

Identity

Identity as Narrative

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Abstract

A broad literature has converged on the importance of accounts, narratives and other rhetorical devices in creating meaning and negotiating identities (e.g., Ashforth, 2001; Scott and Lyman, 1968; Van Maanen, 1998; Weick, 1995). In recent years, scholars have also paid increasing attention to the diverse ways individuals convey and construct personal and professional identities at work, for example, how they use humor, dress, and office décor to accentuate both group identity and personal distinctiveness (Elsbach, 2003; Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997, Van Maanen, 1998). One important way of expressing and claiming identity that has received less scholarly attention in research on career processes and dynamics, however, is narrative.

A narrative is a story that posits a history for an outcome (Weick, 1995). This paper argues that narration is important means of constructing and altering work identities (Gergen, 1997; Ibarra, 2005; Linde, 1993; McAdams, 1997; Van Maanen, 1998) because narrative sustains or restores three key features of identity – its reflexivity, interpersonal nature, and the continuity of the self over time (Baumeister, 1998). First, narrative allows self-reflection by creating a distance between the narrator and the protagonist of the narrative: “consequently, the narrator can observe, reflect, adjust the amount of distance, and correct the self that is being created. The very act of narrating creates the occasion for self-regard and editing.” (Linde, 1993:105). Second, telling one’s story is an interpersonal act. Since identities are claimed and granted in social interaction (Baumeister, 1998; Cooley, 1959; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), without a compelling narrative the external audience for one’s identity claims remains dubious and skeptical (Ashforth, 2001; Gergen, 1997). Finally, narrative establishes or restores identity continuity in the face of any apparent discontinuity or break with the past. A good story allows people to show that the changes they seek (or have experienced) are really not discontinuous or that discontinuity is not as problematic as it might seem (Linde, 1993:140).

Not all narratives are equally compelling. A good story rests on a coherent, goal-directed sequence of events in which the past is related to the present, and from that connection, one can extrapolate to the future (Gergen, 1997; Weick, 1995). A coherent life story is one that demonstrates that our lives are a series of unfolding related and linked events that make sense (Linde, 1993). Establishing coherence, in turn, rests on demonstrating continuity and causality: Continuity implies that although the situation has changed, the fundamental essence of the protagonist remains the same, e.g., in certain key ways the person I was yesterday is the person I am today and will be the person I am tomorrow. Causality implies that there are good and sufficient reasons for observed or impending changes in the protagonist’s trajectory.

This paper argues that a good narrative is especially important for justifying career transition and change. The person in transition faces the narrative challenge of accounting for oneself as both inherently stable and undergoing change at the same time. Landing a post as a medical director of a large hospital, for example, may show that the person in question has been a successful doctor so far and also demonstrates that she is on her way to a higher professional status. Explaining changes that entail moving to a different path, as when the same doctor considers founding a sports equipment business, however, call into question both the person’s past identity claims and future prospects. The former conforms to what Gergen (1997) labels a “progressive narrative,” a story that links events over time so as to show incremental improvement along some valued dimension such as promotion, status, or expertise. The latter requires a transition narrative, one that tells what events rendered the progressive trajectory untenable or unappealing. Making a career transition entails substituting an often well-rehearsed progressive narrative with a fledgling transition story that can only develop in detail and coherence by telling and retelling it, putting it into the public sphere long before it is fully formed (Lave and Wenger, 1991). An appropriate narrative, therefore, is needed to establish or restores identity continuity, a difficult task when anticipated career changes are discontinuous, or otherwise deviate from socially acceptable trajectories (Ashforth, 2001).

Narratives are also a critical means of managing multiple identities. While a consistent narrative told across diverse social circles consolidates identity, it also constrains the person to live up to the self they have claimed to be. Following Bateson (2004:69), we explore the consequences of developing multiple versions of one's life story.

In sum, this paper develops theoretical support for the notion of identity as narrative by developing conceptual links between identity construction tasks and narrative forms, and by showing how identity claiming and granting processes depend on narrative properties such as continuity and causality. The paper then describes how a narrative perspective can illuminate theoretical and empirical issues in research on boundaryless careers including career transition and change, and the multiplicity of the self.

Key Points

- Identity is the concept of self over time and is made sense of through narrative.
 - Narratives are interpersonal – which narrative is told depends on who is present
- Identity as Narrative
 - There are different types of narrative – but they all give both parties a sense of self

Future Directions & Implications

- We need more narrative analysis of stories people tell in and out of organizations
 - Narrative analysis must be evaluative.
- We need the qualitative data itself
 - Solicitation of the narrative must be done in a way that is natural and conversational

Questions & Answers

- If identity is narrative, and narrative is interpersonal - then what about when you are alone?
 - Those who work alone have rich narratives – we tell our narratives to ourselves.
- How do we operationalize a narrative?
 - It must have a plot, it must be enduring, it links the past & future through retelling in the present