

Coaching and Cross-Cultural Transitions: a narrative inquiry approach

Birgit den Outer, Business School, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK.

Email: b.den-outer@brookes.ac.uk

Abstract

This article explores the use of a narrative inquiry approach as a research method for research on coaching practice. It is based on an MA research project on the application of developmental theory to the construction of a stage model for use in cross-cultural coaching practice. Seven international students at a UK university business school related their experiences of living in the UK and how it affected their perspectives of themselves and their meaning-making processes. The article attempts to address three questions: what purpose can narrative inquiry serve in coaching research? What are the pitfalls of a narrative inquiry approach? And perhaps most importantly, how useful could a narrative inquiry be in showing up cultural bias in developmental theory? Initial findings and emerging future research themes are highlighted.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, cross-cultural coaching, developmental theory, narratives and identity

Introduction

Developmental theories¹ are an upcoming domain in coaching research and practice and gaining in popularity because of their perceived alignment with coaching objectives of increased awareness, transformational learning and guiding developmental changes through the lifespan (e.g. Berger 2006, Laske 2006, Bachkirova and Cox 2007, Derry 2008, Cox and Jackson 2010). With this growing popularity also comes increased interest in the applicability of developmental concepts in coaching practice. Attention has been given to universalities of concepts such as ‘regression’ and ‘hierarchy of the developmental stages’ and the desirability of the coach facilitating change from one developmental level to the next (Bachkirova and Cox 2007, Kroger 2004, Manners and Durkin, 2001). However, less attention has been given to caveats with regards to using developmental theories and models in a cross-cultural coaching context. Despite a ‘large and growing body of cross-cultural research’ (Maynard 2008, p. 57) in the area of neo-piagetian cognitive developmental psychology² and the emergence of a relatively new domain of developmental contextualism (Kroger 2004), *implications* for coaching and leadership

¹ I am using this term as a ‘catch-all’ to include all Piagetian, neo-Piagetian theories, such as cognitive developmental, ego developmental and constructive developmental theories.

² Maynard (2008) presents a useful overview of (neo-)Piagetian cross-cultural research, from the 1960s onwards, in three stages: 1. Carry methods (transportation of methods across cultures, testing the universality of Piaget’s theory) 2. Finding the underlying cognitions and designing tasks (adaptation of

development are seldom taken into account. For instance, in the area of leadership development theories, developmental concepts are uncritically and universally applied, despite limitations in research design such as sample size and cultural homogeneity³ (McCauley *et al.*, 2006). It seems timely that coaching research embarks on its own investigations to avoid similar pitfalls.

In this article, I consider what opportunities a narrative inquiry approach has to offer research on developmental models for use in cross-cultural coaching practice. I also reflect on my experience of using this approach in my own research. I end with some brief suggestions for future research themes.

The research looked at the use of developmental theory and how it could inform a stage model for use in a cross-cultural coaching practice. To this end, I did in-depth interviews with seven international students at a UK business school on their experiences of living in the UK and by way of triangulation, one interview with a professional who lived in Italy for four years. My justification for choosing international business school students is that they are potential expatriate employees, and cross-cultural coaching is likely to take place in an expatriate context.

The questions were about what it meant to be living in the UK: what does it mean for the development of our identity to be on cross-cultural journey? In the psychodynamic coaching literature (Zagier Roberts and Brunning, 2007), a distinction is made between meaning-making practice and goal-attainment practice and by researching my topic in the way that I did, I envisaged that my research findings could contribute to knowledge at the meaning-making end of the coaching spectrum.

Identity and culture

One of the central notions that underpinned the study was Kegan's (1982) developmental definition of identity as a continuous and life-long meaning-making process. An individual creates coherence and understands the world around at one particular stage but, through new experiences, loses this understanding before reforming it again at a higher level of complexity. Central to this notion of meaning making and the changing stages of development is the dichotomy of the subject (or "self") versus the object (the "other", or "it", or "conscious self"). This dichotomy denotes the distinction between an embedded intrapsychic framework from which individuals cannot distance themselves, and that which they *can* observe in themselves and therefore play with and manipulate (see also Kroger, 2004). An individual progresses from one stage to the next when what they *are* becomes what they *have*.

Another central notion was that of "culture", a complex and much written about concept, which conjures up many meanings, not only in everyday language but also in

Piaget's methods to a more 'ecocultural approach') 3. Exploring other cultures' models of cognition and development.

³ Authors of this review of developmental theory and leadership found only two studies that focused on leaders outside the United States.

different disciplines representing a number of perspectives. Usually, theorists steer clear of presenting one particular definition, giving instead a discipline-specific overview of the history and evolution of thought processes around the term. A pragmatic definition, i.e. one that could give a context for capturing experiences for coaching clients who have physically crossed a national border, is offered in the domain of cross-cultural psychology. Laungani (2007, pp. 35-36) suggests that all cultures possess core and peripheral features, the former category containing elements such as a past history, a dominant religion, core values and traditions and unique artefacts such as literature, art, music. Elements from the second category vary from culture to culture and include language, internationally recognised boundaries, and social practices. I would add to this the encounter with a foreign language, as included in Laungani's (2007) definition, often forgotten about by native English speaking social scientists or organisational development theorists who write for a world where their language seems so widely employed and understood. This element, learning how to express oneself in a language that is not our own, is a profound experience and significant learning curve, the effect of which on identity warrants a research project of its own.

In summary, crossing culture is leaving the familiar as well as entering the unfamiliar. Related to this, an important notion comes to mind. Feldman (1991 in Martin, 2002, p. 58) rightfully points out that members of a culture do not necessarily share the same values; on the contrary, some members may be vehemently opposed in a number of ways. What holds them together, however, is a *shared frame of reference* in recognition of relevant issues that are either positively or negatively valued: "They may array themselves differently with respect to that issue, but...they are all *oriented* to it" (my italics). I propose that it is the temporary losing of a shared recognition and orientation with regard to the elements mentioned by Laungani (2007) that characterises this specific client group and in which particular coaching openings are found.

Narrative inquiry as research method – what makes us us?

With these two concepts forming the framework for the study, I held semi-structured interviews to collect different perspectives on my research participants' cross-cultural experiences. Based on these and my knowledge of the developmental psychology literature, notably Torbert *et al.*'s (2004) leadership development framework and Kegan's (1982) subject/object processes, I ended my research with the introduction of a tentative stage-based model for use in cross-cultural coaching practice. I also formulated coaching responses for each of the stages, further building on Kegan and Lahey's (2009) work. For the purpose of this article, I will not discuss this model further but instead, focus on the research methodology that I employed.

In my mind, a narrative inquiry concerns itself with the relationship between identity and experience: where does our identity end and our experiencing begin? What makes us *us*? Narrative strategies in that sense address the issue of a continuation of identity amidst relentless change, and provide a *representation* of how we came to be the person that we are (Pasupathi *et al.*, 2007). In creating our narratives in collaboration with the other, we are making explicit our stance in - and perspective on - the world (Czarniawska 2004). This is true even when the other is not present, such as when writing a

diary (e.g. Monrouxe (2009) who points towards the “known individual” in the audience of the audio diary narratives).

Narrative analysis mainly came about as a counterpoint to the absolute, non-perspectival knowledge claims of positivism (e.g. see Tsoukas, 2004), but also as a critique on mainstream qualitative research within the social sciences⁴ Rather than presenting data in broad thematic chunks, taken out of context, narrative analysis favours presentation of the complete account, thereby showing the underlying meaning, complexities and richness that make up people’s experiences (Riessman, 2001; Riessman 1993, in Bryman, 2004). Furthermore, the researcher is recognised as co-producer of the story that is being told, in the sense that what becomes important is framed by what the interviewee wants to tell but also by what the researcher wants to know (see Czarniaswska, 2004).

Accounts or stories are always situated and thus interpreted in a wider context; they cannot just exist as they are (e.g. Czarniawska, 2004). From this it follows that narratives are culturally embedded - that there are broader, culturally defined patterns that determine the way stories are being told and the position an individual holds within them. The extent to which emphasis is placed on grand societal narratives versus the narrative as an individual’s sense-making process⁵, seems to be related to the discipline from which theories and concepts have been taken.

Lisa and Barati

I now introduce two of my research participants Lisa and Barati. Lisa is Danish; she was born in a multi-cultural part of Copenhagen to a car mechanic father, who worked his way up, and a housewife mother. She is in his 10th year of living in the UK, although she has returned to live in Denmark for two periods since first moving to the UK. Living in the UK was her first experience of living in a culture outside her own. Barati was my only non-European participant. He was from Tibet and had only arrived in the UK the previous year but had lived in various other countries before for his studies. His father is a teacher, his mother a housewife.

In the introduction, I highlighted the critique of developmental theory as too euro-centric and as glossing over different types of experience and their impact on development (e.g. McCauley *et al.*, 2006; Kroger, 2004). I therefore felt it was important to conduct an interview with language that was as open as possible. I indicated that there were a few time periods I wanted to talk about, centred around moving abroad: my interviewees’ life before, during and after the event of cultural re-location. There was therefore a certain imposed chronology but few specific questions. However, even this awareness could not prevent certain misunderstandings of very fundamental concepts. For instance, my conversations with Lisa were quite smooth, with her re-location story being quite similar to mine:

⁴ However, the use of narratives is inherently interdisciplinary and not confined to data analysis within the social sciences and has also been used in areas like law, literature, medicine, or organisational studies (Riessman, 2001, Gabriel *et al.* 2002, Tsoukas 2004, Labov 1997, Czarniawska, 2004).

⁵ Elsewhere this debate is coined as ‘small’ versus ‘big’ stories (Bamberg, 2006)

BdO: “Ok, let me phrase the question a little bit differently then, do you feel that you are authentically you here?”

Lisa: “Yes. And I believe that is a very important point because I believe many people don’t. And that is probably why I am so happy here. I can be quintessentially me. I don’t have to adapt in a way that I don’t want to adapt. And that is probably why I don’t feel homesick. Because I want to be here, because of the things I want to realise, the British culture, being in Britain, being at this university, helps me to realise my dreams, my goals. I am accepted and tolerated the way I am.”

It is important to point out that what Lisa describes did not happen overnight but was a slow, arduous journey of observation and imitation, trial and error. However, the point of this snippet is to show that the interviewer and interviewee have a similar understanding of the word “authenticity”. Lisa was my first interviewee and over the course of interviewing my other research participants, all from Eastern Europe, I noticed that the authenticity question was much too big and direct. So when I came to the interview with Barati, my last one, I had adapted my wording quite a bit and tried to ask this particular question in a very roundabout way:

BdO: I’ve got another question, and I’ve been asking people that in my other interviews, and people found it difficult to answer, so if you don’t know how to answer it, don’t worry about it. I’m asking people when they think about who they are as a person, do they feel that the country that they’re living in now,[...] do you feel that you can be *you* in this country? Do you feel that for the person that you are, there’s a place for you here?”

Barati: “That is a very political question, this is a political question”.

BdO: “Do you think?”

Barati: [It’s] a citizenship thing, citizenship rights and everything [...] All political borders, all, say in the Netherlands, Britain, all these political borders are created by human beings, not by nature or by God. So ... until we do good where we are, right, we definitely are a complete perfect citizen of that country. [...] *to be a perfect citizen of that country, it is my duty to do good.* [my emphasis] Right?

BdO: “OK. Yeah.”

Barati: “Until I do good for this country, or I do not do any bad for this country, I feel I am also a citizen of this country”.

There is some evidence from life story/narrative inquiry research that the manner of people’s story telling is culturally embedded. For instance, Americans are more likely to frame their stories as tales of redemption, or overcoming personal hardship to conquer in the end, whereas Asian and African storytellers are less inclined to bring in the individual, or to take some kind of personal perspective (Pasupathi *et al.* 2007, pp. 90-91). Because my data sample is very small I would not want to draw conclusions from just these two

snippets on the manner of story telling in Lisa's and Barati's respective cultures. That said, comparing these two pieces of text and the rest of their interviews I can see that both Lisa and Barati showed quite complex philosophical engagement with their experiences. However, one cannot help but notice that Lisa's perspective on her cultural re-location is person-centred; it is about what this country and this university can do for her, whereas Barati's worldview is about how humans collectively should behave in order to obtain rights of residence, anywhere. Neither of their views is less valid, or less developed, but Lisa and Barati differ in what they consider to be their truths, their world perspective. Here is another example:

BdO: And what about yourself? Do you think you have a better understanding of who you are as a person?

Barati: <Pause> What do you mean by that?

BdO: Well, do you feel you have [...] for instance learned a lot about who you are and how *you* see the world?

Barati: This is a very ... complicated question. I don't understand what you mean. If you ask me "do you understand who you are", there may be different answers.

BdO: Do you want to give me different answers, I don't mind. How do you understand the question?

Barati: It may have religious dimension, you know, dimensions according to religion, they say we are all sons and daughters of God so the ultimate purpose is to realise God, so that is my life, that would be one answer. Right?

BdO: Yeah.

Barati: And there are people in this materialistic world, who are hell-bent to earn money. So if you look from that dimension, life is money. [...] So what I understand from life is balance, a balance between all this material and non-material existence of the world[...] To be happy, to be healthy, to contribute something to the community, to society, politics, betterment, improvement, whatever you say, that is the meaning of life, I think."

The use of a narrative inquiry

Lisa and Barati expressed their perspective on how they see themselves within their context but employed a very different use of language. Comparing the two is useful in demonstrating that what counts as a developed and complex way of thinking in one culture may not do so in another. The key to setting the boundaries of what counts as valid in my mind is through language. This follows on from Flaherty (2005), who bases his coaching work on the philosophy of Wittgenstein. Flaherty (2005) states that, as language provides limitations and opportunities with regard to actions, experiences, relationships, and meaning, the biggest new possibility a coach can offer to a client, therefore, is in expanding

language to make what did not exist before a possibility. He extends his observations to the use of foreign languages where people both construct and inhabit a world that cannot be entered unless one speaks the language. In summary, “[l]anguage is an orientation to our common world” (2005, p. 31), and making observations, holding and expressing a perspective, is impossible without it. To design a developmental model for use in cross-cultural coaching therefore, it has to be borne in mind that the concepts and category boundaries used to define increasing complexity are value-laden and situated in culture.

The narrative inquiry approach helped me define the conditions under which I felt it was useful, and even ethically acceptable, to employ developmental theory in cross-cultural coaching⁶. The most important condition under which it can work is the specification or setting the parameters of the domain of development. In the case of my research project it was development in the context of cross-cultural re-location and assimilation.

Research method considerations

As with all research methods, limitations of a narrative inquiry project can be grouped into those of a practical nature and those of an epistemological nature, although it is sometimes hard to separate the two. To start with the former, first of all, collecting detailed narratives is time consuming. Ideally, I would have like to have interviewed my participants several times over a longer period of time. As it happened, most interviews lasted about an hour and I interviewed two participants twice. I invited interviewees to comment on the written text, treating these comments as data too.

Secondly, the act of “constructing a narrative” is possibly largely a “post-event” strategy, a response by the individual to create a sense of self amidst ongoing change. As I interviewed my participants, the event at the centre of their re-location narrative (my main unit of analysis) was in a sense still under way, so their account of it is possibly less complete. This was noticeable when contrasting the narratives of the seven international students with that of my “triangulation” respondent who had lived in Italy for four years, returned two years ago and was able to reflect on a “completed story”.

Limitations of a more epistemological nature are that the interview, or the “narrative production site” as Czarniawska (2004) calls it, is very much open to manipulation, by both interviewer and interviewee. What is meaningful depends on what the researcher wants to know and what the interviewee wants to tell; what is considered unique depends on their interest. This makes the story that is being told not less “true”; it is, however, only a “sample of reality” (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 49). Calling “moving abroad” an event is an example of where the unit of analysis is driven by the research focus of the researcher: in the broader scheme of their lives my research participants may not experience moving abroad as an event at all.

⁶ I therefore see my research as a contribution to ‘developmental contextualism’ (Kroger, 2004), a relatively recent approach in developmental psychology where apart from the cognitive aspect, social factors are explicitly taken into account.

Another sense in which interviews in social science research are open to manipulation is that interviewees rarely present an unrehearsed story. There is often insufficient time to delve deeper than the “legitimate logic” of the sample life story (Czarniawska, 2004). In that sense, there is a risk that the interview method is somewhat one-dimensional or simplistic and can lead to a story line such as “I left Hungary to come and live in Britain and I was really excited because it was something I always wanted to do...”, because the academic discourse is one of “expanding one’s horizon” and knowing how to embrace the new. Any issues that do not fit this discourse could be left untold. Or, as Monrouxe (2009) words it:

Although we experience events, the events themselves are not stories. We choose which aspects of those events we wish to convey and which to omit, we create plots from disordered experience and give meaning to events (2009, p.82).

Analysis of a narrative poses some headaches. One of the main principles of the narrative inquiry method is that a narrative cannot be broken down into separate chunks but can only exist in its entirety. Short of including every single interview verbatim, how does the researcher honour this principle? It is proposed in the literature (Murray, 2003) that there are two phases in narrative analysis: first a descriptive then an interpretive phase. The former includes a summary of the narrative, identifying key features. The latter includes a process of “appropriation” (a term used by Ricoer, 1981), where the interpreter needs to “play with the account”, rather than just describe it, as well as demonstrate how it relates to the researcher’s theoretical assumptions. For each participant, therefore, I produced a condensed version of the interview narrative, as well as a visual representation of the timeline of their cross-cultural journey and identified significant events. Secondly, although supplemented by interview excerpts from all participants, I analysed just one narrative to answer each of the research questions that I had. The choice of narrative was based on a consideration of which one was most insightful with regard to that particular question, and to some extent representative of other stories in the data. Finally, I also included my own cultural relocation narrative to demonstrate how I co-produced the meta-narrative of the research.

Future research suggestions

I end with four suggestions for future research. Firstly, to obtain more in-depth narratives on the cross-cultural experience for the cross-cultural model, a longitudinal version of my research could be carried out with interviews held periodically to map and inquire into perspective change and development. Perhaps it is interesting to look at other data collection methods, such as the audio or written diary method to allow the possibility of thought outside the subject frame of the research, inquiry into lived experience, and prototypical stories (previously undisclosed stories, Monrouxe, 2009). This method would be able to tackle problems inherent to the method of the semi-structured interview, such as manipulation of the narrative and rehearsed, logical life stories.

Secondly, there is a type of coaching called “narrative coaching” (see Law, 2007; Drake, 2010), which probably deserves more attention than that I have given it here, that could be further explored for cross-cultural coaching purposes. Thirdly, there could be a

further textual investigation into notions of complexity that are culturally specific, and could therefore render problematic developmental analysis tools and the coaching vernacular that they inform. Finally, further exploring cross-cultural narratives could provide an insight for both narrators and interpreters/researchers into processes of how, in Kegan's (1982) terms, language has become something that we have, rather than something that we are.

References

- Bamberg, M. (2006) 'Stories: big or small: why do we care?', *Narrative Inquiry*, Vol. 16 (1), pp. 139–147.
- Bachkirova, T. and Cox, E. (2007) A cognitive-developmental approach for coach development, in Palmer, S. and Whybrow, A. (eds), *Handbook of Coaching Psychology: A Guide for Practitioners*. London: Routledge.
- Berger, Jennifer Garvey (2006) Adult development Theory and Executive Coaching Practice, in: Stober, D. and Grant A. (eds.), *Evidence-Based Coaching Handbook: Putting Best Practice to Work for Your Clients*. New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons.
- Bryman, Alan (2004) *Social Research Methods 2e*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cox, E. and Jackson, P. (2010) Developmental Coaching, in Cox, E., Bachkirova, T. & Clutterbuck, D. (eds.) *The Complete Handbook of Coaching*, London: Sage.
- Czarniawska, Barbara (2004) *Narratives in Social Science Research*, London: Sage.
- Derry, John (2008) *Measuring Developmental Stage in Coaching: Which Instrument?* MA Dissertation, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford.
- Drake, D. B. (2010), 'Narrative Coaching', in Cox, E; Bachkirova, T; Clutterbuck, D. (eds.) *The Complete Handbook of Coaching*, London: Sage.
- Flaherty, J. (2005) *Coaching: Evoking Excellence in Others*, Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann.
- Gabriel, Y., Fineman, S. & Sims, D. (2002), *Organizing and Organizations 2edn*, London: Sage.

- Kegan, R. (1982) *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kegan, R. & Lahey, L. L. (2009) *Immunity to Change: How to Overcome it and Unlock the Potential in Yourself and Your Organisation*, Boston: Harvard Business Press.
- Kroger, J. (2004) *Identity in Adolescence: The balance between self and other*, Hove: Routledge.
- Labov, W. (1997, retrieved 21/03/2005) 'Some Further Steps in Narrative Analysis', *The Journal of Narrative and Life History*, Vol. 7, pp 395-415, <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~wlabov/sfs.html>. Accessed 10/9/10
- Laske, Otto E., 2006, 'From coach training to coach education: teaching coaching within a comprehensively evidence based framework', *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 45- 57.
- Law, H. (2007), 'Narrative coaching and psychology of learning from multicultural perspectives'. In: Palmer, S. and Whybrow, A. (eds.), *Handbook of Coaching Psychology: A Guide for Practitioners*, London: Routledge.
- Laungani, P. D. (2007) *Understanding Cross-Cultural Psychology*, London: Sage.
- Martin, J. (2002) *Organizational Culture: Mapping the Terrain*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Maynard, Ashley E. (2008) 'What we thought we knew and how we came to know it: four decades of cross-cultural research from a Piagetian point of view', *Human Development*, Vol. 51, No.1, pp. 56-65.
- Manners, John and Durkin, Kevin (2001) 'A critical review of the validity of ego development theory and its measurement', *Journal of Personality Assessment*, Vol.77, No. 3, pp. 541-567.
- Martin, Joanne (2002) *Organizational Culture: Mapping the Terrain*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- McCauley, C.D., Drath W. H., Palus C. J., O'Conner P. & Baker, B. A. (2006) 'The use of constructive-developmental theory to advance the understanding of leadership', *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 6, pp. 634-653.
- Monrouxe, L. V. (2009) 'Solicited audio diaries in longitudinal narrative research: a view from inside', *Qualitative Research*, Vol. 9 (1), pp. 81-103.
- Murray, M. (2003) 'Narrative Psychology'. In: Smith, J.A. (ed.), *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*, London: Sage

- Pasupathi, M, Mansour, E., Brubaker, J.R. (2007) 'Developing a life story: constructing relations between self and experience in autobiographical narratives', in *Human Development*, Vol. 50, pp. 85-110.
- Ricoeur, P. (1981) *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (edited and translated by John B. Thompson), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Riessman, C. K. (2001) 'Analysis of Personal Narratives'. In: Gubrium, J.F. and Holdstein, J.A. (eds.) *Handbook of Interviewing*, London: Sage publications.
- Roberts, V.Z., & Brunning, H. (2007) 'Psychodynamic and systems psychodynamic coaching', in: Palmer, Stephen and Whybrow, Alison (eds.), *Handbook of Coaching Psychology: A Guide for Practitioners*, London: Routledge.
- Torbert, B. and Associates (2004) *Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership*, San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Tsoukas, H. (2005) *Complex Knowledge: Studies in Organizational Epistemology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Birgit den Outer is a researcher in the department of Management and Organisational Studies at Oxford Brookes University. She has MAs in Mentoring and Coaching Practice from Oxford Brookes University (with distinction) and Cultural Anthropology from the University from Amsterdam. Her research interests include cross-cultural perspectives and innovative methods of inquiry. She is a member of Culture in Coaching, a special interest group at Oxford Brookes University that furthers the cross-cultural agenda in learning and development in the context of coaching.