Cyber-Self

In Search of a Lost Identity?

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Talking About Oneself Online: Fragmented Identities

This chapter presents a review of the empirical findings resulting from a study about virtual communities dedicated to perinatal death mourning and carried out in 2009. The objective of the research was to determine whether the Internet could develop a new area for socialization and discussion of a loss, with reference to mourning, that is not yet fully recognized socially. In consideration of the delicacy of the theme and the difficulty of meeting the women who had these experiences, I divided the fieldwork into two phases. During the first phase, I used the ethnographic method and participated as a researcher in three online communities for six months.[1] I was able to create bonds with some of the women and started the second phase of the research, in which twenty-five e-mail interviews were sent out on the theme of loss and on the meaning of participating in a virtual community.

In recent developments across a range of disciplines, the idea of a monolithic identity, stable and predestined, has been replaced by a perspective that sees identity as a "process," a complex and constant ongoing work that regards the individual, his relations, and the contexts he moves in. As Di Fraia argues, "rather than an original and unchangeable piece of data, or an immutable property an individual *has*, identity is conceived of as something that one *does*, like a task one continues to perform throughout one's life" (Di Fraia 2007, 37). One preeminent approach in this reappraisal of identity is the narrative approach that views identity as constructed through cognitive and communicative processes based on stories. The capacity for narrative is a skill unique to the human species and dates back to the acquisition of language (McAdams 1993; MacIntyre 1988).

According to this approach, narration is part of the process of construction of identity both individually and socially. At the level of the individual, there is the

purely organizational aspect; an individual understands her own identity through the process of narrative: "a process through which facts, events or situations relevant to the self are understood through their position within the narrative theme" (Smorti 1997, 48). The structuring of the self, therefore, has a narrative form, as McAdams (1993) suggests when discussing the narrative process of constructing personal myths; these are coherent and structured narratives of the self. From this point of view, identity can be defined as "a temporally defined narrative fiction whose principal task is to supply, subjectively and objectively, a consistent recognition tool adapted to the type of social organization to which one belongs" (Pecchinenda 2008, 21). Identity organized through narrative provides a subjective sense of self-continuity because it symbolically integrates the events of an individual's personal experience into the story a person tells about his or her life (Douglas 1982). In this sense, "each human being knows, without even wanting to, that he is a *narratable self* immersed in the spontaneous self-narration of his memory" (Cavarero 1997, 48). At the social level, the definition of identity presented by Bruner (2003) is pertinent, as it stresses that the subject's story of himself is not found exclusively "within a person but also outside him, in those contextual 'blocks,' the pieces of the world that narration brings inside the subject" (Smorti 1997, 31). The final result is what Bruner defines as the *distributed self* that transcends the individual's identity and is disseminated in the stories that others construct, consciously or otherwise, about that person (Bruner 2003). "From this perspective, identity and narratability are two sides of the same coin, different discourses referring to the same reality" (Di Fraia 2007, 43). In other words, each individual's identity is not only the result of an interior process but is also the result of an ongoing interaction between the most significant relationships in which one is involved, relationships that contribute to the creation of an interwoven fabric of ontological stories. Ontological narratives, as Somers (1992) defines them, are about the self; they allow the individual to express the personal identity to others. Writing (or talking) about oneself is a narrative process that involves others, in a dialogue that takes shape in the narration itself. The role of the other is fundamental because he is a witness to our being in and of the world: "[B]asically, we need others to understand who we are and, for this reason, we *are speaking to ourselves* when we constantly tell our story to others" (Di Fraia 2007, 46).

These ontological narratives are also exchanged by personal media, and above all on the Internet. For this reason and from this perspective, it is interesting to examine the relationship between narrative and the Internet. According to Walker's (2001) definition, the Internet is basically a narrative technology, a specific

relational context where fragmented stories are shared. It is important to specify that online stories have special characteristics that put them halfway between traditional writing and oral communication. This is reflected in the critical use of the terms "secondary orality" (Ong 2002), spoken-written language (Mininni 2004), or post-orality (Lamberti 2007) to describe online exchanges. These labels underscore the hybrid nature of the Internet as a site of storytelling: on one hand, the immediacy and the spontaneity typical of face-to-face conversations; on the other, the interposition of writing and a technological interface. This aspect has implications for both the issue of identity and the study of the narratives produced and exchanged online. From the narrative point of view, using the Internet for storytelling typically results in fragmentation, producing short excerpts, reduced and often abbreviated to minimize writing time.

From the standpoint of identity, talking about oneself online produces narrative in the context of the liberating power of spontaneity and of the reflective depth of considered writing. At the same time, the interposition of an interface helps to create an intimate, protected space, ideal for self-disclosure (Pennebaker 1997). With regard to identity, the technical characteristics of the Internet and the mediation of writing help the user to regulate her online presence (Waterworth, Waterworth, Mantovani, and Riva 2010; Riva 2010), to spread it out, distribute it, and adapt it to his most *attended* relational contexts (Helmond 2010; Turkle 1995).[2]

In this sense, the Internet can be considered an identity technology, one of the available "digitalized extroversions of psychological processes, through which every human being constantly produces and reproduces his identity" (Di Fraia 2007, 36). Further, the participatory nature of the World Wide Web and the Internet can be a psycho-relational device (De Kerckhove 2001) through which it is possible to enter into relationships with others. In other words, it is an interactive technology where writing about oneself becomes a form of participation shared with others, where the story is openly shared, in many spaces and in many fragmented narratives. The result is that the chronological dimension of the narrative—the positioning of the story in time and the chronology of events within the narrative—is expanded to include a spatial dimension, no longer a single, defined space but a multitude of spaces and relational contexts.

Perinatal Death Mourning: Linguistic and Cultural Resistances

The issues outlined earlier—individual identity as ontologically determined by narrative, the negotiation of identity narratives with others in the definition of

the individual and social self, and the Internet as a narrative technology—are critical to understanding the analysis that follows. I discuss perinatal death mourning, which refers to the loss of a child during pregnancy or before completing the second month of life (Ravaldi 2006). From a narrative point of view, perinatal death is a very painful turning point; besides completely reorganizing one's life story, it also puts some aspects of individual and social identity into question. When I began my research, I wondered if the Internet, as a narrative technology, could make the process of reorganizing one's identity easier by providing areas in which to share painful experiences. In what follows, I address the question that opened this brief chapter: Can the Internet provide a place where one can recover a lost identity, which in the case of perinatal death mourning refers to the woman's lost identity as a mother?

Before discussing the data, I contextualize the topic of social identity more specifically in reference to mourning. First, I want to clarify that certain discursive and cultural conditions exist that prevent perinatal death mourning being recognized as an experience of real loss in Italian culture. In particular, cultural traditions tend to underrate the strength of the psycho-affective bond formed between mother and child during pregnancy. This aspect is emphasized in common linguistic usage: the expression "parents-to-be" is used to identify a couple expecting a child, as if to say that the expectations and practices associated with the role become effective only when the child is born.[3] The same can be said for the expression used to refer to an unborn child as "a baby on the way."[4] In this case as well, there is a cultural propensity to not acknowledge the existence of a child until after birth—its official arrival. Within this discursive context, it is common to refer to the period of pregnancy as "the waiting." It is difficult, then, for individual women to alter such a linguistically—and therefore culturally—entrenched view, which maintains that the loss of a child during pregnancy is not a real loss but only a missed "appointment" (Ravaldi 2009).

Referring in general to the loss of a daughter or a son, Fornataro points out that "when the partner dies, who remains is called widow; when a parent dies, the child is orphan. When a son dies, there isn't a word that can express what that man and that woman (parents) are. It misses the word, it misses the name to say that" (Fornataro 2012).

Because maternity is often an event shared with significant others, whether relatives or friends, when perinatal death occurs, though, the reactions of others are very important for the mother who suffers it. In most cases, because it is generally considered not to be a true loss, the "failed parents," and specifically the mother, are urged to bring about another pregnancy. This naturally has a

severe psychological effect on the mother, whose grief goes unacknowledged (Ravaldi 2006).

In examining these experiences from a narrative standpoint, both situations lead to disavowal of one's identity. In the first case, the loss of the child is denied; therefore, the painful experience of the mother is not recognized in narratives produced by others or able to be narrated coherently to others by the woman affected. In the second situation, the mother denies her identity as a mother and tries to repeat an experience that did not end well. During the life of a woman who was preparing herself to become a mother, the loss of an unborn child is a turning point, a crucial moment of sudden redefinition of her story. Such a sudden change at the experiential level must affect the story one tells.

In the case of mourning—or any traumatic event—the emotional turmoil of the first phase of the loss often leads to silence (Pennebaker 1997). And it is a silence that conceals the overwhelming need to talk about oneself and one's child, and the deep need to forget on the part of the social surroundings.

The fear of forgetting becomes even stronger in the case of perinatal death mourning, where there are often no concrete objects—images, odors, objects used by the lost child—to which memory can be attached (Ravaldi 2006). The fear that one's child will not be recognized socially complicates the process of coping with the loss. The case of perinatal death mourning, therefore, is important for thinking about identity, social and individual, because two critical aspects come into play: first, the need to feel recognized socially as a person who has suffered an affective loss; second, the drama of having to renounce a social role that had been developing as part of one's identity.

The Internet and Lost Identities: A Case Study

Before discussing the theme of digital identity as proposed and developed within these communities by the participants, I need to identify a few elements that could help define the situation in Italy, both on and off the web. In Italy, perinatal death mourning receives no support from the national health care system and, similarly, there are only a small number of virtual spaces dedicated to sharing this experience.[5] Nevertheless, in the past few years, there have been numerous initiatives designed to raise awareness and form groups, which were principally spontaneous and local associations. For example, it was within one of the groups in the study that chatting was first used to meet and discuss in groups. The participants tried to create a setting for mutual self-help groups.

Second, perinatal death mourning is often thought to be a purely female experience, since the mother is seen as the only person involved. This cultural

legacy is reflected also in the virtual communities, which were exclusively composed of women during my period of study. There have been changes also in this area. On association sites dedicated to perinatal death mourning, reference is now being made to initiatives, both virtual and real, that involve fathers and in some cases also grandparents and other relatives. In any case, it is typically the mother who recounts the loss of a child. As Cavarero reminds us, "old witches or wise wet-nurses, grandmothers or storks, fairies or sibyls, are seen throughout literature to testify to the source of female narration. . . . Women tell stories and there has always been a woman at the source of the power of enchantment in every story" (Cavarero 1997, 158).

Regarding the organization of the sites examined, in the three communities it is possible to read the messages and the various comments without having to log in, but the reader must log in to leave a message or comment on the forum. Usually, access to a community stems from an initial personal contact via e-mail with the moderator, followed by a period of participation "in the wings," without presenting oneself to the group. Only after becoming familiar with the other users' messages can the new participants introduce themselves, and from that moment they can participate fully in the community. The cycle is as follows: acclimation, introduction, participation, taking on responsibility, and exiting from the group.

The first period coincides with a time of exploration of the new digital environment (*acclimation*), a step that usually comes right after the loss of a child. When I asked Alice's mom to tell me the story of her "presence" in the group, she said: "Initially, I didn't sign up, I spent hours reading what others had written, but I was not able to 'come out'! Maybe because to do so meant telling myself 'It's all true, and it really happened and you can't go back. I am also a special mommy and Alice will not come back to me.' Alice died December 2 and I signed up on January 9, if I remember correctly. It was time to face everything, but, most of all, to be hugged by other magnificent mommies." The possibility of participating, as stated earlier, is conditioned by the creation of an account. This moment has interesting implications for identity. As shown by the nicknames they chose, most women who enter the community develop their identity around their denied motherhood. Almost all of them use the first name of the child they lost, followed by mommy (as in "Alice's mom"). In addition, the images they choose to sign their messages refer to maternity or to a neonatal image.

The *introduction* phase, which sanctions the sharing of one's own story with the rest of the group, begins the moment a mother recounts the details of her loss and the painful and traumatic moments that followed. One of the most

common times is when the mother comes home from the hospital, to a house where everything reminds her of the pregnancy. As a narrative, therefore, the presentation phase is sharply focused on the loss with specific references to motherhood without a child. The response by other users is a warm welcome to the group, whose members define themselves as "special mommies." This process is important to establishing social identity: it encourages recognition of motherhood, albeit prefaced by the modifier "special." This feeling of being understood and accepted is the main motivation behind joining an online group. It should be emphasized that in Italian there is no word for a parent who has lost a child, which again underscores society's difficulty in recognizing this condition, with even greater resistance in the case of perinatal death mourning.

An interviewee explained to me the role of the forum by these words: "[L]ittle by little I recovered my serenity, thanks also to them [the other mothers in the forum], sharing highs and lows, expressing our outrage at all those idiotic comments made by the people we ran into every day!" *Participation* starts with daily visits to the forum that take the form of writing about oneself and reading the responses and messages written by other "special mommies." It is also possible to tell the group about taboo feelings: the sense of uneasiness experienced in contact with one's loved ones, the desire to give up, the anger about superficial comments made by others.

Both reading other entries and the responses from group members are extremely helpful to the newcomer in developing a strong sense of belonging and normalizing their own experiences, returning them to the realm of ordinary, everyday life. When I elicited a metaphor to describe the participation to the group, Claudia Ravaldi answered: "Being part of the forum is like having another family in the sense that you belong to a group where personal bonds are strengthened by sharing difficult experiences and they grow with reciprocal exchange and help!" (Claudia Ravaldi, Lapo's mommy, meeting facilitator). Significantly, one respondent described the community as a "mirror," a place to see oneself reflected in the stories of others. In the words of another group member, these moments of identification and recognition make it easier to develop selective affinities and establish special relationships that involve a small number of users. Often, these bonds are based on very similar shared experiences, making recognition even stronger. Through regular narrative exchanges, the special mommies contribute to creating a sense of virtual togetherness (Bakardjieva 2003).

At this point in the participation phase the loss itself, at first narrowly defined, expands into a narrative that focuses more on remembrance, and the experiences shared with the child during pregnancy. But it is also a time when one reflects

on one's own identity, often in a process that involves distancing oneself from "others," represented by everyone in the social context who chooses to remain silent, to not remember, to be unreceptive to memories of an "almost-born" child. The boundaries of the group strengthen in this constant confrontation with the indifference of a social context unwilling to integrate painful experiences. Sofia's mommy is a senior participant and she describes her new role in the community: "I felt the unstoppable need to tell my story as a way to know my child—that no one can ever know directly if not through me—something I would have liked to do very much even outside the Internet, but people never want to talk about it and that hurts us *mommies* a lot. It means that for them, these children never existed, but this doesn't happen in the forum. We talk about our babies freely." The *taking responsibility* phase is the moment in which the acknowledgement of being special mothers helps the participants to rebuild bonds, including those outside the Internet, and become stronger when confronted with the stories of newcomers, whom they try to protect and support. Women who feel they have made some progress in dealing with their loss provide support for newcomers. In terms of narration, messages intended for others predominate, with content less focused on the self and personal experiences, and much encouragement for those going through rough times, sometimes through explicit references to their own stories and experiences.

The last phase, *exiting from the group*, coincides with the acceptance of one's experiences, the relegation of the emotional loss to an area of the memory. It is the moment when one wishes to distance oneself from pain and return to the life-world (Husserl 1972).

Through the in-depth interviews, I achieved a better understanding of the motivations that led women to participate in a virtual group and of the differences between "real life" and online experience. The unanimous opinion of the members confirms a number of key theories of identity and narrative. Substantially, in the community, it is possible to recognize one's lost identity as a mother and one's painful and inconsolable emotional state, due to the loss of your child through producing, sharing, and listening to others' narratives of loss. Reading others' stories and comparing them with one's own experience through interaction in the forum is fundamental to feeling fully understood: an experience completely unknown outside the online community. The sense of discomfort depends on the fact that both loved ones and health care staff are often unprepared to face this type of situation: in fact, mothers who have lost an unborn child are usually admitted to the maternity ward, in beds alongside new mothers.

The principal reason that women enter the forum and continue to participate is the respect for their own denied identity. The women I interviewed stress that in the community you feel understood, accepted for what you are (a mother), and are thus able to open up and tell your stories without being judged by others who have not experienced the same situation and almost always underrate it. To this relationship is added all the values connected to the technology of the Internet, as explained by Marida, a meeting facilitator, who underlines the role of the online group in managing inexpressible emotions: "the online group is an area that welcomes illegitimate pain and suffering. Here we feel understood more easily by those we share with, who have also suffered a loss: it is possible to share a grievous emotional burden and therefore feel partly relieved. I can express my fears, my anxieties at any moment, so I feel less alone. It's an emergency room that is always open and can be reached immediately."

"Being a Mommy Again": How the Internet Works

This brief chapter provides a picture of virtual contexts as an environment for social sharing in which it is not only possible to develop a new identity but also to rediscover fragments of one's self that may have been lost or questioned on the social level. Perinatal death mourning is an example of a situation in which there is a discrepancy between the social self—defined by how others see you—and the individual's perception of the self (Pecchinenda 2008).

The Internet provides an "alternative space" for narrative that, in the case of perinatal death mourning, performs an important function. First, the communal boundaries have precise limits, defined by some procedural and technological markers. These limits don't deal with filters to the platform set by the login but rather the meaning of the identity behind the choice of a particular account name. Users access the community with a nickname that expresses the identity denied them—as mothers. In this way, introducing themselves through traits unrecognized offline, these women are free to elaborate what they feel without compromises or social restrictions. To investigate the reasons that led the mommies to find an answer online, Luca's mommy answered, "I was not able to talk about it with anyone because I had been assaulted with a load of banality, a flood of clichés that made me feel worse instead of better, and so, after shutting myself off from the real world, I decided to look elsewhere for comfort or also for simple discussion." At the same time, writing about oneself on the Net is of fundamental importance to those elaborating a loss and trying to make sense of a traumatic experience. Written language, even if concise, instantaneous, and immediate, forces the users to take advantage of a more linear and rational process

of communication than spoken discourse. The Internet thus defines the boundaries of another area and, at the same time, acts as a buttress supporting the details of an autobiographical story that is often full of painful emotions.

In terms of interactive technology, the web also gives members of this community the possibility of reflecting on their own entries and those of others. At the base of participating in the community there is the mimetic identification mechanism (Morin 2003) that allows members to cope with a traumatic experience, like losing a child, and to emerge from the sense of solitude and estrangement that comes from the way one is perceived by others. Identification, in fact, helps to reinterpret an experience as something ordinary; identification, then, eliminates the sense of not belonging and "being different" that comes with the experience. Paola's mommy describes to me how she felt after the loss of her baby, underlining the unconscious search of isolation from the rest of the world: "[M]ourning is such an all-encompassing event that it takes over all the aspects of life, you completely change, it upsets all your habits and the way you look at life . . . and only someone who has had the same experience can really understand. This is why one seeks distance from other people and needs to find someone who 'feels' the same thing. The forum is the shortest way."

With identity, the mechanisms of recognition and identification help mourners regain control over their lives and reach a "turning point." On one hand, the definition of a different context shared with others who have experienced the same thing helps them to not only be recognized but also recognize themselves—as mourners. On the other hand, within the community area you have a chance to discuss, to take possession of your identity as a mother, a woman who has waited and lived with a child, and then to distance oneself and start to process the loss. Therefore, the Internet is also a place for social recognition, a place where it is possible "to be a mother again" and to satisfy this role through the preservation of the memories of the lost child. With regard to the initial question that opened this chapter, the findings provide a positive answer. The interactive contexts followed the mourner in the double passage of identity: from expectant mother to mourner; from mourner to special mommy.

The principal theories regarding the mourning process (Kaplan 1996) show how the "work" of elaboration (Freud 1917) is done at the moment one is able to interiorly shift the associations with the memory of the deceased. The process ends when it is possible to disassociate the pain of the tremendous loss from the images of who was lost, putting it in an interior space created specifically for the memory of the moments shared with a loved one. The web and, above

all, the community contribute to making this passage possible, defining a space in the memory and letting the mourner recover her lost identity.

NOTES

1. See www.sullealidiunangelo.it; www.ciaolapo.it; and http://genitoridiunastella.it. All three communities began as private initiatives and were operated by parents who had lost children in the pre- or neonatal stage. The most active forum was the Ciao Lapo Association; besides being the most structured it is the most consolidated in Italy, and is directly managed by a psychiatrist. The base principle that guides this experience is reciprocity, or sharing, and reciprocal recognition of each other's stories.

2. About the idea of the electronic distributed self, note the position of Helmond (2010) that uses the expression "Identity 2.0" to give the sense of fragmentation and collaborative construction of personal and social identity.

3. The literal translation from Italian of "futuri genitori" is "future parents."

4. The literal translation from Italian of "bimbo in arrivo" is "baby on-arrival."

5. During the period the research was conducted, I found five virtual communities dedicated to perinatal death mourning in Italy.

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