

Unlocking Meaning Making by Using Stories for Research

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“In every language, in every part of the world, story is the fundamental grammar of all thought and communication. By telling ourselves what happened; to whom, and why, we not only discover ourselves and the world but we change and create ourselves and the world too.” ~ Aidan Chambers

Using Narratives in Social Science

In the late 19th century, linguists, including the Grimm brothers, were collecting narratives from people who lived in isolated villages across Europe to study how language changed over time. Both modern linguistics and the Grimm brothers' fairy tales came from this work. Since then, social science researchers have been using narratives as a form of data. Labov (1972) and Labov and Waletzky (1967) began by collecting stories to understand black English vernacular in Harlem. Now, researchers from a variety of fields (e.g. education, science, and mental health) use narratives as a way to make sense of the world. According to psychologist Jerome Bruner (1990) stories are one way to understand the world. Based on his theory of folk psychology, Bruner believes that we arrange not only the ordinary events of life but also the exceptional events by way of narratives. These stories are descriptions of “how human beings ‘tick,’ what our own and other minds are like... what are possible modes of life [and] how one commits oneself to them” (1990, p. 35). What this means is that we all have shared experiences based on our culture and we use narrative to make personal sense of those experiences.

For this reason, narratives have become a way for researchers to understand *how* people make sense of the world. How do individuals construct stories? What is meaningful in their everyday life? How do these stories fit into their work experiences or what they bring to an organization? These are questions researchers can answer by studying narratives. The difficulty is that there are disparate definitions of “narrative.” Narrative can refer to

anything from a discrete unit of speech, such as an answer to a question, to a whole life story (Riessman, 2008). In trying to capture the most essential characteristics of narrative for doing research, Polkinghorne (1988) considers a narrative to be a type of discourse where events and happenings are configured in a temporal manner by means of a plot where there is a clear beginning and ending. Bruner simply defines narrative as “an account of events occurring over time” (1991, p.6).

Some use the terms ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ interchangeably; however, sociolinguistics differentiates the two:

“Stories can be described not only as narratives that have a sequential and temporal ordering, but also as texts that include some kind of rupture or disturbance in the normal course of events” (DeFina, 2003).

This rupture and the way it is made normal or explained by the narrative is an important element of stories, especially as ways we make sense of the world and everyday life. In fact, for Bruner, this is perhaps the key to understanding the use of narratives by individuals across their lives. We tell stories to make the inexplicable become understandable and to make sense of our lives as they are.

As many definitions as there are of ‘narrative,’ there are as many ways to analyze narratives or stories. Drawing from qualitative analysis techniques, grounded theory, and fields such as linguistics, Riessman (2008) outlines four types of analysis researchers often use, including thematic analysis (for the content of the story), structural analysis (to understand how content is organized), dialogic analysis (focuses on who the narrative is directed to and for what reason it is told), and finally visual analysis which relies not on words but on visuals (or even maps of story lines) to understand the story being told. Each researcher needs to operationalize ‘narrative’ to fit their research questions as well as clearly outline analysis techniques. If these steps are not seriously considered, the meaning making conveyed by the teller might not be clear or might even be changed by the researcher as part of their own story telling.

Storytelling as a Psychological Tool

Storytelling is ubiquitous. We all tell stories and we tell them often. Stories – including religion, fairy tales, and philosophy – are part of our larger culture and we learn at a young age how to tell stories in order to make meaning (Bruner, 1990). The meaning making process is what many researchers are trying to understand when they turn to narratives as a research tool. While meaning making as an idea has broad representation in the social sciences, Vygotsky (1986) identified two parts to any given act of meaning making: making meaning and making personal sense. For Vygotsky, “meaning” refers to knowledge, the “denotative” aspect of knowing, or what other researchers have labeled “knowing that...” (Ryle, 1949; Vygotsky, 1986). The meaning of a work or idea or act is similar to its dictionary definition, and that definition is public, shared, and standard. “Personal sense,” on the other hand, refers to an individual’s attitude toward, personal experience of, and emotional/affective coloring around a word, idea, or act. It is more like the connotation of a word or phrase; that is, it is personal, idiosyncratic, changing, and experiential (Vygotsky, 1986). Combining these two parts of meaning making, we understand that meaning making *as learning* means for the individual to reproduce the meaning correctly and to make personal sense by fitting it into their framework in a way that is memorable.

From this point of view, narratives and stories are what Vygotsky thought of as psychological tools that come from our cultures and are used by us to make meaning and personal sense of life. They are tools that mediate our meaning making. They are also ways of knowing about the world that help us make sense. In his work building on Vygotsky, Bruner (1986) outlined two ways of knowing: paradigmatic and narrative. The goal of the paradigmatic, or logico-scientific, way of knowing “is the establishment of consistent, verifiable descriptions of the world” (Roberts, 1997, p. 134). This is traditionally what we think of as the goal of research: to establish truths that are verifiable and consistent across time and space. But Bruner also argues that we all have a second way of knowing, the narrative one, which “aims to establish not truth but meaning; [in narrative] explanation is achieved not through argument and analysis but through metaphor and connection” (Roberts, 1997, p. 134). In this sense, stories might be real or imaginary but what matters

in that “the ‘right’ story is the one that connects the tellers’ version through mitigation with the canonical version” (Bruner, 1990, p. 86). This second way of knowing is, as argued above, a key one for social science researchers to access. For the researcher, narratives and stories become windows into the public and private meaning making that people do as they make connections in their lives that make personal sense to them and become the public meanings they share.

Using Narratives for Research

Narratives and stories may be used in many ways by researchers. In some cases, stories are simply collected through interviews or journaling and analyzed for recurring themes and ideas. In other instances, researchers use their own stories as guidance as they strive to understand collective knowledge and shared experiences. One researcher’s own story and lived experiences as a gay woman were combined with stories from the literature to “make visible what has been invisible in research and policy” (Carr, 2013, p. 141). Mental health is one sector of the medical field that relies on stories, but not the only one. Jo Spence, a feminist and photographer, chronicled her fight (and loss) against breast cancer through self-portraits. Sociologist Susan Bell used Spence’s photos, similar to oral or written stories, to “illuminate a neglected issue in the literature – visual representations of illness experience” (Riessman, 2008, p. 154). Individual stories give insight into social understandings and cultural groups. One aspect of culture that has been studied for many years using narratives is language.

Labov (1972) argued that black English vernacular is a language in it’s own right and that the stories told by youth and adults from Harlem were “just as skillful, expressive and effective in their use of language as any other speech community” (Patterson, 2008, p. 22). Labov and his colleagues set out to understand the “differences between the vernacular language... of Harlem and the standard English in the classroom” (1972, p. xiv) to explain the reading failures of African American students apparent in New York City schools. This example, while it utilized personal narratives about fight sequences and being close to death, is also relevant to social and cultural impacts of language and stories. Labov wrote,

“We must then understand the way in which the vernacular culture uses language and how verbal skills develop in this culture” (1972, p. xiv) in order to align schooling with culture in a way to maximize success for all students. This same approach can be used in organizations, which are not only the sum of each individual that makes up the organization but also have a culture of the organization itself.

Organizations ranging from federal agencies to science museums are collecting stories for purposes ranging from archiving to education and interpretation. One example is Oregon Sea Grant, which applies science, engages communities, and educates the public about marine and coastal issues. Upon the first director’s retirement, Oregon Sea Grant interviewed and recorded his early history of the program in order to understand not only where the program has been, but also where it is going. This file is archived for future reference and understanding of the early days of the organization, much like personal oral histories are archived for future generations.

At a 1995 conference, museum professionals were asked to tell stories about their work in museums. The hope was to learn about the shared characteristics of museum employees and also to document growth in the field through stories (Spock, 2000). In fact, more museums are using storytelling to communicate their content to public audiences. This is not uncommon for history or art museums but science museums are now accepting the idea of using stories to “break down barriers to science learning, make complex science content more accessible, relatable, and relevant” (Blog: Telling Science Stories, 2014).

Studying Identity Development

While narratives have long been used to study cultural change, language change and development, learning, psychological trauma, and more recently to document aspects of personal and social experiences that are otherwise neglected in the larger culture, a newer area of research that employs narratives is the study of individual and group identities. Due to our oral tradition as humans, the stories we tell are symbolic of who we are. Stories tell about our identity, not only to our selves but also to others. Identity is dynamic and according to Bruner (1990) is personal and social, individual and collective, innate and

acquired, and inner and outer. Through the work of William James and George Herbert Mead, we come to think of identity as both the “I” and the “me”. The “I” is how we think of ourselves and the “me” is how others think about us. Each person continually constructs and maintains not one but numerous identities (Falk, 2009; Gee, 2000-2001). An important aspect of constructing and maintaining our identity is recognition by others. As a person sends a message that symbolizes who they are, another person must receive and recognize that identity (Gee, 2000-2001). Goffman (1959) refers to this as a presentation of self.

Identity has been and continues to be a focus for social science researchers. One way to learn about identity is through personal narratives. As opposed to traditional interviews, which look for categorical responses, narratives provide a forum for people to tell about the exceptional and make meaning. There is no one right way of constructing meaning. Re-authoring (or re-telling) narratives helps an individual make meaning, that is both meaning and personal sense, out of the everyday through detailed accounts of events (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Riessman, 2008).

Building on the idea of visual analysis discussed briefly above, we can understand people’s participation in meaning making through two landscapes: the landscape of action and the landscape of consciousness (Bruner, 1990). White (2007) built on Bruner’s idea and refers to the landscape of consciousness as the landscape of identity. The landscape of action deals with the where, what, and when of a narrative and includes both an underlying theme and a plot (Bruner, 1990). The landscape of action contains “events, circumstances, sequence, time” and is the “material of the story” (White, 2007, p. 78). The landscape of identity deals with what people think, feel, or believe or what they do not think, feel, or believe; that is, it deals with the realm of personal sense making. The landscape of identity allows narrators to “witness events, reflect on them, and to give voice to understandings about... life and identity” (White, 2007, p. 99). As a clinical psychologist, White allows opportunities for people to re-tell their story in a way so that they move between these two landscapes and make both personal sense and public meaning about events in their lives. The landscape of identity also bears internal and intentional states. Internal states are the bedrock of one’s identity and are thought of as being lasting and “sticky.” These internal

states are outward expressions of a self that is found at the center of our identity. These expressions, elements, or essences, are universally present but to differing degrees in each individual (White, 2007). Intentional states, on the other hand, are one's beliefs, values, and goals and are broad consideration of life. As a practitioner, White prefers accessing intentional states to internal states because what people give value to as they live their life is highly significant in storyline development. As people live their lives they are "going about the business of actively shaping their existence in their effort to achieve their sought-after goals" (White, 2007, p. 103). Stories told by people not only express these intentional states for the analyst, they also make those states external and thus public for the speaker, allowing them to make meaning as well.

Practitioner Guide

"...it is in the trafficking of stories about our own and each others' lives that identity is constructed. The concepts of landscape of action and landscape of consciousness bring specificity to the understandings of people's participation in meaning-making within the context of narrative frames." ~ Michael White

As outlined above, storytelling is taken seriously to document, archive, and publicly share personal successes and failures and might be used as a way to learn about people's identity. For now, I want to focus on the latter, by describing how, in my own work, I use narratives to document environmental identities. Because of my background, I am particularly interested in this through the lens of museum research. Recognizing narrative as a way of knowing, many museums are beginning to incorporate stories into exhibit creation (e.g. Roberts, 1997) and ultimately the exhibits themselves. While this is progress for the field of museum research, I believe what's lacking in general is research on what long-term exposure to exhibits and educational offerings in museums has on staff and volunteers and specifically how this exposure influences their meaning making and sense of self, or identity. Therefore, I have chosen to use narratives as a research methodology in order to provide a forum for people to tell about their meaning making process.

The objective of my research is to understand in what ways working in an environmentally themed organization does or does not shape a person's environmental identity. I use the term "working" here rather casually to refer to both full time staff and volunteers who

contribute 100 or more hours of service to the organization. In order to reach my objective I am asking staff and volunteers to make sense of, talk about, and essentially narrativize their own environmental-based life experiences. The idea of using life experiences comes from Tanner's (1980) study, where he discovered that childhood experiences were critical, or significant, life events for one's development towards becoming an environmental activist. Other formative influences that also led people to conservation work and activism include being in the outdoors, family, books, witnessing habitat alteration, pollution, taking college courses, studying natural systems, and love for the area in which they were raised (Chawla, 1999; Palmer et al., 1998; Peterson, 1982). Having research participants first indicate what they believe to be significant environmental-based life experiences sets the groundwork for engaging them in producing narratives about their lives within this framework. These significant life experiences are the landscape of action – the events and the plot over time – but with prompts from the researcher, they can move into the landscape of identity.

I am going to outline one example in order to put this idea into context. As mentioned, for me, this process begins by eliciting significant environmental-based life experiences. The following is a non-comprehensive list of experiences mentioned by one person:

- ❖ Hiking
- ❖ Sitting outside reading
- ❖ Going to the beach
- ❖ Visiting National Parks
- ❖ Walking
- ❖ Writing congressman about environmental issues
- ❖ Travel
- ❖ Snorkeling in Belize
- ❖ Fishing

To use White's (2007) practice of building a narrative map, as he calls it, I take these life experiences or actions and ask questions that lead to narrative production. Here, I start by asking a broad landscape of action question, followed by a landscape of identity question, and the transcript ends on another landscape of action question. It is not necessary to ask questions in this one to one ratio, but it is the case here.

What is one moment in your life where you felt a connection to nature?

I think the first event that I have a memory of was when dad took my sister and me on a road trip to a dude ranch in Wyoming. This trip was our dream trip because we knew we could ride horses all day. Our dad requested that the dude ranch fax their itinerary to us and I remember laying on our stomachs on the living room carpet with a yellow highlighter in hand and highlighting everything we wanted to do. We planned our trip around all day horseback rides and when we arrived at the dude ranch we stuck to our plan. We saw the majesty of the Tetons, fields of wildflowers, and groves of aspens all from horseback. The group would be so quiet as the horses traversed the land. I remember I loved how the sun would look behind the peaks of the Tetons. Even after spending a week there we didn't want to leave.

What does this reflect in terms of what you value?

This is really the first trip I remember taking with my dad. We did another trip to the ranch a few years later, which was equally memorable, but this is really the start of my travel memories. This trip was my first to our National Parks, which we stopped at on the way to the dude ranch, and really my first with majestic scenery. I feel like after this trip, between seeing National Parks and wilderness from horseback, was when I became interested in nature and wildlife. I think I started noticing my surroundings more and this trip gave me knowledge of what else is out there and the freedom to think about it, and to question it.

Hearing that this trip opened the world for you, is there anything in your recent life that relates to this value of nature?

This year my husband and I traveled to Crater Lake National Park with my dad and we did this hike along the ridge of the lake. It was a hike my dad and I wanted to do a few years ago but the weather was bad. This time it was a perfectly sunny and a warm day and we had great views of the lake for most of the hike. Because it was a pretty steep hike we had to stop and catch our breath every once in a while, which allowed us time to actually take in the scenery. I noticed the pattern of trees on the side of the mountains and could hear birds chirping but what surprised me the most was being able to hear the road. You just have this perspective that you're in a National Park and it will be peaceful and quiet so hearing cars and trucks in the distance was somewhat disturbing.

This story is beginning to identify beliefs and values of the narrator, including when they first felt a connection to nature and placed value on the opportunity to see nature in this unique way. Value is also placed on the idea of being separate from a built environment (cars and trucks) when in the natural world. These ideas can be visualized as a narrative map,

which is produced below (Figure 1). The longer the story, as guided by more questions from the researcher, the more arrows and movement between the two landscapes.

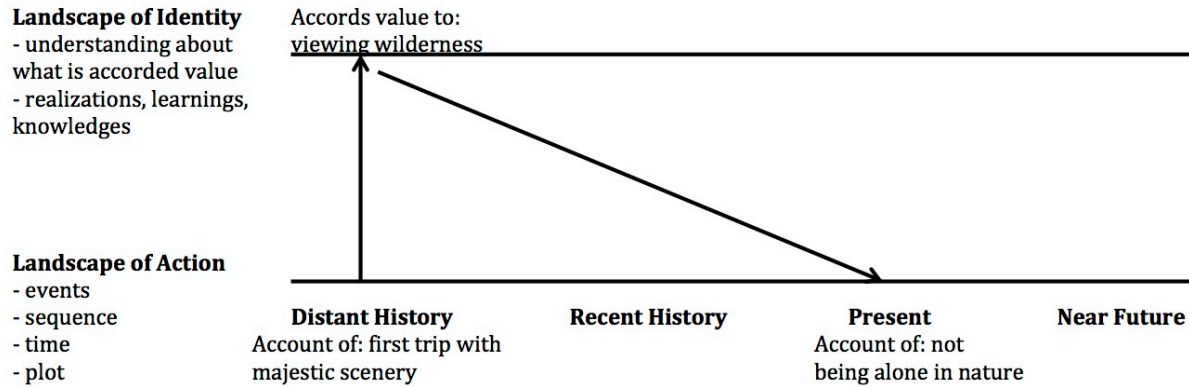


Figure 1. Example of a narrative map.

What can organizations do with this sort of information? In my work, these narratives are a selection of unique cases of staff and volunteers, based on the breadth and depth of significant environmental-based experiences initially mentioned. Beyond analyzing narratives visually by creating a map, researchers might also analyze narratives with one of the more traditional methods (thematic, structural, dialogic, etc.). One blend between White's (2007) maps and traditional thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008) is Wertsch's (2002) idea of 'schematic narrative templates,' which focus on the idea that there are culturally or socially standard ways of telling 'this' or 'that' kind of story. Certain pieces of a story that conform to or are built on a schematic narrative template have to be present but each person adds in their own biographically unique details. Take, for example, how individuals narrativize what happened during the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Most people share ideas about certain aspects of the story, but specific stories such as where one was or whom they were with will differ. Participants might tell stories to me, as a researcher, in a specific way, and in a different way than how they tell their friends. What researchers can look for are one or more schematic structures that repetitively appear across different participants' narratives as well as core stories participants have and share.

By considering both the landscape of action and the landscape of identity, researchers might begin to understand individual's beliefs and values. Identifying and understanding beliefs and values can help organizations create programs and opportunities that have meaning for people who may hold shared experience and a variety of identities, both individually and culturally. If participants share schematic narrative templates, then these commonalities can be used by the organization. For instance, by understanding how individuals make sense of certain events, the organization might begin taking a bottom-up approach for programming or training versus a top-down approach that is often used in organizations. Along these same lines, the organization can provide learning opportunities or certain programs based on the needs, beliefs, values, desires, and interests of individuals within their organization. In organizations where equality might be an issue, the narrative maps and schematic narrative templates are ways of understanding and sharing similarities, and therefore a way to bring individuals or departments together in new ways.

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