

The place of stories in development: creating spaces for participation through narrative analysis

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The stories that we hear as we conduct development research or implement development projects are often relegated to the margins of development studies. This article argues that these stories require our attention, for they are windows on to indigenous narratives of development and our placement in those narratives. Examining these stories as efforts to emplot experiences of development and encounters with development professionals within particular narratives enables us to better understand our own positionality in the communities in which we work, and therefore better understand the opportunities and challenges that our research/interventions present to the emergence of a truly participatory development.

La place des histoires dans le développement : créer des espaces pour la participation à travers l'analyse narrative

Les histoires que nous entendons lorsque nous menons des recherches dans le domaine du développement ou mettons en œuvre des projets de développement sont souvent reléguées aux marges des études du développement. Cet article soutient que ces histoires requièrent notre attention, car elles constituent des fenêtres sur des narratifs autochtones du développement et de notre positionnement dans ces récits. En examinant ces histoires en tant qu'efforts pour intégrer les expériences du développement et les rencontres avec les professionnels du développement au sein de récits précis, nous pouvons parvenir à mieux comprendre notre propre positionnalité dans les communautés au sein desquelles nous travaillons et, par conséquent, les occasions et les défis que nos recherches/interventions présentent pour ce qui est de l'apparition d'un développement véritablement participatif.

O lugar das histórias no desenvolvimento: criando espaços para participação através de análise de narrativa

As histórias que ouvimos quando conduzimos pesquisa de desenvolvimento ou implementamos projetos de desenvolvimento são frequentemente relegadas às margens dos estudos de desenvolvimento. Este artigo argumenta que essas histórias exigem nossa atenção, uma vez que elas são janelas para narrativas de desenvolvimento nativas e nosso lugar nessas narrativas. Examinar essas histórias como esforços para empregar experiências de desenvolvimento e encontros com profissionais de desenvolvimento dentro de narrativas em particular nos permite compreender melhor nossa própria posição nas comunidades nas quais trabalhamos e, assim, melhor compreender as oportunidades e desafios que nossas

pesquisas / intervenções apresentam para a emergência de um desenvolvimento verdadeiramente participativo.

Las narrativas en el desarrollo: creando espacios para la participación a través del análisis de historias y relatos

Las historias o relatos que los investigadores escuchan cuando realizan investigaciones o llevan a cabo proyectos a menudo se relegan a los márgenes de los estudios relacionados con el desarrollo. El presente ensayo sostiene que estas narrativas merecen ser escuchadas porque son maneras de asomarnos a las visiones autóctonas sobre el desarrollo y sobre la opinión que se tiene de los mismos investigadores. El análisis de estas narrativas sobre el desarrollo y sobre las relaciones con los profesionales del desarrollo permite que los investigadores comprendan el papel que desempeñan en las comunidades donde trabajan y entiendan mejor las oportunidades y retos que su presencia provoca para que surja un desarrollo participativo real.

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Introduction

The formal field of development studies seeks to improve human well-being through the application of ideas and technologies deemed appropriate by our (often scientific) understandings of rigour and validity. This general approach to development enables certain kinds of knowledge and action. At the same time, it relegates to the margins, if not excludes, other types of information that might otherwise illuminate the experiences of those living in the Global South, and alternative pathways to the improvement of their well-being. More often than not, quantifiable data, such as crop yields, child weights, and income become the lenses through which we view the Global South, and the challenges facing those who live there. But what of other, more experiential sources of information about these challenges? What do we do with the stories that people tell us¹ about their lives as we go about the process of gathering rigorous, valid data? These stories have no comfortable home in our reports and writing, especially if we aspire, or receive pressure, to conform to conventional standards of rigour in our research (see also Pigg 1992).

In this article, I argue that these stories are more than just colouring for our reports, or interesting anecdotes for the classroom or conference presentation. They are reflections of the process through which ‘the developing’ position themselves and development practitioners/researchers in their experiences of a rapidly changing world. (Lewis *et al.* 2008 make a similar point about fictional representations of the development experience.) Formally examining such stories as locally specific narratives of these experiences opens a path to the identification of social barriers to participatory development in the communities for which we work. Such identification is critical if we are to better understand the (mis)understandings and power dynamics that emerge from particular development interventions, for such understandings can present new opportunities to empower these communities to build a truly participatory development.

White men and river gods

In 1997 I was conducting fieldwork in Ghana’s Central Region. One evening, during an informal conversation in the kitchen with Kwame, one of my principal informants, he eagerly related

a story told to him by a friend in a different village. 'Some time ago', said Kwame (through my translator), 'the government was building a road, and they had to cross a river':

So they hired a Ghanaian contractor to build a bridge, and the contractor started, but before he could finish, the bridge fell down. So the government hired another Ghanaian contractor, whose bridge also fell before it could be finished. So the government went to the white man and asked him to build the bridge. And the white man came, and he bottled the river gods, and his bridge stood.

Kwame then asked me to explain how the white man could possibly learn to bottle river gods. Initially, I had no idea what he was describing, and found myself unable to answer. Kwame seemed unperturbed by my inability to explain this event, simply shrugging and saying 'the white man is very clever', as if bottling river gods was something that happened in due course.

A few days later I realised that the person who had witnessed the bridge construction and told Kwame this story had probably seen someone taking water samples from the river. Kwame (and/or the original storyteller) was describing a form of hydrologic study for which he had no category within his own context. In an effort to make sense of this study and subsequent events, he attributed the successful bridge-building effort to involvement with the supernatural. In this light, this story was far more than a somewhat interesting and amusing anecdote shared over drinks. It was a clear illustration of the unintentional production of power relations between white and black, between 'developed' and 'undeveloped' that grew from a seemingly neutral, scientific development intervention. The European contractor probably never gave any thought to the social ramifications of conducting a hydrologic study, or applying other tools of engineering to constructing the bridge. I doubt that he or she intended to (re)produce social divisions between white and black, developed and developing, in building the bridge. However, this project constructed much more than a bridge. And although I was not building a bridge, or indeed applying any overtly scientific methods or technologies in my research, the fact that I was white and from the Global North mobilised this differentiation in the space of a simple conversation, positioning Kwame and me in the world, one of us with the answers to the world's problems, and the other left to watch and wonder.

Stories as narratives of development

One means of bringing stories such as Kwame's into a formal research frame is to treat them as narratives of development. Narratives are generally understood as efforts to present information as a sequence of connected events with some sort of structural coherence, transforming 'the real into an object of desire through a formal coherence and a moral order that the real lacks' (Ettema and Glassner 1989: 258). Narratives are therefore efforts to organise and explain experience. By treating stories as narratives, we can see how 'All of us come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making' (Somers 1994: 606).

Discussions of narrative are nothing new in development studies (e.g. Roe 1991). The literature is replete with references to 'narratives of development', as in discussions of crisis narratives that legitimise certain development interventions and the social and environmental violence that accompanies them (e.g. Fairhead and Leach 1995; Roe 1995; O'Brien 2002; Davis 2005). For example, O'Brien (2002: 484) illustrates how accounts of the relationship between shifting cultivation and deforestation follow what he calls 'the well-worn trajectory of an Eden-lost story'. This storyline begins with shifting cultivation as a practice existing in a state of stability and harmony with nature, followed by a disruption, such as population growth, that upsets this state, and eventually a downfall to environmental degradation driven

by intensification and/or extensification. While this plot may have little to do with the actual events and processes involved in a particular case of forest degradation, O'Brien notes that this narrative structure allows for the intervention of scientists and other experts as 'saviours' who can redeem the situation and return things to their harmonious state. Thus, the Eden-lost narrative persists in part because it allows scientists and development experts to (re)create roles for themselves that justify their interventions as part of an intelligible narrative of the world.

The use of narrative in development studies has produced powerful critiques of development practice and development projects. For example, Ferguson's (1994) now-classic study of the Thaba-Tseka Development Project in Lesotho was, in part, anchored in a narrative analysis of the texts surrounding the project. The Thaba-Tseka project, conceived by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Bank, and the Canadian International Development Organisation (CIDA), sought to stimulate 'mountain development' in the Thaba-Tseka district in the east-central part of the country through a combination of infrastructural improvements, livestock/range management initiatives, and agricultural plans. Reading project documents, and development-agency documents on Lesotho more generally, Ferguson (1994: 58) identified an overarching understanding of Lesotho as 'a stagnated peasant economy which requires only the correct inputs to become "developed"'. For example, the World Bank Country Report for Lesotho noted that the country 'was and still is, basically, a traditional subsistence peasant society' where labour migration is a relatively recent response to population pressure, and not an integral part of local livelihoods (Ferguson 1994: 31). This official construction of Lesotho had little to do with the place as it was experienced by those living in it. Labour migration had long been a part of livelihoods in Lesotho, and as a result its economy was transnational and anything but a simple peasant economy. The official construction of the country, Ferguson argued, was an effort to make sense of Lesotho, to create a 'suitable theoretical object of analysis' and 'a suitable target for intervention' (Ferguson 1994: 73). In this light, the absence of wage labour and other non-agricultural livelihoods in the various development agencies' understanding of Lesotho makes sense. Such livelihoods challenged their narrative of what development should be in Lesotho, and therefore challenged the authority of development experts to implement their programmes there.

The concerns for narrative and categorisation found in the contemporary development-studies literature are very close to those in this article, but differ from the discussion at hand in two critical ways. First, previous concerns about narratives of development are focused on formalised narratives that emerge from development institutions (although recent work by Lewis *et al.* 2008 extends this focus to fictional representations). In this article I am concerned with informal, individualised *stories* that, like Kwame's, emerge in the context of informal conversations and make no direct reference to development or any other formalised categorisation of knowledge. Second, the narratives interrogated by people like Ferguson and O'Brien overtly reference such ideas as development and environmental protection, which are often categories generated in the Global North. There is no term for development in Fante, Kwame's native language. The closest term is *mpountuo*, which more closely connotes 'infrastructure', though if applied to a particular end product (of a project, building, business, etc.) it takes on the connotation of having 'done well'. Yet, without using the word, the bridge story is about development as we understand it in the Global North, for it is an episode in a larger narrative of social and economic change across Kwame's lifetime. These stories are not 'the other' of the more-or-less formalised development narratives found in official documents. Stories like Kwame's, just like statements in World Bank country reports, are emplotments of experiences that give events and statistics significance, turning them into episodes in a larger story. Where Ferguson's work examines the rewriting of Lesotho by development agencies, a process that produced those living in the country in a certain manner and without their consent, stories

like that of Kwame emerge from ‘the developing’ and make clear the agency of those in the Global South in the construction and maintenance of these narratives.

The importance of stories for participatory development

Understanding the stories that we are told in the course of our work or research as the transformation of individual events into episodes through their emplotment in narratives carries tremendous importance for development studies and development practice. These narratives circulate within the communities where we work, as well as between those of us from the Global North and the people with and for whom we work in the Global South. Kwame’s conclusion that ‘the white man is so clever’ is not the result of the one story he related to me, but instead is a narrative through which he could make sense of, and emplot, that story to make it an episode in an intelligible organisation of the world. The stories that we are told are clues to the larger narratives in which we are positioned when we conduct work in the Global South. Therefore, they are a means of understanding the power relations that exist between those from the Global North and the communities in which they work. As the degree to which the community feels free to truly participate (argue, disagree, make suggestions) in particular projects or research programmes is greatly shaped by these power relations, the insights that we can glean from these stories are critical to the success of the work undertaken under the rubric of participatory development.

Understanding that these power relations are visible, at least in part, in these stories provides a means of better decentring these relations and creating spaces for participation. Development researchers and practitioners cannot simply disavow their social position in the communities in which they work – to do so is likely to lead to blindness towards the persistence of these relations over time (for discussion of this issue, see Kapoor 2002; Chhotray 2004; Parfitt 2004). Instead, to subvert these power relations, we must create spaces for the reworking of the narratives in which we are cast, consciously recognising and participating in the rewriting of our places in them. I say that *we* must create these spaces by rewriting *our* place in them, but not to re-inscribe the authority and agency of (external) development professionals, for the working and reworking of these narratives takes place with or without our participation. I am merely trying to highlight for practitioners a practical point of entry into a process of mutual rewriting that can result in a space for a truly participatory development.

‘I think the white man is so clever’

The 11 years during which I have worked in Ghana’s Central Region have spanned my time as a graduate student up to the edge of tenure at a research university. Although my status in academia has inevitably changed as I have completed my degree requirements and moved forward with publications and grant writing in a tenure-track position, my status in my study communities has remained interestingly fixed. This status has never been openly voiced. Instead, it has emerged in passing comments that are part of conversations about life, farming, the weather, travel, families, and any number of other topics exchanged as pleasantries and conversations. One such comment, referenced earlier in Kwame’s story, is the phrase ‘*I think the white man is so clever*’. This phrase recurred in conversations with different informants, especially in the context of a discussion of a new technology or idea that the informant had heard about on the radio or by word of mouth. Initially I took little notice of such comments, except to try to decentre them (for example, by noting that many inventions or discoveries were made by Blacks, Asians, and other ethnic groups) as I felt a critically aware academic should. Over time, though, I came to recognise that this statement, like Kwame’s bridge story, was an

effort to place me into a narrative that assigned social positions to both the speaker and the listener – an effort to emplot me as part of a larger story that made sense to the person with whom I was speaking. I was a white man, and the implicit message behind that statement was not that I deserved his praise, but that I had information and knowledge about how to farm or otherwise earn a livelihood that I was not sharing with him or other people in the village. This narrative was not one that I imposed on these informants, but one that they constructed through various experiences and stories (such as the bridge story) and imposed on me. I was being located in a social narrative not of my own making.

In this narrative, I was cast as the expert, one who had knowledge and resources that could improve their lives if only I would share it with them. Kwame and others like him cast *themselves* in the role of recipients of this knowledge, but not participants in its formation. This narrative has been noted time and again in development studies (and post-colonial studies), and in the era of participation we are all trained to subvert it when we see it emerge in the work of development agencies, governments, and NGOs. However, we are less trained to look for its construction by those living in the Global South. In short, we are not trained to look for the ways in which others emplot us.

The assumption that the only problematic authors are those in these agencies and organisations runs oddly parallel to the (neo)colonial assumption that those in the Global North are the teachers, and those in the Global South are the students. In (often rightly) blaming ourselves for the constructions of power and knowledge that have led to many problematic outcomes in development, we assume that we are the principal authors of narratives that accord status and authority to the development practitioner and researcher. Those in the Global South become the powerless victims of these narratives, as opposed to the co-authors. The Global South is of course full of its own authors and stories, but this is not something that we easily acknowledge in current critical development practice.

Subversion and co-authoring

Once I recognised the narrative, and my place in it, I was able to contest it more effectively, and in so doing open up spaces for conversations different from those that might otherwise seem permissible to the participants in this particular narrative. Decentring my role in the narrative of development that shaped my interactions with my study communities required shifting tactics anchored in a recognition of my emplotment as described above. As a graduate student, I was able to self-identify as a ‘schoolboy’, a local category that implies some level of immaturity and needed learning. While I could not fully occupy this category in the way that a Fante teenager from these communities might, I was able to create a sort of ‘white-man-in-training’ identity that, while answering to the larger narrative of white/developed, black/underdeveloped, left space for conversations where members of the community took the lead and took responsibility for educating me about their needs and their ideas.

Once I had completed my dissertation and returned to these communities as a professor, I was no longer able to employ the schoolboy identity to create spaces for open exchange. Now I was a ‘prof’, a category that in these communities goes beyond white/developed and into the realm of unquestioned wisdom. This new identity greatly hindered my first efforts at fieldwork after taking this job, as several farmers openly expected me to tell them what to plant and how to plant it. I was able to decentre this narrative when, after one farmer suggested that I should be telling him what to plant instead of asking him about his practices, I asked him ‘*Do I look like a farmer?*’ He paused, admitted that I did not, and then started laughing. This intervention did not completely deconstruct his narrative of white/developed and black/developing, or my emplotment in that narrative. I was still an expert, just not about farming. This created a

space for him to speak freely to me about agriculture in the community, while still maintaining a belief in me as the expert.

In both decentrings, I did not completely subvert the power relations between myself and local residents like Kwame. To completely deconstruct this narrative was beyond my ability, as it was a narrative constructed through myriad experiences over which I had no control, and into which I had been placed without my consent. Further, to try to operate outside this narrative was to risk a breakdown in communication that would have compromised my ability to interact with these communities. However, through an awareness of the narratives in which I had become an episode, I was able to create spaces for free exchange within this narrative, and therefore spaces in which participation in my research could take place. While I hope that these small interventions called into question the larger narrative into which Kwame and others placed me, and the power relations that it (re)produces, I cannot be sure that my actions were of such significance as to offset the other experiences out of which this narrative was born.

The place of stories in development studies

Stories such as Kwame's have long been denigrated as anecdotal – the opposite of rigorous, verifiable scientific research. They are used as epigraphs but not evidence, and thus are accorded little importance in our research. As I have illustrated, however, these stories contain critical information about our positionality in the communities in which we work. They tell us something about the extent to which an individual, or the entire community, feels comfortable in participating in our projects and research.

While there is a vast literature on participatory development, and an emerging set of 'best practices' for participation, the uncritical application of these practices in any community rests on the idea that participation means the same thing to all people in all places, and that the use of these 'best practices' will overcome the issues of power and knowledge that shape what participation comes to mean in the context of particular projects. When conducting work that is fraught with power relations that often compromise people's willingness to participate (and, at times, our willingness to let them participate), we must consciously create spaces for participation, where the narratives that place scientists, experts, and 'white people' above those without such training or social status can be decentred, however partially.

This article is not a call for the immediate, radical decentring of the power relations inherent in development as it is conceived and practised today. These narratives, however problematic they might be, are the products of complex, even over-determined origins. No single person created these narratives, and no single person can completely decentre them. However, we can create spaces for participation by carefully listening to and thinking about the stories that we are told, and using the understandings of our positionality that emerge from these stories as opportunities to decentre the power relations created by/creating these narratives. At the same time, we can plant the seeds of change in these narratives, authoring new plots that might, over time, be woven into new narratives in which those in the Global South are better able to see themselves as important sources of information, ideas, and practice in development. Thus, paying attention to the stories that we are told as we conduct our work can serve as a path towards an ever more participatory development, both in the context of our own projects, and in the larger context of global development.

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Note

1. Clearly, those living in the developing world tell one another stories about ‘the developed’ that might be of great interest, but in general we lack access to such stories because of their very nature. Therefore I focus, for the purpose of illuminating and furthering development practice, on stories that we are told, and for which we are the intended audience.

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