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NARRATIVE APPROACHES TO RELIGION AND GENDER

A biographic study with Christian young men

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Introduction

Narratives connecting religion and gender are everywhere. We find them splayed across the news media headlines, visualized in corporate advertising, emplotted in the pages of popular literature and circulating through the stories we tell in our everyday lives. As often as these narratives take up and repeat various racist, sexist and anti-religious stereotypes, so too they draw us in by apparently subverting these tropes. For scholars working at the interface of religion and gender, learning to see and think narratively can be extraordinarily productive. Research in this field is often driven by an activist commitment to feminist, queer and decolonizing ethical positions. While some draw on narrative methods to increase the visibility of a marginalized group and promote their rights, others want to explore a group perceived as ‘problematic’, or show the appeal of a group’s unique ways of ‘doing religion’ or ‘doing gender’. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how a narrative approach opens up new possibilities within this activist orientation to religion and gender research, by presenting case studies of two Christian young men attending evangelical churches in England.

I begin by positioning narrative research in relationship to three other prominent qualitative methodological orientations in religion and gender research—ethnography, discourse analysis and visual methods. I set out some of the foundations of narrative research and explain the biographic narrative approach I took in my work with Christian young men, drawing attention to important features of the approach (such as open-ended interviewing) that make new understandings possible. I then present the cases of ‘Ethan’ and ‘Jack’ (pseudonyms). Drawing on Lynn Gerber’s work (2015), I show how ‘godly masculinity’ is negotiated in both the ‘lived life’ as it is recalled in narratives of particular events and the ‘told story’ as a dynamic self-presentation. I then draw some conclusions about how the narrative approach to these cases enriches and deepens how we think with concepts connecting religion and gender like godly masculinity. In particular, I argue that thinking in terms of both real events and their performative representation will be important for future research on religion and gender.

Positioning narrative in qualitative religion and gender methodology

Ethnography has had an immense influence, both on gender research and in relation to the transformative social action it has inspired. Since Margaret Mead’s foundational ethnographic...
study *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* in 1935, ethnography has been increasingly shaped by feminist (Skeggs, 1994) and postcolonial (Smith, 2013) theory and practice. Further, the influential ‘lived religion’ approach to religion and gender (Orsi, 2002) carries a strong ethnographic sensibility and has given rise to a wide range of important ethnographies, including work on nonmedical healing (McGuire, 2008), British women converts to Buddhism (Starkey, 2020), French Mary Magdalene alternative pilgrims (Fedele, 2012) and queer nuns (Wilcox, 2012). Ethnographers are frequently required to innovate in order to adapt to new, non-traditional sites of cultural expression. As cultural expressions of the intersections between religion and gender increasingly move online, digital ethnographies represent an important possibility for understanding how social media technologies both challenge and reproduce inequalities in the representation of religious and gendered phenomena (Marcotte, 2010). Like narrative research, ethnography frequently uses stories as primary sources of data. Further, ethnographic accounts are often written and read as coherent narratives in their own right. There is thus a strong affinity between ethnographic and narrative methodology, and both approaches are often oriented towards the promotion of intercultural understanding and mediation.

In contrast to ethnography’s focus on ‘thick description’ of social interaction (Geertz, 1973), discourse analysis focuses more exclusively on the role and function of language, finding its theoretical origins in the work of Michel Foucault. The most important idea that discourse analysis draws from Foucault is that power is reproduced, subverted and redistributed linguistically through speech and texts, and that these movements of power can be studied and made visible through various representational means (Foucault, 1970, p. 81). While discourse has also been theorized in relation to embodiment and materiality as well as language (e.g. see Fox & Alldred, 2016), discourse analysis most commonly involves the analysis of texts. In qualitative work, texts commonly include transcripts (of interviews, political speeches, etc.), policy documents (governmental, institutional), websites, novels and television shows. In the discursive approach, religion and gender are constituted by complex and shifting sets of power relations produced through speech and language (Hjelm, 2014, p. 855). Judith Butler’s (1990) influential discursive approach to sex and gender as performative has profoundly shaped queer theoretical studies of religion and gender, particularly work relating theology and religious studies to the growing visibility of LGBT and intersexed lives (e.g. Loughlin, 2007; Cornwall, 2013).

As with ethnography, there is a close relationship between discursive and narrative approaches. Narratives and narrative performances can be analysed in terms of multiple intersecting discourses, as in Louise Archer’s (2001) work on the intersection between race, religion and masculinity in discourses of Muslim young men. Furthermore, the way that discourse-based research proceeds can take the form of a narrative—either of the changing form of that discourse over time or of the way that communities have reacted and responded to the fluctuating demands of discursive forms (Keane, 1997).

In contrast to ethnographic and discursive approaches, some areas of scholarship are increasingly resisting the dominant practice of textual analysis by paying attention to the visual. Visual approaches are gradually gaining purchase in sociology at large after being long considered to lack rigour and scientific objectivity (Holliday, 2000). Knauss and Pezzoli-Olgiati, in their article addressing the interface of religion, gender and visuality, argue for an approach to images as embedded in individual and group practices rather than inert objects (2015, p. 2). In the context of religion, images play a strongly normative role, demonstrated by the authors through votive imagery of the Virgin Mary as exemplifying “patience, humility, chastity, obedience and self-abnegation” (ibid., p. 4). For Knauss and Pezzoli-Olgiati, visual methods contribute uniquely to the study of religion and gender by attending to a variety of dimensions of visual practices: “the ambivalent balance between reiteration and innovation, between explicit
norms and tacit assumptions, between dominant discourses of power and the subversive critique of naturalised paradigms” (ibid., p. 15). The visual can thus be approached not just as denoting static images that carry static meanings of religion and gender, but also as embedded within evolving social processes of normativity and counter-normativity. In this way, visuality is closely related to narrativity. It is quite clear that images can tell stories, but in considering visual practices the composition, placement and interpretation of imagery can be approached with a narrative sensibility.

**Narrative research on religion and gender**

In the previous section I showed how narrativity is nested within many of the methodological approaches that religion and gender scholars take. However, explicitly narrative research approaches do have some distinctive features. Broadly, narrative methodologies proceed under the assumption that narratives are fundamental to understanding how humans make meaning (Barthes, 1966, p. 156) and that they provide a unique (though not necessarily privileged) access to processes of meaning making. As a ‘family’ of approaches, narrative research draws on numerous convergent and divergent philosophical orientations, unified by an attentiveness to the ‘storied form’ (Riessman, 2002, p. 1).

One way of approaching narratives as ‘storied forms’ is to think of them as carriers of ideas about the way the world is and the chains of cause and effect supposed to constitute it. Viewed this way, *emplotment*—the meaningful sequentialization of events—is an essential feature of narratives and narration (Polkinghorne, 1995). Scholars examining religion through narrative commonly identify ‘genres’, such as the conversion narrative (Smilde, 2005) and the healing story (Singleton, 2001). Considering genre allows for exposition of socially determined ‘rules’ concerning how certain kinds of stories should be ‘plotted’; that is, what events can and should be placed in meaningful sequence. It also draws attention to what possibilities are afforded once these rules are repeated or perhaps broken. For example, biographical research pays close analytical attention to the ordering of events within micro and macro contexts of storytelling. Cazarin and Griera’s research with female Pentecostal pastors in Spain shows the usefulness of attending to particular biographical ‘choices’—in this case, the placement of the narrative ‘turning point’. The authors identify the turning point of receiving a divine call as opening up the possibilities of ‘de-gendering’ the qualifications for church leadership (2018, p. 460). Within wider narrative methodological writings, Kupferberg has set out the complexities around the meanings of turning points in narratives while agreeing that the turning point represents an “heuristic tool of discovery” (2012, p. 236). Biographical narrative approaches like Cazarin and Griera’s open up the possibility of understanding turning points as interpellated by religious and gendered meanings and symbolisms (2018).

While narratives should be understood as structured by certain dominant forms of social convention, they must be understood as involved in a variety of individual practices—a story requires a storyteller. Most types of narrative analysis dealing with oral narratives (as my own research does) attempt to account for both the ordering of the story itself and the performative aspects of storytelling (Bamberg, 1997). However, there are a variety of ways to study religion and gender narratively besides the oral approach. Narratives can also be gathered through the use of visual methods such as photography, studying the processes of composition and collation (Bach, 2006), or through other non-oral means, like diaries and maps (Taylor, 2016). In this way, depending on the research questions and research design, there are a number of different options for ‘types’ of narratives that researchers might aim to gather.
Introducing the biographic narrative interpretive method

Having considered some of the conceptual tools offered by narrative research more broadly, I will now outline my use of the biographic narrative interpretive method (BNIM), an oral narrative approach taken in my research with Christian young men recruited from evangelical church youth groups in urban areas of England, part of a wider study of religious young people’s experiences of sexuality education. Originally developed by Tom Wengraf, Prue Chamberlayne and Michael Rustin for a project on immigration and social exclusion (Chamberlayne & Rustin, 1999), BNIM has been drawn upon for a wide range of research topics, including both religion (e.g. Blom, Nilsson & Santos, 2016; Greenough, 2017) and gender (e.g. Walkerdine & Jimenez, 2012). In BNIM, narrative is primarily a way to study subjectivity, drawing on different aspects of narrative theory in shaping its particular construction of what subjectivity entails. Religion and gender can thus be studied innovatively using these framings of subjectivity, as dated, situated and mutating. In this next section I will unpack some of these powerful framings of subjectivity and show how the overall approach shaped my research with Christian young men.

Biographic narrative interviewing

The biographic narrative interview method is significantly different from traditional semi-structured approaches. BNIM interviewing typically divides a single interview session into two sub-sessions. The first sub-session consists of a ‘single question inducing narrative’, facilitating a ‘whole life story’, followed by a period of supportive listening (Wengraf, 2019, p. 192). The role of the interviewer in sub-session 1 is minimal—they do not interrupt or otherwise offer any directions or encouragement. As the participant tells their story, the interviewer writes down verbatim cue-phrases of around three to five words. The interviewer’s selection of these cue-phrases is governed by three main principles—(1) points that seem of subjective significance to the participant; (2) points that have potentially further narrative detail to be explored and (3) points of subjective importance to the interviewer. The reason BNIM requires that this initial narration be more or less ‘improvised’ in nature is because BNIM works under the assumption that the movement between different topics and tonalities of speech is meaningful (Wengraf & Chamberlayne, 2013, p. 79). This interviewing method draws on the psychoanalytic concept of ‘free association’ in its attempt to elicit and preserve these mutations of subjectivity, so as to subsequently place them under analytic attention. While traditional semi-structured interview approaches will often approach participants ‘as a Christian’ or ‘as a man’, these are resisted in BNIM’s open-ended, facilitative approach, such that space is opened for new or unexpected sense to be made of Christian and/or masculine identity.

In the break between the sub-sessions, the interviewer takes stock of the cue-phrases they have recorded, selecting those that seem most important while attempting to strike a balance between the aforementioned principles of selection (Wengraf, 2019, p. 200). In the second sub-session, the interviewer works through the ‘starred’ cue-phrases in the order in which they were mentioned, asking for further narrative detail. In BNIM, questioning must always work towards facilitating the participant’s telling of their story. Narrative questioning aims to move the participant towards giving what Wengraf calls a ‘particular incident narrative’ (Wengraf, 2019, p. 202), for example, ‘that day we did x’ as opposed to, say, a generalized situation (e.g. ‘after school we would do y’). This reflects the aforementioned focus on dated subjectivity, explored further later. Sub-session 2 is concluded when all the starred cue-phrases from sub-session 1 have been worked through in chronological order.
This is where the *dated* and *situated* approaches to subjectivity in BNIM come through clearly (Wengraf & Chamberlayne, 2013, p. 76). Subjectivity is *dated* in that it is always experienced and recalled within temporal bounds. For BNIM, subjectivity is more adequately engaged in narrative interviews when it is evoked in narratives of a *particular time*. Further, subjectivity is *situated* in that it is experienced and recalled through a sense of one’s own bodily limits. Similarly, for BNIM subjectivity is more adequately engaged in narrative interviews when it is evoked in narratives of a *particular situation*—especially where sense, smell, taste, touch or other bodily sensation is evoked. Part of the skill of ‘active listening’ required for narrative interviewing is becoming attuned to when the participant ‘shifts’ into this dated/situated mode of recollection—often marked by a change in posture as the participant subtly ‘replays’ aspects of the memory in their narration.

BNIM’s eschewing of a highly structured, pre-prepared interview schedule shaped by the concerns of the researcher means the agenda can be shaped by the concerns of the participant. This does mean that the interviews are more demanding, both on the skill and sensitivity of the interviewer and on the participant, who is called on to do extensive memory work in recalling the details of particular events. I noticed that participants often spent significant time talking about topics that were of great importance to them, but these were topics that I had not considered relevant to my study, requiring me to greatly broaden the scope of my interpretation. Open-ended approaches such as BNIM help avoid the reification of categories of religion and gender that can occur through overly structured methodologies and allow for new understandings to emerge. Narratives of family life, friendship, hobbies and mundane habits that might otherwise have been missed are allowed to emerge, offering great potential for broadening the scope of how religion and gender can be theorized in relation to different social phenomena. I will now outline how these principles continue to be worked out in BNIM’s interpretative approach.

**Biographic narrative interpretation**

The overall interpretive question guiding BNIM analysis is ‘how did a person who lived their life in x way come to tell their story in y way?’ (Wengraf & Chamberlayne, 2013, p. 78). BNIM thus takes a ‘twin-track’ approach to analysis, first examining the ‘lived life’, then the ‘told story’, finally integrating these two analyses into an analysis of ‘successive states of subjectivity’, forming the basis for the final write-up.

The analysis of the ‘lived life’ begins by extracting the ‘objective’ events from the transcribed interviews and ordering them chronologically (sometimes this requires checking details with the participant following the interview). Once this timeline of the lived life has been created, it is analysed by taking each chronological point and asking two analytic questions—first ‘how might this event have been experienced by the participant?’ and second ‘what might happen next in their life if the event was actually experienced in that way?’ Through this process, the researcher begins to generate different contrasting ‘structural hypotheses’ about the ‘structure of the lived life’ (Wengraf, 2019, p. 285). This is then used to consider a number of different ways the story might be told.

The analysis of the ‘told story’ takes the moment-by-moment flow of the interview interaction as its source material. The first stage of analysis is to roughly organize this flow by segmenting the transcript. The guiding analytic questions this time are ‘how was this person experiencing this particular part of the interview?’ and ‘what might the person go on to talk about if they did actually experience this part of the interview in that way?’ (Wengraf, 2019, p. 266). As before, while this process unfolds the researcher generates structural hypotheses
regarding the ‘structure of the told story’. This allows the interrelationship of religion and gender to be approached in a novel way, as having an emotional shape that changes and develops within specific contexts of narrative performance.

The writing up of the final account is where the ‘lived life’ and the ‘told story’ developed so far are ‘woven together’ to form what Wengraf (2019) calls a model of ‘successive states of subjectivity.’ As noted earlier, BNIM regards the changes between states as just as interpretatively significant as the states themselves. Unlike conventional qualitative analysis, which tends to view the interview as a singular ‘slice’ of subjectivity, BNIM treats both the ‘lived life’ and the ‘told story’ together as historically extended events. The analytic emphasis is therefore not on an accurate description of a particular ‘slice’ of subjectivity within the lived life or told story, but in understanding the more or less patterned mutation of subjectivity through the lived life and told story. However, the mutability of religious and gendered subjectivity is not incompatible with its structured nature. In accounting for matters of both structure and agency as distinctive modes of understanding subjectivity, BNIM shares affinities with critical realism as developed from the work of Roy Bhaskar (1997). It is realist insofar as it assumes the reality of events affecting people’s lives and critical insofar as it leaves the questions of veracity open, taking a critical approach to how recalled events function performatively. The broader potentialities of critical realism for the study of religion and gender have yet to be explored—Line Nyhagen begins this important task earlier on in this volume (Chapter 4).

Biographical research makes no aspirations towards typical social scientific criteria of generalizability—as Wengraf states, the point of theorizing in BNIM is ‘not to develop transhistorical generalities but rather to enrich the understanding of the focal case partly by undertaking the reconstruction of theory’ (2002, p. 310). The strengths of BNIM lie in the ability to generate new conceptual or theoretical possibilities and to challenge hegemonic narratives. Religion and gender can be engaged not just as categories or static representational phenomena but also as practices, enacted through storytelling. In this way, biographic research carries a distinctive epistemological orientation towards religion and gender, allowing these phenomena to unfold themselves as part of life-storytelling rather than under the direct pressure of pre-planned, carefully worded questioning. In the presentation of the cases later, I will show in more detail how the distinctiveness of BNIM, including the open-ended interviewing and the understanding of subjectivity as dated, situated and mutating, helped deepen my analysis of the relationship between Christianity and masculinity in the lives of the young men I worked with.

A biographic narrative study with Christian young men

Framing godly masculinity

Within the literature on Christianity and masculinity, I find Lynn Gerber’s concept of ‘godly masculinity’ most useful for positioning my research theoretically. Godly masculinity is defined by Gerber as constituting ‘idealized forms of masculinity that evangelicals use to articulate sub-culturally specific gender ideals, criticize hegemonic forms of masculinity, and vie for their own hegemonic positioning in the culture at large’ (2015, p. 29). For example, godly masculinity entails the rejection of macho emotional detachment and legitimizes intimacy between men. The ideals of masculinity as requiring heterosexual conquest, competitiveness and the objectification of women is also resisted. Having shown this, Gerber makes the important point that godly masculinity needs to be kept distinct from Connell’s (2005) influential concept of hegemonic masculinity, because, while it continues to reify aspects of heteronormativity, it also problematizes many of the key features of traditional masculinity dominant in Western societies.
Gerber’s concept was developed through research with the ‘ex-gay’ movement in American evangelicalism. While my study participants (Ethan and Jack) self-identified as heterosexual, the concept of godly masculinity is still highly relevant for understanding their narratives. As I will show later, both Ethan and Jack were deeply involved in negotiating their own failure to adequately integrate with the hegemonic masculinity they perceived within the sexual culture of their schools. Instead of same-sex desires, Ethan and Jack wrestled with their desires to participate in masculine ideals of heterosexuality, not just through being ‘in a relationship’ or sexually active but also through demonstrating sexual knowledge and being ‘one of the lads’. While they did not speak in the abstract concerning ideals of ‘what a Christian man should be’, godly masculinity can be seen in the cases as a set of ideals concerning how Christians should resist the sexual and gendered norms of society. The narrative approach allowed me to deepen Gerber’s account by drawing attention to both the structure of godly masculinity and its dynamic instability, showing how attending to the ‘living’ and the ‘telling’ together makes this possible.

Study overview

The two cases I present here are part of a broader project on sexuality education and religion undertaken for a PhD in education. English sexuality education provision is uneven and often low quality, but reform has been prevented by controversy and ongoing political contestation, much of which stems from religious and cultural differences over sexuality and gender (Vanderbeck & Johnson, 2015). The aim of the project was to consider how English sexuality education might be responsive to religious young people’s sexual subjectivities. However, I deliberately designed the project to not ask directly about educational and learning experiences. I wanted to consider educational experiences as part of the person’s more general life story of sexuality and romantic relationships.

In the recruitment process, the study was positioned as providing an opportunity for young people to reflect on their story of romantic relationships and sexuality and in doing so help improve the practice of school teachers and Christian youth workers. Having built a relationship with church youth coordinators, I ran a short session as part of each youth group’s weekly meeting during which I facilitated a discussion of the issues they faced as Christian young men and invited them to participate in the study. As such, participants knew that I was both a Christian youth leader and an academic researcher, which played a key role in structuring the interview data.

The cases I present here, Ethan and Jack, both come from participants recruited from independent evangelical churches in urban areas of England. While the meaning of the term ‘evangelical’ is contested across the literature, English evangelicals often position themselves in tension between the pressure to conform to urban, middle-class values of liberal tolerance and the responsibility to remain faithful to God (Strhan, 2015). While English evangelicalism is increasingly diverse across issues of gender and sexuality, the conservative evangelical churches Ethan and Jack attend maintain traditional beliefs about the proper place for sexual expression being within heterosexual marriage.

Ethan identified as mixed heritage (white/Asian) and Jack as white. Both identified as middle class, but Ethan was careful to emphasize that he went to a school in a ‘very deprived area’. In what follows, I will present Ethan’s and Jack’s cases in brief, emphasizing those points that draw out the power of the narrative methodology in producing novel understandings of the connection between Christianity and masculinity.
Ethan begins his narrative with some snapshots of early episodes in his school life, demonstrative of what he calls a growing ‘hype’ around sexuality at school. This includes episodes that resonate with established research on hegemonic masculinity, that is, male peers’ evaluation of girls’ attractiveness and boasting about sexual exploits (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002). Ethan evokes the types of things that his friends would supposedly say, such as ‘guess how many girls I shagged last night?’ in a tone of voice intended as a parody of comedically excessive masculinity. During this period of the story, Ethan’s humorous and mocking evocation of his friends’ speech works to ‘test the waters’ of my attitudes towards this stereotypical youthful masculinity. In seeing that I did not laugh along with his presentation, Ethan establishes my ‘seriousness’ and low regard for this form of masculinity. Through this process, godly masculinity is being solidified as a ‘buffer’ between us, as Ethan works out ‘what kind of Christian man’ I am. This will go on to deeply influence the performance of his narrative. Thus, while the actual events being reported are important in conveying the background of a hyper-masculine social environment, the analysis of the ‘told story’ allowed me to develop further nuance about how godly masculinity is present through Ethan’s case.

The first key turning point in Ethan’s story is when he started experiencing puberty. Ethan describes his rapid bodily changes as a profoundly empowering experience as he begins to feel he is ‘taking his place’ within the masculine hierarchies of school life, attracting compliments about his appearance from both female teachers and peers. Ethan describes returning from his ‘first kiss’ during a game of spin the bottle with the feeling of being like ‘a kid in a sweet shop’, evoking this moment with a tangible change from neutral to bristling bodily posture. Ethan began going to house parties and having sexual encounters with girls, though he is clear that he never went ‘all the way’ (implying intercourse), and that it was his religious commitments that kept him from taking this ‘massive step’. Ethan’s description of this period of exploration and flexing of his new masculine power is rather ambivalent. Ethan wants to emphasize that while he did not gain any significant enjoyment from these sexual experiences, they were ‘fun’ and did provide an enjoyable boost to his social reputation. This presentation can be considered congruent with presentation of godly masculinity, as sexual moral compromises are presented as not really satisfying. Yet at the same time, Ethan also presents himself as enjoying the status he gained amongst his peers as a result of his ‘achievements’, despite the fact that this enjoyment of worldly status does not conform with a godly masculinity. In this way, bringing together the ‘lived’ and ‘told’ analysis has permitted us to see that the real, embodied experience of pubertal change has ambivalent and unstable meaning for Ethan—the ambivalence of his emergence as a desirable young man is hard to articulate without vacillating between the poles of sexual empowerment and moral endangerment.

The next major turning point for Ethan comes as he felt the need to stop his current course of action in his sexual life. This comes from a particular incident in which a talk about sexuality at a Christian camp leaves a great impact on a number of his friends, from which Ethan goes away feeling ‘this has got to change hasn’t it?’ He feels the decision to change his sexual behaviour was ‘the first time I made a decision for my own well-being’. Perhaps surprisingly, Ethan puts the emphasis on this choice being for his own well-being rather than out of obedience to God. BNIM encourages us to think of the ‘whole’ while focusing on the ‘part’ of narration—in this case, we can recognize a familiar genre—the narrative of redemption. While we might recognize this as a common narrative form (and thus perhaps as inauthentically ‘rehearsed’), Ethan’s decision to change his behaviour—to stop going to house parties and spending time with his group of male school friends—reminds us of the power of the realist approach in
BNIM. In this sense, Ethan’s sexual behaviour really did change, at least to some extent, and that for Ethan this resulted from a turning point of epiphany and moral resolution resulting from a growing awareness of moral incongruence between his Christian identity and his sexual activity. This also plays the role of ‘turning point’, giving coherence to Ethan’s narrative performance. The narrative approach helps illuminate this aspect of mutating subjectivity by connecting real changes to social conditions with real changes in the ‘live’ interview process. Treating narratives as both ‘objective’ (lived) and ‘subjective’ allows for new understandings of religious masculinities to emerge.

Following this, Ethan developed a strong sense of his difference within the culture of his college. He entered a relationship with a Christian girl from his youth group, developed after a longer period of friendship. Ethan spends some time describing how they have negotiated sexual boundaries that keep them from going too far beyond non-sexual displays of affection, through a series of narratives illustrative of times in which temptation was strong but was ultimately overcome. By the end of the interview, it was clear that godly masculinity, something unstable fluctuating between me and Ethan and helping shape the direction of the interview, had moved from an initial ‘hardness’, creating distance between us, to a ‘softness’ in which moments of greater intimacy between Ethan and I were possible. This included the eventual expression of a painful and uncomfortable sense of regret over his past, a regret that the power of the narrative of redemption and the Christian theology of divine forgiveness has not yet been fully able to overcome.

In presenting Ethan’s case, I have drawn attention to a number of ways in which the narrative approach allowed for the development of some novel considerations regarding the relationship between Christianity and masculinity. Gender scholarship frequently emphasizes the importance of tracking the transformation of masculinities through the process of social change (e.g. Seidler, 2013), but we can also see how important it is to account for how masculinity transforms dynamically within the performance of narrative. Ethan’s case can thus be characterized as an ‘ambivalent leaving behind of hyper-masculine sexuality’. Ethan frequently parodies hegemonic masculinity while conveying a discomfort that his own deep familiarity with this masculine culture betrays a less-than-desirable level of past compromise. Thus, the narrative of a masculinity that is gradually softened and mediated through increasing religious commitment and spiritual seriousness (a ‘godly masculine’ narrative) should be considered as produced at least partially by the inherent dynamics of the narrative form and the confines of the relationships in which such a narrative becomes tellable. Future research on both Christian masculinity and religion/gender more broadly has much to gain from the sensitization to both the structures of narrative and how they harden and soften through the dynamics of representation (in this case oral storytelling, but certainly applicable beyond this format).

**Jack**

Jack’s story begins a little earlier than Ethan’s, in the late stage of his primary education (i.e. age 10–11). Jack experienced both verbal and physical bullying, suggesting himself that this earlier bullying turned him from an outgoing, friendly child to an insular, shy and awkward teenager. Examining Jack’s narrative as a whole, we can see the vital role this early period plays in the mutating pattern of Jack’s subjectivity—his shifting sense of himself as an ‘outsider’ and the consequences of this for the role of religion and gender in his life. Besides bullying, Jack’s growing sense of himself as a ‘PC gamer’ amplifies this sense of marginality. BNIM’s orientation to the interview as a structured whole helps show how the initial point of departure for narration turned out to be crucial for the development of the whole case.
Much like Ethan, the sudden (in this case, unwelcome) emergence of sexuality as a crucial dimension of school life is significant. For Jack, this is navigated less in terms of his participation or non-participation in hegemonic masculine cultures and more in terms of the sexual initiation of his close male friends. Jack gives a vivid description of his own developed imagination of the awkward sexual activity of one his close friends, Andrew. Jack struggles to imagine his childhood friend Andrew as a sexual being, since he seemed awkward, shy and childish. Jack’s imagination is conditioned by his knowledge of the childish layout of Andrew’s bedroom—containing teddy bears and ‘a lego man on a zipwire’. This shows another aspect of the complexity of subjectivity that BNIM is able to capture. These vivid imaginations that come readily to mind when considering the early stages of ‘becoming sexual’ amongst peers are approached as historically mutable aspects of sexual subjectivity. The image of the ‘awkward’ Andrew being sexual in his childish bedroom functions as Jack’s way of solidifying his vertigo from the sudden and unwelcome intrusion of the sexual into his social group. This amplifies Jack’s own patterned sense of failure to conform to the expectations of masculinity via heterosexual initiation.

This sense of failure emerges most clearly in the first turning point in Jack’s story, an instance where he was texting one of his female ‘best friends’ and used a particularly tactless word or phrase. This triggered a series of events resulting in him being ‘branded’ with this particular word, and, consequently as he puts it, ‘I pretty much lost all my friends at that point’. The vagueness here is important—Jack never reveals exactly what he said and was unwilling to do so even when I asked him ‘off the record’. Following the ‘word’ incident, Jack was excluded from most social activities, keenly felt in particular incidents in which he was ‘the living goalpost’ in games of football and ‘on the outside of the circle’ at social gatherings. There are a number of particular incidents in which Jack tried to stand up against his ongoing victimization—lashing out at a girl in one incident where he was being publicly mocked. Jack’s narration of these events is demonstrative of a wrestling with moral culpability—the questions driving him are (in my interpretation) ‘did I deserve the pain of this period of my life?’ and ‘were my actions in response to it justified?’ This is demonstrative of the power of BNIM’s ‘realist’ orientation to the lived life. The ‘told story’ is not complete without understanding the echo of this painful event throughout Jack’s idiosyncratic narrative style of frequent diversions and critical/self-vindicating self-commentary. This ‘echoing’ of the lived life within the told story represents a form of failure to conform to both religious and masculine norms, a deeply rupturing event within Jack’s presentation of the ‘told story’. The rupture even affected the dynamic tone of the interview. In the ‘smaller’ stories that follow this turning point, Jack is at pains to vindicate his various actions as the sense of abjection evoked by this event threatens any possible positive presentation of a coherent godly masculinity. One could even say that this rupturing event is analogous to the ‘event’ of Ethan’s pubertal ‘transformation’—while for Ethan many doors are opened, for Jack the doors are slammed shut.

Following this, Jack sought ways to cope with his exclusion. He began to game more intensively and extensively, and subsequently met a number of new gamer friends online. He had online romantic relationships with two young women, the latter of which developed a sexual element, in which they participated in sexual roleplays on online forums (typed, not videoed). Up until this point, Jack’s identity as a Christian does not seem to have played a major role in his life, but in his ‘told story’ Jack identifies these sexual roleplays as feeling particularly morally problematic in relation to religious identity. At the same time, Jack is rather positive in his presentation of what his online sexual activity made possible—to explore different Jacks’ and to feel desirable in the midst of social rejection. We can see how this is produced, like Ethan, by the need to present a godly masculinity composed of both an acceptable masculinity and an acceptable Christianity. This is conditioned by context of performance, to myself as an older
Christian man with whom their emotional vulnerability is fluctuating, being gradually solidified and eroded at various points through the interview interaction.

The second turning point of Jack’s case begins with a spiritual epiphany. While attending a charismatic Christian youth worship service, Jack experiences a powerful sense of divine forgiveness, mediated through the words of a worship song. For Jack, this moment symbolizes the beginning of his recovering ‘sanity’, accompanied by a sense that he was now becoming a ‘real Christian’. We can see here the power of local theorization using case comparison. Epiphanic, redemptive moments are crucial in both Ethan’s and Jack’s narratives as a socially normative form of life-narration. However, for Ethan, his epiphany was a moment of repentance and moral conviction, while for Jack this moment was more about receiving forgiveness for his moral failures and comfort for his sense of painful exclusion. Ethan already possessed a form of hegemonic masculine ‘success’, problematized by his religious subjectivity, while Jack’s case is prominently one of hegemonic masculine failure, through which his religious subjectivity provided healing. We can thus see the convergences and divergences of how godly masculinity operates, conditioned by both the real (lived) and ideal (told) location of individuals in gendered social hierarchies.

There is a final point to be made regarding the power of BNIM for understanding Jack’s case. Throughout the interview, and increasingly towards the end, Jack takes time to demonstrate and discuss his knowledge of sexual and gender diversity. Besides being interesting on a purely attitudinal level (Jack being a young person with a demonstrably ‘conservative’ sexual ethic of premarital abstinence yet also highly aware and tolerant of sexual/gender diversity), this is arguably crucial for understanding the later shifts in Jack’s sexual and religious subjectivity. Thus, for Jack, the demonstration of his knowledge about sexual diversity serves as a way of managing appearances. The presentation of a ‘knowledgeable self’ mitigates the representation of his early tactlessness in the ‘word’ incident, reflective of a lack of practical skill at navigating relational dynamics and appropriate speech comportment. Sexual knowledgeableness is a key component of hegemonic masculinity, allowing Jack to salvage some of this acceptability both for his own self-image and for his presentation of masculinity to me as an older man. Being knowledgeable serves as a proxy for actual heterosexual ‘success’, further limited for Jack by his commitment to premarital sexual abstinence. However, at the same time, BNIM analysis encourages us to see this powerful sense of knowledgeableness not just as the management of appearances but also as having a history of variable mutation, anchored in a real ‘lived life’. Becoming sexually knowledgeable through his online research and sexual experience thus works as a way for Jack to rescue his godly masculine identity from the real experience of exclusion and abjection following the ‘word’ incident.

Conclusions

Gerber’s concept of godly masculinity has proved highly relevant for understanding the cases of Ethan and Jack. Building on this, I have shown how theoretical constructs like godly masculinity can be deepened by approaching research with religious young men with a biographic narrative sensitivity to the real recalled events of life and the way they are emplotted in narrative sequence. Thinking in the ‘lived life’ mode, I have shown how the pressure to make concessions to hegemonic masculinity is heavily problematized by Ethan’s and Jack’s different forms of godly masculinity, with this difference determined to some extent by their different positions within masculine hierarchies. By thinking also in the ‘told story’ mode, an even richer picture emerges, moving the interpretation beyond the place it otherwise might stop, that is, at the idea that this is a ‘case’ of godly masculinity being shaped through unique personal circumstances and contexts.
While this imagination of gendered religious ideals (like godly masculinity) as ‘resources’ that are ‘taken up’ and ‘shaped’ in various ways is one valuable interpretative approach, my BNIM analysis makes a richer array of understandings possible—the ‘echo’ of the lived life in the management of gendered religious appearances through the micro–mutations of the told story; the relations of narrative ‘genres’ (like the epiphany) as not just structure imposed on memories, but as arising partially out of real material conditions created by gender and religious inequalities; how the assumed security of gendered religious subjectivities falter and fragment even as they are performatively enacted.

In this sense, narrative approaches like BNIM carry the potential to enrich interpretative approaches to religion and gender. Even if it is not followed ‘to the letter’, there are valuable methodological resources to draw on—the interviews’ focus on facilitating only narration, the fragmentation and reintegration of the ‘lived life’ and ‘told story’ and the attention given to the mutations of the case rather than its quotable ‘moments’ organized into themes. Thus, as I have shown in the earlier account, gendered religious constructs like godly masculinity can be reframed as features of a dated, situated, narrative subjectivity, a subjectivity can be ‘known’ in a variety of ways.

I observed at the start of this chapter how many scholars of religion and gender are deeply invested in the ethical usefulness of their work—raising visibility, advancing rights and so on. As previously noted, my research with Christian young men is deeply connected to concerns about the secularist bias of progressive sexuality education in Western nations (Rasmussen, 2015). However, I am also concerned that my careful presentations of cases will be ossified and turned into symbolic condensations of godly masculinity ‘cases’ that are then ‘usable’, either for my own ethical causes or for the rather different ethical causes of others. Narrative approaches like BNIM resist these ossifications in requiring researchers to always account for ambiguity and instability even as they notice patterns and structures that recur through cases of subjectivity. Further, developing new methodological approaches to religion and gender supports the important project of widening the range of ways that gendered religious lives can be communicated and known about. The consequences of this should be a hesitation to produce knowledge that can be ‘used’ to mobilize activist interventions of various kinds (such as educational or therapeutic work with religious men) and instead consider more how to facilitate new ways of knowing about the lives of those that activists seek to work with. While narrative should by no means be privileged in this regard, working and thinking narratively certainly opens up many exciting possibilities for future research on religion and gender that makes a difference.

**Bibliography**


Narrative approaches to religion


