

Narrative identity construction as a goal-oriented endeavor: Reframing the issue of “big vs. small” story research

Theory & Psychology
21(1) 1–7

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DOI: 10.1177/0959354309358121

tap.sagepub.com



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Abstract

In this paper I propose reframing the study of all narrative construction—big or small—as a goal-oriented value-laden intentional process. Narrative construction of identity serves various purposes at different times. Both situational and trans-situational factors present a host of competing viable alternatives, attractive possibilities, and multiple constraints with regards to identity construction. The individual must navigate these and exercise choice in order to construct a particular manifestation of identity with narrative means. While Bamberg’s suggestion to focus research on identity performance in interaction with the help of micro-analytic study can contribute to identity research in valuable ways, I alternatively argue that research in this field would benefit more by focusing on uncovering narrators’ explicit and implicit intentions in constructing identities through stories, revealing the goals, constraints, and values guiding identity construction.

Keywords

autobiography, goal-oriented psychology, identity, narrative identity, small stories

In this commentary, I wish to concur with Michael Bamberg’s (2010) emphasis on the constructed nature of identity narratives. However, this basic attribute leads me in a different direction regarding the preferred focus for future research on identity and narratives—big or small—serving various purposes at different times. I propose reframing the study of all narrative construction as a goal-oriented and value-laden process. Despite the methodological difficulty involved, I suggest research focus on uncovering narrators’ explicit and implicit intentions in constructing identities through stories.

A basic claim that runs throughout Bamberg’s article is that identity narratives are constructed. In the first part of the article Bamberg discusses the topic of identity’s functions in order to later show how narrative was theorized as particularly suited to

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fulfill these functions. Here he makes an elegant proposition: rather than siding with one side of the argument, as others have done, as to whether a good identity grows naturally towards inner consistency, self-sameness, and continuity or whether constant change and flexibility are more natural or more in order (cf. Côté, 1996; Gergen, 1991; Lifton, 1993; Schachter, 2005); whether identity naturally involves separation and independence or rather community bonding and an interdependent self (Adams & Marshall, 1996); and whether identity is better thought of as essentially agentially constructed or imposed by social structure (Rattansi & Phoenix, 2005)—Bamberg instead asserts that the essence of identity work is the ongoing negotiation of the opposing poles on all three issues. And so, for example, identity's function is neither to provide a sense of self-sameness nor to enable flexibility; rather, identity is manifest in the particular way in which individuals, together with their surroundings, deal with the challenge put forward by the two opposing poles by attempting to co-construct a relatively coherent relationship between them, through narrative accounting, in ways that are deemed somehow tentatively plausible by all parties involved. Narrative construction functions in the service of these three aspects of identity.

In the second part of the article Bamberg addresses what he calls big vs. small story research. Here, Bamberg's fundamental claim is that narratives need to be understood as constructions of past events that are tailored for and within specific local situations ("small" stories) rather than comprehensive ("big") texts that authentically represent and reconstruct lives as lived and experienced. Identity stories are first and foremost performances. They are claims for identity recognition made in interactional dynamic contexts. Bamberg goes on to claim that approaches to narrative that attempt to analyze such texts without taking this dynamic interactional aspect into consideration, somehow attributing to these stories a halo of unadulterated truth divorced from context, are missing out on the fundamental characteristic of the narrative—which is its telling. Bamberg writes:

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. (p. [27ms])

The underlying premise of both discussions is that identity stories are constructions and not exact representations of reality that somehow develop naturally. Construction is part and parcel of identity narrative for a few reasons. First, this is because facts in and of themselves cannot fulfill those functions Bamberg enumerates unless given meaning—and meaning is an interpretive move. Within stories, facts are interpreted and given meaning. More importantly for our discussion, however, construction is integral because potentially more than one good identity story can be told about one life, or about one life episode, in any one situation, and so there is no one natural "good" alternative. In relation to the first topic raised by Bamberg, even if we were to dismiss for the moment the issue of the audience, different stories can be told because each of the three opposing poles present, at face value, valid goals that can be attractive to the person doing identity work. Both integrity/steadfastness and flexibility/spontaneity can be worthwhile goals (while both rigidity/stubbornness and capriciousness/impulsivity are attributes one would try to steer away from). Individuality and independence sound good, and so do embeddedness,

commitment, and community. That is exactly the reason why Bamberg identifies these three poles as presenting identity challenges. Since it is not a straightforward decision which is the “desirable” (natural, more developed, worthy, or mature) pole and which is the “undesirable” pole, there is potentially more than one way to deal with such challenges. Multiple options necessitate choice. Individuals can construct different stories (and lives) by choosing to configure a particular blend of relationship between each of these three sets of poles. Bamberg recognizes the inherent multiplicity involved that necessitates constructing identity when saying that the mainstay of identity work through narrative is the attempt to manage “different and often competing and contradictory positions” (p. [28ms]).

Likewise, regarding the second topic, given that stories are told in interaction or with a particular audience in mind, and given that audiences differ regarding what they deem acceptable contents and structures of identity, the storytelling interaction might very well turn out differently with each different audience, here once again recognizing the inherent potential multiplicity of the identity story. Bamberg criticizes the big story approach that holds to the view that a good story is a naturally comprehensive, coherent, accurate, and exact representation of reality, and that narrators mindlessly adopt the criteria of “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” as guiding identity construction and narrative life-story telling. Such a perspective fails to recognize the potential multiplicity and the dynamic character of the situation in which the story is being told.

My first point of disagreement with Bamberg is that it is important to distinguish between two issues conflated here. The first is the issue of life stories as constructions rather than exact representations. The second issue has to do with how we understand what it is that guides narrative construction and where we look for the answer to this question. Regarding the former, I do not think that this issue is seriously contested by anyone studying life stories. While perhaps sometimes researchers using qualitative methods naively overlook the issue of construction or fail to account for the constructive aspect of narrative accounts, I believe this is not the case among most researchers specifically studying life stories and identities—even of the “big story” type, many of whom discuss identity narratives as constructions (Freeman & Brockmeier, 2001; McAdams, 1993). The issue I think being argued is not about whether stories are constructed or not, but about what drives and what guides the construction process.

Even given the constructive premise that multiple stories are possible and identity work goes on so as to construct one story out of many possible stories, the question still remains as to how do we understand which story, out of many, is constructed and why? Big story and small story researchers look for and find the answers in different places. Small story researchers have traditionally looked for the answer in the particulars of the interactive situation in which the story is told—giving great emphasis to the audience and dynamics of the interaction in determining which story gets told. Big story researchers have looked for the answer in the needs, traits, attitudes, or other developmental characteristics “within” the person and/or in established social templates—claiming that there are forces that drive individuals to construct (or adapt) comprehensive and/or consistent and/or truthful master identities that transfer with them to all situations.

Both of these perspectives regarding the processes of narrative identity construction can be reframed in terms of their being goal oriented. McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals (2007)

have noted that any narrative account of personal memory is created within a specific situation, by particular individuals, for particular audiences, and to fulfill particular goals. It is this last phrase about goals that deserves more emphasis. Constructions are choices. Individuals choose, within constraints, what kind of constructions to build, adopt, or present. Choices can and should be analyzed. Since construction is an intentional act, the decisive issue is in the uncovering of the explicit and implicit intentions of the constructing author in constructing a particular story. Some of these might be determined by local circumstances; others are related to concerns that transcend the local. Small story researchers' contribution would be to show how aspects of the situation dynamically create the backdrop of constraints and opportunities for identity construction as an intentional act. They would show how such intentions can change in the course of interaction. Big story researchers' contribution would be to identify goals that an individual adopts that transcend the local while perhaps interacting with situational ones.

Small story researchers' narrow focusing on situational interactional aspects of construction unfortunately gives an almost exclusive emphasis to the performative aspect of identity construction. In Bamberg's paper, identity construction is described as guided by the goal of "pulling it off"—i.e., putting on a convincing performance and gaining recognition for one's identity bid. This means that the listener will come to accept the speaker's construction as an authentic representation. If your story is rejected, you haven't done a good job. Along these lines, Bamberg suggests that narrative research on identity should look beyond the storytelling's literal text towards the body dynamics of storytelling, using videotape and analyzing gesture in trying to understand how recognition is achieved (or not).

However, even if we accept the importance of the bid for recognition in interaction, we have only gone one step forward. Questions still remain. What identity is it that the storyteller wants the other to recognize, and why? What does the narrator bring to the interaction? Is the decision as to what story is acceptable wholly up to the listener? And what is it that the listener wants or finds convincing, and why? Will analyzing gesture get us closer to such understanding? Bamberg's emphasis on performance privileges "passing" but does not spell out what the narrator as agent wishes to have pass, and why. Bamberg sees interaction as an arena in which identities are practiced—but leaves open the question "practiced to what purpose?" Lastly, what aspects of identity practiced will be taken from one interaction to the next, and why? "Where" are they transformed from one interaction to the next, and by what set of principles?

Framing identity construction as goal oriented has implications for researchers of the "big story" persuasion too. Their pursuit would be to understand what drives and guides individuals in creating, revising, and maintaining comprehensive identity stories. They would then need to detail these goals and the socially and personally imposed constraints on them, explain what makes them stable and what makes them change, and describe the unique attributes that justify giving them special focus in research. Big story researchers might indeed, for example, claim that there are psychological and/or social forces that push towards creating or adopting and adapting "big" stories—comprehensive, relatively consistent, and perhaps even "truthful"—that transcend specific situations. Such forces might be an inner need for coherence, meaning, or integrity or the result of a social sanction on inconsistency. Whether the source is psychological or social (if the two can even

be separated), this makes the story no less of a construction. I would suggest, however, that rather than making a “strong” claim that such goals for stories are inevitable, natural, or mature—thereby bringing on much of the criticism described in Bamberg’s article—a “softer” claim is more appropriate: that such goals *when adopted* become potent trans-situational factors in identity construction. I emphasize *when adopted* for the simple reason that there is nothing unavoidable about them—they are choices.

Here one of Bamberg’s examples is telling. Narrating a comprehensive story faithful to the “truth” can also be a goal of an author that guides story construction. Contrary to what might be expected, the story of the student who left out her own illness and her friend’s death from her life story is a fine example. For when the interviewer asked if anything important was left out, the student brought up these issues, though she didn’t have to. She could have brushed off the question with a simple “no” and ended the interview as a good performer. The only reason to do so was her choice to comply with some standard of completeness as understood by her—triggered by the interviewer’s question, yet picked up and acted on by choice.

Thinking of identity construction as involving valid choices between opposing poles rather than as a result of implementing naturally developing psychological qualities turns the issue of identity construction into one of values and preferences. This solves some of the problems that Bamberg raises in his article regarding “big story” research. For example, Sartwell’s (2000) critique discussed by Bamberg regarding whether life really *has* the purpose and meaningfulness that narrative theorists often attribute, and whether narratives themselves *have* the kind of coherence and telic quality that narrative theorists often assume, becomes a non-issue once we accept that narratives *do not* have such coherence nor meaningfulness *unless a person chooses* to imbue the narrative with coherence or meaning. Conversely, an individual might choose what Bamberg presented as Sartwell’s alternative, that of “finding pleasure and joy in the here and now.” This then becomes a real two-sided moral dilemma—not an empirical one, or a developmental one. Bamberg writes that identity construction is “morally infested.” Leaving aside the derogatory connotation of “infested,” I wholeheartedly agree.

I believe Freeman and Brockmeier (2001) recognize just that when they write “we wish to . . . call attention to the fact that the narrative construction of identity not only has a psychological, social and aesthetic dimension, but an *ethical* one” (p. 75). Such a perspective does recognize the constructed nature of identity, yet it adds that such construction is not a psychological necessity but an ethical imperative—imperative to those who find it so. I would add, however, that I can both envision an individual choosing (explicitly or implicitly) to construct a life story that they see as an authentic representation of their life—that is, loyal to the “truth” as the person understands it—and conversely another choosing to reject such imperatives, identifying the debilitating coercive aspects of such a construction. The answer to such issues is not to be found in empirical research.

Empirical research in this field should be focused on finding better ways to understand the underlying goals and constraints that guide narrative identity construction—and the way that longstanding and local stories interact. I would suggest attempting a phenomenological analysis—problematic as this might be. In this and in other regards, I follow the lead set by Avril Thorne, in a previous commentary on Bamberg’s work (Thorne, 2004). Thorne suggested that narrators should be asked to explain why they

told the story they did. She notes that both situated and personal approaches to identity agree that narratives emerge partly from individual choices: “Of the vast array of stories that might be told at any particular time, the speakers have some ‘say’ as to which story gets told, whom the stories are about, and to whom the stories are told” (pp. 363–364). Thorne suggests that we examine these choices and ask why particular narratives are told or resisted by particular speakers.

The problem with asking is that once again we have to deal with an interaction between participant and researcher, and with the possibility that the accounts of the narrator will be distorted for this reason. And yet, given that constructions are the result of choices of intentional subjects, we need to ask. Finding ways to analyze the accounts of individuals regarding the stories they tell in an attempt to uncover the explicit and implicit intentions behind narrative choices is a challenge that needs to guide identity researchers—whether looking at stories big or small.

Adopting such a perspective, researchers collecting “big” stories lose the halo of studying “real” lives as lived—but they gain something else instead. “Big story” identity narratives can then be studied not for their loyal descriptions of what was but rather as tentatively created accounts of the past that justify the starting points for what one wants to be. Researchers can then attempt to determine what individuals consider good identities, and perhaps why.

Lastly, a related note on Erikson, the function of identity, and the moral aspects involved in identity formation. When Erikson (1968) wrote of identity development in adolescence and discussed the emergence of a sense of sameness and continuity, it was not as a culminating summary of past life but as an ongoing construction created as the basis for future meaningful adult life. Erikson saw identity as the basis for the ability to be intimate and generative. He discussed identity as a “*subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity*” (p. 19). Identity’s function is future oriented—it is to invigorate for forthcoming action yet future looking also in the sense that life culminates at the later stage of old age wherein the results of identity choices can be reflectively assessed as worthwhile or not. That is not to say that Erikson did not hold that certain stories can do this better than others owing to the way they are structured. Yet here, too, we can see that identity choices also serve an ethical vision of meaningfulness rather than only some naturally inevitably unfolding progression. What makes identity particularly so fascinating for study is the way it involves issues traditionally outside science’s mandate—promising many more years of heated debate.

Funding

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

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