILENCE AS POWER: LIFE SCRIPTS AND MASTER NARRATIVES

Thus far I have mentioned the idea of culturally dominant narratives but have not yet discussed them in detail. Cultures provide a shared understanding of what a life looks like, the types of experiences to be expected and the ages at which they are most likely to happen. For example, Meyer (1988) argues that modern Western cultures divide a life into stages based on education and work life, with the end of childhood and beginning of adulthood coinciding with school graduation and the beginning of old age coinciding with retirement. Although life stages may be heavily based on biological factors (e.g., puberty, childbearing), cultures modulate these biological considerations in forming social expectations. For example, with the advent of the second wave of the women’s movement, age of childbirth is now a much wider culturally acceptable window than previously (Rindfuss, Morgan, & Offatt, 1996). Similarly, with modern life requiring more and more education in order to become a productive member of society, adolescence has stretched out to include ages that were previously considered young adults (18 to 21 years old), and we now have a category of “emerging adulthood” to describe people in their early 20s. All of this is to make the point that cultures define ages and stages of a life that impact on how individuals construct their own life trajectory.

Within psychology, there is growing evidence that individuals, at least in modern Western cultures, share a “script” or “canonical cultural biography” of what a typical life looks like (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004; Berntsen & Bohn, in press; Habermas & Bluck, 2000). For example, Berntsen and her colleagues have demonstrated that when asked to list the most important events that any given individual in the culture will experience and the age at which they will experience that event, there is high agreement across research participants of different ages, and different industrialised cultures in identifying the core events that define a typical life. Thus the life script is a schematised framework shared among members of a culture for representing a typical life common across individuals.

Moreover, individuals seem to define their own life narrative in relation to the cultural life script (Berntsen & Bohn, in press). In constructing a sense of one’s own life, individuals reference the life script and compare similarities and differences. Thus the life narrative is the story of the individual life as it is placed within the cultural life script. Further, individual identity is at least partly defined by the life narrative. Who we are is linked to the story we tell about ourselves (McAdams, 2001). Thus identity is guided by the life narrative and the life narrative is guided by the life script. As each individual constructs a narrative identity that defines an individual life story of the self, they seem to do so in relation to cultural expectations of what a typical life looks like.

Although life scripts have been postulated to be normative, describing typical events and ages, they also serve a prescriptive function. It is not simply that one typically graduates high school at age 18, but that one should graduate high school at age 18. It is not simply that one typically gets married and begins a career path in one’s 20s but that one should get married and begin a career path in one’s 20s. Indeed, if one deviates from the life script there is a sense in which an explanation is needed, and this explanation takes the form of a narrative. Critically, although one may have narratives of culturally important transitions, such as high school graduation and the birth of a first child, these narratives are not explanatory (e.g., Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007); individuals do not need to engage the listener in constructing a coherent explanation of why this event occurred. In fact,
unless something interesting or surprising happened during this event (e.g., tripping and falling on the way to the graduation podium; spilling the wedding punch on your new in-laws), these stories tend to be flat descriptions, with little narrative tension. When the individual violates expectations and/or deviates from the life script, an explanatory narrative is necessary, and this narrative changes the course of the life from the culturally assumed life script. Thus one need not voice the canonical but must voice the deviation from the canonical. Individuals that conform to the life script may remain silent, but those that deviate must speak.

As argued by Simpson and Lewis (2005), in contrast to liberal feminist theories that posit voice as power, post-structuralist theories posit silence as power; essentially the canonical is the unmarked and therefore does not need to be voiced. If the canonical is expected, there is no need to voice it; it is given, the invisible background of shared understanding. This conception of silence is the freedom not to speak, to be silent, the freedom to assume shared knowledge that comes from a position of power. The need to speak, to give voice to experience, comes from a need to explain, justify, rationalise, convince, both others and oneself. From this perspective, when power gives voice, silence is oppressive, but when power gives silence, voice is justification.

**Master narratives**

Whereas life scripts provide a series of normative and prescriptive events, master narratives provide culturally shared evaluative frameworks (Thorne & McLean, 2003). Narratives are empowering, in that narratives move beyond description to provide an evaluative framework that carries moral justification. Master narratives are essentially cultural myths and motifs that provide a moral, ethical, and affective framework for understanding events. A classic master narrative in American culture is the “Horatio Alger” story of a young poor immigrant boy who worked his way from rags to riches. This story is a morality tale about overcoming adversity, pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, working hard and ultimately achieving material success. It is the “American Dream”.

McAdams (2006) has identified a master narrative that is pervasive in American culture, the redemption narrative. In this narrative the individual, often from an early place of privilege, faces some significant adversity, and by facing and overcoming this adversity becomes a better person. It is a survivor narrative. Master narratives may also be gendered. Thorne and McLean (2003) found that males were more likely to tell “John Wayne” narratives, in which the narrator overcomes adversity through individual strengths, whereas females are more likely to tell “Florence Nightingale” narratives, where the narrator succeeds through helping others. These narrative motifs provide templates for the explanatory narratives that are necessary when individuals deviate from the life script.

Critically, master narratives provide more than explanations; they provide the moral and ethical guidelines of how a life should be lived (Freeman, 2007). In addition to the prescriptive events of a life script, which can be said to define a “good life”, master narratives provide the framework for defining a “moral life”. A redemptive narrative goes beyond describing how adversity led to success by describing how the individual has become a “better person”, more prosocial, more moral, more ethical, more appreciative of life, through the very act of facing and conquering adversity, which is itself a moral imperative: “We must be strong and overcome.”

In summary, life scripts provide the form of a typical and prescribed life. This is shared cultural knowledge and therefore may remain silent. However, when individuals deviate from this script, they must provide an explanatory narrative, and this narrative will be influenced by the types of cultural master narratives available that provide a moral and evaluative explanation of deviation. Thus a life narrative must explain why one did not complete an education, why one did not marry and have children, why one did not pursue a productive career path; one does not have to have a story of why one did complete school, marry and have children, work productively. The deviation is given voice, but the typical life script is silent. Note that life scripts are not silenced; any individual member of a given culture can provide the script. Rather it is that the life script is the assumed, silent canonical background, the shared cultural knowledge, against which the narrative is told. As assumed shared knowledge it is simply not voiced. Deviations from the canonical require explanatory narratives, which themselves can become morality tales and templates for others. Thus what must be voiced and what must be silenced are in constant tension, as normative, descriptive, and moral cultural narratives evolve.
Scripts within scripts; narratives within narratives

Following from these arguments, life scripts become layered; there is the overarching cultural life script, e.g., the American life script, but embedded within this are scripts for sub-groups, including racial groups (the African-American life script is different from the Euro-American life script), gender, ethnic minorities, immigrant groups, children of the 60s, and on and on. Each of these groups develops its own life scripts in relation to similarities and deviations from the overarching cultural scripts. The points of similarity define us all as “Americans” and the points of deviation define the identity of the specific group. Within these cultural groups are families, who also have their canonical life scripts, and that are communicated through the generations through mythic tales of family members (Fivush, Bohanek, & Duke, 2008). Individuals are simultaneously members of multiple groups (and families as we move in and out of marital relations). Thus, in any given conversational context, different aspects of the life narrative will need to be voiced or may remain silent, depending on the shared understanding of the speaker and listener.

The argument is not that an individual’s memories are completely constructed in the social interaction (e.g., Gergen, 1994), but rather that the conversational context backgrounds certain events and foregrounds others (Fivush & Buckner, 2003). For example, a female business executive will share certain aspects of the life script with her male colleagues that will lead to the voicing and silencing of particular life stories, and this will be different from the aspects of the life script shared with her working mothers’ group. The particular autobiographical narratives that will be told in these two contexts will depend on different shared representations of the world that will background certain stories as shared understandings that do not need to be voiced, different discrepant stories that may need to be explained, and different discrepant stories that will be silenced and not told at all. However, it is also the case that if certain stories are told certain ways multiple times, the story becomes more entrenched. Cue et al. (2007) have demonstrated that when certain aspects of the story are repeatedly recalled, these aspects become easier to recall subsequently. More important, aspects of the story that are not recalled by the speaker and not heard by the listener become more and more difficult for both speaker and listener to recall over time. Thus in privileging certain aspects or evaluations of the narratives, other aspects or evaluations become more and more difficult to recall over time, and thus become more and more likely to remain silenced.

Thus the argument is that individual life narratives are fluid, dynamic constructions.

Depending on the cultural and conversational context, particular canonical narratives will be foregrounded that will help guide the retrieval of particular memories. Most important, the canonical narratives will also guide the interpretation of those memories; conformity does not need to be explained or evaluated, and therefore these memories may remain unvoiced, but deviations must be understood, and there are templates for these kinds of narrative explanations. At the individual level, over time, certain narratives and certain interpretations may become more and more stable, leading to a more stable life narrative across contexts, and these may, in fact, become the self-defining memories of the individual. In this way, canonical narratives and life narratives are in constant dialectical relation. At a cultural level, multiple narratives are in tension, with the culturally dominant narrative being challenged by narratives of resistance, and as these narratives are told and re-told, they may be integrated into the dominant narrative, thus leading to evolving cultural understandings of identity.

Truth and morality

As I have argued throughout this paper, narratives provide a moral stance. People may agree on the facts of what happened (i.e., accuracy) but if they disagree about what those facts mean, the memory is not perceived to be truthful in that the narrative does not make sense (Bruner, 1990; Freeman, 2007). Truth emerges from the construction of shared meaning, and shared meaning emerges from the construction of shared narratives. When the narrative is contested, there is a perception that one narrative cannot be “right” whereas the other narrative is, and, critically, the “right” narrative carries the moral imperative (Freeman, 2007; Selater, 2003). This is how resistance narratives can create change: through claiming the moral imperative, resistance narratives challenge the truth, not the accuracy, of culturally dominant
narratives. If truth were not contested, resistance narratives would have no power.

SPEAKING THROUGH SILENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR MEMORY, IDENTITY, AND WELL-BEING

This analysis of voice and silence points to the complex intertwining of remembering, speaking, and silencing. Within culturally dominant narratives, where there are shared assumptions about the events of a life, events that conform to the script do not have to be told, yet these events are recalled, as the skeletal backbone of the life story. As do other types of generalised events representations, or scripts, life scripts provide schematised versions of events, spare in detail, that provide the shared cultural representations that need only be referred to in passing (Nelson, 1986). Thus, while individuals recall these events they do not provide a rich narrative tapestry that is woven with personal meaning. Rather it is those narratives that do not conform to the life script that define individual identity, stories that differentiate us from the norm, events that must be voiced; they must be explained, justified, understood, and this leads to narrative plot and tension. As Bruner (1990) argues, narratives involve “troubling” a problem that must be solved. Thus power derived from conformity leads to being silent, a life lived in harmony with the shared cultural script that does not require rich compelling stories. In contrast, deviation often leads to being silenced and the need to gain back power through voice, to justify and explain one’s life.

A critical dimension is whether the deviation from the culturally dominant narrative can be heard when it is voiced. Some deviations may be so threatening to the dominant narrative that they simply cannot be heard and so continue to be silenced. At the cultural level this may be historically modulated, as in the changing cultural understandings of violence against women, and the kinds of stories of violence and abuse that can be told and heard now that were silenced just a few decades ago (Enns et al., 1995). When and why certain groups are able to create these kinds of resistance narratives that confer power and voice is well beyond the scope of this paper, but within the social science literature much has been written about social justice movements, and how certain stories begin to be heard (Kleinman & Fitz-Henry, 2002).

At the individual level, the life script provides the expected background against which the life narrative is created. Narrative identity is not just what we remember but how we remember. As Pasupathi et al. (2007) have argued, we can use narratives to reveal who we are, to dismiss certain events as not self-defining, to create causal chains and explanations for how and why things occurred as they did, and how and why one has become the person one is. The master narratives and motifs available in the culture guide these kinds of individual narratives. Individual narratives of deviation can be dismissed or explanations can take the form of a narrative of victimisation. In contrast, deviations may become resistance narratives, narratives that reveal and explain something about the self that leads to gaining voice and power; these are redemption narratives.

Not surprisingly, it matters what kinds of narratives individuals tell. Narratives that are not coherent, that cannot be linked to meaningful explanations, can lead to identity confusion and fragmentation; this is often what happens following traumatic experiences that are silenced, both by the culture and by the individual, and cannot be integrated into a coherent sense of narrative and identity (Brewin, 2003; Janoff-Bulman, 1991). The individual must have a community of listeners able and willing to hear and validate their experiences in order to create more coherent narratives, and when they do, the evolving narrative coherence is linked to higher levels of both physical and psychological well-being (Frattaroli, 2006; Pennebaker, 1997). Thus narrative and identity are dialectically related, such that coherent narratives help create a coherent sense of self, and a coherent sense of self helps create and maintain coherent narratives (McLean et al., 2007).

But even if a coherent narrative can be formed, it still matters what shape that narrative takes. Individuals who create redemption narratives from their discrepant experiences show high levels of generativity, a commitment to the next generation and to the community, and they show high levels of well-being (McAdams, 2006). Thus the kinds of resistance narratives that individuals create have far-reaching implications for both their developing understanding of who they are and for their sense of well-being in the world. Ultimately the stories we tell matter. In the words of Susan Brison (2002, p. 51), who lived to tell the story of her violent rape, “In order to construct self-narratives we need not only the words with which to tell our stories, but also an audience
able and willing to hear us and to understand our words as we intend them.”

REFERENCES


