Forgotten Memories?
Silence, Reason, Truth and the Carnival

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Introduction

- A ‘restarted’ carnival?
  - I was repeatedly told by townspeople that the Annual Summer Carnival was restarted in 1989, but I wondered, ‘restarted following what?’
  - Although many townspeople can tell the story of the restarted carnival in 1989, the reasons for the demise of the old carnival seem almost universally forgotten. Or as the account of one townsperson suggests, deliberately silenced.
  - There appeared to be a reason the Carnival stopped that no-one could ‘remember’
Research Setting and Method

• Research Setting
  – Annual Carnival of a rural Northumbrian market town

• Method
  – Part of a broader ethnography concerned with stories of belonging & community
    • Participant observation
    • Lengthy conversations
    • Reflection on fieldnotes

A close up of carnival HQ shows photographs of the old carnival
Key Ideas

• Key ideas
  • Tilly’s ideas in *Why?* on the reasons people give for the stories they tell
  • Plummer's ideas in *Documents of Life 2* around memory and evaluating the truthfulness of stories
  • This paper probes accounts about the demise of the old carnival and its restart
  • How stories become what Plummer calls ‘true memories’, frozen by being written down or constantly retold within certain social frameworks
  • What happens when stories are not written down, retold or apparently remembered?

• A growing silence...
  • Although there is a lot of information about the Carnival since its restart, no one, including the event organizers, could tell me anything about the demise of the old carnival
  • In this section I explore the growing silence I encountered as I attempted to find out about the original Carnival
  • Following are fieldnote entries concerning conversation with people I felt sure would know what happened to the old carnival
Silence

- Penny told me the carnival had been ongoing since she was a girl and she remembered tap dancing on stage. Penny is in her late 60s. She also said the carnival did stop for a while but she couldn’t remember why (Fieldnotes 3 June).

- Treasurer: She said that the Carnival was restarted in 1989 because of the town twinning with St. Meen le Grand in France... She also knew that a carnival had existed before but didn’t know what happened or much about it but suggested people I could talk to. One of the people she suggested I talk to is the shop owner at Carnival Head Quarters who she said would remember the old carnival. The other is the President of the Carnival Committee, I was assured that he would know (Fieldnotes 5 August).

- After a whole summer of trying to get the shop owner at the Carnival HQ she was actually there!! I talked to her and she remembers the carnival as a girl – she said it was the hospital carnival originally. She didn’t know why the carnival stopped (Fieldnotes 8 September).

- Carnival President: He enthusiastically began to talk about what would be happening next year and how much better it would be than the prior years. I asked about the old hospital carnival and why the carnival had stopped. He said he really didn’t know anything about that and could only talk about the carnival since it restarted in 1989 (Fieldnotes 5 August).
• Tilly (2006) in *Why?* investigates the reasons people give for the things they and others do.

• Stories, Tilly suggests, are explanatory accounts, including cause-effect descriptions of events and their justifications.

• For Tilly, the stories people tell about what happened, what they did about it and the claims they make, are adapted from models of social processes they have learned, interpreted and adapted from others.

• Conventions for Tilly, provide simple reasons such as ‘I forgot’.

The parade of floats
A code of silence?

- I began to wonder if these really were simple conventional reasons, because there appeared to be a code of practice at work.

- Typically, Tilly (2006) suggests, codes are used in situations such as legal proceedings, medical procedures, and administrative policy decisions by specialists, and not by ordinary people.

- However, it seems that in the above four accounts there is a shared code of silence...
A mysterious end...

• As no one could tell me why the old carnival ended, I went to the library and scanned through fifty years of un-indexed microfiche...

• 1938 – Carnival to Aid Hospital

• 1949 – Carnival to fund Swimming pool

• 1950 – focus on a ‘successful financial return’

• 1954 – Carnival to be the biggest and most ambitious ever...

• And then? Nothing until the restarted carnival in 1989

News reports from 1938 - 1954
THE Truth

- That there was an actual silence was conveyed to me two days before my fieldwork for 2009 ended, at a point when I had reconciled myself to the fact that I would never find out what happened to the Carnival.

- I was then visited by a man I had not knowingly met before.

- My visitor told me that the 1954 Carnival did take place and record amounts of money were raised towards the swimming pool. The money was displayed in two large glass jars as contributions to the much advertised ‘carnival barometer’. However, the morning after the Carnival, the glass jars were found smashed by the river and the money? Stolen!

The fair after the parade
Frozen Stories

- There could be other, rather more prosaic reasons why the Carnival ended in 1954

- Perhaps the reason for the demise of the old Carnival really was forgotten as many of the people claimed. But why?

- It was not frozen. Plummer (2001) writes that ‘freezing’ a story by writing it down transforms it into a ‘true memory’

- And THE TRUTH?

- “Stories told from different points of view have their own truth at the time of telling” (Plummer 2001, p239)
Conclusion

• Perhaps this lack of constant reminding is the reason it has slipped from memory.

• Maybe a shameful event did occur, perhaps the money was stolen, and perhaps the original reason for the silence was a communal sense of shame surrounding the event. But maybe not.

• Even if there was an initial silence, through lack of reminding, the reasons – whatever they were - may have simply been ‘forgotten’. They were not ‘frozen’ into a ‘true memory’.

• As Plummer (2001, p242) comments, “what matters to people keeps getting told in their stories.”