

Who am I? Big or small— shallow or deep?

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Abstract

Mark Freeman's and Elli Schachter's commentaries on my target article "Who am I? Narration and its contribution to self and identity" open up opportunities to clarify. In this response I differentiate more clearly between biographic approaches to narrative and my proposal to approach identity and self as dilemmatic spaces that are navigated by way of narrative practices. While Freeman and Schachter suggest an approach to identity by highlighting narrating as first-person (mental) operations of a solitary (self-)intending and (self-)reflecting individual, and identity research as inquiry into individuals' reflections and intentions, I clarify my alternative: narrating as an interactive practice—an approach which accentuates narrative practices taking place as situated and contextualized second-person encounters within which identities and a sense of self emerge as navigations of three dilemmatic identity spaces. In addition, in this response to Freeman's and Schachter's commentaries I once more attempt to underscore the merits of a practice-based approach to narrating activities for empirical identity research.

Keywords

identity, narration, narrative, practices, self, who-am-I

EXCERPT:

- | | | | |
|----|------------------------------|----|-------------------|
| MC | Maria Cramer | JE | John R. Ellement |
| SH | R's attorney: Stephen Hrones | CR | Clark Rockefeller |
-
- 1 MC why wha can't you remember certain things↓
why is it so difficult to remember↓
 - 2 CR <pause> I couldn't tell you
I just don't know↓
 - 3 MC have you been trying to remember↑
I mean it just be//
 - 4 JE //does it trouble you↑
not being able to remember↑
 - 5 CR I'm not quite sure what I'm supposed to remember↓

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- 6 JE well you know most people are able to think back to their childhood (.)
they can//
- 7 SH //we're not getting into that↓
- 8 JE no I'm not saying that↓
I'm just saying most people that just gives them a sense of where they are(.) and
who they are
- 9 CR ehem ehem ehem (.) well ehmm not for me
- 10 JE how does that sound sit with you
does that worry you↑
what's your feeling about that
- 11 CR I don't lose much thought over it now
- 12 MC I mean that some people are curious about that you know
wanna know that background
I would imagine you yourself would be really curious about it cause it's your own
background
- 13 CR well you know I try to look forward
rather than look into the past
- 14 JE what are your dreams these days
- 15 CR I very rarely remember dreams

Mark Freeman (2010) and Elli Schachter (2010) have commented on my article (Bamberg, 2010a) from perspectives that can be said to differ minimally. Both come from a “big story” biography perspective, and their comments primarily address issues of temporality (what I termed for the purpose of identity research *diachronicity dilemma*). Both synchronicity and agency dilemmas are touched on in passing, which may be due to the fact that biography research typically is interested in issues of change and coherence across a life or a particular time-span. To summarize the gist of our differences, we start from two different conceptions of personhood. The small story discursive practice perspective I adopt starts from a conceptual framework of a person who is socially interactively constituted—though of course thoroughly agentive, and also occasionally strategic. In contrast, the big story biography approach starts from a first-person individualistic vantage point: the person as self-oriented, self-reflective, and ultimately rational. This first-person (self-reflection) perspective works with the assumption that sense and meaning making rest inside the person, and from there are displayed in second-person (discursive storytelling) practices and attributed to third-person others. In contrast, our second-person (co-constructural/social) perspective works from sense and meaning as originating in social interaction (the second-person perspective) and from there as transferred into third- and first-person attributions as in third- and first-person narratives. At stake are differences in conception of how these two different perspectives theorize and approach the relationship between the social and individual, as well as the complex relationships among language, practice, the body, emotions, and the mind.

Let me set the scene by commenting on the scenario that the reader enters. My article originated from a controversy that began in 2006 in which my colleague Alexandra Georgakopoulou and I introduced the term “small stories” in an attempt to challenge what we saw as an overemphasis on big story biography research (including an often fuzzy methodology) within the field of identity analysis (see also Georgakopoulou,

2007). Schachter and Freeman respond to my article where I laid out the central tenets of our small story practice orientation—an approach that builds constructively on stories told in interaction, making them relevant for identity research in general. In doing so, we argue that small story research provides a theoretically sound point of departure for big biography research to begin, thereby providing a space for big story research as different, though ultimately resting on the shoulders of a small story practice perspective. In sum, the first concern with our introduction of small story research was to shift away from a single emphasis that views first-person biography as the sole and privileged narrative domain for identity construction towards a view that includes not only first-person biography but also third-person stories. Our second, and probably more relevant, concern is with the actual production of stories—the way they are put together in everyday situations as second-person (socially) designed.

What rationale is there for making these two concerns so central for identity research? First, we are no longer solely relying on stories in which the speaker introspects and reflects about the self in purely retrospective terms. We have documented in other work that third-person stories about others, playing in the past or set up as hypothetical futures, can be as valuable and worthy in their potential for identity constructions. Second, our approach opens up the possibility for an empirical differentiation and investigation of three identity domains—domains that I construed in my contribution as intrinsically dilemmatic spaces within which identity work has been shown to be situated. Third, our approach suggests viewing narrators as (agentively) drawing up and taking positions (which I metaphorically described as “navigating”) by use of interactive positioning devices (which I termed, in line with others, “discursive/interpretive repertoires”). These devices or repertoires are open to empirical analysis and have been laid out empirically as *positions*. Fourth, our approach also enables the analysis of how narrators orient themselves as “positioned,” i.e., as navigating within spaces that are experienced as “given” by factors and contexts—seemingly “out of control” of the narrator. Fifth, it clarifies some principled assumptions about the intersection of the social and the individual as well as with regard to how we theorize and inter-relate language, thought, emotion, and the body. Finally, and perhaps most relevant, the explicitly adopted second-person perspective, i.e., to take narration as recipient designed and jointly constructed, views the third-person orientation of what stories are about and the first-person perspective of a self-centered rationality to be in its service. In other words, our small story practice perspective takes an explicitly pragmatic and practice-based starting point from which self and identity can better be understood and differentiated, and provides big-biography-based research with a theoretical and methodologically better informed platform.

Starting from these premises, it is clear that my suggestion was not to have both research methodologies sit happily together side-by-side and wait for tension to dissolve. Rather, I aimed to join the two approaches in an overarching discursive framework—one in which there is space for bodies, thoughts, emotions; where the individual and social are not set up as excluding each other, and where there is space for intention (although we prefer the term *purpose*) and reflection (among other cognitive and emotional competencies). On this view, discourse is not set up oppositionally to big story approaches, as both commentators view it. Rather, our small story practice perspective assigns a super-ordinate but connective and facilitating role to discourse—one that connects self and other as well as facilitates the analysis of self-centering and self-reflecting.

Freeman (2010) starts his commentary by taking issue with my recommendation to treat narrating—just like any other speech activity—as falling under the Gricean maxims and following the cooperative principle. He claims that narration, particularly when answering the who-are-you question, does not need to be condensed and united, nor should it function to resolve ambiguity. Identity, in his opinion, is the answer to a “big question,” one that requires that we halt our interactions with others, reflectively pause, begin to talk to ourselves, and thus engage in an access mode to issues and concerns that bear on existential questions such as the quality and value of life. He holds that answers to these enduring questions cannot be found in what he views as the trivial, and local, situated and interpersonal chit-chat that people—often unreflectively—engage in during everyday interaction. This argument throws us back to our “life on holiday” debate from where Freeman started a few years ago. The only change now is a new spatial twist: what used to be *small* versus *big* is now turned into *deep* versus *shallow*. Let me skip the rhetorical metaphor and try to get to the heart of our difference.

At first glance, there is nothing wrong with the assumption that a withdrawal into the private modes of talking to oneself, introspection, and self-reflective contemplation may offer access to deep-seated, existential, and soul-searching questions—a view that is consistent with the modern therapeutic view about the self. This view is also consistent with a point that I made in my article, where I pointed the reader to places where this reflective space is institutionally provided—as in religious services and the confession, in therapy, and also in biographic research interviews, all designed to encourage soul-searching and, within limits, contradictions and ambiguity. I argued further that small story research sheds light onto how these kinds of introspective practices are occasioned and how they function. The approach that I presented in my article, although starting with investigating the practice of “doing biography” in more everyday situations, tackles the theme of introspection as a potential “identity facilitator.” My claim, however, is that these identity facilitators, as interesting as they may be, should not be given any privileged or basic status. They are private modes of autobiographic self-explorations—often with the intent of seeking self-therapy—modes not necessarily equally accessible by everyone.

The difference, then, between our positions can be articulated as follows. Freeman suggests a preference for examining existential reflection; and for that purpose, he signals an interest in what people refer to when introspecting. Owing to these preferences, he proclaims to be less interested in issues (that he argues we privilege) such as everyday activities, local face-to-face encounters, the communicative space, dialogue, interactions between people, data collection and analysis, context, practice, and, last but not least, construction—the main arenas of small story research. The contrast set up here, however, is more than one of individual preference. While for us the issue of accessing identity is through the stories people tell, starting with those that are practiced in everyday settings, the contrasting mode of inquiry for big biography research is introspective reflection. And in the course of working up this dichotomy, it is suggested to us that the small story approach is shallow and flat, whereas big story biography research gets to the real—*deep*—issues of life, value, and existence.

To sort out this difference in perspective it is helpful to briefly examine where we started and where we now seem to depart in our venture of using narration for identity

research. Both commentators and I agree that big and small story research in general are promising modes of inquiry when dealing with the diachronic dilemma, i.e., the navigation between constancy and change across time. I should mention that it is here that we small story researchers have asserted ourselves more strongly and have empirically shown that third-person narrations about others—even hypothetical others—with no self-reflection on the speaking self, also do the same job; and the reason is that these kinds of stories (simply) require an equal navigation of identity dilemmas equal to that of big self-reflection stories (see Bamberg, 2010b, 2010c; Georgakopoulou, 2007). Let's, though, limit our discussion—as Freeman wishes—to identity work that is based on diachronic self-thematization, i.e., reformulating the who-are-you question that is typically asked in identity interviews so that the speaker engages in self-reflective contemplation. It is here that Freeman and I fully part, given that he moves self-talk into the realm of self-reflection that no longer follows the social maxims of accountability and cooperation. He claims that, because individuals respond to inner selves, they no longer have to be intelligibly accountable, can meditate, contemplate, and self-explore by use of modes of (self-) inquiry. While there is value in such activities of self-exploration, it remains open how we, as analysts, set up our research participants to engage in such modes and subsequently are able to make these modes visible as *reflections*, *intentions*, *ruminations*, and the like. First, if one de-values second-person discourse as a domain in which deep thinking does not take place, how can talk about reflection become the primary access mode for identity analysis? And further, how can we access introspections, intuitions, memories, intentions, or reasons if not by analyzing what people say, to whom they speak, how they say what they say, and the like?

In our own empirical work with storytelling we have shown in several articles and chapters that we are interested in how narrators establish a referential (third-person) world (positioning level 1). We further suggested that they do this in concert with other communicative activities such as making use of “their past”—by use of remembering, thinking, introspecting, and, at times, a good dose of reflecting. However, it is the discourse they use that we analyze—not their intuitions, memories, introspections, contemplations, or reflections per se. Furthermore, let us be clear: we do not believe that narrators in everyday situations, local face-to-face encounters, in their communicative space, or in their interactions talk *thoughtlessly*, or don't make use of their intuitions, memories, reflections, introspections, and the like. And although it may be possible in certain kinds of interviews to use interactive techniques that assist interviewees to more effectively remember, reflect, or ruminate, we see little use in privileging any of these interactive styles and cognitive modes over other modes by claiming that we gain direct and privileged—or simply *better*—access to them in these types of interview occasions.

Let me briefly summarize and begin to move forward. As I explained in the target article which served as the reference point for the two commentaries, emotional and bodily means that go into our constructions of narration (along with cognitive means) all play a role when language is used to answer the who-are-you question. Naturally, when doing identity analysis, none of these modes should a priori be discarded. Working with the assumption that we can cut through discourse and narration and tap directly into reflection (Freeman, 2010) or intentions (Schachter, 2010) in order to gain (privileged) access to how “the big” existential questions are solved strikes me as over-simplified and

problematic. This way of theorizing cognition understates the importance of agency, the circumstances and contexts in which identity work takes place, the role of language and discourse in identity work, and the notion of construction—to which I will turn next.

Both Schachter and Freeman contest my use of the term “construction,” and I apologize for not having been clear enough in terms of what *construction* means within a small story practice framework. Freeman asks rhetorically whether interactants bring nothing—no past, no memories—to their interactive encounters, and have to construct a sense of self anew at each and every occasion. And Schachter contends that the notion of construction for the distinction between a *narratively discovered* versus a *constructed* reality is hardly new. I am grateful for these questions because they open the opportunity to clarify.

Of course, narration and other quotidian talk is thoughtful. As speakers we position ourselves (and others), and doing so we display a sense of who we are. The stories we tell may not always be deep or ruminating over existential issues, but the way we make use of our discursive repertoires for positioning purposes indexes a sense of self. Each small move or act may give away aspects of who we are—intended or deeply reflected, which Schachter and Freeman claim to be essential for identity, or, as we hold, quite often not fully intended or deeply reflected. But how does this relate to construction, and narrative construction in particular? While Schachter recommends exploring “what drives and what guides the construction process” (p. [6ms]), Freeman suggests using the construction metaphor more restrictedly, i.e., for the purpose of constructing *change*, and only *big* change (by way of *deep* self-reflection). In contrast to their suggestions, we focus on the *how* question, i.e., what are the means (or building blocks) that are used for change—but not only change? We also ask: What are the building blocks used for the construction of constancies? And further: What are the means to *navigate* the space between constancy and change (the *diachronicity dilemma*)? And what are the means used to coordinate diachronicity with *synchronicity* and *agency*?

At this point it may be legitimate to ask Freeman and Schachter to identify and lay out the *construction means* they identify in their analysis of the identity work of others—and if construction is not the right metaphor, what intentions and reflections are *made of*—so we can identify them empirically in identity research. Let me specify this request in the form of a number of questions: I think it can be taken for granted that in both small and big story research we build on the *constructed* nature of stories. But what is it that really is constructed here? Our lives? Or more specifically: the existential reflection that gives meaning to lives? Freeman may be correct in assuming that this is the big and ultimate question lurking when we (have time and are given opportunities to) reflect and introspect (constructively) long and deep enough (with or without narration); though nothing much is gained if we (*simply*) view existential reflections as “constructed.” Schachter suggests that we should seek to find out why a particular story (of one’s life) was shared at a particular occasion, and not a (potentially) different story. I agree. One starting question for narrative analysis is: Why this story at this time and location, and how could this story have been told differently? Now, the answer to this question for small story research lies in the particulars of constructed detail: What exactly is constructed here and how so? Is it the plot? But what does the plot of my life consist of? One answer might be: the relevant events, or a good representative set thereof—put together in the form of a (more

or less) integrated sequence. Again, I would suggest moving smaller: How are the particular events depicted? Events can be constructed from different vantage points as accomplishments, telic, causative (caused by what agency)? But why limit the question to (relevant) events only? What about states (things that are held constant so that events can stick out against a more stative background)? Is it perhaps assumed in the big story approach that states come as givens, and all we need to “explain” are challenges to constancies?

The answer to these questions depends on another question, one that is more pragmatic: What is it that speakers aim to accomplish? More broadly: What is the potential of narration and narrative analysis for the business of identity research? The answer, in my opinion, cannot be found through a framing of identity analysis as consisting of big versus small, and most definitely not deep versus shallow. The answer has to be delivered by way of empirical analytic research—research that takes into account how people navigate their identity (dilemmas), where our focus is not exclusively on change but on identity maintenance as well. John Edwards’ televised interview on *ABC Nightline* on August 8, 2008 (Bamberg, 2010b) and Mark Sanford’s press conference on June 24, 2009 (Bamberg, 2010c) are sites where biographic identity work has been analyzed in terms of how discursive repertoires are used to navigate the three identity dilemmas in concrete and publicly available situations. Such analyses document how attention to detail can be revealing and exciting, and how we can avoid quick readings of people’s intentions or reflections, such as in an appeal to our intuitive judgment in the example at the start of this response that Clark Rockefeller shuns autobiographic detail to avoid being further implicated. While this may be true, it may be advantageous to pause and listen to more of his biography construction. As Freeman seems to suggest with his story about his mother, and as documented in the excerpts of Clark Rockefeller’s responses to the who-are-you questions by reporters, there are others who may not rely in the same way on repertoires that make their stories (and themselves) available as we interviewers—often desperately—would like to have it.

My appeal here is to turn to participants’ actual narrating activities and empirically reveal how we as researchers approach such telling activities. It would be intriguing for those of us who come from our different small and big story perspectives and work with each other’s data. For instance, instead of only having access to Freeman’s second-hand account of how his mother differentiates herself from her fellow bingo players, I would love to work with her own story—to see how she navigates a sense of self as different *and* same, what membership categories she actually utilizes as part of her discursive repertoire, where and how she navigates her personal agency *and* how she positions herself as constrained or “manipulated” by institutional forces outside of her control.

What is it that we can take away from the debate that has unfolded across the original article, the commentaries, and this response? At first glance, there seem to be (at least) three potential modes of inquiry for identity and self research: one that views *intention* to be the principle source, a second that relies on *reflection*, and a third that views and analyzes narration as *talk-in-social interaction*. The first two share a principled interest in what is assumed to be behind first-person stories—a solitary *intending* or *reflecting* subject that is only subsequently brought to the social arena, including the contexts or communicative situations with others. Accordingly, the typical kind of everyday and mundane

second-person orientation is devalued, and third-person stories are effectively excluded from identity research, leaving the narrative analyst to cut straight through talk to speakers' deeper-level intentions and/or reflections. Our small story discursive practice approach offers an alternative to these views insofar as it relies on the analysis of situated and interactive social processes of self and identity *construction* and effectively opens the territory to interpret third-person *and* first-person stories. This should not be mistaken as doing away with intentions or reflections or deny their existence. Quite the opposite: the analysis of the nuances of narration as discursive practices paves the way to an understanding of narration as more than (individual) mental operations. Simultaneously it expands the contribution of narration and narrative theorizing to identity analysis from an originally limited self-centered and individualistic first-person perspective to a second-person perspective that becomes inclusive of third-person narratives *and* first-person narratives—and ultimately is able to contribute more productively to identity research in general.

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