An Essential Tension in Sustainable Development: Narrative Identity in Adult Learning

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Abstract

Sustainable development can be thought of as changes required by a nation, a community and beyond that can foster a context for individuals to imagine and recreate parts of their tradition to live a different and better life. Intrusions, external or internal, whether in the form of technology, economic, environmental, educational or health can bring dramatic disruptions to those whose lives are based in deep-seated traditions. Adults who learn to fuse old ways of understandings with new can embrace the tension between the two and can emplot a narrative that makes sense to them. Moreover, this narrative holds one's identity intact, which is particularly important for the adult undergoing major changes in life. Narrative identity is one of the mainstays of sustainable development because the identity of the adult living through development is not designated simply by one's place or language, but by a story that becomes part of one's past as well as future. Herein is a discussion of the place narrative identity, as a research directive, can have in sustainable development with practical application exemplified in a malaria reduction project.

Keywords: Sustainable Development; Identity; Narrative Identity; Adult Learning; Health

Introduction

Development can no longer be thought of as basically entering a setting racked by poverty and disease, and issuing materials, technology, and health services to help the poor. The concept of development has graduated beyond a paternalistic, remedial orientation to one that houses not only material and structural changes, but also includes ideas such as culture, personhood, identity, and otherness [1-10]. Rarely are questions of identity and, even less often, imagination central to discussions on best ways to promote sustainable development. Development programs more often take on the flavor of economics, technology, and training along with the most effective ways to evaluate such efforts. Certainly, these efforts are important to successful development. However, innovative ideas and life changes seldom take hold unless the adults of a community come to new understandings of who they are and what part they play in the "development act" [11].

The development act relies more on ontological considerations than epistemological ones. The notion of adult identity in the development act calls for adults to learn not only new skills and habits but, more importantly, how to re-imagine themselves and their future in terms of their past and current situation. It is in the narratives adults tell and re-tell about the development situation that they have the opportunity to imagine their world in different ways. Thinking of one's world in other ways provides a certain freedom leading to actions that can promote its transformation [6-8,11]. From a cultural anthropologist's perspective, this brief article presents the primary theoretical aspects of narrative identity that are important to consider in the development act. The discussion of narrative identity is drawn primarily from Paul Ricoeur's work in Oneself as Another [12].

Narrative Identity

In developing his theory of narrative identity, Ricoeur's aim was to close the gap between two poles of a person's identity—the aspect that is changeless and the aspect that is influenced by one's interaction with others. The narrative identity of a person—similar to an autopoietic system—strives to maintain an internal stability while remaining open to the variant cultural mediums in which the person lives. Ricoeur holds that in the application of

narrative theory an identity of character will be achieved which will articulate the grounding of the historical significance of a life-history. More specifically, Ricoeur [13] in order to move beyond the idea that identity is static, posits that there are two parts: *idem* and *ipse*. Idem identity is understood as being the same, called sameness; it remains constant over time and is recognizable throughout time. Ipse identity, while it includes remaining constant, called self-constancy or self-hood, it also changes because of its responsive nature to others and to the environment in which a person lives. The ipse identity is that aspect of the individual that permits one to change within a lifetime. It is temporal and unpredictable. Considering this dynamic nature of identity, there is often a tension between the idem and ipse— the sameness and the changeability. If change comes into the life of a person and the stability, or sameness, is threatened, trauma can occur.

Ricoeur, realizing there will always be change in one's life, argues for a healthy tension between the two identities. This means that there needs to be an overlap between the idem and the ipse. The goal is to be able to interact with the new and different but still retain one's integrity. Ricoeur [12] gives an example of how we retain, or not, the timelessness of our history in our life. The example, on page 123, is found in the idea of "… keeping one's word in faithfulness to the word that has been given." The keeping our character is in the dimension of something general, but keeping our word is in the dimension of a "who," a particular person. As Ricoeur [12] writes on page 23: "The continuity of character is one thing, but the constancy of friendship is quite another." We can stay the same throughout time in a character—recognizable over the years by contemporaries. Character is a general aspect of our identity, but keeping one's word expresses identity in terms of a specific "who." The character in and of itself does not reveal a person. Rather, as Hannah Arendt [14] claims, we only know who someone is when we know his or her story.

Narrative can hold these two poles of identity together. In mediating between the pole of sameness (idem), what we call character — a set of attitudes and capacities, our culture and traditions—and the pole of selfhood (ipse), including trust and integrity to oneself, despite the trials, tribulation, and intrusions which identify the path of life, we see that our identity can be held together as well as expressed and shared through narrative. The story through emplotment—a mediation of sorts—can make sense of the diverse and contradictory in our life. Thus, narrative identity offers us a structure of human identity and so of human self-understanding. Over time, the stories of a project, a community, a policy can contain both the past and how the future was appropriated in a way that made sense to the polity members as well as to the researcher or developer. Narrative identity provides a way to understand what needs to be retained, on one hand, in a person's life, the core aspects of the history and the culture which shape the character of both a person and his or her cultural community, and on the other hand, what new elements can be introduced into this life or community in such a way that the sameness—the character— is still intact.

The new elements need to be introduced in such a way so as to not take away from the trustworthiness of people in question. Narrative identity allows for both stability and novelty—even though these two poles may be in tension—to be interwoven into the life story of a people in community. People often live with tension since anything new or different, or a different understanding of something, are part of everyday life. Obviously, when the tension is too great, lives fall apart. However, people have a significant capacity to live with differences in their lives because they have the ability to emplot them to make the contradictions fit. It is important to note, though, when events do not fit, or when the polity members believe they are asked to do something that does not make sense to them, there is no emplotment of the novel into their everyday life. The narrative identity is breached.

All of us have seen at one time or another, a chaotic life story that people try to stand by. At times people try to abide by the developers' new ideas and accept what they are given by virtue of receiving something they need or did not have before, such as food, technical equipment, malaria nets, medicine, or even money. However, if the novel entries into a community are not understood nor fit coherently in the story they tell about themselves and to others, the development efforts will not last over time; the change is not sustainable. There is a powerful force in the idea that people can look at themselves as characters in a story who accept and reject events in their lives. Through reflection and imagination people can come to new understandings about who they were, who they might become and who they are today. They are the only ones who can bring forth a new world by writing or telling a story that makes sense to them, both on an individual and collective level which can be extended to a local, national, and international level. Ricoeur [15] explains that the fruitfulness of narrative identity is

…in that it can be applied to a community as well as to an individual. We can speak of the self-constancy of community, just as we spoke of it as applied to an individual. Individual and community are constituted in their identity by taking up narratives that become for them actual history.

Janne Nijman [16] brings the issue of self and other in her discussion of Ricoeur's theory of identity to include the self with the international other, moving beyond the space of community. Following Ricoeur's concept of self [12], Nijman argues on page 105 that the "'hermeneutics of the self' helps to operationalize human potential" and places her discussion in the context of people acknowledging and reimagining their past (she calls this activity "doing history"), which can lead to new possibilities for their future. In other words, as Nijman holds, on page 93, "… the future is not an inevitable, natural, necessary continuation of the past". Imagination, sparked by conversations with locals, creates a space that opens the potential to bring forth a new world in relationship with others. This new world could include those very ideas, materials, and actions from outside normal traditional life resulting in a better life leading to sustainable development. Such a world brings to the construct of identity the necessity of the

international in order for any person today to be a complete self.

For example, the technology and medical expertise from abroad can be very helpful in many circumstances if introduced, accepted, and used appropriately. Narrative identity theory played a significant part in a project in northern Myanmar during which culture, tradition, imagination, and ceremony played a significant part in educating adult villagers to integrate the proper use of malaria nets in their everyday lives. Previously, these villagers had been provided mosquito nets. However, they most often rolled them up to use as pillows.

After the malaria project was implemented, the proper use of nets resulted in substantial reduction of the incidence of malaria [7]. The world of these adults changed on the health and economic fronts of their village life. They were able to live with the tension of the new (use of malaria nets; covering water barrels) and the old (usage of nets introduced through traditional ceremony). Most specifically, the old, in this case, was the participation in a traditional ceremony which included the involvement in the preparation of the nets by dipping them into a solution of insecticide (non-toxic). Upon each women preparing enough nets for her household, she would take them to her house where she hung them up properly with the help of a volunteer who had been trained in the proper use of the nets. After all the houses had been furnished with nets, there was traditional dances and games followed by eating locally prepared food. It was a celebratory day—beautified by the local villagers dressed in their finest traditional clothes—that was etched into the story told and re-told to neighboring villages. As the incidence of malaria was lessened and the health of the villagers markedly improved, the story was expanded to include this good news along with an increase of the use of malaria nets among several villages.

When one's health changes, life both on an individual and communal level changes. The most dramatic change is the allowance for economic sustainability to flourish—good health allows work in the rice fields to resume. One's identity and story of who they are change on one hand (no longer hungry and sick) while the constancy of the self is retained on the other (maintaining a traditional ceremony integral to their lifeworld).

A valuable aspect of using narrative identity theory in the development arena is that identity can be constructed. In other words, individuals and communities can participant in their own identity creation by celebrating new learnings integrated with their traditions at the same time as potentially transforming their lives both on an individual and social level. In the example above, the local villagers were able to retain enough tradition of their life to hold onto the familiar, and at the same time they were able to imagine and practice a new way of being in terms of taking care of their health. They chose the way they wanted to make use of what the foreigners brought them to help them combat malaria.

They changed the story (their history, their tradition) of who they were and who they were becoming and in the process were able to create a new narrative identity. The researcher or developer cannot escape being a part of this constitutive process based in tradition, imagination, and language—particularly having had in-depth conversations with the locals [2]. In this case, the locals and the internationals brought forth a new world together in the development act.

Concluding Remarks

This development process is not a linear phenomenon; it is based in an essential tension that is revealed only in the telling and re-telling of one's identity that contains both one's self and the other. A poem, a literary artifact such as a metaphor, or a narrative can hold this tension and therefore bring it into the purview of everyday life. The work of Paul Ricoeur provides the researcher and developer with a concept of narrative identity which envelopes the reasoning and expression of this tension needed for moving beyond the idea that imagination is housed simply in one's mind that results in an image—be it a village, a country, or our world. The most important aspect of imagination is its constitutively social function, based in language and discourse, rather than image. We need to interpret the role of imagination as a relationship between the self and the other (here the other being the anthropologist) as an intentional projection of possible meanings, and a way to schematize different others under a semblance of the same. Proleptic imagining on the part of the adult in the development space brings to fruition new ways to understand and make sense of one's life.

The point of how we think of social change and how we carry out the development act influence how we design adult learning programs in the development context. The received pedagogy by which the adult learns anything new—farming, education, health, technology—assumes the learner is the receptacle that receives the new information and that, in turn, this new information has meaning in their lives. For the most part, it is the westerner, often with good intensions, who feeds the poor or sick new information without understanding how learning takes places in different cultures. Sustainable development does not take hold unless adults understand in their own meaning-making processes that which is introduced. Moreover, the introduction of anything new or different most often entails adults seeing their own lives in new ways and in relationship with different others. Furthermore, if the personal and collective narratives the community members use to tell do not cohere with the daily realities they face in development processes, there is no possibility for sustainability. At this point, it is the manner in which adult learning is designed and carried out that marks the way local people often are integrated into a new way of life successfully or not. The underpinning of adult learning is key to development in the sense that the question of how changes to the question of who and why. The how is the easy part;

the who should be doing the new intervention and why should it be done, are the critical questions that can began the learning process that, in turn, holds an essential tension of the old and the new that sustains not only the development story but its practice in everyday life.

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