

Stories, big and small: Toward a synthesis

Theory & Psychology
21(1) 1–8

© The Author(s) 2010

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0959354309354394

tap.sagepub.com

**Mark Freeman**

College of the Holy Cross

Abstract

Michael Bamberg's article "*Who am I? Narration and its contribution to self and identity*" is an important attempt to locate the fashioning of self and identity in those sorts of local, relational, interactive practices found in everyday life. Valuable though this "small story" perspective is for turning our attention to these more local narrative practices, it is but one inroad into the formation of self and identity. Rather than serving as an alternative to those "big story" approaches that rely on individuals reflectively taking stock of larger segments of life (as in memoirs, autobiographies, and other such life narratives), it is thus more appropriately seen as a useful complement. Also argued herein is that the local narrative practices being considered, rather than serving as the source of self and identity formation, are more appropriately seen as the interactive sites in which they are expressed and figured. Only by integrating small story and big story perspectives, therefore, can we begin to tell the whole story of who we are.

Keywords

construction, identity, narrative, reflection, self

I am delighted to have the opportunity to comment on Michael Bamberg's article (2010), mainly because this exchange represents the continuation of a conversation about narrative, self, and identity that we have been having for many years that I have greatly enjoyed. The questions Bamberg raises following his presentation of the two interview excerpts bring us to the heart of the issue of identity. They also serve as an inroad into his distinctive perspective on narrative self-fashioning. "[L]ife stories," he asserts, rightly, "are not necessarily fixed," but "are told for purposes" (p.[4ms]). These purposes range from avoiding implicating oneself in dastardly deeds, as in the case of Clark Rockefeller, all the way to those rather less discrete purposes entailed in reflectively taking stock of one's life. One might add that life stories are also a function of the context in which they are told, the interlocutors involved, and any number of other "local" factors. Determining the impact of such factors on the stories told is thus a most valuable and worthy endeavor, one that

Corresponding author:

Mark Freeman, College of the Holy Cross, Department of Psychology, 1 College Street,
Worcester, MA, 01610, USA.

Email: mfreeman@holycross.edu

does well to tether the creation of life stories to the specific times, places, and relational spaces in and from which they emerge.

But there is of course a critical edge to Bamberg's perspective as well. "If past-time narration is triggered by the 'who-am-I' question, i.e., having to account for the identity or sense of self of the narrator as its goal, there is little space for ambiguity, boundary transgression, or exploration of novel identities. On the contrary," he continues, "the goal is to condense and unite, resolve as much ambiguity as possible, and hopefully come to an answer that lays to rest further inquiry into one's own past and identity" (p. [9ms]). Here, one might ask: Why must there be "little space for ambiguity" in response to this question? If I take a reflective pause, perhaps after some bit of irrational, mystifying behavior and ask myself who I am—as in, Who *are* you?—I am likely to find myself in a vast expanse of ambiguity, coupled with perplexity and, perhaps, a significant dose of dismay or horror. It is true that, insofar as I am at all interested in *understanding* myself, I will at least *aim* in the direction of "resolution" (fully aware that whatever resolution I might come to, even if temporarily, will likely be compromised by my defenses and blind spots), but there is no reason to assume that "big questions" of the sort being referred to need to culminate in clear, fixed, monolithic rendition of who and what I am or that they are designed to lay further inquiry to rest.

As Bamberg goes on to argue, "the reduction of identity to the depiction of characters and their development in the narrative realm leaves out the communicative space within which identities are negotiated and the role that narration takes in this space." Moreover: "Reducing narratives to what they are about irrevocably reduces identity to be depicted at the representational or referential level of speech activities—disregarding the everyday life activities in which identities are under construction, formed, and performed" (p.[9ms]). Questions abound, once again: Why speak of the "reduction" of identity here? There is no question but that some narrative approaches are more attentive to the communicative space within which identities are negotiated. Such approaches in fact serve as a valuable complement to those that are more oriented to the representational/referential level. But I certainly wouldn't charge these latter approaches with "reducing" anything; they are simply coming at the issue of identity from a different angle, finding in the "what" of narrative more fertile territory for thinking than the "how." I would also ask: Must the ostensibly reductive approaches Bamberg refers to result in disregarding everyday life activities? Surely not. Now, insofar as one is a tell-me-the-big-story-of-your-life narrative psychologist, it is true that such everyday activities might be given short shrift if not disregarded entirely. But it is no less true that *in situ* communicative exchanges, of the sort Bamberg wishes to privilege, can and frequently do inform the larger-scale self and identity work being considered.

It is this privileging I most want to interrogate here. If Bamberg's zeal is mainly for the sake of providing a counterweight to (what he sees to be) the reigning narrative-based approach to self and identity issues, then fine; counterweights can be effective and good. Likewise, if he is simply calling for a more inclusive, pluralistic approach to the study of self and identity, one that can accommodate both big and small stories alike, that would be fine too. There would be macro-analytic scrutiny for the former (that focus more on the "what" of narratives) and micro-analytic for the latter (that focus more on the "how"). Why not call it a day? I would be content to do so. I would also be content to acknowledge

that there are different orders of identity, some of which lend themselves to big stories (and thus focus more on its “expression”), some to small (and thus focus more on its “production”), and some to other modes of inquiry altogether. This is simply by way of saying that there exists room here for (more or less) peaceful coexistence, in terms of both modes of inquiry and theoretical perspectives. In fact, I would venture to say that any truly comprehensive perspective on identity formation would, of necessity, make use of big stories, small stories, and everything in-between. I am attracted by the prospect and have even begun doing some work related to it. But Bamberg seems to want something more.

Following a masterful presentation of how the narrative turn came to be—one that essentially shows how the genealogy of modern Western subjectivity came to demand the recourse to story as the dominant, indeed (seemingly) “natural,” mode of self-accounting—Bamberg goes on to identify problems with the resultant, big story-dominated view. Eschewing the “pleasure and joy in the here-and-now” for the ostensibly more tepid mode of gazing backward in reflection, big story narrative emerged, in some critics’ eyes, as a “normalizing machine,” draining away the erotic energy of “life itself.” So it is that we find, in Georgakopolou (2007), for instance, the call for an “antidote” to the big story tradition. *Antidote?* Aren’t antidotes generally used in response to *poisons* of one sort or another? Bamberg uses the softer language of “alternative,” but seems to be moving along much the same path: “Story analyses that remain fixated on the represented contents of the story in order to conclude from that how the teller reflects on him-/herself, miss out on the very interactive and relational constructedness of content and reflection” (p. [26ms]). But again, why frame the differences at hand this way? I do not think that those of us who lean in the direction of big stories are “fixated” on represented contents; speaking for myself, I am simply more interested in what people are talking about than how they talk about it. And, while I appreciate the sympathy Bamberg seems to be expressing here (actually, I know it’s really not sympathy!), I don’t know that I am “missing out” on anything. Here too, I am simply not as interested in the “interactive and relational constructedness of content and reflection” as others are, and, consequently, choose to direct my narrative attention elsewhere. I therefore return to the live-and-let-live philosophy of peaceful coexistence voiced earlier. There is room enough in the world for all of us.

Having offered this peacefully pluralistic/egalitarian rejoinder, let me now sharpen my response just a bit. In line with what was said earlier in his article, Bamberg states that, “We are interested in how people use small stories in their interactive engagements *to construct* a sense of who they are, while big story research analyzes the stories as *representations* of world and identities within them” (pp. [25-26ms]). It should be noted that it is not only small story enthusiasts who recognize this constructive dimension. Telling one’s story, whether big or small, is a poetic process, one in which the very act of speaking or writing gives new form to experience (see, e.g., Freeman, 1999, on “the poetic construction of selfhood”). But how far should the construction/production metaphor be taken? Do we construct ourselves anew during the course of our interactions? In one very basic way, the answer is yes: as William James, among others, reminded us long ago, we *change*, however slightly, each and every time we act in the world; hence, the self that emerges post-interaction is, assuredly, a different one than the one who entered into interaction in the first place. But how different? It depends, of course, on the

nature of the interactions. If it is a monumental one (e.g., “I was adopted?! 54 years ago?!” or “How long have you been having this affair?!” or “One month to live?!”), the change can be drastic, perhaps even entailing the construction of a virtually new self. For more routine interactions, however, the self we enter with and the one we exit with are likely to be much the same, particularly in the case of those of us whose identities—as professors, therapists, husbands and fathers, wives and mothers, and so on—have settled in. (Not many boundary transgressions these days!) This suggests that the constructive process—if by “construct” we mean *build*, anew—is more limited than Bamberg suggests, at least during those phases of the life course that have moved beyond that sort of *sturm-und-drang* negotiating that comes the way of adolescents (the focus of much of Bamberg’s recent research), jilted lovers, and other such identity-uncertain or identity-challenged beings.

Let me try to concretize this assertion. During the course of the past several years, I have done some extensive “research” on my mother, an 86-year-old woman in the throes of dementia. I do not interview her. And I certainly don’t ask her to tell me the story of her life; it would be virtually impossible for her to do so. What I do is simply spend time with her, sometimes at her assisted living residence, sometimes at our home nearby, carrying out just those sorts of quotidian activities Bamberg wishes to highlight. Over the course of the five or so years since she was diagnosed, I have become much more attuned to the communicative space of narrative, not least because my very presence sometimes leads her down a very dark and disturbing path. I will get a panicky phone call, generally in the middle of the day after she wakes up from a nap, utterly confused about where—and who—she is. If I can, I will go over to her place. If not, we will have to speak by phone. “Mark, I don’t know what’s going on. My things are here,” she might say, “but I don’t know how they got here.” It’s not unusual for her to assume that it is her first day there. “Do I stay here?” she asks. “Yes, ma, you do; you actually live here, and you have for a while.” “I’ve lived here for a while? How long?” “Well, it’s been more than four years.” She is stunned, utterly mystified, our brief exchange being a boundary transgression in its own right, yielding an all too novel identity. “*Oh, my God,*” she will say. “*Oh, my God. Oh, my God.*” She might then utter a phrase in Yiddish, that her own mother would utter as she grew older, which translates roughly as “Oh, what becomes of a person.” She might then go on to offer a blistering self-condemnation, calling herself “stupid,” a “moron,” “brainless.” Against the backdrop of what she once was, and on some level still sees herself as being—competent, smart, in control—this sudden news hurts, and leaves her suspended in a kind of frustrated grief, mourning over what is irretrievably gone and what has been left in its place.

But who exactly is it who feels this frustrated sense of loss and who has retained a memory, however indistinct, of her own integral self? And where does “she” come from? A big story remains in view, still, but it is a ghostly one, a narrative largely *in absentia*, and it emerges most often in the context of exchanges with me and other intimates: that is, with people who matter and who once had a quite different image of who and what she was. This underscores the local, communicative, relational dimension of identity construction. But it also underscores the fact that there may be no separating this local dimension from those rather more longstanding self-images and concerns that are brought to the situation of dialogue. And so, even as her “sense of self” is shaken by her discovery,

which has indeed issued from our exchange, this very shakenness is inseparable from the larger story of her life. While important identity work transpires during the course of our exchanges, therefore, these exchanges are not the *source* of her innermost concerns. Rather, they are a relational site for realizing aspects of her identity that might otherwise go unrealized, “releasing” them, as it were, for consideration. Hence the “*Oh, my God!*” she perpetually utters. As Bamberg notes, “sorting out how the person can view and present a self as the same person s/he used to be, but at the same time as different and new, is not straightforward and easy” (p. [11ms]). How true.

Despite the devastation of her memory, my mother still has a sense of her own singular being—even in its absence. So it is that I have spoken about “the stubborn myth of identity” (Freeman, 2009)—with myth referring here not to falsehood but rather to an enduring mythopoetic structure. In regard to Bamberg’s first “dilemmatic territory” concerning the diachronic aspect of identity formation, therefore, it would seem that big stories remain quite relevant. Moreover—and here I run the risk of doing some privileging of my own—I would suggest that to the extent that there is a constructive process operative in the work of identity formation, the lion’s share of this work is likely to occur less through momentary interactions than through a more distanced mode of *reflection*, that is, in the context of re-viewing, re-thinking, and in turn re-fashioning who and what we are. Small-scale momentary exchanges remain important, frequently, no doubt, serving as the “data” to be interpreted and reflected upon. But generally speaking, they are not the primary site of identity work. That work—that poetically *constructive* work—tends to go on after the fact, through big(ger) stories, whether fashioned implicitly or explicitly. Indeed, there is a distinct sense in which the very *idea* of identity, particularly as regards this first dilemmatic territory, the diachronic, *requires* bigger stories. This is because the idea of identity, insofar as it entails the positing of (some measure of) continuity in and through difference, bears the idea of diachronicity within it; and the idea of diachronicity makes no sense apart from both interactive practices and reflective acts that go beyond those more momentary engagements that are the focus of small stories.

Something similar may be said in regard to Bamberg’s second dilemmatic territory, which deals with the self “as special and unique vis-à-vis others” (p. [11ms]). According to Bamberg, “our private sphere of drawing up a sense of who we are is modeled on conversations and dialogues that we practice in the realm of our everyday interactions.” As such, he continues, “we prefer to view emerging views of self as same and as different from others routinely based in practices, where they are precognitive and shot through with what could be called unconscious defenses” (pp. [11-12ms]). But are these emerging views “based” in practices—again, are practices to be considered a *source*—or are they *displayed* in them? Bamberg’s answer is clear: “These practices are typically ones in which versions of self-differentiation and integration are negotiated with others, tried out, rejected or accepted—in short they are part of a continuous navigation process rather than anything that is built on preexisting givens in the form of traits or drives” (p. [12ms]). This last statement may well be true in the case of adolescents, actively engaged in the process of identity formation. But is it true more generally?

Let us return to my mother for a few moments. Unlike many others in her residence, she refuses to play bingo; it reeks too much of meaningless time-passing on the part of old people for her to participate. This particular (dis)inclination in turn leads to spirited

exchanges with aides, her peers, and others. Important though these exchanges are in navigating her sense of self, they do not *produce* her feeling of being different from “all of them.” Rather, they *express* and affirm this difference. Whatever else I might be, she in effect says, I am not *them*. It is likely true, of course, that this sense of self emerged, in part, through discrete practices of the sort being considered. Sometime during her distant past she may have engaged in exchanges that belittled bingo-playing. Or, some sort of association may have been established between bingo-playing and old people, with their walkers and wheelchairs. Insofar as these images and associations were reinforced through the years, her disinclination to play might have been strengthened, woven into the fabric of her identity as a too-vital-to-play-bingo person. Right now, she can remember none of this. If I were to ask her why she doesn’t play, she would no doubt find it difficult to come up with a reason. But the point is, there is a *history* behind her inclinations and disinclinations, one that has sedimented and congealed into a largely stable constellation of identity practices and a largely stable sense of self. These practices do *rework* one’s identity and sense of self, and in some instances can result in significant changes. In this sense, we can, rightly, speak of “a continuous navigation process”—more visible, perhaps, at some phases of the life course than others. In certain situations, moreover, it may be the case that this navigation process takes place essentially *ex nihilo*, apart from any and all “preexisting givens.” But as a general rule, these preexisting givens—not necessarily in the form of traits or drives but in the form of one’s hermeneutical readiness—are precisely the condition of possibility for such navigation meaningfully to occur. We bring an identified *world* to each communicative exchange in which we are involved, and it is this world that circumscribes and gives sense to the dialogue that results.

This brings us to Bamberg’s third “dilemmatic territory,” concerning agency. And his perspective here, as far as I can tell, is very much in keeping with the notion of hermeneutical readiness just introduced. “[W]hile agents appropriate and draw on interpretive discursive repertoires that preexist—in the sense that they have been used before by others—these repertoires leave sufficient room for transformation and newness” (p. [13ms]). To speak of our living in a world that precedes us, therefore, is in no way tantamount to a strict cultural determinism. On the contrary, and again, it is precisely our being “always already” in the world as we navigate through it that is the requisite condition for our doing so meaningfully.

None of what has been said here should be taken to mean that big stories “win” in the end. Big stories that ignore or fly in the face of those smaller ones that comprise much of everyday life are likely to entail just that sort of totalizing, flattening, disembodied, eros-draining “reductiveness” that Bamberg and other critics have rightly identified. But small stories, set wholly apart from bigger ones, cannot possibly tell the whole self-and-identity story. This is partly because of the identified world that is brought to each and every interaction in which we engage. As above, it is also because the idea of identity is generally assumed to require a more extended time-frame than small stories—alone—entail. Third, as important as moment-by-moment interactive practices may be for self and identity processes, I would argue that the idea of self as well as the idea of identity (in their modern, Western forms) require a reflective component, one in which “I” take stock of “me,” and this in turn entails a distancing, a stepping-back—which is to say, an

extrication from precisely those action-filled moments at the heart of the small story perspective.

The same is true, I would add, of the notion of “the human good.” Although there is no question but that small stories can and do carry considerable moral weight and are often thoroughly suffused with questions and concerns pertaining to “goods,” bigger questions and concerns, bearing upon the nature, quality, and value of “my life”—those dealing with what Charles Taylor (1989) has referred to as “hyper-goods”—are, of necessity, bound up with bigger stories. Indeed, if Taylor is right,

in order to make minimal sense of our lives, in order to have an identity, we need an orientation to the good, which means some sense of qualitative discrimination, of the incomparably higher. . . . This sense of the good has to be woven into my understanding of my life as an unfolding story. . . . Thus making sense of my present action, when we are not dealing with such trivial questions as where I shall go in the next five minutes but with the issue of my place relative to the good, requires a narrative understanding of my life, a sense of what I have become which can only be given in a story. (pp. 47–48)

Perhaps some of us, Taylor included, have given short shrift to those “next five minutes,” rendering them more trivial than they ought to be. Along these same lines, perhaps there has been some neglect of those quotidian, fleshy relational matters that so much of life is about. I thank Bamberg for reminding us of this. But there is no getting completely away from big stories in thinking about self and identity. What is needed, therefore, is neither an antidote nor an alternative but a truly synthetic, dialectical endeavor in which the multiple orders of time and being, practice and reflection, that characterize the life of experience find a suitable home. Let’s get to it.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- Bamberg, M. (2010). *Who am I?* Narration and its contribution to self and identity. *Theory & Psychology, 21*, XXX-XXX.
- Freeman, M. (1999). Culture, narrative, and the poetic construction of selfhood. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology, 12*, 99-116.
- Freeman, M. (2009). The stubborn myth of identity: Dementia, memory, and the narrative unconscious. *Journal of Family Life, 1*. Retrieved from <http://www.journaloffamilylife.org/mythofidentity>
- Georgakopoulou, A. (2007). Thinking big with small stories in narrative identity analysis. In M. Bamberg (Ed.), *Narrative – State of the art* (pp. 146-154). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mark Freeman is Professor of Psychology at the College of the Holy Cross. His writings include *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (Routledge, 1993); *Hindsight: The Promise and*

Peril of Looking Backward (Oxford University Press, 2010); and numerous articles on memory, self, and narrative. Among other current projects, he is nearing completion *The Priority of the Other: Attention, Devotion, Transcendence*, in which he seeks complement his longstanding interest in the self with an exploration of the category, and place, of the Other in psychological life. Address: College of the Holy Cross, Department of Psychology, 1 College Street, Worcester, MA, 01610, USA. [email: mfreeman@holycross.edu]