

Review of “*Marked Identities. Narrating lives between social labels and individual biographies*”¹

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Abstract

This is a book review of the volume edited by Roberta Piazza and Alessandra Fasulo, and entitled *Marked Identities. Narrating Lives Between Social Labels and Individual Biographies*, Palgrave Macmillan, London-New York, 2015.

The book consists of various interviews with individuals whose lives, mainly because of the group to which they belong, could be viewed as ‘marked’. The difference between the idea of ‘stigma’ and the notion ‘marked identity’ is underlined, together with the idea of ‘diversity’, which today is not necessarily something that one should hide but, quite the opposite, something one can be proud of. One of the main ideas of this text is that identity is not a rigid reality but a process, by which individuals negotiate the version of who they are with others.

Keywords: identity; social stigma; life histories; narratives; qualitative interviews

This recently published volume consists of eight chapters, written by different authors with various backgrounds ranging from Italian Studies, to Psychology, Political Psychology, Social Sciences, Criminology, and Journalism. The two editors of the volume - Roberta Piazza and Alessandra Fasulo - are, respectively, Senior Lecturer in Linguistics and English Language at the University of Sussex and Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Portsmouth, in the UK. Each chapter is the result of a study into the reality of individuals who narrate their life histories focusing in particular on those circumstances that have made them somewhat ‘different’; that is, people with a special or ‘marked’ identity.

The idea of a ‘marked identity’ is deeply connected to Goffman’s concept of ‘stigma’; Goffman himself saw the notion of mark and then of stigma as essentially relational processes. As Roberta Piazza and Alessandra Fasulo write in the Introduction to the book: “Our discussion is deeply indebted to Goffman’s work as we will be adopting a relational approach to societal labels and keeping a focus on the processes whereby certain definitions of identities are foregrounded and worked on by the individuals on whom they are bestowed; however, our definition of the phenomenon is wider.

¹ *Marked Identities. Narrating Lives Between Social Labels and Individual Biographies*, Palgrave Macmillan, London-New York, 2015, pp. 200, Roberta Piazza and Alessandra Fasulo (Editors)

Both 'mark' and 'stigma' clearly refer to a loss, or 'gap' [...] by which the individual feels diminished, but it is the word 'stigma' that has more commonly carried this meaning in the following decades" (p: 1-2). For this reason, the editors of this volume chose to use the word 'marked', rather than 'stigma', for the title of the book.

Indeed, the term 'marked' underlines a kind of special attribution, but not necessarily a negative one. It displays merely a different, out-of-the-ordinary identity and, as such, this identity should not be hidden but, rather, made visible. The meaning of the term 'diversity' has undergone noteworthy changes; today 'diversity' is not something that one should hide but, on the contrary, something one can recognize, or even be proud of. This different attitude towards 'diversity' can be traced back to the beginning, some forty or thirty years ago, of a new moral discourse on tolerance by which diversity acquired a positive value. Also, social media greatly enhanced the positive outlook connected to given social issues, thus helping people feeling more accepting of their special identity.

In the introductory section of the book, the concept of identity is dealt with diachronically. Unlike in the past, identity today is not viewed as a rigid concept but, rather, as a fluid and dynamic process in which individuals and groups can more easily publicize how they perceive themselves while, at the same time, they also receive a plurality of descriptions from external sources. There is, in fact, a "constant interplay between large scale, long term changes in society affecting identity processes, smaller-scale and faster changes in the discourse around specific groups and labels, and the trajectory of individuals who select and transform identity positions and narratives along the way" (p. 8)

Each chapter of the book portrays a different life story, based on an interview between the author/s and the main character/s. The stories are thus based on interviews, a traditional tool used in the social sciences for qualitative research. The editors of the volume place a great value on the inherent reciprocity of the interview situation; in fact, even though the interviewer retains a more powerful position he/she is nevertheless inevitably involved in what is being told and is also influenced by the environment in which the interview is taking place.

The author of the first chapter is Roberta Piazza. She interviewed 'Irish Travellers', a nomadic group living in the UK, caught between stigmatization and self-image. Molly Andrews, in the second chapter, deals with East German identity, while Phoebe Trimmingham carried out research among homeless people in Brighton.

The fourth chapter, by Maria I. Medved and Jes Brockmeier, collects life histories of a group of Aboriginal people in Canada; the fifth chapter by Roberta Piazza and Antonia Rubino is based on interviews with an Italian Jewish group who witnessed deportations in the Fascist era.

Hilary Bruffell, in the sixth chapter, talks about the delicate and dramatic issue of teenage motherhood in Great Britain. The last two chapters deal with health problems: for chapter seven Georgia-Zetta Kougiali interviewed a group of drug users and alcoholics trying to overcome their addiction and how this is reflected in the organization of their narratives. In chapter eight, Alessandra Fasulo explores and discusses the psychological dynamics of an individual with a rare disease who was diagnosed with the condition in his forties.

Notwithstanding the differences amongst the groups that have been researched and interviewed, all the studies in this book seem to agree on the fact that a marked identity – whether a homeless person, an Aboriginal, or an ill person – is too limited a concept and does not take into account the complexity of human beings. Moreover, identity turns out to be an intricate notion, which sometimes resorts to various strategies in order to fulfill an individual's need in given circumstances.

For instance, as Anna De Fina writes in the Afterword to the book: "Indeed, for example, claiming a collective identity that overrides individual concerns, as in the case of Jewish survivors or East Germans, can be a strategic choice that allows individuals to provide a deeper sense to their own experience". (p. 195) Conversely, some other individuals may prefer to do the opposite, that is, they may create a distance between themselves and their group, a stigmatized community, in an effort not to be identified with it.

Indeed, narrative analysis is a useful and powerful tool to investigate in an in-depth and articulate way the complexities of individual and group identity.

Bibliography

1. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1963.