

Religious identity development through filmed stories

‘Father and daughter’ contributing to a quest orientation of religious identity development

Dr. K.H. (Ina) ter Avest, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

kh.teravest@uu.nl

Abstract

In this paper identity development is seen as a dialogical process between ‘I’ and ‘the other’. The philosophical line of thought of Emmanuel Levinas on the concepts of ‘the other’ and ‘dialogue’, and the theory of the Dialogical Self are combined in a theoretical framework with regard to the role of cultural and religious narratives in the construction of a personal and professional narrative identity. This is exemplified with the presentation of the animation ‘Father and Daughter’, facilitating the coming to the fore of until then latent voices in the multi-voiced Self.

Introduction

Individuality and sociality are central in education and identity development, since the aim of education is to facilitate the construction of an identity in order to prepare the individual for his or her role in creating social cohesion in the community. Therefore, identity development in our days is central in educational institutions, like schools and day care centers. In our view personal and institutional identity are intertwined (Ter Avest, Bakker & Miedema 2007; Ter Avest & Bakker 2008).

In this contribution we focus upon the personal, in relation to the culturally and collectively laid down aspects in the self-narratives of people. The question we aim to answer is: ‘In which way and to what extent do voices from literature or cultural stories facilitate the wording of the self-narrative’, and the other way around: ‘In which way and to what extent do people become conscious of their self-narrative in confrontation and in dialogue with literal and cultural plots and themes’.

Identity, professional as well as religious identity, develops in and through the communication with others (Erikson 1968, Fowler 1981). It is in the interactional space between ‘I’ and ‘the other’ that (religious) identity emerges. In this interactional space, the voice of the other becomes a permanent track in the person’s identity as one of the voices of the multi-voiced Self. However, the creation of an interactional space is not just a matter of course. We

illustrate this by the animated film 'Father and Daughter' facilitating the encounter with the o/Other.

In the first paragraph of this article we focus upon the concept of identity, in particular the development of professional identity, taking as our starting point that identity develops in context in the encounter with others.. Next, in the second paragraph, we follow the philosophical line of thought of Emmanuel Levinas on the encounter with the o/Other In his view dialogue is a prerequisite for any encounter. The Dialogical Self is the central concept in the Valutation Theory, which will be described in paragraph three. The VT is at the base of the Self Confrontation Method (SCM), a methodology that in our view offers a splendid research instrument for the exploration of the self narrative and its plot, the life theme. The presented theories offer in the fourth paragraph a framework for the creation of the interactional inter- and intrapersonal space of encounter, stimulating the religious development. In this fourth section we touch upon the role of stories in society. In particular the story of 'Father and Daughter' is given attention, since this story functions as an example for the role of cultural and religious stories in the exploration of the collective aspect in each self narrative. In the fifth paragraph we reflect upon the inter- and intrapersonal encounter with stories, for which Henning Luther's concept of 'individualisation through religion' is of great help.

1. Identity

"I open the door to enter the classroom. Fifteen new faces look up at me. These are my new (student) teachers. For the next two years I will work together with them on the further development of their professionalism in the field of education or, more specific: religious education. As I enter the classroom I become aware that I'll have to introduce myself. "I am ... " Quickly I decide what aspect of my life and work I want to share with the (student)teachers. Besides my name I tell something about my professional background and the work I am doing now. "I was trained as ...". With this sentence I show myself to be member of a culture and context in which positions are important. For this very moment my identity seems to be a complete wholeness, something that I 'have', that I possess. The process of identity formation will continue after this moment. My professional identity is (re)build in interaction with others, in meeting these still unknown (student)teachers. In a different context I might have told a completely different story about myself and the introductory sentence will vary related to the context of the encounter: a course, a professional

meeting with colleagues, a church council, during a vacation trip. But in all these variety of contexts I still would be recognizable as more or less the same person”.

The above quoted intra-personal reflection represents the concept of identity as a story we tell about ourselves. ‘I’ is the author of the autobiographic narrative, actively reflecting on the ‘critical incidents’ in his life.; ‘me’ is the ‘self as known’, or ‘the empirical self’. In the same way professional identity is constructed in telling and retelling the story of the professional development, illustrated with memories of ‘heroes’ and ‘life-events’. In the professional ‘me’ are included different identifications and role expectations, as well societal images and related permissiveness and tolerance. In ‘me’ are included the images of the acting ‘I’ as mirrored by different ‘significant others’, as well as the ‘generalized other’. The other, the colleague or friend, is of pivotal importance in constructing my identity. In the next paragraph we introduce the outstanding line of thought of the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, on the encounter with ‘the o/Other’.

2. Emmanuel Levinas and the o/Other

Not the ‘I’ or ‘me’ is central in the writings of the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1975), but ‘the other’. Levinas has extensively written on the role of ‘the other’ in the encounter, sometimes writing the Other with a capital, denoting the outstanding position of the other in a person’s development as well as pointing to the presence of traces of God in the encounter, an immanent transcendence.

The philosophy of the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1965) can be characterized by its starting point in the ‘I’, coming into being as a moral being through ‘the other’¹. It is in the relation with ‘the other’ that I experience ‘myself’ as an ‘I’ and ‘the other’ as ‘not-me’. However, the other is not just an other ‘I’, not an alter ego. Such an act is called by Levinas the ‘colonization’ of the other. ‘I’ and ‘the other’ differ from each other in an essential way. ‘I’ as well as ‘the other’ are unique and as such ‘the other’ can not be ‘just like me, *only a bit different*’; the other is different in a substantial way.

Levinas introduces the concept of ‘sociality’ characterized by the relationship with the alterity of the other. Levinas conceives sociality as an encounter with the other, in which the other’s appeal is not interpreted as a temptation to colonize him, on the contrary the other invites me to resist this seemingly natural tendency to ‘kill’. According to Levinas’ concept of

¹ The pivotal importance of the other is represented in the writings of Levinas by using the capital ‘O’ in writing ‘the O/other’. In some of his writings Levinas refers to The Transcendence, or the Wholeness of Being by writing ‘the Other’.

sociality, the other questions my be-ing. Answering the other leads to the ultimate responsibility, understood as a responsibility to do anything possible to give room to the other's be ing there, how ever different he may be, not to say *múst* be in Levinas view. The other questions my tendency to see the other as 'just like me, *only a bit different*'; the other withdraws himself from this natural tendency to colonize, which can be positively interpreted as a command, or as Levinas coins it: an invitation to response-ability for the other. According to Levinas the duality of 'I' and 'the other' is the motivating force to quest humanity (Levinas 1984/1996, p. 63).

Levinas' idea of knowing the other, can be seen as knowing the other embedded in the communality of 'marking the boundary of colonisation', in the encounter of a dialogue. Dialogue in his view is more than a conversation, more than an exchange of views². Dialogue is rooted in the Greek words *dia* and *logos*; *dia* meaning *in between* and *logos* pointing to *saying*. Dialogue as Levinas sees it is a process of saying in the space of encounter in between people, an interactional space. It is in this space of encounter that the 'I' as well as 'the other' leave behind their natural tendency of colonization in order to explore interactively knowing each other. In this kind of communality in the space of encounter, the other frees himself of its strangeness and as such comes to be-ing as part of 'me'.

The idea of the 'other' as part of me, and the elaboration of the concept of dialogue, come very close to the ideal and ideas on the Dialogical Self (DS), formulated in the Valuation Theory (VT), as developed by Bert Hermans and Els Hermans-Janssen (1995). In the next paragraph we will elaborate on their ideas and the corresponding Self Confrontation Method (SCM).

3. Hermans and the other in the Dialogical Self

The theoretical framework of the Dialogical Self, the Valuation Theory, is rooted in the metaphor of 'the person as a motivated storyteller' (Hermans and Hermans-Jansen 1995, 1). Hermans describes the concept of Self as 'an organized system of valuations' (Hermans, 1987). The concept 'valuation' in the Valuation Theory means that the 'storyteller' gives a certain valuation to (a part of) his life-story or a collective story.

Every person constructs his or her own 'system of valuations' by telling and retelling his of her life-story. In each narrative Hermans distinguishes two basic motives, motivating a

² Literally an exchange of views or of thoughts would mean a loss of one's own ideas – these personal ideas being replaced by the ideas of the other (cf Visker 2007, p. 317).

person's perspective in situations, or a person's drive in actions. It is the dynamic relation between these two basic motives that Hermans and Hermans-Jansen describe in their VT and explore with the help of the corresponding Self Confrontation Method.

The use of terminology in the valuation theory implies that Hermans departs from the notion that an individual is affectively related to the events, situations, stories and people in his life. The two basic motives Hermans distinguishes, are called the S- and the O-motive. The S-motive is directed at the reinforcement of personal strength and defence of the personal domain. The O-motive is directed at the other; involvement and solidarity with other people or organisations. According to Hermans, the O-motive also encompasses religious orientations like the feelings of a bond with God. Positive as well as negative feelings bridge the gap between the manifest events and the latent motivations underlying them.

Characteristic for the VT is a flexible and dynamic interaction between the two motives in the long run.

3.1 Self Confrontation Method

The Self Confrontation Method (SCM) is based on the above mentioned VT. In the first place the SCM was developed as a method to explore the life story with adults. The SCM aims to assist in the "construction and reconstruction of the self as an organized process of valuation". In the SCM's dialogical interview³ the person is invited by a 'facilitator' to tell his or her life story. The life story is condensed into a certain number of thick expressions, called *valuations*. An example of such a *valuation* of a professional biography is:

| | S | O | P | N ⁴ |
|--|----|----|----|----------------|
| In a team meeting I stopped my colleague | | | | |
| offending one of the younger teachers | 14 | 11 | 33 | 8 |
| by asking her to bring into the discussion | | | | |
| on RE, a new aspect preconditional in our | | | | |
| school context | | | | |

³ The dialogical interview, as conceptualized in the VT and the SCM, is an elaboration of the biographical interview as described by Kelchtermans (1994). The main difference is the fact that in Kelchtermans' method it is the interviewer who interprets the data of the interviewee, whereas in the interview of the SCM it is the narrator him or herself who constructs and interprets the data.

⁴ The maximum score for S=20; O=20; P=40 and N=40

Some twenty or thirty of these *valuations* together constitute the ‘organised system of valuations’, constituting the biography at that very moment. To these *valuations* the person relates his/her feelings. For this purpose a list is composed of various feelings, related to the two basic motives. Out of a list of 24 different affect terms⁵, the person denotes for every one of those affects to what extent the affect relates to the mentioned event or situation in the *valuation*. In the example given above the principal experiences a rather strong and positive feeling of self confidence in the worded situation; she also is positively committed to her colleague, although some negative feelings question the limits of her commitment. Different valuations, although different in their affect scores, may reveal a similar pattern of affects, showing a preference for either the positive or the negative feelings, as well as for the S- or the O-feelings in relation to the formulated valuation.

In the SCM different voices, ‘I’ positions, and their S- respectively O-motivations, are reflected upon. By confronting the different voices with each other and with their accompanying valuations, the SCM aims at a *disruption* of an inner balance amongst the different ‘I-representations/’voices’ in the DS – as for example between the material Self and the religious Self. This disruptive encounter is seen as a necessary precondition for development. As a result of the disruption the composition and hierarchy in ‘I’-positions alter.

4. Identity in stories

The encounter with the other not only takes place in real world life, but also in stories. ‘A storied landscape’ is what our world is called, because it is full of historical and metaphorical stories. The stories of a culture—stories of national identity, struggle, suffering, and resilience, stories of religious traditions — take their place in the stories of an individual as he or she constructs his or her own personal biographical narrative, putting together in a process of *bricolage* elements of so called Master Narratives he or she feels affiliated to (cf Hammack 2008, p. 233).

⁵ The affect terms are: joy, powerlessness, self-esteem, anxiety, satisfaction, strength, shame, enjoyment, care, love, self-alienation, tenderness, guilt, self-confidence, loneliness, trust, inferiority, intimacy, safety, anger, pride, energy, inner calm, freedom.

4.1 *Father and Daughter, the animation*

‘Father and Daughter’, made by the Dutch filmer Michael Dudok de Wit, represents the life cycle situated in the Dutch landscape. The subtle style of this animation opens up the space for until then unknown voices of the multivoiced Self, to participate in the intrapersonal dialogue on existential and religious issues. The story of Father and Daughter is a poignant tale about a father who says goodbye to his young daughter and leaves. Also one could say it is the girl who is the main character in this narration, when you focus upon her and notice her reaction as her father disappears after he departs in a small boat. As the wide Dutch landscapes live through their seasons, so the girl lives through hers. She becomes a young woman, has a family and in time she becomes old, yet within her there is always a deep longing for her father. In the director's words, the film shows her 'longing' for her missing parent -- her unending devotion as she returns over and over to the spot on the banks of the water where they last stood together. A partly lively, partly mournful accordion score accompanies the images in Father and Daughter, which are without dialogue. The music underlines this animation telling the truth of life, that is: ‘ the fear of death, fear of life, the feelings that bring people together and force them apart, the costs of intimacy’⁶.

4.2 *Father and Daughter, the interactional space*

In the dialogical interview we confront the respondents (principals of primary schools) with the eight minutes’ Oscar winning animated film ‘Father and Daughter’. We ask the person to relax, to unbend the mind and watch the film. Afterwards we ask the person to write down the fragments in the film that were most impressive, that touched the heart. This part of the animation functions as a ‘presented valuation’, to be confronted with other voices of the ‘organised system of valuations’.

Below we give you an example of valuations, including the ‘presented valuation’ of the animation of Father and Daughter:

1. (from the personal biography):

I am sitting on my mother’s lap.

She is telling the story of

Little Red Riding Hood.

S O P N

18 8 32 21

⁶ in: theme description of the Annual Conference, Religious Education Association, November 7-9, 2008.

2. (part of the current dominant view on profession of a teacher):

| | S | O | P | N |
|---|---|----|----|----|
| A good teacher is emotionally attached to her pupils. She will do all she can to guide her children to adulthood. | 7 | 14 | 32 | 22 |

To this (part of the) ‘organised system of valuations’ we added the ‘presented valuations’ as constructed after watching the animation *Father and Daughter*. This valuation was formulated as follows:

3. (from *Father and Daughter*)

| | S | O | P | N |
|--|---|----|----|----|
| The daughter as an elderly woman returns twice to her bicycle falling down, leaves it and walks into the water (underlining the words ‘walks into the water’). | 8 | 17 | 30 | 24 |

From the affect scores of these valuations we see a striking similarity, and read a strong correlation, between the affect pattern of the second and the third valuation. This opens of the space for ‘ an open ended, responsive dialogue with existential questions raised by contradictions and tragedies of life’ (Batson, Sdhoenrade and Ventis, in: Wulff 1997, p. 238). At first sight there seems to be no relation between the wording of the two valuations. However, a closer look at the scores of the affect list, and in particular at the feelings involved, reveals a longing for a ‘role model’ in her profession, a role model of ‘the good principal’. The fragment of *Father and Daughter*, she mentions in valuation three, manifests the longing for an expert, a leader, at the same time evaluated as an impossible quest. A ‘leader’ she had recognised in her father as well as in one of her teachers during her professional training as a teacher. Elaborating on the character of the father in the animation, this principal referred to her own father as absent during her childhood (as in the animation), which she relates to her mix of positive and negative feelings related to ‘longing for a role model’; positive and negative feelings she admitted, she also felt towards the Christian God. *Allah*, in her view, was more generous, accommodating to man/woman as imperfect although created according to God’s own image and idea. She referred to *Sura 2: 286*, stating in her own words and interpretation that *Allah* won’t ask you things to do you can not fulfill. This

she related to her 'solution' of the tense situation she worded in valuation three. The contradictions in the valuations of this principal in an 'open responsive dialogue' structured by the SCM, created the interactional space to elaborate on existential questions rooted in the personal biography and related to her professional identity.

6. Individuation through religion

In the preceding paragraphs, in a nomadic way, we made use of the concepts of the philosophy of Levinas and the Valuation Theory of Hermans&Hermans-Jansen in relation to the integration of (parts of) (collective, animated) stories into the life-story, as a process of encountering 'the other'. In this last paragraph we will reflect upon the role of the animated film in the creation of an interaction space of encounter, with regard to the (professional) identity development, from the point of view of the practical theologian Henning Luther.

In his posthumous work '*Religion und Alltag*', published in 1992, one year after he died, Henning Luther formulates religion as a critique on every day practicalities and every day's practical wisdom. Religion, following Luther's line of thought, is not the foundation of life, but is 'the other' opposing my life. In keeping me aware of suffering and grief, continuously causing feelings of uneasiness that keep me 'moving into the force field of life.... a way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives' (Fowler 1981, p. 4). In these feelings of restlessness we encounter God, according to Luther (1992, p.239 ff). As in Fowler's thinking, also in Luthers interpretation of religion, identity development and religious or faith development are interrelated; personal (and as a part of this: professional) identity and religious identity are nested identities⁷.

The film *Father and Daughter* triggers the imagination and the coming to the fore of until then latent voices of religious traditions, as partners in the dialogue of the multi-voiced Self. Secular at first glance, the film '*Father and Daughter*' appears to be a very effective invitation for the encounter with 'the o/Other' in an interactional space.

⁷ This concept is coined by Honey (1999) in relation to ethnic, national and state identity.

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