

Who am I? Narration and its contribution to self and identity

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Abstract

This article critically examines the recent turn to narratives as tools for identity construction and identity analysis. While self and sense of self will be used largely as synonyms, the attempt is made to draw up a distinction between self (sense of self) on one hand and identity on the other. Rather than starting with a definition of features and functions of self and identity, I propose to start from the identification of three practical challenges that self and identity formation processes are facing. These three challenges will be explicated in terms of dilemmatic spaces within which identity activities—and at their center: narrating—are “navigated.” They consist of: (i) a successful diachronic navigation between constancy and change, (ii) the establishment of a synchronic connection between sameness and difference (between self and other), and (iii) the management of agency between the double-arrow of a person-to-world versus a world-to-person direction of fit. While biographical approaches (*big story* research) have contributed in valuable ways to identity research by exploring the links between narrative and life, they have traditionally confined themselves to the analysis of lives as texts. A *narrative practice approach* (*small story* research) is suggested to solve a number of problems and shortcomings of traditional approaches.

Keywords

biography research, identity, narration, narrative practice, self, small stories

EXCERPT (i):

First question of the interview

- 1 Interviewer who are you↓
- 2 SH (lawyer) we’re not getting into that
- 3 Interviewer //you said
- 4 SH (lawyer) //we’re not getting into any aliases or anything
- 5 start 1993
- 6 Interviewer right
- 7 I mean who are you (1 sec) now↓
- 8 Interviewee Clark Rockefeller↓

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EXCERPT (ii):

Last question of the interview:

- | | | |
|----|-------------|--|
| 1 | Interviewer | ...is there anything |
| 2 | | maybe looking back |
| 3 | | that you think you may have forgotten |
| 4 | | that tells us a little bit about who you are |
| 5 | | and what brought you this far |
| 6 | Interviewee | I guess like (.) |
| 7 | | the only two things that I could think of |
| 8 | | that had probably a big impact on my life |
| 9 | | I actually had a very rough college career |
| 10 | | I had so many bad things happen |
| 11 | | cause in my sophomore year my best friend died |
| 12 | | due to a car accident |
| 13 | | and this semester this year I got cancer |

Let me start with some brief comments on the two excerpts: both come from interviews in which an interviewer is probing into a person's identity. Excerpt (i) presents the very first question of the interview: *who are you*, while excerpt (ii) stems from a phase in the interview we typically would characterize as "post hoc," i.e., from when the actual interview is in the process of being concluded. What happens in these excerpts is in a sense atypical, but we can see shining through the interaction in both cases the normalcy of expectations that is characteristic for the relationship between narrative and identity. Let me try to explain.

As mentioned, excerpt (i) captures the opening sequence of an interview between *Boston Globe* reporter Maria Cramer and interviewee Clark Rockefeller, who is accompanied by his lawyer Stephen Hrones. The interview takes place on August 20, 2008 at the Nashua Street Jail in Boston, where Rockefeller is held because he had allegedly kidnapped his daughter. When arrested, a series of aliases turned up that he had used while living in the US, which in turn sparked the interest of the public and the media. Of interest in this excerpt for us is the fact that the *who-are-you* question, the typical question to establish the identity of a person, is interpreted by Rockefeller's lawyer as an attempt to probe into his client's life story, i.e., the disclosure of his history of taking on different identities. Apparently owing to some previous agreement, the lawyer instructs the interviewer to probe only into his client's most recent identity, starting with 1993. The journalist follows up by rephrasing her initial question from line 1, adding the temporal qualifier *now* (line 7). And the interviewee answers short and succinct stating his most recent alias: *Clark Rockefeller*—end of story.

Excerpt (ii) presents a short sequence, about one hour into a life story interview in which a peer-interviewer had probed—thus far quite successfully, so it seemed—into the life of a 21-year-old student. The structure of the interview, after the life had been told and a few probes into the area of the research question had been made, was set up to bring the interview to an end by asking whether the interviewee may have forgotten something that s/he now would like to add. While the interviewer's bid to terminate the interview usually is accepted at this point, the interviewee in this case takes the opportunity to add *two things* (line 7). Although at first somewhat hesitant, she foreshadows *two things* as part of a *very rough college career* (line 9) and as *bad things* happening to her (line 10),

and then discloses them with more detail: one year ago, her best friend died in a car accident, and this year she has been diagnosed with cancer. What is surprising is that none of these events had been mentioned in the interviewee's life story—they were “left out.” Within the story of her life, as disclosed in the interview, she clearly positioned herself as someone who is searching for some purpose in her academic orientation and her life as a whole. And, as such, these two “left out” events could have been woven into her story. However, the interviewee seemed to have decided not to take this option.¹ Nevertheless, she mentions these important and emotionally charged events post hoc—as possible “additional data” that *could* have been chosen for disclosure, but weren't—leaving us with the question: how important are these *two things*; and more generally: what is the stuff that typically is selected as worthy to insert into a life story? And what is left out?

Raising these two examples to a more general level of reflection, we may ask: what are identities made of and where (or better: when) do identities start? Do identities and sense of self encompass whole lives—all experiences ever made? Or do they consist of memories—and maybe only memories that are considered relevant enough to feed into one's life story? However, life stories, as our two examples show, are not necessarily fixed. They are told for purposes, for instance to avoid getting into things that may turn out to become harmful—and here we may not always have a lawyer next to us to give advice. Would it be possible to conceive of our current sense of selves as starting 1993—to pick a random date? For instance, when we realized that the identity others had attributed to us was not who we felt we really are? Or, when we felt that something had happened that, we may decide to argue, drastically changed our life-course and sense of who-we-are now? The stories that in such cases would connect our years before and after that point in time would probably drastically differ: they most likely would mark *ourselves* as discontinuous. Furthermore, as excerpt (ii) seems to suggest, it is questionable what content in terms of lived experience or life-events is relevant to be admitted to our life stories. Maybe the actual events are not that relevant; and more relevant is what they stand for, i.e., how they connect with other events and how they differentiate *ourselves* as special and unique (or as everyday and mundane). While a history of alcohol abuse (cf. Mishler, 1986a, for this example) is arguably irrelevant to a sense of self, whether and how it may fit the sense of self presented in a life story is a different question. Why at all, one could ask, do we rely on stories as seriated events of what actually happened when attempting to draw up a sense of who we are? It may be more adequate (and also safer) for a presentation of who we “really” are to rely on a series of hypothetical (imagined) events and position a sense of who we are in this fictitious story of made-up characters, in made-up time and place: the narrator's sense of self, her identity may be shining through with much more clarity, much less opacity.

In the following, I will pick up on these questions regarding the connection of life, life stories, and identity formation and review how traditional narrative research has positioned itself as a substantive contribution to a theoretical framing of identity and sense of self. Taking off from this vantage point, I will lay out my own sense of why narrations are relevant for the formation of identities and how we can make more productive use of them in the domain of identity research. I will start off from definitions of what I take identity and self to be—or better: the issues that acts of identity formation typically are confronted with, and how narration may help us to understand these issues. While I have thus far used the terms self, sense of self, and identity interchangeably, I will attempt to differentiate between

identity and *self* (whereas I use *self* synonymously with *sense of self*). I also will differentiate between different narrative approaches, comment on their merits and shortcomings, and therewith try to push narrative analysis toward a more comprehensive approach.

Identity, selves, and narration

Checking the *Oxford Dictionary* (Hornby, Gatenby, & Wakefield, 1963) for brief and concise definitions of self and identity, we find two definitions for identity: “1. state of being identical; absolute sameness; exact likeness. 2. who sb. is; what sth. is”; and for self we find: “1. person’s nature, special qualities; one’s own personality; 2. one’s own interests or pleasure.” Now, this is a start, and we may turn next to the latest edition of the *APA Dictionary of Psychology* (Vandenbos, 2006). Here it says for identity: “an individual’s sense of self defined by (a) a set of physical and psychological characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person and (b) a range of social and interpersonal affiliations (e.g., ethnicity) and social roles” (p. 312); and for sense of self: “an individual’s feeling of identity, uniqueness, and self-direction” (p. 542). Reading deeper in the *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, we find a broad range of references to terms such as self-concept, self-image, or sense of identity, centering on issues of separation and individuation, and the feeling of being unique and alike. Often, the attempts to define self and identity rely on self-representations, i.e., mental constructions about us as persons in terms of what we are identifying with and how we are identified (usually by others). Identity and sense of self are something we are said to *have*, i.e., they are properties of an internal make-up as “who-we-are” as persons, not easy to shake off. None of these definitions claims that self-reports or self-narrations are in any way central to “who-we-are.” Rather than attempting to enumerate the (internal) properties for self or sense of self and identity, and assuming that we can arrive at the distinguishing features between these terms, I am suggesting to start off by giving definitions in terms of what self and identity—functionally speaking—are supposed to accomplish. What questions or issues are self or sense of self and identity supposed to give answers to?

In broad strokes, identity is a label attributed to the attempt to differentiate and integrate a sense of self along different social and personal dimensions.² Consequently, identities can be differentiated and claimed according to varying socio-cultural categories, e.g., gender, age, race, occupation, gangs, socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation states, or regional territory. Any claim of identity faces three dilemmas: (i) sameness of a sense of self across time in the face of constant change; (ii) uniqueness of the person vis-à-vis others in the face of being the same as everyone else; and (iii) the construction of agency as constituted by self (with a self-to-world direction of fit) and world (with a world-to-self direction of fit). It is argued that *identity* takes off from the continuity/change dilemma, and from here ventures into issues of uniqueness (self–other differentiation) and agency. In contrast, notions of *self* and *sense of self* start from the self/other and agency differentiation and from here can filter into the diachronicity of continuity and change.

The engagement in activities that are interpretable as making claims vis-à-vis the who-am-I question require acts of self-identification by implementing and choosing from particular repertoires that identify and contextualize speakers/writers along varying

socio-cultural categories. It may be helpful to consider these repertoires not as mental or linguistic schemata located inside the mind, but rather as pre-conscious, not fixed, and open to change, depending on context and function. Narrating, as a speech activity that makes claims vis-à-vis the who-am-I question, requires the ordering of characters in space and time; and thus it has been argued to be a privileged genre for identity constructions: it requires the contextualization of characters in time and space to be presented and accomplished by use of bodily means—such as gestures, posture, facial cues, and gaze in close synchrony and coordination with the way speech is delivered (including the prosodic delivery and its supra-segmentation).³ At the same time, narration activities unite two different ways of making sense: a scientific approach according to which events follow each other in a quasi-causal and non-teleological sequence; and a hermeneutic and plot-governed approach from where events gain their meaning quasi-retrospectively owing to the overarching contour in which they configure (McCarthy, 2007). In addition, and moving closer to the referential parts of narrating activities, whether they attempt to establish a fictional or factual referential world, narrating seems to draw toward aspects of “human life”—something more than what is reportable or tellable, but life- and live-worthy (Taylor, 1989). In sum, narrating enables speakers/writers to disassociate the speaking/writing self, and thereby take a reflective position vis-à-vis the self as character in past or fictitious time-space, make those past (or imagined) events relevant for the act of telling (a bodily activity in the here-and-now), and potentially orient to an imagined “*human good*.” It is against this horizon that narrating in recent decades could establish itself as a privileged site for identity analysis—a new territory for inquiry.

Explication

While designing characters as prot- and antagonists in fictitious time and space can open up territory for identity exploration—with the potential to transgress traditional boundaries and test out novel identities—narratives of factual past-time events are dominated by an opposite orientation. The delineation of what happened, whose agency was involved and to what degree, and the potential transformation of characters in the course of unfolding events are firmly in the service of demarcating and fixing the identity under investigation. 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, 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 (Bamberg, 2010).

However, 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. 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. However, it is within the space of everyday talk in interaction that narration plays an important function in the formation and navigation of identities as part of everyday practices and for its potential function to orient toward “*the human good*.” In the following, we will elaborate on the

three above-mentioned identity dilemmas as framing the major challenges that this formation process faces.

What we originally called the dilemma of constructing “sameness of a sense of self across time in the face of constant change” often has been abbreviated under the headers of “continuity and discontinuity” or “permanence and change.” While Burke (1965) underscored the primacy of language and interpretation as social acts in navigating this diachronic contradiction, others have attempted to bridge individual and cultural levels of analysis, resulting in the recommendation to strengthen “cultural continuity” (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003). In contrast to privileging continuity over discontinuity or change, and in contrast to viewing internal (cultural or individual) continuity as challenged by an abstract notion of “change,” one that is inserted into individual lives from the outside, we prefer to view this dilemma from the agentive potential of the person, a culture, or a society (Brockmeier, 2009). Accordingly, identifications that are relevant for a diachronic sense of self take place in the process of sorting out what events qualify as formative or transformative for the emergence of identity. In everyday practices, but even in therapy, this is not a sudden and voluntary choice (based on reflection) between one (e.g., permanence) over the other (e.g., change) but takes place as a navigation process that relies heavily on culturally available symbolic tools which—in this process—are continuously re-sharpened. In addition, it should be noted that diachronically navigating between sameness and change in order to sort out a sense of self across time is tied very closely to how the “lived-in-space” is presented as same and continuous versus new and different (and a potential challenge). Overall, 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. And narrative means seem to lend themselves for practicing such navigations, because narratives are the genre par excellence for sorting out this diachronic aspect of identity formation.

The second dilemma, attempting to view the self as special and unique vis-à-vis others in the face of being the same as everyone else, is equally relevant for answering the who-am-I question. The contradiction faced here is one that is based not on the temporal, diachronic dimension of becoming who-I-am but on the synchronic assumption “I-am-who-I-am” owing to my alignment with—or better: *positioning* with regard to—others. In order to differentiate (and integrate) a sense of self, others are “brought to existence” (constructed) in terms of social categories. Social categories are typically referring to groups of various degrees of scale: reference groups, membership groups, social category groups, cultural groups, and crowds (Phoenix, 2007). Drawing on group membership categories, it has been claimed, establishes the basic link between individual sense of self and social dimensions—irrespective of whether this link is considered to be of a more cognitive nature (Tajfel, 1981) or as an integral part of discursive/conversational activities (e.g., Baker, 2004; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998). Building on Billig (1987), 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. Again, we prefer to view emerging views of self as same and as different from others as routinely based in practices, where they are precognitive and shot through with what could be called unconscious defenses (Hollway, 2007; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). 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.

Turning next to the third dilemmatic territory which we originally termed “the construction of agency as constituted by self (with a self-to-world direction of fit) and world (with a world-to-person direction of fit),” we may recognize that this dilemma has rarely been made central for debates over self, sense of self, and identity. While the above two dilemmas are seen as central for the constitution of a diachronic and synchronic process of identity formation, agency thus far has assumed a step-child status in such debates. Issues of agency are typically viewed in terms of “*who-is-in-control*,” asking whether it is the person, the *I*-as-subject, who constructs the world the way it is, or whether the person, the *me* as undergoer, is constructed by the way the world is, subjected to it. While this binary division is typically viewed as one between inside (of the individual) versus outside (as in society), the issue is more complex: on one hand, it seems to be correct to assume an interiority at one end of the continuum from which a person’s agency can be argued to originate. Social structures as governing, and to a degree determining, people’s actions are one possibility of the world-to-person direction of fit; another one exists in the assumption of biological or partly psychological dispositions that are equally viewed as housed inside the person and determining his/her actions—if not action potential. Again, we feel that the impasse posed by this dilemma can be avoided by viewing the navigation between the two poles as a dynamic process, as one that is situated and continuously in flux. And while 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, particularly in the realm of everyday positioning practices the way we characterized them above, and will elaborate further below.

I am purposely not presenting the orientation toward “*the human good*” as an additional dilemma for identity and identity formation processes. Navigating the above three dilemmas is already shot through with valuating practices. Constructing continuities and discontinuities (change) across time, setting up a self vis-à-vis others (as same and different), and presenting a self as agent or as undergoer require value positions that are “morally infested” (Bamberg, 2010).⁴ Positioning a sense of self within the above three dilemmatic spaces is not one of zero-sum but rather of degree. It takes place in past or fictitious time-space that is assumed to be leading up to the present, makes social categories relevant for the bodily act of telling, and is infested with an orientation toward an agentive sense of self in relation to the meaningfulness of relationships, worthwhile lives, and “*the human good*” (Aristotle, 1921–1952; Kraut, 1989). Constraining the analysis of identity and identity formation to one of the three dilemmatic areas will not suffice. Empirical work in the domain of identity research faces the task of tying these three contradictions together: viewing the narrating subject (i) as not locked into stability nor drifting through constant change, but rather as something that is multiple, contradictory, and distributed over time and place, but contextually and locally held together; (ii) in terms of membership positions vis-à-vis *others* that help us trace narrators’ “means of showing how identities, social relationships and even institutions are produced” (Baker, 2004, p. 164); and (iii) as the active and agentive locus of control, though simultaneously

attributing agency to outside forces that are situated in a broader socio-historical context as well as in bodies and brains. Along these lines, identity is not confined by just one societal discourse but open to change. Identity is able to transform and adapt to the challenges of increasing cultural multiplicities in increasingly globalizing environments.

Starting from the assumption that narration is first of all a verbal act that is locally and bodily performed in situated, interactional contexts, and from here could begin to migrate into other, differently contextualized media (e.g., writing, film, and opera), its function in identity formation processes cannot be reduced to the verbal means used or messages conveyed. Rather, the local interactional contexts in which narrative units emerge form the foundation into the inquiry of identity formation and sense of self. While transformations from oral to written forms of text traditions are widely studied within the longstanding approach to text-critical analysis in the frame of the hermeneutic cycle, work with transcripts from audio-recorded records is relatively new. Much younger, and becoming rapidly more sophisticated, are concerted efforts to audio-visually record narratives and to analyze the way they emerge in interaction, including the sophisticated ways in which they are performed. Audio-visual material, of course, can be more fully (micro-analytically) scrutinized in terms of the contextualized coordination of narrative form, content and performance features, and how they interact in the service of identity formation processes.

In recent books and articles, we have tried to promote and apply this type of micro-analytic analysis to identity that is accomplished in narration under the header of *positioning analysis* (Bamberg, 1997, 2003a, 2007a, 2008, 2010; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). The term *positioning* has been contrastively refined and redefined with reference to earlier forms of positioning analysis (see Davies & Harré, 1990; Hollway, 1989; van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). The purpose of this redefinition has been to focus more effectively on the navigation within the “agency-dilemma,” that is, the apparent contradiction between the speaker as positioning him-/herself as agent, and the societal, socio-cultural constraints seemingly “always and already” at work positioning “the subject.” Positioning analysis along these newly defined lines studies how people as agentive actors position themselves—and in doing so become positioned. This model of positioning affords us the possibility of viewing identity constructions as two-fold: we are able to analyze the *way* the referential world is constructed, with characters (such as self and others) emerging in time (then) and space (there) as prot- and antagonists or heroes and villains. Simultaneously, we are able to show how the referential world (of what the story is about) is constructed as a function of the interactive engagement, where the way the referential world is put together points to how tellers “*want to be understood*”; or more appropriately, how tellers *index* a sense of self. It is precisely this groundedness of sense of self and identity in sequential, moment-by-moment interactive engagements that is at best undertheorized and at worst dismissed in traditional identity inquiry that operates solely on the basis of verbal texts or cognitive representations that are said to feed texts.

Self and identity and their fit with “narration”

Self and *identity* are traditionally tied up with the essentials of what is taken to be human: across time and space, in phylo- as well as socio- and ontogenetic terms. This,

however, disguises how conceptions of self and identity historically, culturally, and in each individual's personal history (ontogenesis) have evolved and continuously change. In addition, an essentialist view of *self* and *identity* camouflages the links between these concepts and their counterparts *narration* and *narrative practices*. The following sections will attempt to disentangle them; focusing first, though briefly, on the traditional connections between "narration and self," followed by a section on "narration and identity." A brief discussion of the problems facing these traditional approaches to connections between narration and self/identity will take us to an alternative view, one in which we redefine narration within a practice-based approach.

Self and narration

Although *self*, *I*, and *me*, are highly specific morphological items of the English vocabulary (which have become lexicalized in these forms called "pronouns"), they are commonly assumed to refer universally to corresponding concepts in other languages. This, however, has been contested. And a closer look reveals that the concepts that are assumed to be likened to these lexical items most often have a history of their own that varies in interesting and illuminating ways across historical and cultural contexts (Gordon & Gergen, 1968; Heelas & Lock, 1981; Lutz, 1988; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). Notions of a *modern self* (Elias, 1939/1991, 1998; Gergen, 1991) are taken to be deeply intertwined with the development of nation states and local communities—particularly the city, the emergence of the subjectivity of the young *citoyen/citizen* ("sociogenesis" and "socialization"), forms of knowledge and reflection ("rationalization"), feeling and perception, in cahoots with an increasing "interiorization" and "psychologization."

In this process of "becoming modern," self-narration (autobiographies and life-writing) springs to the fore as the basic parameter and practice-ground for setting the self apart from the *I* as speaker/agent and *me* as character/actor. Acts of thematizing and displacing the self as character in past time and space become the basis for other self-related actions—such as self-disclosure, self-reflection, and self-critique; which in turn enable moves toward more or better self-awareness, self-consciousness, and self-understanding (but also self-deception); which in turn can lead to acts of self-constraint, self-control, and self-discipline. And what comes further to light within this process is an increasing differentiation (and integration) between the *I* and the *me* (James, 1900; Mead, 1934) and simultaneously between the *I–We/Us–Them/Other* dimension (Buber, 1923/1970; Elias, 1939/1991; Ricoeur, 1992). Thus, *self*, apparently, is the product of an *I* who can manage three processes of differentiation and integration: (i) it can posit a *me* (as distinct from the *I*); (ii) it can posit and balance this *I/me* distinction with a *We*; and (iii) it can differentiate this *We* as *Us* from *Them* as *Other*. This process of differentiation needs to be taken into account when talking about a self as different from the other and viewing a self "in relation to self" (such as in self-reflection and self-control). Self, as differentiated from other, developing the ability to account for itself (as agent or as undergoer), self-reflect and self-augment, can now begin to look for something like temporal continuity, unity, and coherence, i.e., *identity* across a life. In other words, it seems as if selves as differentiating themselves from others and reflecting on and regulating themselves

(at any one synchronic point in time) are the prerequisite for the establishment of “unity.” Only with this being accomplished can this “unity” morph (over time) into a diachronic, temporal self, i.e., cast itself in terms of “continuity” and “development.” To sum up, what emerges as a first though still tentative divide between identity on one hand and self (as sense of self) on the other is that the synchronic navigation of difference and sameness (dilemma ii) and the navigation of one’s agency (dilemma iii) are different from – if not prerequisites for – the establishment of a diachronic identity (dilemma i).

Identity and narration: Biography and life-writing

Although children from early on begin to differentiate themselves from others and straddle issues of agency and accountability, i.e., tackle two of the three identity dilemmas relevant for the establishment of “identity,” they are said not to “have a life” before transiting into early adulthood (Erikson, 1963; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas & Paha, 2001; McAdams, 1985): the ability to conceive of life as an integrated narrative forms the cornerstone for what Erikson called “ego identity”—on the basis of which later identity development can run its course. The underlying assumption here is that at some point in socio- and ontogenesis, life begins to co-jell into building blocks that, when placed in the right order, cohere: important moments tie into important events, events tie into episodes, and episodes tie into a life story—and the use of the term *important* in this context translates into *life-forming*.

It is this analogy between life and story—or better: the metaphoric process of *seeing* life *as* storied—that gave substantive fuel to the narrative turn. The strength of how scholars (and laypeople) in the past have made use of this connection, though, varies. On one hand, there is a relatively loose connection according to which we tell stories of lives (others’ and our own) by using particular narrative formats. Lives can be told as following an epic format or as if consisting of unconnected patches. On the other hand, though, most often lives are told by laying out characters—and their “development” (see my discussion of John Edwards’ life story, Bamberg, 2010). Character, particularly in modern times, requires an internal and an external form of organization. The former typically is organized in the form of a complex interiority, usually in the form of traits, and seemingly organizing the actions and the course of unfolding events as outcomes from motives that spring off from this interiority. The latter, external offset of character development takes the plot as the overarching principle that lends order to human action and answers the threat of a discontinuous and seemingly meaningless life by a set of possible continuities. This interplay of a human (and humane) interiority and culturally available (often cultivated and practiced) models of continuity (plots) gives narrative a powerful role in the process of seeing life as a story. It also should be noted that the arrangement of interiority as plot-governed gives answers—at least to a degree—to the “direction-of-fit” or “agency” dilemma. With narration, thus defined, life transcends the animalistic and unruly body; and narration gains the power to organize unorganized material into what Punday (2003) calls “human temporality”: the answer to non-human, a-temporal, and discontinuous chaos.

Another, and probably more direct and stronger, connection of employing the narrative metaphor for life starts off from the assumption of a “narrative mode of thinking.”

In separate, but similar ways, both Bruner (1986), originally a cognitive/developmental psychologist, and Polkinghorne (1988), a clinical psychologist, vie for the argument that there is a particular cognitive mode (module?) of making sense of the (social) world that is organized “narratively.” However, this does not imply, as Bruner (1991) cautions, that the mind is “locked up inside one person’s subjectivity, ... hermetically sealed off” (p. 76). Sarbin (1986), coining the term *narrative psychology*, affiliates the cognitive claim with a more strongly formulated ontological position and argues “that we live in a story-shaped world; that our lives are guided by a narratory principle” (Sarbin, 2003, p. 23). Freeman’s (1993, 2007) and Mishler’s (1986a, 2000) work with autobiographical memories focuses particularly on the interrelationship between memory, autobiographical memory, and narrative. Mishler early on propagated the use of autobiographic narrative interview data in the form of a “contextual approach”—one that does not limit itself to the capture of human experience or look “behind” the author (see also Riessman, 2008) but that fosters inquiry into the realm of interaction and relationships.

McAdams (1985, 2006), building on narrative theorists such as Bruner, Polkinghorne, and Sarbin, has turned the assumption of selves plotting themselves (in and across time) into a life-story model of identity. His model clearly states that life stories are more than recapitulations of past events and episodes. They have *defining* character: “our narrative identities are the stories we live by” (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006, p. 4); and elsewhere: “in the emerging adulthood years ... people begin to put their lives together into self-defining stories” (McAdams & Janis, 2004, p. 161). McAdams’ efforts in connecting the study of lives to life stories is paralleled in a wider turn to biographic methods in the social sciences (Chamberlayne, Bornat, & Wengraf, 2000; Denzin, 2001; Fischer & Goblirsch, 2007; Fischer-Rosenthal & Rosenthal, 1997; Rosenthal, 1995, 2006), and by Amia Lieblich and Ruthellen Josselson’s joint efforts that have resulted in the publication of a book series of 11 volumes (spanning over 15 years) entitled *The Narrative Study of Lives* (Josselson & Lieblich, 2009).

The roots of these efforts stretch across a wide range of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Goodson (2001, p. 129) reports the origins of life-history methods in the form of autobiographies dating back to the beginning of the 20th century. Thereafter, life-history methods have spread from the study of attitudes in social psychology (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918–1920) to community studies in sociology, particularly within the Chicago school, and 40 years later back into psychology. Retrospectively, it may be argued that the early studies of the members of the Chicago school, particularly what became well known under the heading of “oral history,” as in the works of Studs Terkel, lacked the analytic component of modern-day narrative inquiry. However, without these origins within the discipline of sociology, Bertaux’s collection *Biography and Society* (1981), and Plummer’s *Documents of Life* (1983), and the subsequent foundation of the RC38 in 1984, the Research Committee on Biography and Society, within the International Sociological Association, would have been unthinkable. The methodological principles were laid out in the early empirical work by Schütze (1977, 1984) in Germany, picked up and refined in current narrative interview approaches by his compatriots Fischer and Rosenthal (Fischer & Goblirsch, 2007; Fischer-Rosenthal & Rosenthal, 1997; Rosenthal, 1995, 2006), and subsequently in the works by Chamberlayne and Wengraf (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Wengraf, 2006) in the UK.

Against this background, it may have become clearer how the relatively massive turn in the social sciences toward biography and life writing was able to gain ground as a new approach to identity research. It emerged as a concerted attempt to wed self-differentiation (as a self that can reflect synchronically upon itself) and narration (as plotting a sense of characterhood diachronically across time) into an answer that addresses the three identity dilemmas laid out earlier: a speaker/writer accounts for how s/he (i) has emerged (as character) over time, (ii) as different from (but same as) others, and simultaneously (iii) can account for how s/he views him-/herself as a (responsible) agent. Managing these three dilemmas in concert is taken to establish what is essential to his/her *identity*. Consequently, life writing and biography, preferably as autobiography or life story, become the privileged arenas for identity research.

Problems

The link between life and story, and between the exploration of lives (including selves and identity) and the exploration of narratives, has traditions going back to Freud (1913), Murray (1938), and Allport (1937). More recently, via MacIntyre (1981) and Ricoeur (1985/1988, 1990/1992), these traditions have been able to establish themselves in the form of a common backdrop for narrative psychologists and narrative biography research in general. However, this close connection between life and narrative is said to require a particular *retrospectiveness* that only credits “*life as reflected*” and discredits “*life as lived*.” Sartwell (2000) has questioned (a) whether life really *has* the purpose and meaningfulness that narrative theorists often attribute, and (b) whether narratives themselves *have* the kind of coherence and telic quality that narrative theorists often assume. The particular problem Sartwell sees in this kind of approach (see also Bamberg, 2003b, 2008) is that the lived moment, the way it is actually “sensed” and experienced, is said to only gain its life-worthy quality in light of its surrounding moments, which only in concert add up to a meaningful temporal plot configuration. Rather than empowering the subject with meaning in life, Sartwell argues, narrative, conceived this way, drains and blocks the subject from finding pleasure and joy in the here and now. The subject is overpowered by narrative as the normalizing machine.

Another problem of the close linkage between life, story, and identity follows up on Lejeune’s (1989) problematization of what he termed “the autobiographical pact.” According to Lejeune, what counts as autobiography is somewhat blurry, because it is based on a “pact” between author and reader that is not directly traceable down into the textual qualities. Thus, while a first-person life story can use the first-person to pretend the identity of author, narrator, and character (Wilkomirski, 1996), the use of a third-person can be employed to camouflage its identity. Autobiographical fiction thrives on the blurring of these boundaries. While Lejeune in his earlier writings relied on the obligation of the author to a referential truth, he shifted in his later writings to search for a reader-based principle in defining “autobiography.” Of interest here are “the perennial theoretical questions of authenticity and reference” (Porter, 2008, p. 25), leading up to the larger issue of the connection between referentiality and narration.

While most biographic research has been quite aware of the situated and locally occasioned nature (often in institutional settings) of people’s accounts (Mishler, 1986b; Riessman, 1993, 2008) and the problems this poses for claims with regard to the speaker/

narrator's sense of self or identity, a number of researchers have launched a large-scale critique of the biographic turn as reducing language to its referential and ideational functions and thereby overextending (and simplifying) narration as the root metaphor for the person, our (sense of) selves, and identity. At the core of these voices is the call for a

[much-]needed antidote to the longstanding tradition of 'big stories' which, be they in the form of life stories or of stories of landmark events, have monopolized the inquiry into tellers' representations of past events and themselves in light of these events. (Georgakopoulou, 2007a, p. 147)

Narration, identity, and practice

Attempts to transport the interactional, context-, and performance-oriented aspects of narration into the analysis of identities reach as far back as Goffman (1959) and Burke (1945, 1969), reiterated repeatedly by others within the field of biography research (Mishler, 1986a, 2000; Riessman, 1993, 2008). More recent attempts to integrate this acknowledgment into empirical analysis center on a number of key positions. First, there is the proposal to resituate narration as performative moves (Langellier & Peterson, 2004; Peterson & Langellier, 2007) that allows—and asks for—the analysis of embodied practices and material conditions of narrative productions. Next, along a similar vein, Gubrium and Holstein (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000) argue for a narrative ethnography—one that is able to analyze the complex interplay between “experience, storying practices, descriptive resources, purposes at hand, audiences, and the environments that condition storytelling” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008, p. 250; see also Georgakopoulou, 2007a, p. 20). How much auto-ethnographic self-reflection of the researcher could or should become part of this research endeavor is left open (see the work of Bochner, 1997; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Third, of relevance here are Wortham's attempts, following Bakhtin's lead (1979/1986, 1986/1993a, 1929/1993b), to make dialogue, mediation, and emergence more central to the analysis of auto-biographical narrative and self-identity (Wortham, 2001); and, in addition, supplement them with ethnographic data (Wortham, 2005).

Georgakopoulou (2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007a, 2007b) and I (Bamberg, 1997, 2003a, 2007a, 2008; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) have tried to develop an alternative approach to big story narrative research that takes narratives-in-interaction, the way stories surface in everyday conversation (small stories), as the locus where identities are continuously practiced and tested out. This approach allows us to explore self at the level of the talked-about *and* at the level of tellership in the here-and-now of a storytelling situation. Both of these levels feed into the larger project at work within the global situatedness within which selves are already positioned: that is, with more or less implicit and indirect referencing and orientation to social positions and discourses above and beyond the here-and-now.

Placing emphasis on small stories allows for the study of how people as agentive actors position themselves—and in doing so become positioned. This model of positioning affords us the possibility of viewing identity constructions as two-fold: we are able to analyze the *way* the referential world is constructed, with characters (such as self and others) emerging in time and space as prot- and antagonists or heroes and villains.

Simultaneously, we are able to show how the referential world (of what the story is about) is constructed as a function of the interactive engagement. In other words, the way the referential world is put together points to how tellers “*want to be understood*”; or more appropriately, how tellers *index* their sense of self. Consequently, it is the action orientation of the participants in small story events that forms the basic point of departure for our functionalist-informed approach to narration and, to a lesser degree, what is represented or reflected upon in the stories told. This seems to be what makes our work with small stories crucially different from work with big stories. 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.⁵

Behind this way of approaching and working with stories is an action orientation that urges us to look at constructions of self and identity as necessarily dialogical and relational, fashioned and refashioned in local interactive practices (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). At the same time, it forces us to recognize that small story participants generally attune their stories to various local, interpersonal purposes, sequentially orienting them to prior and upcoming talk, continuously challenging and confirming each other’s positions, which—as we pointed out earlier—is accomplished as speakers enact their positions as bodies. It is in and through this type of relational activity that representations in the form of content, that is, what the talk is to be taken about, are brought off and come to existence as “second-order constructs.” 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. Furthermore, our analysis urges us also to scrutinize the inconsistencies, ambiguities, contradictions, moments of trouble and tension, and the tellers’ constant navigation and finessing between different versions of selfhood in local interactional contexts. However well established the line of identities-in-interaction may be in the context of the analysis of conversational data, this emphasis is still in contrast to the longstanding privileging of coherence by traditional narrative approaches (as recently acknowledged by Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Through the scrutiny of small stories in a variety of sites and contexts, our aim is to legitimize the management of different and often competing and contradictory positions as the mainstay of identity work through narrative. Finally, we aim to advance our project of documenting identity as *a process* of constant change that, at the same time, when practiced over and over again, has the potential of resulting in a sense of constancy and sameness.

In addition, there is another, probably more important, aspect to the production and analysis of narratives as interactional and bodily performed data—which contributes to what can be asserted as the “visibility” of these performed interactions. While the analysis of audio-recorded stories has enabled an increasing focus on the prosodic and suprasegmentational delivery of narratives, the use of audio-visual means of recording narrative interactions opens up the way bodily practices such as gaze, facial expressions, gesture, and posture contribute to how answers to the “who-am-I” questions are accomplished and how they may come across. The reduction of the human body in narrative practices to his/her voice and working from transcripts, as fine-grained and detailed as they may be, seems to work too closely tied up with the framework of narratology that

originated from work with literate stories, particularly works of fiction (Bamberg, 2004). Again, this is not how we experience and understand stories in situated narrative practices, where it is bodies that engage in story-telling. And although it may be tempting to rationalize and analyze bodies as “inscribed by” language or texts (as in “body-language”), bodies are the locus of experience and meaning construction (Grosz, 1994; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962); and when engaging in narration, our narrative practices still rest in bodily practices. They are reflected in our choices of linguistic/rhetorical devices, prosodic features and behavioral gestures—all as working against the horizon of audience’s/viewers’ culturally shared repertoires of expectations.

Summary and conclusion

It was the declared aim of this article to probe deeper—and theoretically more soundly—into narrative theorizing in order to better understand how narrative research can more productively contribute to the exploration of identity and sense of self. The noun *narration* was purposely chosen, in contrast to *narrative* or *story*, in order to emphasize the activity of narrating, and to de-emphasize the final product of a text. The activity of narrating was qualified as firmly grounded in “talk” (discourse), but as “embodied talk” that is analyzable as multimodal engagement. Understanding narration as embodied talk differs from cognitive, linguistic, or literary approaches that are more likely to highlight the thematic or content and stylistic aspects of narrative texts. In addition, the activity of narrating as embodied talk requires the sequential interactive dimension of talk as the constitutive context for its understanding—and this applies in the same way to the local participants as to the analytic work with narratives in narrative inquiry. Consequently, narrating in interaction is not necessarily bound by previously held positions, convictions, or beliefs (though it may), but is open to negotiation. As such, the actual theme or content of what is being told is dependent on the interactive situation in which narrating takes place.

Taking this more open structure of narrative as a bodily mediated and highly interactive process and applying it to the formation of identity and sense of self, I introduced the assumption that neither self (or sense of self) nor identity is defined (or definable) in terms of *fixed* positions that are a priori, pre-discursively, rationally defined. Rather, the notion of dilemmatic spaces was introduced within which narrators typically position a sense of who they are and how they intend to come across. Again this interactional navigation of “intending to come across” is not necessarily cognitive or even reflective (Hollway, 2007). It was at this point that the contribution of narration was viewed as differently contributing to identity on one hand and self (or sense of self) on the other. Narrators typically position characters (including themselves) in their stories as same as or different from other characters and make claims with regard to the agency of these characters as constituted by the social context versus internal personal (psychological) qualities. However, the positions taken only index what we called a synchronic sense of self, and this type of character positioning takes place in other genres as well. In contrast, positioning a sense of who a character is diachronically, across time and space, i.e., navigating the continuity/discontinuity dilemma, speakers more typically rely on narrating as their primary genre activity. Against this horizon, it was suggested to reserve the

terms identity and identity formation when speakers navigate the who-am-I question diachronically, while it makes better sense to talk about the accomplishment of self (or sense of self) in light of navigating the difference/sameness and agency dilemmas.

Returning with these insights to the original two excerpts presented in the opening of this article, we can see more clearly the answer of Clark Rockefeller to the who-are-you question as a brief attempt to establish a starting point (stating his most recent alias); however, one that is unlikely to develop into a (diachronic) presentation of his identity. And indeed, the rest of the interview answers present himself as the character of Clark Rockefeller that is “made” out of self-identifying building blocks that are only connected to one another in terms of a self-differentiation. Consequently, the interview does not succeed to establish a sense of the interviewee’s identity, and is likely to be (mis-) interpreted as a self-serving statement.

In contrast, the interviewee in excerpt (ii) was able to establish a full-blown account of how she became who she is, across the time and space of her personal development. Nevertheless, the interview did not seem to have “succeeded,” because some of the interviewee’s important experiences—experiences that can be taken as important for the formation and her understanding of her “true self”—were withheld. However, as I tried to argue, it is not necessarily the content of the experience or experiences per se that produce identity across time and space and sense of self vis-à-vis others and in relation to the agency dilemma. Rather, indexing the navigation within the three dilemmatic territories and connecting the three territories with one another is what demarcates identity and sense of self; and narrators have plenty of “experiences” or “life-events” to choose from and arrange (or re-arrange) them in their narratives.⁶ Consequently, it can be said, no life story ever is the same—and, more important, lives are open to change.

Insights like these underscore the relevance of the process and practice orientation by which identity and sense of self were approached in this article. Being led by the metaphor of narrating as a navigation process between different dilemmatic positions, and, in addition, as grounded in bodily interactions with others, narrators continuously draw on positions that have been previously tried on in discursive settings (positions that in turn draw on “interpretive repertoires,” see Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 138). These positions are practiced in story-telling practices, where some of them, over time, may become personally inhabited and habitual. This, however, should not take away from the fact that these practices are continuously shifting. They are employed locally, are contextually situated, performed by bodies, and continuously point toward the open-ended (and somewhat fluid) constructions of identity and sense of self—and owing to their dilemmatic underpinning are often contradictory and inconsistent. This, however, is not meant to imply that there *is* no sense of a synchronic self or that there *is* no sense of diachronic identity.

The constructions of a sense of self as a unity, and of a sense of identity as (more or less) coherent, constructs that big story research has been able to productively illuminate, are as true, real, and relevant as what we have posited as story-telling practices that can lead up to and result in these constructs. We nevertheless propose to start inquiry into identity or sense of self in contexts where narrating activities are in the process of being performed. This starting point for narrative inquiry comes close to recommending observing authors in the process of writing: watching where and how they edit and revise, and in this process work up versions that may result in a final text. It is this version-making in identity formation processes and situations in which a sense of self is

at stake that is telling; maybe much more than the attempt to catch the most authentic (as in true or real)—or even the most recent edition.

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Notes

- 1 The possibility that she has “forgotten” these events should not be discarded. It is very well possible that the flow of the interview led to a construction of the interviewee’s identity that simply didn’t bring to the fore these two events. They didn’t “fit” the construction that was emerging in this situation. A similar possibility is that it would have taken “too much work”—emotionally as well as rhetorically—to weave these events into a somewhat coherent life story that presented an answer to the “who-are-you” question.
- 2 The intended reader will find the absence of a discussion of what is traditionally divided into *social* and *personal identity*. However, the narrative practice orientation that will be developed toward the end of this article will dissolve this distinction.
- 3 While speech activities typically are delivered in *segments*, interrupted by small pauses, breath intakes, silences, and the like, *prosody* refers to the intonation contours of smaller segments and tone-of-voice of the delivery.
- 4 Pulling this issue of “moral perspectivizing” out of the realm of practical positioning activities and placing it into the (mindful) realm of reflectivity (as taking place in “moral reasoning”) has ramifications on the view of the person as “rationally” versus “practically moral” (see recent discussions of this issue by Bamberg, 2007a; Sokol, 2007).
- 5 Characterizing the interactive realm as the space of “construction” and the “construction” of characters, time, and space (analyzable in the form of themes and content) as “representation” is a purposely chosen contrast – one that is supposed to capture “represented content” as a “second-order construct.”
- 6 Although this may sound as if “experiences” are the raw material out of which life stories are formed, it is the meaningfulness of experiences that is relevant for the inclusion or exclusion in the stories being told. And the meaningfulness is not only a question of what has happened in one’s life, but also one of what has been practiced and established as “meaningful” in such practices.

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