

What do we mean when we refer to our "identity," and how do we represent it in the stories we tell about our lives? Is "identity" a sustained private core, or does it change as circumstances and relationships shift? In this thoughtful and learned book, a recognized master of research interviewing explores these questions through analyses of in-depth interviews with five craftartists, who reflect on their lives and their efforts to sustain their form of work as committed artists in a world of mass production and standardization.

"Mishler explores the meaning of the 'hand-made' for artisans devoting their lives to crafts, and in the process, enlarges both theory and method of human science study. This is truly a fascinating, sophisticated, and important study and one unique in showing the significance of taking seriously a reflexive and dialogic perspective in the study of identity."

—BERTRAM J. COHLER, University of Chicago

"Expect to be alternately enchanted, challenged, bewildered, sometimes even disoriented and finally enlightened."

—LOUISE J. KAPLAN, *American Craft*

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## *Preface*

A preface is the threshold of a book, a place of exits and entrances. As I prepare to leave the work behind, I invite you—prospective readers—to enter it. It is a charged moment. Feelings of protectiveness intersect with the need to say what the book is about. Our initial meeting may mark the beginning of a more extended dialogue, and the foyer is not a place to linger long. My task is to draw a floor plan, briefly trace the history of the work, and map out what you can expect to find ahead.

It may seem strange to introduce a report focused on analyses of personal narratives, a genre of discourse, with architectural tropes.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, images of building and constructing surfaced when I looked back at how this book came to have its final shape. It has been long in the making, and to characterize the process as revising a text seemed inadequate to the work of constructing and rearranging units of meaningful discourse larger than words, sentences, or paragraphs. As my understanding of narrative and identity—key thematic concepts in the work—changed through successive stages of analysis, I added, revised, deleted, and rearranged sections, continually modifying the overall structure. The interpenetration of form and content suggested in this metaphor of building anticipates the perspective that informs the work.

In good part, the complexity of the process reflected the plurality of content areas addressed in the study: the crafts and the work and lives of craftartists; methods of narrative analysis and their application to life history interviews; the process of adult identity formation. These keywords in the book's subtitle are of equal importance; each, however, has its own

history as a general topic and field of inquiry and as a particular domain of personal interest. How to bring them together, to create a unified whole from several quasi-independent parts, was the central problem.

The profusion of interests made this an exciting task but also posed risks that became evident in an earlier draft, which was overly complex in structure and thematically diffuse. Addressing these problems required radical renovation. The current version is more unified, with the aim of clarifying the central argument and making connections between parts more visible and easier to follow.<sup>2</sup> Readers will be the final arbiters of whether and how well this aim has been achieved. Now, to the promised floor plan.

The core of the work, the foundation that remains in place through earlier changes and the latest renovation, is a number of life history interviews with five craftartists I conducted about a dozen years ago. Selected transcripts of these interviews are the data for this study, and their detailed analysis is the basis for my exploration of the value of a particular approach to narrative analysis for understanding adult identity formation, which is the central problem of the study. My interest in the crafts as a form of "nonalienated labor" and in the work and lives of craftspeople antedated these interviews. The ground for the foundation was prepared ten years earlier, when I photographed and talked informally with several craftartists as they did their work. My fantasy of a photo-essay on this project never materialized, but the experience stayed with me, and I began to learn more about the history and current place of the crafts in society.

My initial notion of what might motivate craftartists to pursue their work in a society that was relatively unreceptive and provided little in the way of social status or economic rewards was expressed in a draft research proposal (Mishler, April 1987), written after the interviews discussed in this book. It began with a quotation from William Morris, the godfather of the late-nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts Movement that valorized "handicrafts" in the context of a critique of the dehumanizing impact of industrialization and mass production (Morris, 1966/1883). I made the bridge to the Marxist concept of alienation via C. Wright Mills's analysis of the loss of craftsmanship in modern bureaucratic society (Mills, 1953). The aim of the proposed study, reflected in its title, "Work and identity: The lives of craftpersons," was to contribute to research and theory on the crafts as a form of creative work and to reflect on the general problem of relations between work and personal identity.

The concept of adult identity formation is the scaffolding of this report. Each chapter—with all of them directed to the analysis and interpretation of the interviews—focuses on a particular problem in the study of identity. This term, relatively unspecified in the original proposal, was elaborated over the course of the work. For example, in my first report on one interview (Mishler, 1992), I proposed that "identity" be defined as a collective term referring to a set of sub-identities (among them a work identity), urged attention to the process of identity formation, and pointed to the significance of disjunctions and discontinuities in lifetime work trajectories. Echoes of this preliminary formulation will be found in the core analytic chapters, respecified as a set of problems in identity research and theory that became apparent as I examined, comparatively, the formation of my respondents' current work identities as craftartists: universality vs. inter-individual variability in personal and career trajectories (Chapter 2); intra-individual continuities vs. discontinuities in the achievement of adult work identities (Chapter 3); coherence vs. tension and contradiction in life stories (Chapter 4); individual vs. relational conceptions of identity (Chapter 5). In each instance, I try to make the case that the second term in this series of polarities offers the most productive and appropriate perspective for theorizing, studying, and understanding identity formation.

My work on narrative analysis began before this study (Mishler, 1986a; Mishler, 1986b), but developed concurrently with it. It is the third axis around which the book revolves, less a distinctive focal point than a shaft running through all the parts and holding them together. Narrative research is an umbrella term that covers a large and diverse range of approaches, the result of the rapid expansion of this area of inquiry over the past dozen years (Mishler, 1995). My own approach is a sub-genre, defined by specific theoretical assumptions and methodological procedures. These will be detailed in Chapter 1 and the analytic chapters, and are listed here in an abbreviated, slogan-like form as a guide to what follows.

My attention was first drawn to stories in my studies of medical interviews (Mishler, 1984), in which I found that patients' stories of their illness experiences were ignored or interrupted by physicians. My initial attempt to develop systematic methods to analyze narrative accounts in research interviews (Mishler, 1986a) relied on the sociolinguistic model proposed by William Labov and Joshua Waletzky (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). The widespread influence of this seminal paper on other narrative

researchers is documented in a recent Special Issue of the *Journal of Narrative and Life History* (Bamberg, 1997a).

Although my approach has changed owing to limitations of the Labov-Waletzky model for dealing with embedded, lengthy, and multiple stories found in unstructured life history interviews, it remains grounded in sociolinguistic methods (Gee, 1991; Schiffrin, 1994). That tradition assigns special significance to the structure of speech and texts, and provides methods for specifying the linguistic features of different types of discourse units and the various ways in which they are tied together into larger units of meaning: for example, words into clauses, clauses into sentences and stanzas, stanzas into narrative episodes. This entails close listening to tape-recordings of speech and close reading of carefully prepared transcripts. This is the fundamental methodological principle for the analysis of interviews presented in this report.<sup>3</sup>

These structural descriptions of speech are not themselves transparent. Their construction is only the first, though necessary, step. Interpretation of their psychological, social, and cultural functions depends on additional theoretical assumptions. Two are of particular importance in my attempt to learn about identities from the shape and content of narratives. The first is that an interview is a dialogic process (Mishler, 1986b), a complex sequence of exchanges through which interviewer and interviewee negotiate some degree of agreement on what they will talk about, and how. My respondents' accounts of their life experiences are situated in that context and may therefore be viewed as co-produced. This requires the readers to pay as much attention to an interviewer's questions and statements as to an interviewee's responses. This stance allows us to explore how a respondent's stories may be influenced by their location in the course of the interview, given the social relationship established during its course.

The second assumption that guides my interpretive approach is that narratives, and other discourse genres, are social acts. In speaking, we perform our identity (Langellier, 1999), making a "move" in the field of social relationships (Labov, 1982). This pragmatic view of language highlights what we are doing as social actors in selecting and organizing the resources of language to tell our stories in particular ways that fit the occasion and are appropriate for our specific intentions, audiences, and contexts. The principle of structural analysis and the assumptions of dialogue and performance constitute the theoretical and methodological framework of this study, a study of "narrative as praxis."

## STORYLINES

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