

Making sense of stories: The interface between narrative, self and sense

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Abstract

Our lives and sense of who we are (i.e. self-identity) are both experienced and created through the stories we narrate and the people we tell them to. As such, it is claimed that these stories provide the researcher with a lens through which to understand other people's life experiences and share in their construction. After reviewing the literature on narrative research, this paper takes one business person's enterprise development narrative and uses this as the foundation for critically reflecting upon the advantages, challenges and limitations of working from a narrative perspective. It concludes that, despite inevitably providing a self-centredness and sequence and directionality to the sense made of past experiences, a narrative still provides insights into an individual's conception of self and how they believe they reached a decision that is more contextualised than might be the case with other qualitative research techniques.

Introduction

This paper examines an enterprise development narrative of a business owner operating in the Maori tourism sector in New Zealand and shows how the insights gained are both rich and, at the same time, give us cause to speculate about the utility of using a narrative approach to understand other people's experiences. The paper starts by reviewing the narrative literature. It then describes the research approach used to create the illustrative narrative. The data gathered using this approach is then analysed and discussed in order to draw conclusions on the value of a narrative approach for revealing insights into the way identity, narrative and sense-making interact in the process of making sense of an entrepreneur's start-up experience.

Narrative and making sense of life's experience

When examining an individual's life, the constructs of "story" and "narrative" are especially useful in conveying the coherence and the meaning of their life (McAdams, 2001). According to McAdams (1985; 1993; 1996), individuals living in modern societies link the events in their lives together and create purpose for themselves by constructing internalised and evolving narratives of the self. Through these narratives or stories they create identities for themselves (Gabriel, 2004) through sharing a particular quality or flavouring of self-understanding (McAdams, 2001). This means

that our stories reflect who we believe we are and, sometimes, how we believe others see us.

As well as providing a means to construct our identity (Cullum, 2004), a story also shares how we view the world around us (Alvarez & Urla, 2002). The very act of storytelling helps an individual to make and present the sense of the event they are describing (Brown & Jones, 1998). Thus, the process of storytelling allows individuals to bring order to a disorderly world (Bruner, 1990). Past experiences gain coherence and meaning through recounting them to another.

Not only do stories provide insights into how individuals perceive and interpret their environment, they communicate valuable ideas, insights and lessons to others. They help listeners to understand how individuals reach decisions (Fisher, 1987) and, in so doing, capture individual expectations and values (Czarniawska, 1997; 1998). In so doing, they present the researcher with a valuable means for gathering data on how a person interacts with their world, and crafts and understands their place within it.

Individuals recount stories socially to explain how they reached a decision (Mumby, 1987) and, in doing so, attempt to create accounts that are defensible and appear rational to their listeners (Boje, 1991). These accounts do not represent any objective truth as they privilege some information and omit or minimise other information that does not support the storyteller's decisions or world view. They must be interpreted within a wider context. For example, Cullum (2004) discusses how a storyteller will try to align their story with existing known stories, a phenomena she termed "impulse towards coherence" (p. 315). This phenomenon was found to be particularly strong when respondents were presented with artifacts related to their story during the narrative interview. Such findings illustrate the way our experiences are not only known through stories but located within and interpreted in relation to the stories of others.

Narratives and the understanding they provide are consequences of experience. This sits well with the notion of sensemaking which is also a retrospective process. Weick (1995) suggests we can only know what we have done after we have done it. In the present we are often not consciously aware of the effect specific events or people are exerting on our behaviour. Similarly, Walton and Mallon (2004) propose that individuals review their past actions, and then use this process to make sense of where they are now and how they got there. This process of retrospection makes the past clearer than the present or future (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). For this reason our behaviour in the past is understood better than our behaviour in the present because we have more information to draw upon once an event is in the past.

According to Searle (1995), by working from a sensemaking perspective the researcher is able to tap into the individual's cognitive and social realities. Narrative analysis provides a means for doing this. It links context to the cognitive process of sensemaking (Reissner, 2005), shedding light on individuals' sensemaking (Currie & Brown, 2003). This is because narratives, by virtue of the way they allow people, places and events to be woven together, create a meaningful whole that makes sense for the teller. "Narrative can be described as a means of 'making sense' of our social world, and sharing that 'sense' with others" (Turner, 1999, pp. 78-79). We argue that, because of the intertwined nature of narrative, decision-making, sensemaking, identity construction and context (both social and non-social dimensions), a narrative approach provides a means of linking context, both social and non-social dimensions, to the

cognitive processes of sensemaking (Reissner, 2005) and identity construction. As we are specifically interested in how people experience business start-up, we concluded that an analysis of entrepreneurs' start-up narratives would allow us to examine the link between identity and start-up decision-making from a sensemaking perspective.

Our approach

The process of collecting the respondent's narrative began with an initial approach, by phone, by one of the researchers enquiring as to whether they would be interested in participating in this study. Throughout the rest of this article that researcher will be referred to as the interviewer. This initial communication was smoothed by being able to state that the individual had been recommended by another entrepreneur, in the tourism industry, as someone whose foundation story the researchers should consider collecting for their study. A time and location were then arranged that were convenient for the respondent. The researchers were always aware that being able to collect a subject's story was a privilege as people freely choose who they share their stories with.

The collection of the narrative began with the following initial open question from the researcher:

I'd like to invite you to tell me the story of how you started your business venture. I am interested in what you do and the reasons why you made the decisions you did. Start where ever you feel the story begins.

This approach of starting with an open conversational device has been successfully utilised by Hamilton (2006) and encourages respondents to feel at ease and respond freely. As the respondent's story unfolded, the interviewer encouraged the respondent by making use of the linguistic patterns *hmm*, *yes*, and *ah* as a way to indicate interest and to minimise his input into the story. At times however, the interviewer would seek clarification of an issue by asking the respondent *why* or through reflecting back an idea to a respondent to ensure he had accurately captured it. The interviewer also made use of silence as a way of showing interest in each respondent's story. The use of silence in an interview is important, as it both creates space for the subject to talk and indicates that the interviewer is listening. The amount of silence required when collecting a narrative may vary and is often influenced by the cultural background of the respondent. Researchers themselves may also need to become comfortable with periods of silence while collecting a narrative.

The researcher, who was the primary data-collector, collected the participant's foundation story narrative and initiated, and was part of, the social context in which the respondent's narrative was shared. This researcher may, therefore, have altered the way in which the respondent retold their narrative through his verbal or non-verbal communication in response to all or parts of the respondent's narrative (Reissner, 2005). In collecting a narrative, the researcher actively creates a communication event in which the respondent shares their story. As such the respondent may tailor their story to what they believe are the researcher's information needs. This risk can be reduced by developing a relationship with the respondent prior to the event, collecting each narrative in a setting familiar to the respondent and avoiding settings that reinforce the fact that the communication event occurred because of a research objective. A good narrative interviewer seeks to make the respondent as comfortable as possible and allows them to develop their story in their own way (Riessman, 2008).

The narrative interview was taped and then transcribed to produce a transcript—a deeply interpretive process (De Fina, 2003) that reflects a researcher’s theoretical perspective, methodological orientation, and substantive interest (Riessman, 2008). This study chose to include the researcher’s contribution to the respondent’s story in the transcript. The researcher’s voice was included in order to allow the process of co-construction to be acknowledged—recognising that the interview was a discursive accomplishment between two active participants who jointly constructed the narrative and meaning (Mishler, 1986).

The acknowledgement of the researcher’s role in co-creating each narrative is in line with both the ontology and epistemology of interpretivism.

Reflective analysis of the respondent’s narrative was conducted in order to ensure that the researcher had accurately captured their foundation/start-up narrative and to control for the inclusion of ideas or concepts introduced by the researcher prior to their narrative being included in this study. This process of reflective analysis involved the respondent reviewing a typed transcript of their foundation/start-up narrative in order to ensure that the researcher had accurately captured the components of their story.

An inductive approach that involved identifying and conceptualising themes in the subject’s start-up story or narrative was employed. The analysis was grounded in the narrative data in the sense that there were no pre-existing hypotheses or theory being formally tested. Instead, a form of reflective literary analytic narrative analysis was used not unlike that used by Mills and Pawson (2006) and Mills (2007) in studies of enterprise development narratives. Emergent themes were coded and conceptualised to form a conceptual framework and then this was compared to existing conceptualisations of identity, capital and entrepreneurship located in the literature on enterprise start-up and development.

The role of an interviewer can never be one of objective detachment (Cullum, 2004). The process of collecting a respondent’s story always involves the active participation of the interviewer as it “is an act of collaboration, not an individual process” (p. 47). This presents the researcher with the dilemma of whether to try and limit their input into a respondent’s story or simply to acknowledge their role as co-creator of the story.

There is no right answer for this question as it depends on the researcher’s research paradigm, the type of data they are interested in collecting and how willing a respondent is to share their story without prompting. Some respondents may need little prompting to share their story, while others may need to be questioned about events or reasons. A good narrative researcher, however, allows a respondent’s story to unfold naturally, using information disclosed by the respondent to guide the story where necessary (Riessman, 2008).

How a narrative is transcribed to produce transcripts is a deeply interpretive process (De Fina, 2003) that again reflects a researcher’s theoretical perspective, methodological orientation, and substantive interest (Riessman, 2008).

Joe’s narrative

The following section examines the narrative collected for this study. This particular narrative is from a Maori entrepreneur who has established businesses in both the North and South Islands of New Zealand.

In the beginning . . .

The respondent Joe [not his real name] chose to begin his enterprise development story with his first entrepreneurial act, which occurred at around five-years-old. He situated this act, which involved selling postcards, in the context of his father's social entrepreneurship activities.

I don't recall at an early age wanting to be in business, but I do remember my first business transaction and that was when we were doing shows up in Rotorua back in the sixties, late sixties, early seventies. I was only about five, five or six. My Dad used to operate them. In those days they were performances where they would, the tourism industry, they worked for the tourism industry, in the tourism industry and what they did they would do shows, kapa haka shows and Maori experiences, being Rotorua. And the purpose behind [sic] was to fulfil some tribal expectation; to building a new meeting house. Building a new dining room, so it was very socially driven.

Like many narratives, Joe's was chronologically structured and began at a point in time much earlier than when the planning for his most recent tourism venture began. For many individuals like Joe their present situation can only be understood by explaining their past.

Joe's first entrepreneurial activity was extended to reselling soft drinks, bought from the shop at the venue, at a profit to the performers at half time in the show.

So, we'd go over and buy a soft drink and have a drink. You see in those days the shows would have a half time. And people would go out and have a smoke because everybody smoked in those days. So, my brother went over and got a drink and brought it over and I was having a swig and a performer started asking for the drink. So I thought, "Let's go and buy drinks and then bring em [sic] back at a retail rate." And, you know, get a commission out of selling the performers and that, so I used to make a bit of extra money.

This activity occurred within the context of cultural events that involved Maori cultural performance. In the narrative, the details provided as this activity was recounted allowed Joe to assert his cultural identity as Maori. At the same time, this account introduced a theme which permeates the rest of the narrative. This was the notion of identifying opportunities and turning them into a commercial reality—a characteristic commonly ascribed to entrepreneurs and probably the attribute most commonly used to distinguish them from other business people. Thus, the narrative was founded on an account of an activity that firmly established the respondents' cultural and entrepreneurial identities.

The serial business developer

Once Joe had established his entrepreneurial beginnings, he proceeded to recount the chronology of his employment. His experiences were annotated to link these to his emerging motivation to be in business for himself. For example, he noted that in one job he really admired the owners' position.

Joe: Then I moved up into [company] where there was like 30 of us, but what I admired was the positions they had. I really liked the position they had.

Int: So, did you like the positions of the owners or . . . ?

Joe: The position of the owners, yeah. The owner, manager, boss.

Int: Okay.

Joe: That really spun my wheels. That's pretty cool. They can do everything.

This introduced the theme of agency and contextualised the motivation to be one's own boss—a commonly cited motivation for business start-up. It was linked to the concept of benchmarks against which Joe could measure his activity.

So, I always kind of put benchmarks and milestones in place just to try and improve myself . . . I'll try that one day.

Social comparison was an integral part of this benchmarking. This is clearly illustrated in the following excerpt where Joe looked at others and judged that their experience was not something he wanted for himself.

And then I bumped into people who'd worked companies for like 30 years in the same field I was in. Half of them hadn't even been out of the country and that was really scary to me. I thought, "I'm not going to end up like that".

Joe's narrative explicitly revealed states that he both viewed as desirable—financial freedom—and undesirable—unvarying routine. His narrative provided insights into things that Joe valued about being an entrepreneur and which led him to engage in entrepreneurship.

Joe reported starting a number of companies. This serial start-up behaviour was explained in terms of a need for regular change and development, likening his approach to a preoccupation with "the hunt rather than the kill".

I actually put it down to—I give more to the hunt rather than the kill. So, once the kill's done I kind of shift off and move somewhere else.

When the interviewer gave Joe an opportunity to confirm that the development phase of a start-up was his prime interest, the notion of expertise was introduced in a way that gave an important insight into Joe's self-identity. He presents himself as a developer rather than a consolidator. The narrative interviewer needs to know when it is appropriate to direct a respondent's story in this way to gain greater insights into the respondent's identity. Too much direction from the interviewer can result in a narrative that has been shaped by the informational needs of the interviewer and not the information that the respondent wants to share.

Int: So, you're more interested in the whole starting up of, say, an enterprise?

Joe: Yeah, that excites me more, getting—you know, getting the wheels rolling and getting to—but I've always got to get someone else—my other company now I've got to get someone in now to take it to the next stage because that's not my area of expertise.

This "business developer" identity was always located within Joe's sense of being Maori. Being Maori was a fundamental aspect of the narrative because it provided the legitimacy for Joe to be engaged in Maori tourism ventures. This legitimacy and the expertise that accompanied it is captured in the following excerpt:

Yeah, I was really confident of my appeal in Maori culture because I was raised in it. So I had no problems, absolutely no problems you know in how . . .

The narrative thus provided a framework for Joe to discursively present his self-identity, which drew together his sense of being a serial developer, Maori and someone who sought new challenges where he had the ability and the support to get "things rolling".

In his narrative Joe also took on many roles: good son; adventurous young man; student of life learning from others how to be an entrepreneur; business man; and husband.

Joe's narrative about his entrepreneurial journey reflects how he saw himself at various stages of his life and how these roles impacted on his entrepreneurship.

Role models, facilitators and collaborators

Other people were very visible in Joe's narrative and were cast in various roles. They were models and inspiration, facilitators and collaborators and financial backers.

... but in that process I was working and moving around quite a bit with X [associate] and um what I learned—what I saw in X... was a very straightforward, simple guy... who just went out and did it. So that was quite an inspiration to me.

So, we—some operators approached me and says [sic], "Hey, we want some shows. The marae [Maori gathering space in a Maori village but referring here to a marae-based activity] has crashed and burned." So, I started them up at [location]... And then they came along and helped fund a lot of it. Of course a lot of it was us jointly.

People and the networks they belonged to helped take the risk out of Joe's enterprise developments, often because they provided the financial backing.

Because I knew they had the dollars and I knew that they were as behind it as I was.

But I took a business knowing everything about it and with an existing network. And knowing the partnership had strength to contribute.

When the narrative was taken as a whole, the listener could not help but be taken by the way Joe uncritically presented enterprise development as a collaborative experience. Only in his observations about how having others financially backing his ventures reduced the risk was there any indication that he conceptualised his collaborations in a strategic manner. This observation could be interpreted within Hofstede's (1984) notion of collectivity. Contemporary Maori culture continues to be characterised by a collective ethos and Joe's narrative reflects this.

Making sense of enterprise development decisions

We will finish by focussing on Joe's start-up decisions and use the discussion to reflect further upon the advantages, challenges and limitations of working from a narrative perspective.

Joe shared a range of reasons for how he had reached the point of establishing a tourism business. The reasons he gave were:

- being able to control the activities of a business;
- accumulating knowledge about a business;
- avoiding doing the same job for 30 years;
- the excitement of starting up an enterprise;
- having his wife's agreement;
- doing something he was passionate about; and
- emulating the success of another tourism operator.

These reasons sit rather nakedly on the page. By listing them like this, we do not wish to suggest they can be understood without reference to the start-up narrative of which they were a part or the other intersecting narratives that shaped this narrative. Other elements within the narrative, such as Joe's statements about how he saw himself, need

to be integrated into these reasons in order to understand Joe's decision-making. Joe's statements about how he saw himself, for example, suggest his self-identity included a view of himself as someone who understands the cultural tourism sector, has the cultural credentials necessary to legitimately operate in this sector, seeks novelty, and whose aptitude and expertise is most suited to the development rather than the consolidation phase of business start-up. This self-identity supports the reasons he gives for his tourism start-up; reasons that would generally be considered rational reasons for establishing any enterprise and reflect the findings of Boje (1991). Taken together they supported a rational persona. Thus, for Joe, enterprise development was narrated as a coherent and rational process set within a supportive socio-cultural context. Undoubtedly, this coherence and rationality needs to be seen, at least in part, as a consequence of the way that storytelling encourages the storyteller to give a sequence and directionality and a sense of intentionality to past experiences. The researcher in this case encouraged these effects as, in the introduction to the interview, he asked the participant to give reasons for his actions. Such encouragement no doubt prompts the interviewee to frame his behaviour as the outcome of rational processes.

The researcher was also engaged in a one-on-one dialogue with Joe. As solitary interviewee, this sort of communication space would have encouraged Joe to speak from the "I"—to cast himself as the central character in the narrative—despite the collaborative flavour he gave to his enterprise development activity. We have to wonder whether his centrality would have been so pronounced if others (e.g. Joe's wife) were present and participating in the interview experience. It could be argued that the choice of individual interviews had contributed to the way Joe structured the narrative and provided yet another mechanism by which the researcher and his notion of narrative was present, both in the data and the subsequent analysis.

For these reasons, it could be argued that an interview-based narrative approach is flawed as a means of tapping into people's lived-in-realities. It encourages realities to be experienced from the perspective of one central character who behaves in a rational and sequential way. Life, it is often argued, is a socially constructed experience that is never entirely logical, sequential or rational. On the other hand, the fact that narratives told in a one-on-one situation result in self-centred and logical, sequential and rational accounts of an individual's behaviour could be viewed as strengths from the perspective that this is actually how the individual seeks to understand their own behaviour.

Conclusions

According to Fisher (1987), life can be described as a storied phenomenon with stories providing a means for people to understand themselves within the context of their ongoing life story. For the researcher, a narrative approach that collects stories allows them to tap into another person's life experiences and appreciate these from within the interpretive contexts in which they understand their world. This is because stories capture not only sequences of events and the characters and settings that shape these but the meaning that these events, people and contexts have for the storyteller. In so doing, they provide a more holistic view of experience and reasoning than might be possible using other approaches (e.g. survey, observation).

A narrative emerges in the telling. This means that its richness and complexity is shaped by the context in which it is created and collected. Individuals may, in telling their stories, re-order events to create rational reasons for pursuing certain courses of action.

They could do this for a range of reasons, not least being in order to present themselves to their listener and co-constructor as a rational person. In the case presented here, we encounter a start-up story that was a chronology of supposedly deliberate enterprise developments. Whether the orderliness and rationality were part of the actual experience of startup cannot be assessed unless some form of data triangulation is undertaken (e.g. observations of others, development journals). We chose not to pursue such triangulation as our primary goal was to understand the sense the respondent made of his experiences in an interview situation, not to definitely and objectively describe this experience.

Our approach allowed us to show how an enterprise development narrative provides a context for the discursive construction of the respondent (and researcher's) self-identity and sense about a particular experience. The interview process contributed to the emergent narrative in a variety of ways. Undoubtedly, it provided a frame which encouraged "self-centredness" and a linearity and rationality that might not have been evident if the story had been told in a more social non-research setting. However, we believe that all narrative events are inevitably shaped by the context in which they occur. If we were seeking definitive truths then this would be a problem. Given that we were working from an interpretive perspective, which focuses on interpretations of reality that are inevitably social (Weick, 1995), and not some objective reality or absolute truth, we feel there is no cause for concern. All that is required is that the researcher takes a reflexive stance and is sensitive to the impact of the research context they create and their role in this on the form of the emergent narrative. In other words, we conclude that as long as the researcher recognises that they are, by virtue of their collaboration, an integral part of the narrative they "collect" and seeks to define and acknowledge their contribution, narrative approaches such as ours offer a powerful way of exploring the experiences of another person.

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