Working with Narratives to Understand the Experiences of Becoming a Parent

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ABSTRACT: This paper introduces the methodology of narrative as a way of reflecting on experience. An example of one narrative is presented to illustrate some of the claims that have been made about narrative analysis. The paper also examines what this one narrative suggests about some of the ways these parents acquired and constructed their parenting knowledge and practices.

As part of their daily life people tell stories to each other and themselves. In this paper I introduce the methodology of narrative as a means to consider and reflect on experience and identity, as they are expressed through these stories. To do this recent claims about the nature of narratives and what they enable us to understand and do are examined. Some of these points are then illustrated by one narrative about the experience of becoming a mother and father. However, from the minutiae of daily life detailed in the narrative we also gain insights about some of the process involved in the construction and acquisition of parenting knowledge and practices. Hence, another purpose of this paper is to illuminate the way that these parents’ knowledge and practices were forged through practical activity and experience. In particular, the narrative shows the way that their experiences were mediated by the knowledge and practices of trusted others, expert knowledge and their experiences of their own families. As a whole, the paper exemplifies the potential of narrative analysis to provide a means of getting close to experience by locating the particulars of experience in context and time. This in turn aids an understanding of the way in which social life proceeds and identity is constituted and reconstituted over time.

Narrative

From a variety of disciplines, the pathways of narrative have been advocated as the means to consider and reflect on experience. Van Mannen (1990, p. 120) ascribes the etymological root of narrative to the Latin gnoscere, noscere “to know”. The extent to which we can really know and understand another’s experience has been an age-old preoccupation but currently, on quite different grounds, the case has been made that narratives offer a way of at least getting close to the experience of others. The most direct argument holds that narrative re-description is part of the life world and that the shape and structure of
people’s stories are pre-given in the shape and structures of the experiences recounted. As part of their daily life, people tell stories to each other and themselves. Whether the story begins with the moment of birth, the departure for a morning’s fishing, the beginning of a quarrel, or a first encounter of a friendship enjoyed, the “stories are lived before they are told” (McIntyre, 1984, p. 212). Hence, it is argued there is a predisposition to express the story in a way that replicates the shape of the experience. Narrative then is a way of enabling us to meditate and reflect on experience without abstracting ourselves from it.

In a slightly different but related vein Taylor (1989) makes a case for inevitability of narrative. He argues that we are impelled to tell stories:

We grasp our lives in a narrative…It has often been remarked that making sense of one’s life as a story is also like the orientation to the good, no optional extra; that our lives exist also in this space of questions, which only a coherent narrative can master. In order to have a sense of who we are and of where we are going (p. 47).

Building on this argument of the irrefutability of narrative as part of human experience, others have stressed that narratives provide a vehicle for understanding not just our own lives but how life is lived more generally. Shostak (1989, p. 239) argues:

No more elegant tool exists to describe the human condition than the personal narrative. Ordinary people living ordinary and not-so-ordinary lives weave from their memories and experience the meaning life has for them. These stories are complex, telling of worlds sometimes foreign to us, worlds that sometimes no longer exist. They express modes of thought and culture often different from our own, a challenge to easy understanding. Yet these stories are also familiar. It is just this tension – the identifiable in endless transformation- that is the currency of personal narratives, as they reveal the complexities and paradoxes of human life.

The potential of narrative for understanding the other and the self are combined with a reflexive twist in the work of Ricoeur (1969, p. 20) who suggests that narratives foster the “comprehension of the self by detour of the comprehension of the other.”
Others have developed a critical turn as they argue personal narratives, at the level of the individual, reveal the way in which given rules and concepts of a society or culture are accepted or challenged. Abu-Lughod (1993, p. 8) addresses the potential of narrative to work against the “culture” concept and problematise notions of homogeneity, timelessness, and coherence. Writing about the use of narrative in interpreting women’s lives The Personal Narratives Group (1989, p. 8) argue that “Both narratives of acceptance and narratives of rebellion are responses to the system in which they are originated and thus reveal its dynamics”. They identify four dimensions of the context of narratives that are important in building a critical stance:

1. The importance of the interpersonal relationships in which the story emerges.
2. The significance of the intersection of the individual life with a specific historical moment.
3. The importance of the frameworks of meaning through which the individual orients themselves and makes sense of the world.
4. The way in which the interpretation of the narrative is shaped by the context of the interpreter.

Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992, p. 6) argue for a critical theory of narrative at the level of the individual. They emphasise the formative and deformative effects of narratives on individual’s lives: “Stories give direction to lives”. Given that there is more than one single story to be told about a life, they argue that the relation between narratives, the discourses that constitute them and forms of life must be the focus of a critical perspective. Ochberg (1992, p. 267) goes on to draw on psychoanalysis to explore the possibilities of a “narrator’s stories getting ‘better’, ‘freer’ of misunderstandings”.

Narrative has also been turned to by those working in the related field of identity. Somers and Gibson (1994) make links between experience, narrative and social identity. They argue that experience is constituted through narrative and that “through narrativity we can come to know, understand and make sense of the social world and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities” (Somers & Gibson, 1994, p. 59). They contend that by attending to time, space and analytic relationality narrative has the potential to produce an understanding of identity that is multi-layered, processual and relational. Furthermore, they argue that it provides the conceptual sinews for producing “a tighter, historically sensitive coupling between identity and agency” (ibid, p. 79). Benhabib also stresses the work of narrative in constructing a sense of self but she also alludes to the pragmatic nature of narrative. She argues that self-identity is “constituted by a tale” wherein the
events of the past are “reformulated and renarrated in the light of the present and in anticipation of the future” (Benhabib, 1986, p. 349). Calhoun (1994) argues that it may suit us to think of identity as a discovery but that it is always a construction. Both Benhabib (1986) and Calhoun (1994) underscore the way in which the tale is told to others, in a shared social moment, and it is “never separable from claims to be known in specific ways by others” (Calhoun, 1994, p. 10).

Accompanying these different arguments for attending to narrative as a way of commenting on experience and identity are different views about how narratives should be managed. For some, they are of value, in and of themselves, as a standpoint from which to view the world; a description of a sense of being-in-the-world that is left free of the conceptual reworking and rhetorical embellishment that accompanies intellectual endeavour. Jackson (1996, p. 8) argues:

> The fetishised products of intellectual activity all too often assume a life of their own, reinforcing the illusion that life can be possessed, controlled, captured, and pinned down. Our aim is to do justice to the lived complexity of experience by avoiding those selective re-descriptions, reductions, and generalisations which claim to capture the essence of the lived in underlying rules, or overarching schemata, yet, in effect, downplay and deaden it.

Others claim the value of assuming a different standpoint, whose turf is the use of conceptual schemes and theoretical tools to work with narratives in a way that is emancipatory. Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992, p. 14) argue for the importance of analysing narratives, in terms of psychic and social obstacles to reveal “better” stories that could be told, “in terms of a larger emancipatory interest”. Writing from within sociological traditions Somers and Gibson state the value of explicating the culturally and historically specific narratives available to groups and persons to reveal the repertoire of narratives available and to bring to attention counter narratives “that do not continue the long tradition of exclusion so characteristic of dominant ones” (Somers & Gibson, 1994, p. 74).

Somers and Gibson (1994, p. 61) argue that it is useful to distinguish between four different kinds of narratives. Ontological narratives refer to the stories that individuals use to make sense of their lives and explain who they are, and they are born of social interaction over time. Public narratives are those that are sustained and transformed by the “interpersonal webs of relationality” that exist in cultural and institutional frameworks that are larger than the individual, such as one’s family, the church, the workplace, the government and the nation.
Conceptual narratives are those concepts and explanations that are constructed by social researchers, often without recognition of their constructed and narrative quality and the contribution of ontological and public narratives. Metanarratives are the masternarratives, the epic dramas, within which we are embedded, such as Progress, Enlightenment, Industrialisation, and which, paradoxically, are built upon abstractions. These distinctions are useful for highlighting the different dimensions of narrative whilst underscoring the social nature of the construction of narrative.

Polkinghorne (1995, p. 5), drawing on the work of Jerome Bruner, has distinguished two kinds of narrative inquiry. He defines “Analysis of narratives” as studies that analyse elements of narratives or stories and then produce paradigmatic typologies or categories. “Narrative analysis” he defines as studies that analyse actions, events and happenings, and this analysis then produces a narrative. It is within this second form of inquiry that the narrative that follows is located. The data for this narrative analysis comes from research with eight couples over a period of eighteen months as they became parents for the first time (Loveridge, 1999).

I started working with the families in the last months of their pregnancies and continued until after the babies’ first birthdays. In the case of the family that is the focus of this paper there was a further interview two years later. The narratives for each family were built up from conversations, interviews and observations recorded as I spent time with the families on their own, at antenatal classes, when other family members, friends or Plunket nurses were visiting, at their support groups or just out and about at places in their neighbourhood, like the park. I have attempted to stay with the detail of the accounts of the people I worked with rather than reduce their accounts to rules or generalisations. However, I have imposed the form of the narrative as I have attempted to show how the mothers and fathers explained at various points throughout the year how they acquired and constructed their parenting knowledge and practices.

In the narrative that is the focus of this paper the continuous sense of self presented by the mother and father, amidst the variations and seeming contradictions in the stories they told about what they were doing and why they were doing it, contributes to our understanding of the way in which identity is constituted and reconstituted over time. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

**Nicola, Simon and Edward**

At the time Edward was born Nicola was 28 and Simon 30 and they had been married for 5 years. They had lived in Spenceville all their lives and felt they
were in quite close contact with their family members, particularly those living locally. Simon’s parents immigrated to New Zealand from Germany in the early 1950s. He had no extended family here but his father and some of his six brothers and sisters live in the region and the rest in other parts of New Zealand. Simon had good memories of his childhood. With six siblings and living in a cul-de-sac of houses with young families there had always been lots of children to play with. On the other hand, Simon felt that with six siblings to compete with for his parents’ time, “I don’t really think any of us really got a lot of quality time with Mum and Dad”. His father worked two or three jobs and his mother had started working part-time outside the home as the children got older. There had never been a lot of money but there was always plenty to eat. Simon’s family were practicing Catholics and most of the family had been educated in the Catholic Education system. During his teenage years he had completely rejected the Church as he felt religion was “a duty and very unreal”. In his early twenties he had become involved in an interdenominational church after “a real living experience of Jesus and God”. Simon felt that Christian values were central to the way that he and Nicola lived their lives and the way they were constructing their family life. In particular he stressed the importance the Church placed on a good and wholesome family for the stability of society. Simon described himself as shy and lacking in confidence.

Nicola’s parents had lived all their married life in the region. Her mother’s family had farmed in the region for several generations and her maternal grandparents and aunts and uncles all lived locally. Nicola saw them quite frequently. Her father had moved to Spenceville from the far North after he had met Nicola’s mother. Nicola had had very little contact with her father’s family whom she described as hermits and peculiar. As well as running a café, Nicola’s parents also had a small lifestyle block and her father was particularly interested and active in the financial markets. She had two sisters and a brother and although she felt that she had had a very happy childhood she found it odd that she could remember so little about it. Nicola had always been involved in the Church but had left the traditional Methodist Church of her childhood as a young adult to go to the interdenominational Church that she and Simon belonged to. She felt that Christian values, particularly not leading a selfish life and caring for other people, were very central to how she lived her life. Nicola felt that Simon had had to prove himself to her family in a sense because his family had not been as well-off as her own and he had “nothing much behind him except being a really nice guy”. Nicola described herself as a caring person who was quiet and not very confident.
Early Days

Before Edward was born, Nicola and Simon had attended antenatal classes at the hospital and then when they decided they wished to have a home birth they also attended the antenatal classes run by the Home Birth Association. They both read books about birth and infant care before Edward’s birth, and throughout the following year Nicola continued to read widely and she discussed what she had read with Simon. A number of their family members, friends and church members had had babies and they felt that they had spent quite a lot of time before Edward was born observing people with children. Throughout the year I was doing the research, they had people living with them who needed support, including a young woman who had had a baby and stayed on for a few months.

When I first met Nicola she was working as a nurse. She took parental leave just before Edward’s birth and then when he was six months old she returned to working as a nurse for 1 day a week and some on-call duties. Work had been such a big part of her life that she had found it really difficult to give it up completely. Despite feeling that her extended family didn’t approve of mothers who worked outside the home she had decided it was important to do this for herself. When Edward was first born, Simon had a job driving that took him away from home for 13 hours a day. Simon was a trained electrician but had had a lot of different jobs for short periods of time. He was concerned that as economic times became harder it was going to become less tenable to change jobs so frequently and that such a broken work history did not look good. Some of the men in the Church counselled Simon about his work and when Edward was around five months old Simon became self-employed. This meant working fewer hours in a day with more flexibility in the hours worked. It also meant he was able to look after Edward when Nicola was working. Simon felt that society expected mothers to be more involved in caring for children than fathers but he himself wished to “get past that idea” and make sure that Edward had “balanced contact with both”.

After Edward was born, Nicola joined La Leche League and she gradually became very involved with the organisation. Initially she belonged to the main group and borrowed books and the League magazine from their library. Later in the year she joined a support group for the League that was committed to the enrichment of the branch, as well as seeing to the practicalities of keeping the local branch going, and to support of the support group members. Nicola felt that this group had substantially influenced the way she and Simon had done things for Edward. She described them as a group dedicated to demand breast-feeding but also a certain style of parenting. Some of their parenting ideas she found a bit whacky but she appreciated the way they loved their kids, and didn’t deny them what they wanted, in contrast to other people who “take a harder
view”. She also participated in a support group she referred to as “the Park group” because the members had all met by chance at a local park. Nicola considered this group to be much more heterogeneous in their views about parenting, and found the views and practices of some of the group members difficult to accept.

Initially Nicola and Simon explained the way they had cared for Edward as having been driven by his needs; what happened throughout the day was determined by what he needed, particularly in terms of sleep, feeding and entertaining. They used phrases such as “going with where he is at”, “working around him”, “give into him”, “demand feeding”, “accommodate him”, and “he governs your day” as they explained how they(3,6),(994,994)

Nonetheless, refuting the discourse did not make it disappear. The discourse of a routine for babies had been so dominant in the child rearing literature and familial practices in New Zealand that its echoes remain. The historical presence exerts an influence by being a referent, and at some moments, as something that one refuses. This is revealed in Nicola’s reported dialogue with herself over when she should be bathing Edward:

Because I think I was sort of struggling in my mind with the parent’s generation and how they in the Plunket books had 6,10,2,6 and 10 they’d do things for babies and they would always give them a morning bath.

These numbers refer to the hours at which Plunket recommended infants should be fed and changed. Later on, as will become evident, Nicola and Simon changed their practices to be less driven by Edward’s needs and to take more account of their own needs as individuals and as a couple.
A Side-trip: Sleep and the Lack of it

The accounts Simon and Nicola gave of their practices surrounding Edward’s sleep provide some insights into the ways that this couple used their interactions with trusted others and information from the child rearing literature to adjust and justify what they were doing as Edward changed and their own needs changed. When Edward was about six weeks old Nicola and Simon described how they had started having Edward sleep with them in their bed. Nicola described Edward as a “very wakeful baby” and it could be anywhere between 9.00 pm and 1.00 am before he went to sleep and they were concerned that with a 5.30 am start that Simon might fall asleep at the wheel of his daily 13-hours driving. Nicola, Simon and Edward had been away on holiday with Nicola’s family. It was a small house and Nicola and Simon were anxious that Edward’s crying would wake the other family members so they had taken him into their bed to sleep. On their return home they tried to put Edward in his bassinet at night but after some difficulty getting him to sleep they ended up having him in bed with them. Nicola described their feelings:

Well it’s something that we’re struggling and working through at the moment because not many people do it, or not many people talk about it and you don’t like to tell very many people that you do it … I’ve been reading a book about it called Nighttime Parenting and that is really good, and I agree with what it says. It’s only a cultural thing. I mean these primitive cultures have their babies with them all the time. They carry them with them, they have them everywhere and it’s just our culture and society that say that your baby should be in a room on its own at night, when you know it just...to me it seems so stupid when it’s been part of you for nine months and then all of a sudden there’s that separation. Yeah, there’s a lot of...a lot that it involves but I agree with a lot of it.

Nighttime Parenting by Sears (1985) proposes that “night-time parenting” is one of the practices of a total parenting style he refers to as “attachment parenting” which includes creating a peaceful womb experience, breast feeding with child led weaning, responding promptly to baby’s cries and travelling as a father-mother-baby unit. Hence this is what Nicola is referring to when she says, “there is a lot that it involves”.

Simon was less concerned with what other people thought. He felt that other people’s views on the matter of where Edward slept were not really an issue:
He’s our baby and, you know, we’ve got his best interests at heart and if his best interest is that he sleeps in our bed and that he feeds when he wants to, well that’s our prerogative not theirs.

By the time Edward was six months old where he slept was no longer an issue. At this stage he was mainly sleeping in his own room, although he spent the occasional night with Nicola and Simon. They were more preoccupied at this stage with when he got to sleep and how continuously he slept. Edward was very difficult to get to sleep and had been waking two to three times a night. Each night Simon was spending two to three hours singing and rocking Edward after his bath, trying to help him over the divide between wakefulness and sleep. Nicola and Simon had discussed leaving Edward to cry but they didn’t think it would work nor did they think it appropriate to leave him on his own when he was distressed. Simon felt that “at six months it’s still hard for him to distinguish between what he wants and what he needs”. He supported this position by referring to the developmental discourse of the Plunket Nurse who said that it wasn’t appropriate to train babies into sleep patterns before they are about nine months old.

When Edward was nine months old Nicola explained how she and Simon had changed what they were doing over Edward crying when he was put to bed. She wasn’t sure if it was a matter of “getting hard” or “thinking you really know what is best for them” but they had started leaving Edward to cry when he was going off to sleep. Simon accounted for it in terms of Nicola’s exhaustion with the broken nights they had had since Edward had been born. With Edward becoming more “demanding” during the day he felt Nicola’s level of tiredness was less tenable; he and Nicola needed their sleep too. As she explained what they were doing in terms of getting Edward to sleep,

Nicola made a reference to the *Sleep Book*. *The Sleep Book* advocates establishing clear routines around bed-time, and then, having said the final goodnight, not to respond to calling-out or crying. They note that it is important for parents to check their children if they have any doubts that something might be wrong. I asked Nicola how she had come across the book.

Nicola: Um, through friends at church, you know and I used to think…the pastor and his wife sort of mentioned it one day that they’d tried it on their kids and I thought…I know it was pretty radical from what I’d think I sensed through La Leche, ‘cos it’s not one of their recommended reading books and, um, it was against their philosophies and the pastor and his wife used it and I thought, Oh gosh, you know, fancy them using that book and I thought Oh, if it’s alright for them, it’s alright for us. It was
funny, I did think that. And we borrowed it from our friends and I thought, oh, I’ll just read it, you know, and that’ll be it and the night we went away with friends whose daughter slept through the night and then they said after Edward in the next morning Oh he’s just like a new born baby. I sort of had him in and out of my bed all the time with me, my sleeping bag, we were in a camp, and I thought after that…that night made me think, right ok we are going to try it out on you. So we just did and it did work and then I felt a conflict of, you know, the La Leche people because I know they wouldn’t do anything like that.

Judith: And so what happened when you felt that conflict, how did you resolve it?

Nicola: I didn’t (laughing). I just avoided it. I didn’t sort of say anything about it to them or anyone from there I wouldn’t sort of talk much about letting Edward cry or using it, I just wouldn’t mention it. So, it wasn’t really resolved, it was just sort of brushing it under the mat. We can’t let Edward rules our lives so I want to tend to, you know, draw back from some of the other things they believe in and intervene a bit earlier than they would.

Simon ended his account of their change in practices governing Edward going to sleep by reflecting that they had “forced sleeping habits on him more, which sort of changed our theories a bit there”.

These accounts of Nicola and Simon about Edward’s sleep illustrates the way in which the coherence of their accounts was not an issue as they lived their experiences. Their preoccupation was a pragmatic one of getting some sleep for everyone; finding a modus vivendi, with theories being changed or used to support their practice rather than drive it, and expert knowledge taking second place to the knowledge of trusted others. My preoccupation as a researcher, at that point, was a concern with how people explain living with contradictory discourses and I missed the point that pragmatically it didn’t matter.

This episode of Nicola’s story also illuminates the reflexive dimension of narratives that permitted Nicola to not only tell the story but to observe and comment on the self that was being created (Linde, 1993). In this instance she separated herself as narrator from herself as the protagonist of the tale, and commented on her ready acceptance of the practice of trusted others when it conflicted with what she had been previously doing. As she narrated the story, she noted the contradiction between the two different approaches, and used the narrative to evaluate the positions. Linde (1993, p. 123) argues “Narrative is
thus an extremely powerful tool for creating, negotiating and displaying the moral standing of the self. This is centrally established by the evaluative component of narrative and by the social negotiation of evaluation”.

**Creating an Itinerary for Another**

These accounts of how Nicola and Simon have cared for Edward and how they have arrived at those particular practices have been generated through focussing on the nitty-gritty of their everyday practices. Towards the end of Edward’s first year we discussed in a more abstract way what sort of life they were trying to construct for Edward and what had influenced this vision. Simon wanted to create a happy, balanced, secure life for Edward and show him a lot of love and be close to him. He felt that his own upbringing, which included a certain amount of discipline, respect for elders, and attention to manners, had resulted in being a well-balanced person and making a contribution to society. This, he felt, had “moulded very much the way we’re going to bring up Edward, plus our own convictions as Christians”. However, he felt that he wanted to build on his upbringing to be more open with Edward than his own parents had been, admitting to his children when he made mistakes and communicating with them about his and their feelings:

**Judith:** In what way would you see it building on the way that you were brought up?

**Simon:** Well, I think just taking it a step further and teaching them to be honest and open, because we weren’t and I think that one of the reasons I was quite shy, I never really had a lot of confidence in myself because I was never really taught to express myself or, you know, allowed to communicate what I was feeling to my parents and um...

**Judith:** How do you think children learn those sorts of things?

**Simon:** By example. Basically I think kids learn most things by example, by watching their parents and watching their friends and their friends parents and um...because they can only learn by seeing or by hearing really, or by doing and finding out whether it works or not.

Simon described both his parents as people who didn’t communicate with people, “partly because of who they were…they really didn’t know how to communicate very well and so we never learnt how to, really”. He wasn’t sure
why his father didn’t, but thought that in part it may have been due to his experiences during the war in Germany. Also although his father had never talked about it, Simon understood from other family members that his father had been offended when his mother-in-law sent money to help him and his wife set up their own home. From that point on he had stopped talking German and spoke English without a trace of an accent, stopped seeing German friends, broke links with the family in Germany and had nothing more to do with the German community in New Zealand. His father explained these actions as part of the need to assimilate to his new country and become a Kiwi but Simon felt that it was more connected to feelings of arrogance and humiliation. Simon experienced the years that immediately followed the rupture as ones in which his parents’ relationship was icy and non-communicative. His mother he considered as someone who loved her family and had been quite happy at home but “she was never one to get into any deep conversations”.

Nicola also wanted to create a life for Edward in which he felt loved and happy, whilst firmly disciplined, and with a good self-esteem. Nicola didn’t think that the family that she and Simon were creating would be different from their own families except that Simon was much more involved with caring for Edward than her own father had been with his children. In contrast to the assertion of a lack of communication from Simon’s father, both Simon and Nicola stressed how involved Simon’s father had been with many of the daily tasks of practical caring for his seven children. Compared with Nicola’s father and the fathers of many of their friends, he had been involved on a daily basis in a much wider range of caring activities. They felt he had been a good role model for Simon and his brothers, as they were all very involved with caring for their children, to a greater extent than many of their peers. Like Simon, Nicola identified a feeling of openness and closeness as something that she felt that she had missed out on in her upbringing and yearned to foster with Edward:

I guess, you know, the parent in you always wants to give your child more, things that you missed out on in your upbringing, that you want to make sure they don't miss out, and my family never talked, you know, close, you know, intimate, close things much and I sort of hope that we don't have those sort of hang-ups, you know, that anything from our past coming through to him like. I don't feel close to my father and I think probably, because you know, Mum was my mother I felt more closer to her but not intimately close and I'd hope that we could be, you know, I'd hope that Edward would have the freedom to talk about anything he wanted with us.
Both Nicola and Simon felt that having Edward had changed their lives deeply. Simon referred to it as a “growing experience”, “a challenge” and “that the biggest thing is just the fact that you realise you’ll lose your freedom”. As he explained this further, he alluded to the connection between his own project of the self becoming intertwined with that of another:

It is a changing experience. Your life takes on a whole different meaning. And you realise there’s a bit more to life than just the two of you and your own desires. And you get engrossed in children, I think, because they are an extension of yourself, you see yourself in them, and so you want to train them up, you know. Hopefully, you want to do the best for them all the time.

As he elaborated on this sense of engagement with his child, Simon highlighted a sense of commitment and the recognition that parents are never perfect.

You are committed to caring for them. I think that is the biggest thing. You are committed to caring for them and, you know, you want to do what’s right, even though you may not always do what’s right, basically your heart’s still with the kid and you can look out for them.

Nicola too talked of the sense of growth that had accompanied becoming a mother, along with the sense of loss of freedom:

It sort of brings more out in you and you’re discovering a part of yourself that you’ve never done before … But I have found the hardest thing was just the sleep, hassling over that because we know he hasn’t slept as much as other babies and now with sleep being so erratic through the day…that’s the part I find hardest, just sort of having enough time away from him during the day, and I guess I do get time away from him but it is when I am working, so I still don’t feel I can ask anyone to look after him just so I can do something pleasurable for myself, and yet I’ve talked about it enough, but I just can’t justify paying someone so I can sit down at the sewing machine (laughs).

In these accounts, which were generated from more abstract discussions of what Simon and Nicola were doing as parents, there is a strong sense of narrative constituting identity as the events of the past are “reformulated and renarrated in the light of the present and in anticipation of the future” (Benhabib, 1986, p. 349). Their own identities were being reworked as they engaged with the project of creating a sense of self for Edward. It is interesting too, to note the
gaps, the discontinuities and the contradictions with the accounts that were generated from the description of the nitty gritty daily care of Edward. For Nicola in particular there seemed to be a greater rupture with the practices of daily care that her mother had followed, whereas the more abstract discussions revealed a sense of doing some things similarly but also changing some. Simon did many of the things on a daily basis that his own father had done, but was clearly seeking a qualitatively different relationship through communicating more.

Their accounts of how they responded at different times to the issues concerned with Edward’s sleep are useful for reflecting on the way in which the strong emphasis on the social construction of narrative and, from that, identity, tends to occlude any recognition of the contribution of the body and the way that bodily processes are shaped by life and shape life. This initial account of Nicola and Simon’s should caution us against forgetting the point made by Dollard (1935, cited in Polkinghorn, 1995, p. 11) that it is also important to attend to the embodied nature of people, and to include the bodily dimensions in people’s explanations. More recently, Connell (1995, p. 386), writing about sexuality, has argued that “bodily processes are drawn into social relations”. He highlights the way that pushed to its logical limit the social constructionist position, which concerns itself only with discourse, inscription of the body and subject positioning, makes the body disappear. “This definition evacuates rather than resolves problems about bodies; which are certainly surfaces to be written on, but are also busy growing, ageing, reproducing, getting sick, feeding well or badly, getting aroused or turned off, and so on” (Connell, 1995, pp. 386–87). In this context, these points relate not so much to the bodily dimensions of Nicola and Simon, as the narrators, but to Edward, the protagonist of their tale. Edward’s bodily needs were inescapable, as he was busy, amongst other things, being wakeful and active. That they choose to articulate their response to his bodily needs in a way that seemingly put him in control can be related to the competing discourses of child-centred versus parent-driven care. However Edward as a baby with a bodily needs is a reminder that narratives are not purely fabricated from experiences borne of the social.

**Further on the Journey: A Change of Route**

Two years after I finished doing the initial fieldwork for this research, Nicola rang me to say that she had changed some of the ways she was doing things as a parent and she felt it important that I record these changes, and the way that her thinking had changed. At this stage Edward was three years old and their second child, Grace, ten months old. She initially described the changes as arising from the discussions that she and Simon had had after reading a book,
Preparation for parenthood, and listening to eight cassette tapes that accompanied the book. However, as the interview progressed and Nicola looked back over the previous year she identified other reading and discussions as also contributing to the change. She had borrowed Preparation for parenthood from a friend from her Church. An American couple who travelled throughout Australasia running courses and workshops on parenting wrote the book, and they had come to Spenceville not long after Nicola had first seen the book. She started off feeling quite sceptical about their approach. Statements like “fussy babies are made not born” had made her feel quite cautious. Both Simon and Nicola listened to the tapes and then Nicola went to a workshop run by the authors.

Nicola: We started to listen, and over two or three weeks we talked together about it ourselves and could see where they were coming from because at first we didn’t really agree with what they were saying until we heard their reasons why. Like, they talk about God being a god of order, like how he made the world in seven days…there was an ordered pattern and the Adams (the authors) see the family life as being one of order and routine for having things running well so therefore they are against demand feeding and into routine feeding and they call it parent-controlled feeding. They say right from as soon as the baby is born stick it in a routine and don’t just feed it when it cries and from that routine the baby’s metabolism stabilises and they get used to knowing when they are fed and when they are not fed and they are more contented, so they are not going to be demanding on you because they know their routine and they are secure in that and will sleep through the night on their own … It is sleep feed play sleep feed play over a four hourly cycle so by four to six weeks they are dropping the late night feeding and the early-morning feeding. By about 12 weeks of age they might be going to bed at 7.00 and sleeping for 12 hours which is great and it is a lot earlier than a lot of people with demand feeding, you are not going to achieve the same thing. It doesn’t matter if they are bottle or breast fed, their body has kind of metabolised into the way they digest their food because it is a regular thing.

Judith: That is quite different from what you had been doing,

Nicola: Yeah, well none of the books that I have read when Edward was little or before he was born were talking about routine feeding, it was sort of an old-fashioned thing that our
parents did with us, you know, like thirty years ago that was what they did and I just thought it was an old fashioned thing and the only books that mentioned it seemed to be the old Plunket books.

On the basis of book and the tapes Nicola made a distinction between what she saw as a parenting style that was driven by the demands of the child and one that was controlled by the parents. With a demand-fed child she felt that the parents catered to their needs all the time and their life revolved around the child, but with feeding times and routines that were set by the parents they were the ones who were in control. This new approach involved “putting a bit of distance between you and your child” but she saw it as something that would be to her advantage in the long run. Nicola felt that this new approach for parenting also addressed the relationship between the mother and the father in a way that the other approach had neglected:

One comment they made in the set of cassettes was who sits in the back seat of the car when you have a new baby. They say not to put the baby in the front rear facing and the mother in the back. They said in a marriage the husband and wife come first, that relationship, I know the parent-child relationship is important but the marriage comes before the children and with this whole programme they are wanting to keep that in front first.

As she worked through describing the differences in the two approaches she continued to emphasise her initial scepticism and cautiousness. So, I asked her again about any conflicts she had felt between the different views. She felt that with a second child you don’t get as much advice and that you are left to get on with things more. Also, she wasn’t going to La Leche meetings very regularly so there hadn’t really been any conflict. However she did feel that she had to be a bit careful about what she said and how she said it to other people because “everyone likes to think that the way they do things is the best way”.

Although Nicola had identified the changes in their practice as parents as arising from the book she had recently been reading, she had read lots of other books that we had discussed that hadn’t brought about this kind of change so I asked her about it more closely.

Judith: What was the main reason that you changed what you were doing. At first you came across the information but what do you think it was that helped you decide to use the information rather than thinking oh that is an interesting approach?
Nicola: I could see where the people were coming from and because we are a Christian family and they way they explained the reasons for what they were doing I could see it made sense from that point of view, from the Bible point of view. So that would be one reason, plus the fact that you were, the parent, you were the one meant to be in control not the child bullying you, and the long term outcome of it all was to the parent’s advantage and the child’s advantage and also the fact that you are not tired plus you knew where you were for the day with your routine. So all of those things were an advantage.

Later in the interview she went on to elaborate what she saw as three strands that had come together for her in terms of her parenting in the previous year. There had been the book and cassettes we had been discussing, another reading course she had done with a friend that was also biblically based, and then a course she had done at her church on parenting. As she reflected on this she also identified a change in her own thinking about her role as a mother. This led her to reading that she and Simon had been doing on the family, more generally, which she identified as contributing to their new approach to parenting:

It is also that one thing that was a turning point for me last year was when the children were a bit of a drag or a drain or hard going, I learnt to be able to see past that. And everything that I am doing for them, no matter how regular and routine, is building something into them. And you don’t have a second chance like you think you do because there are all these years ahead of you but everyday turns into a week and the time is gone. So I do realise now how I speak to them and what you do every day is important. And one sort of thing leads on to the next. Simon and I have been reading a couple of books by Mary Pride who is an ex-feminist and it is really interesting because having been a feminist and now not and she has written a lot of books …and she is really into mothers staying at home and if she is going to work to work from home and home ministries and a lot of things that she does for children. And we have read a couple of her books and that has even changed our attitudes to family life even more. So, we have been doing a lot of learning in this whole area.

In this telling of a change in their parenting practices Nicola has woven together several accounts. Linde (1993, p. 6), writing of the accounts that she can give of why she became a linguist, argues
...the more such accounts I am able to give, the more I make my being a linguist coherent with the entire fabric of my life. The existence of so many multiple accounts seems to assume that the choice of profession is well-motivated, richly determined, and woven far back in time....It helps guard against the chilling possibility that one’s life is random, accidental, unmotivated.

Looking back over the various stories that Nicola has created there seems to be a movement towards greater unity in the expert knowledge and trust relations that she and Simon referred to. Initially, the expert knowledge that Nicola drew on came through her involvement with La Leche Group, although she had always maintained a selective stance towards their practices. With their second child, the expert knowledge came to Nicola via classes, groups and seminars organised by the church. It aligned more closely with the practices and views of the trusted others in their church community and had become more “coherent with the entire fabric of” her life. However, as her accounts illustrate, this was by no means a smooth or even process and was had its difficult moments. This narrative illuminates the way that:

a coherent life of experience is not simply given or a track laid down in the living. To the extent that a coherent identity is achievable at all, the thing must be made, a story-like production with many pitfalls, and it is constantly being revised, sometimes from beginning to end, from the vantage point of some new situation of the ‘I’ that recollects. (Crites, 1986, p. 160)

Throughout our discussions and time together there was never any sense that the gaps, contradictions and discontinuities in the accounts of Nicola and Simon led to an incohesive sense of self. Rather, they presented a continuous sense of self that they saw as still being “discovered” through the process of being a parent. This narrative reveals lives that proceed without the need to explain or resolve all contradictions to maintain a sense of coherence. It may be that intense and frequent talk about babies with other parents, friends, neighbours, grandparents, researchers or, sometimes anyone who will listen, contributed to a sense of cohesion or integrity. Also, following the argument that the “story is lived before it is told”, some of the cohesion must follow from the continuing, daily, sometimes hourly, tasks of caring for an infant that, whether carried out in a routine or less scheduled manner, are repeated again and again.

In Nicola’s narrative of the evolution of her parenting practices, the spatial, temporal and relational aspects of identity are highlighted. Her narrative identity was “constituted and reconstituted in time and over time” (Somers & Gibson, 1994, p. 67), within the larger matrix of relations that she lived her life
within, and against the backdrop of particular stories from her life that resonated deeply for her. This emphasises the importance of seeking the intelligibility of social action through recognising that “people are guided to act by the relationships in which they are embedded and the stories with which they identify – and rarely because of the interests we impute to them” (Somers & Gibson, 1994).

**Conclusion**

The preceding narrative has been presented to reflect on the nature of narrative and to represent the process of acquiring and constructing parenting practices and knowledge for one family with their first child over the course of a year. In particular, I have used the narrative of Simon, Edward and Nicola to illuminate the claims that have been made for narrative as a means for getting close to experience without abstracting ourselves from it and as a means of understanding identity. It would also be possible to provide other analyses of this narrative, as suggested by the frameworks proposed by Somers and Gibson (1994) and The Personal Narratives Groups (1989) but this is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. Such analyses are carried out from the standpoint of conceptual schemes and theoretical tools which are closely related to the concerns of those interested in explaining life and abstract us from the immediate experience and standpoint of those living life. Whichever kind of analysis we choose to pursue we should be clear about the standpoint from which we seeking to answer our questions and what it enables us to apprehend about the world. The content of this narrative has also demonstrated the way in which the experiences of these people, as they became parents, were mediated by the knowledge and practices of trusted others, expert knowledge and their experiences of their own families. This process of mediation suggests the importance of creating a genuinely democratic public culture of dialogue about parenting practices and knowledge that will provide possibilities for people to build on or challenge and transform their own experiences, the experiences of those in their immediate social world and expert knowledge.

**References**


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr. Judith Loveridge is a Lecturer in Early Years Education at Massey University. She became interested in the experiences of parents as her family and friends and she herself began having children. Although many studies had previously been done about parents they did not reveal how women and men became mothers and fathers in the context of their daily life and lived experience.
Modern parents have the entire internet at their disposal and don’t follow any single authority. It’s hard to know what to trust. In this guide, we’ll talk about how to raise a person you really like, without losing yourself in the process. Family meals matter to older children as well, even as they experience the biological shifts of adolescent growth. Keep that social context for food as much as you can, even through the scheduling complexities of middle school and high school. Parents as Digital Role Models. When a parent wants to post on social media about something a child did that may embarrass the child, Ms. Homayoun said, it’s worth stepping back to consider why. Are you posting it to draw attention to yourself? The parenting styles commonly used in psychology today are based on the work of Diana Baumrind, a developmental psychologist at the University of California at Berkeley, in the 1960s. Maccoby and Martin also contributed by refining the model in the 1980s. As a parent, if I have to choose one parenting style, without any research data, I would consider my parenting goals and the type of parent I want to be. My ultimate parenting goal is to raise a healthy, happy, kind and responsible person who will love me and our family when she grows up. AND I also want to enjoy the experience of parenting. It is hard to imagine being cold and strict (authoritarian), cold and indifferent (neglectful) or warm and indulgent (permissive) will achieve all of my goals. Show respect and understanding. Encourage talking about their feelings and experiences. Behave toward them in a way that you want reciprocated. When children behave badly, it is sometimes a reflection on the example of the parent. Ways to be a good parent. The following are additional tips on what makes a good parent. Parenting tips for toddlers. At the age around one to two years, toddlers start to learn to walk and talk. Discovering more of the environment and people around them, toddlers become more autonomous and cautiously test their independence. However, they are still self-centered and can be quite stubborn. At this age, their language and physical skills develop quickly. Care orders, under which parents and the local authority share legal parental responsibility, are made under section 31 of the Children Act 1989. Where a child is accommodated under a section 20 voluntary agreement, the parents have sole parental responsibility. Becoming defensive is natural when faced with resistance, but a combination of emotional intelligence and a directive approach (both elements of Motivational Interviewing — Miller and Rose, 2009) may help to keep essential lines of communication open. Process Think about working in partnership with birth parents and the role birth parents play in supporting the child’s plan for permanence. Understand, though, that once you let go and accept who your child is, a different kind of love can develop. You’ll be able to see her clearly for the person she truly is. I have found that true acceptance is one of the most powerful, loving things a parent can give to their child. 2. How to Let Your Child Experience the Pain of Natural Consequences. In general, it’s not a good idea to try to protect your child from experiencing the consequences of his actions. How will your child learn from his poor choices if you take away the natural consequences of those choices? It becomes extremely important as a parent to be able to disconnect from your emotional response to this misbehavior. Emotional responses include feeling guilty, embarrassed, ashamed, or simply disappointed.