1 Careers, Emotion and Narrative: How Stories Become Scripts and Scripts Become Lives

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Abstract

In this chapter I examine how emotions can stimulate story-telling, and how these stories can become scripts, for our careers and lives. To develop this theme I examine a pivotal event in my own career, my decision to drop out of university, which captures many of the key themes in play. I show how I "narratively sleepwalked" onto and off a degree course, how my underlying career narrative led me to pursue a particular path despite abundant evidence that it was not for me, and how the roots of this ongoing error can be traced back to a much earlier period of my life. The chapter identifies a number of issues around narrative and memory, showing how a career narrative can influence perceptions of current and future events, but also recollection of past events.

Introduction

This chapter examines the role of narrative as a coping strategy for disruptions to the career project. Previous work has examined this phenomenon in mid-career (Blenkinsopp and Zdunczyk, 2005; Blenkinsopp, 2007a and 2007b), but here the focus is on early career. This might seem an unlikely point to explore career disruption, but even prospective career projects are narratively constructed. I will examine, using autoethnography, how we may construct narratives which are plausible but 'wrong' (Gabriel, 2004). Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research [that connects] the personal to the cultural". Anderson (2006) terms this 'evocative' autoethnography, and suggests a more 'analytic' autoethnography is also possible. This approach is adopted here, as a response to the methodological difficulty of gathering data on both the long arc of career and the short run fluctuations of emotion (Blenkinsopp, 2006). My experiences become 'data', available for analysis in the same manner in which individual clinical cases are analysed and written up for publication. I show how

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misreading my own character at a key stage of my childhood led me to develop a narrative of my future career which was badly at odds with 'reality' and yet shaped my career decisions for almost a decade.

The Case of the University Dropout

When I began to think about my career, dropping out of university in October 1986 after just 3 weeks, seems the obvious place to start. However, I quickly found myself having to explain the complicated sequence of events which led up to it.

Retracing My Steps

In early 1985 I dropped 'A' level Geography and took Physics, which had significant consequences for my career, as I failed to get the grade in Physics needed to get into Medical School. I came late to my decision to apply for Medicine and thought this weakened my application. I imagined Medical Schools wanted applicants who 'always' wanted to become a doctor, and my original 'A' level choices gave away that I hadn't been thinking about Medicine when I made them. Bruner (1990) notes our sensitivity to 'breaches' in expected canonical forms and, conscious of this, I was constructing a 'false' account in my application, calculated to give an impression which was misleading and closer to the 'typical' applicant's narrative.

In August 1984 I passed my 'O' levels. I hadn't thought much about going into Sixth Form or what I would study, I just expected to take the sciences. As I only actually liked Chemistry, and my 'O' levels indicated humanities were my forte, this is surprising. I was aware of this, as I saw a Careers Adviser to discuss it and this led to me adding Geography as a sop to my concern at dropping my 'best' subjects. This was a non-decision: I took another 'A' level rather than make a hard choice about which subject to drop.

Earlier that summer I read a biography of Freud and began to think about becoming a psychiatrist, though that did not crystallise into a decision to apply to study Medicine for several months.

In spring 1982, I chose my 'O' level options. I wanted to study sciences but my housemaster, impressed by my argumentative stance with a priest who had insisted on the literal truth of Genesis, felt I had a flair for rhetoric and argumentation and should study humanities. I proved his point by arguing my way into to taking the sciences. This represented my first conscious career choice.

Each event described above appears minor, yet each had a significant emotional component and important career consequences.

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What Happened Next

After I dropped out, my 'A' levels made me strikingly over-qualified for almost all the jobs for which I applied. I included my brief time at university on applications, oblivious to the negative impression it created, so was asked at every interview whether I thought I would go back to university to which I would blithely answer 'yes, probably'. The first time a panel didn't ask, I got the job.

That job was at the Department of Health & Social Security. I hated it, and almost immediately started applying for other jobs, mostly lab technician posts, as they offered the easiest route out. Having good science 'A' levels, I always got shortlisted, but would then be interviewed by a puzzled middle-aged chemist who couldn't understand why 'an office worker' wanted to work in a lab. I found this infuriating because I saw myself as a scientist and this self-image represents the common thread running through my early career. In the next section I trace its origins and how it came to have such an influence.

How Events Produce Stories

During my time at school my career aspirations were only loosely formed, but led to a raft of potential career stories, diverse yet in some ways similar. I use the term raft deliberately, in order to be able to draw an analogy with log driving, the technique used by lumberjacks to bring logs downstream. Logs are not lashed together, they form a loose raft simply because the current pushes them together. The current on which my raft rode could be loosely described as 'science and nature'.

The origins of this could be traced to the excitement of the Space Race, to the popularity of science fiction shows like Dr Who, and to my nearness to nature, the countryside being literally over our back fence. I read a lot about science and nature and grew quite knowledgeable. All this played its part, yet I would trace the origins of my 'would-be scientist' career narrative to an emotion – feeling lonely. I was a gregarious child but encountered a major barrier to being gregarious – the major pastime was football, which I was hopeless at and hated. During my early school years this produced a sharp division between school and home – at school football dominated, whereas at home we just 'played out' – on our bikes, climbing trees, etc. The position reversed when I started secondary school – football dominated less at school, but we had moved to a new estate where it seemed everyone but me wanted to spend their days playing football. Since my friends from school lived further away, for a while, my life outside of school was relatively solitary. I spent much of my time exploring nearby woods with our dogs. It was not that I fled from human contact to the solitude of nature, just that I enjoyed those activities

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more. If there had been a dozen other like-minded kids, no doubt we'd have formed a gang but there wasn't, so I was often alone.

McAdams and Janis suggest adolescents lack the "cognitive flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity that are required for making narrative sense of what a complex world has to offer" (2004: 168), which leads them to narrate their lives in terms of "stories that embody a high degree of coherence *but may have little relation to the reality of their lives*" (2004: 163, emphasis added). My self-narrative at this time emphasised a solitary self, and when I looked to the future, the careers I envisaged reflected this – I imagined myself working alone and in nature.

My 'science and nature' career narrative was undermined by the gulf between the science which so captured my attention and science as taught in school. My 'raft' became less tightly bound, and my yen to be 'a scientist' faded gradually. I went from 'naturalist' to 'something scientific', and eventually, to 'something using science 'A' levels'. Nevertheless, even in its attenuated form this 'scientific' narrative influenced my career choices for an extended period.

So, a narrative identity created in response to a very particular emotion episode (feeling lonely for a short period in my early teens) was propagated across time despite being in many respects being a woefully inaccurate depiction. The gregarious, articulate boy recognised by his housemaster did not recognise himself, and chose options consistent with his own misapprehension, in pursuance of a loosely plotted but coherent 'scientific' career narrative. He repeated this mistake when choosing 'A' levels, inadvertently corrected it by choosing Medicine, then repeated it again in choosing an alternative degree through clearing. Even dropping out of a scientific degree course didn't seriously undermine this narrative, for reasons which I outline later.

How might we theorise this? Weick (1995) suggests events trigger an emotional response which cues sensemaking and identity construction, both of which are narrative in form. This process can generate narratives which are plausible but misleading, most especially where events trigger intense negative emotion such that the search for meaning is almost frantic: we look to make sense of the situation to 'make the emotions go away'. Even less intense emotions stimulate us to develop and enact a narrative interpretation, which may then frame our understanding on an ongoing basis for an extended period. Sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995), meaning that a narrative can be developed and sustained even though an accuracy-driven analysis would suggest a quite different interpretation.

How Stories Become Scripts: A Driven Man

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> You will *never* understand how it feels to live your life with no meaning or control and with nowhere left to go. You are amazed that they exist and they burn so bright whilst you can only wonder why. (*Common People*, lyrics by Jarvis Cocker)

The aftermath of me dropping out created an 'engine' which drove me forward on the 'wrong tracks', the tracks laid down by my misguided 'scientific' career narrative. The anxiety which pervaded my life at that time, a fear I would 'amount to nothing', drove my sensemaking for an extended period and made me perennially concerned about my career. I spent six months on the dole, but this extended period of unemployment wasn't particularly noteworthy in the context of youth unemployment levels in my home town at the time. The experience made me very aware I did not come from a background that would hand me many opportunities, and conscious I had spurned the main opportunity – university education – that might have made the biggest difference. My subsequent experiences of unemployment, and extended observation of it through my time at the DHSS and as an outplacement counsellor for British Coal, gave me a strong belief that the wolf does not live far from the door. I was once told that 'talent' will always find work, but I know that is simply not true and a gnawing fear of unemployment or getting stuck in a dead-end job pervaded my career. Only relatively recently has the fear subsided, but it is never far below the surface.

So, despite now working in a profession which is practically a byword for 'comfortably middle class', there is still a certain working class attitude underneath. For a long time I had a 'chip on my shoulder', and my career aspirations were partly driven by a 'Jack's as good as his Master' attitude. I knew I was at least as smart and capable as the people for whom I worked, but having eschewed the sensible route of university and a graduate career, I had to work doubly hard to prove this and get to the position I 'deserved'. I could portray this in terms of me knuckling down and getting on through hard work and indeed there was a good deal of that. However, the emotional tone was less sanguine and positive – a mix of surliness and paranoia.

How Scripts Become Lives

> Autobiography, however implicit or explicit, always risks becoming self-sealing in the sense that it may tempt the teller into a 'life' that suits circumstances so comfortably that it even conceals the possibility of choice.   (Bruner, 1995: 162)

The narrative surrounding me dropping out of university was told and retold for years, often with an instrumental imperative (eg. a job interview) which 'prevented' me from re-examining the events in a more detached manner. In my account above, as I moved backwards in time each jump backwards was to an apparent turning point, where we encounter me weaving a tale to rationalise

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a particular course of action. Moir (1993) notes young people are frequently called upon to explain their career choices – in applications for work or study, to parents, teachers and friends – and can become accomplished at accounting for their actions in differing ways to different audiences. When I dropped out, the narrative I told was "wrong course, wrong university, wrong city, wrong house" plus "will be going back to university soon" (omitting the embarrassing but more accurate "was totally homesick" and the crucial "didn't really want to go in the first place"). It was hard for me to admit the latter even to myself, and this represents something of a *leitmotif* for my career thinking over many years, I often make decisions based on emotion, but mask this (from myself as much as anyone) by what appears a perfectly rational explanation for the decision. This is consistent with the idea of narrative as a response to the emotion triggered by events. Events do not have to be novel to trigger an emotional response, but where they *are* novel the emotional response is likely to be more intense and possibly more prolonged: more intense because the disruption is greater, more prolonged because it will take longer to develop a plausible narrative which 'normalizes the breach, restores the expectation, and enables projects to continue' (Weick et al., 2005: 414).

This suggests minor events can have major effects by stimulating the development of a narrative which becomes a personal 'canonical form' (Bruner, 1990). Such a development will not generally be a mere unfolding. The chaos theory notion of 'sensitive dependence on initial conditions' *may* be apposite for career systems with a single point of entry, where career progression thereafter is dependent more on seniority than performance, such as the French *cadre* system (Dany, 2003). However, it seems less likely in the context of a boundaryless career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), so we might ask how it is possible for an early, embryonic narrative to become a fully-fledged personal canonical form. One explanation is that although the plausibility of a career narrative may wax and wane over time, it is unlikely to be completely replaced unless a better narrative can be found. And since the narrative serves as a heuristic, we attend less to information which conflicts with the narrative, thereby progressively reducing the likelihood that new information will be noticed and a better narrative developed.

I suggested a 'scientific' career narrative arose in my early teens and ran through the first ten years of my career, shaping the choices I made. I do not want to imply a sense of inevitability to this. At key points other factors served to keep me on this particular path, illustrated by two examples. Firstly, in my school year the brightest pupils chose the sciences, so the idea of taking the Humanities was to some degree 'unthinkable' – I was kept on the tracks of my 'scientific' narrative by a felt imperative to compete with my peers, a sense that to do otherwise would be mildly shameful. Secondly, lab technician posts offered the best route out of the DHSS, and this served to repair the disruption to my 'scientific' career narrative caused by me dropping out of a scientific

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degree course. This was supported by one of the ways I used to explain my decision to drop out, which was that I had chosen Chemical Engineering thinking it would be similar to Applied Chemistry. Applied Chemistry thus became the 'road not travelled' which I told everyone would have been the right degree. These two situations served to buttress the 'scientific' narrative such that it was told often and for a long time, and eventually became a canonical form, acting as a script for my career.

Narrative and Memory

Though the theme of narrative and memory runs right through this chapter, I want to address it directly in this section. My parents' recollection of how I came to apply to study Medicine is rather different from that outlined earlier. They recall a major driver in my search for a degree subject had been a concern with employment on graduation. I told my mother I'd discovered graduates in Medicine had a 100% employment record. That a semi-conscious fear of unemployment should be in mind at the time is unsurprising, and its influence can be seen in my hurried choice to do Chemical Engineering, which also seemed to offer a cast-iron guarantee of work after graduation. This gives an interesting insight into my thinking, quite at odds with my own narrative of reading a biography of Freud and becoming intrigued by the idea of becoming a psychiatrist.

In the revised career narrative, a working class child of Thatcherism, growing up in the region most despoiled by Thatcherite industrial policy, has issues of unemployment writ large in his thinking. In search of a degree offering good employment prospects he finds Medicine, an occupation already contemplated as being of interest. In response to his perceptions of the expectations of the Medical School admissions process, he begins the process of constructing a narrative identity around Medicine, for example by changing 'A' levels to avoid the (correct) impression that applying for Medicine was a recent decision. University applications were a major topic of conversation in the Sixth Form, and so he gets to tell his 'going to be a doctor' narrative a lot. At some point the narrative becomes detached from its origins, and he becomes enchanted by the notion that he has found his vocation.

My original version is much better suited to the conventions of autobiography, but which version is correct? Do such corrections to my recollection matter? Commenting on the use of autobiography in research, Bruner states:

> It does not matter whether the account conforms to what others might say who were witnesses, nor are we in pursuit of such ontologically obscure issues as whether the account is "self-deceptive" or "true". Our interest, rather, is only in

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> what the person thought he did, what he thought he was doing it for, what kind of plights he thought he was in, and so on.   (Bruner, 1990: 119)

Following this logic, it would not matter whether the events occurred exactly as I described them, but crucially important that the account honestly reflects my perception and analysis of the situation at the time. But here's the rub – there is no particular reason to assume my recall of my *perceptions* is any more accurate than my recall of the *facts*. I have argued the 'facts' of these situations gave rise to narratives, which persisted and shaped my perception of *subsequent* events. Equally significant for the current discussion is the way in which these narratives may have shaped my perception of *past* events – to the extent that some significant events were lost to my recollection.

In autobiography the author is implicitly making claims of accuracy greater than those made by authors presenting the accounts of others – Lejuene (1989) calls this the 'autobiographical pact'. Autoethnographers face particular difficulties in attempting to distinguish between their perceptions then and now, their narratives then and now. They are able to recognise their own changing perspectives on these stories, which can lead to an excess of caveats within the writing, intended to avoid misleading the reader, but which may serve simply to confuse. Medford coined the term mindful slippage to describe "the difference between what we know (or what we cannot remember) and what we write" (2006: 853) and argues that though editing is unavoidable, autoethnographers must accept an ethical imperative to maintain truthfulness.

Conclusion

This chapter examined my decision to drop out of university, the roots of this decision, and its impact upon my career. The case suggests several matters of considerable significance to understanding the importance of emotion in career theory. Emotion is likely to have a disproportionate influence in early career because a) it comes first and can therefore influence the rest of our career, b) at this early stage we have no prior experience which might help us make sense of the situation and our emotional response, and c) emotion regulation improves with age (Gross et al., 1997). For all these reasons, we are likely to search avidly for narratives which help us 'cope with the pain'. Yet at the same time, our narrative skills are less well-developed (McAdams and Janis, 2004). Taking these matters together, since we are making an urgent search for narrative explanations for events which are novel to us, we are more 'at risk' of developing plausible but misleading narratives – narratives which fit poorly with the 'facts' of the situation, yet are so plausible that they come to shape our recollection. Finally, such narratives can have a prolonged and potentially baleful impact upon our careers, since we may go forward making sense of our

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career on the basis of this initial narrative, which may not be re-evaluated unless and until some significant shock (cf. Louis, 1980) makes us revise this narrative.

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