1. Introduction

Jesù writing is hard work all my fingers ake already.
Umberto Eco *Baudolino* (2002: 2)

Anything from the sound of a word through the color of a leaf to the feel of a piece of skin can […] serve to dramatize and crystallize a human being's sense of self-identity.
Richard Rorty *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989: 37)

Eighteen years old and already a Trainee Pop Impresario. Not a job title you'd find pinned to the spongy gray partitions of your local Job Centre. But this is how Simon saw himself; this was his route to becoming someone. Inspired and voyeuristically revolted in equal measure by Malcolm McClaren's prissy art school colonization of DIY boot boy culture, he was captured by the tin foil opportunity of London, loud music and the confidence thin hope of fame and fortune. For this particular small town boy the counter-culture, big city dream had spun its web of fortune round again: he was mobilised, ready for action.

Vicious, Simonon and Joey Ramone. Bass playing was cool, but it wasn't hard in 1979. Hell, John Entwhistle and Bill Wyman were the competition! Okay, it was difficult to actually play with the thing with it dangling round your ankles, but punk facilitated ATTITUDE if not proficiency. With three riffs safety-pinned to his mind, a bag fit for hitching and a quick 'so long suckers' to those that would never leave, Simon followed the Whittington trail to London.

It was hard, managing two work identities. But Simon enjoyed the attention that the record label received from the music press. As the business grew – it made little money, though the bands always whispered and muttered about being ripped off – Simon joined forces with a friend, Paul (Simon's brother, Ed, helped out too). As time and record releases issued forth, Simon and Paul began to feel comfortable with being (very) minor pop entrepreneurs.

Somewhat against the fashions of the time – or at least that was what they said and thought of their studious anti-fashion – they would dress up in dark business suits, ties and sheepskin overcoats. Cheap and flashy cigars would be smoked, and they otherwise attempted to project an image crossed somewhere between Malcolm Allison (a famously sheepskin coated manager of Crystal Palace and Manchester City football teams in the 1970s) and the Kray twins (photographs were even posed for, copying a portrait of theirs). Simon was projecting an image. It was complex, or so he thought, and aimed at cloaking himself with an entrepreneurial confidence, but in a 'psst … need a new watch or silk stockings?' sense. The 'hard' spivvy image (and the talk that went with it), was consciously orchestrated as counter fashion (remember, at the time the frills of New Romanticism were in popular vogue), a marketing strategy, and intended to install some faith in themselves and

the bands they managed. They needed this 'tough' and supposedly sophisticated exterior to cover their immaturity, inexperience and occasional fear when dealing with some of the actually nefarious gig promoters and the like that abound in the music industry.

   Simon had created a sense of who he wanted to be. He had made himself a self-identity.

This self-making process is what *Narratives of Enterprise* is about. The above story is intended to introduce the central concept of the book: the narrative construction of self-identity. The story suggests that a large part of the social meaning of who individuals are is created by the juxtaposition of the individual and society; through the interaction of the individual and others.

My purpose in writing this book is to examine the manner in which people – in particular, enterprising people – express and project their self-identities. As will become apparent the approach adopted in this book sees self-identity as something that people create through narrative expression. Because people talk about themselves in relation to other people, things and institutions, narrative expression of self-identity is an inherently social achievement. Thus this book is also focussed on the social contexts in which narratives about self-identity are spoken.

The first few pages of this chapter present a narrative about how I perceive who I was in the past. Within the story are many contexts in which I am placing myself through my narrative. A stance to the institution of work is adopted; the importance of artistic and entrepreneurial expression and desires about self-fulfilment are expressed; I comment on the importance of the way people look and how this can create perceptions of power and control, and so on. Through my beginning with a story, I have also established some cultural and contextual empathy: I have established an age (a teenager at the time of punk), a cultural sensibility (punk, counter-culture, 1970s football, gangsters and the swinging 1960s), a geographical location and my personal experience with entrepreneurial creativity. As a way of introducing a book the narrative also makes an academic and stylistic statement about the sort of writing that follows, and the sort of writer I perceive myself to be. Thus, this part narrative is awash with individual and contextual narratives of self-identity.

This book is not about my entrepreneurial and self-identity however. The research presented in this book is about Paul and John, who are also entrepreneurs and the research subjects of this book. Though others – their assistants Mark and Will, their business partners and others in their work and life histories – feature in the tale I tell, the analytical focus is resolutely on Paul and John and their entrepreneurial self-identities.

Who are these people then? Simply, they are two entrepreneurs who run a small firm in the port fendering business. Prior to starting their firm, 'Fenderco' – a small joint venture firm with larger and corporate partners

based in Europe and Australia – they worked together for Harbourco for a number of years. The company is responsible for designing and selling fendering equipment: large steel and rubber structures that are designed to stop ship hulls and wharf sides from being damaged in berthing and manoeuvring procedures. Fenderco is based in Maltonbury, a small fictitiously named market town in middle-England. It is also where the fieldwork that provides the empirical material for this book was conducted. For now however this is enough about Paul and John. Getting to know the research subjects is just one aspect of this introductory chapter. There are other things that need to be said. First something more about the purpose and scope of the book should be addressed.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF *NARRATIVES OF ENTERPRISE*

A book on any topic, academic or otherwise, needs to be interesting. Academic books have a duty to be original too. Any story however banal or clichéd will have its new aspects, if for no other reason that the context and setting in which the story is told will necessarily differ. Being interesting is in my mind more important than originality. What is hopefully both, particularly to those interested in entrepreneurs, about this book is that it offers the mostly theoretical discussions of the narrative construction of self-identity more 'bodied stuff' on which to feed (Geertz 1973: 23).

The 'stuff' of this book (Paul and John) is admittedly somewhat limited in terms of the numbers of research subjects investigated, but the analytical objective pursued in *Narratives of Enterprise* demands empirical investigation based on ethnographic research.[1] Ethnography relies on the researcher/writer experiencing, recording and then representing a part of the world, as if they were a stranger; ethnographic studies often make what is familiar seem strange, interesting and helpful in ways they have not been before. The contribution I make therefore is not at the level of aggregated facts. Rather it is in the form of describing, clarifying and creating a vocabulary for certain processes. As Charles Taylor has written, I am making explicit 'the self-understandings that constitute our social life' (1989: 105). The book can be described therefore as empirically informed theorising. Hopefully because of this sustained engagement with just one social context, and the readers' ability to get to know the subjects well, your interest will also be captured and sustained.

In addition, the book adds to our understanding of two things. First, the social and narrative processes of self-identity construction in general are explored through the detail of a particular case. Second, and more importantly given the paucity of long-term qualitative research into entrepreneurial

activity, small businesses and the people who work in and run them, the book adds a great deal to our understanding of entrepreneurs. This is not because there are few studies of entrepreneurial behaviour, far from it. Rather it is because there are few investigations of entrepreneurs from the philosophical, methodological and disciplinary perspectives adopted in this book. As a result the study offers a significant new horizon on our sense of what sort of people entrepreneurs can be, and the different ways we might go about thinking and talking about them. This second contribution is more important because this book is mainly offered to readers interested in matters entrepreneurial, though other readers will also find the often difficult to grasp, and oftentimes poorly written, theory on self-identity made clearer through reading this book.

The need for convincing explanations of entrepreneurial activity via interpretive methodologies has almost become a cliché within some of the academic disciplines that are interested in these topics. More studies using these perspectives do seem to be emerging however, as the limits (Grant and Perren 2002) of more traditional philosophies and methodologies have been reached. As far as I am aware, only Dorinne Kondo's (1990) work exploring the crafting of identity in a small Japanese firm has previously focussed on self-identity and small business activity in a similar way.

This is a different book from Kondo's, and not just because it's set in England. The theoretical tools used to explain what was seen, heard and felt whilst in the field, are skewed more towards understanding the individual construction of self-identity, than the identities in the small firm as a whole (Kondo's chief achievement). I am more interested in *entrepreneurial* self-identity than in identities per se.

This emphasis on the individual is not without its broader significance. What does *Narratives of Enterprise* and its new horizon on entrepreneurial agency have to offer? What do the new perspectives I draw upon offer that psychology and economics cannot?

To answer this we need to think historically. The entrepreneur and enterprise have since the early 1980s undergone a profound and arguably politically inspired economic and social resurrection. Whilst scholars argue about the material economic and organisational impact, few would disagree that the rise of enterprise and entrepreneurial rhetoric has profoundly recast the thinking behind the management of most economic and organisational activity, to say nothing of the broader social impacts. In the past notions of the entrepreneur might have suggested heroism, it was just as likely, at least in Europe, to be used as a term of abuse (Burrows 1991: 1). Where people as such were treated at all in mainstream literatures it was exceptional individuals that were seen as the key to understanding entrepreneurial agency. Static theories of economic and psychological behaviour, where people were rational, possessed traits, had essences and had the same inherent motivations

and desires, could more or less cope with these exceptions. But what happens when everyone becomes an entrepreneur?

Many argue that the rise of individualism and enterprise over the last three decades means that people in the Western world have become enterprising selves (Rose 1996; du Gay 2000b). This type of talk is often overdone, and there are always arguments between those that see the future in the present and those that see the past: on the topic of enterprise some have suggested that the past was never as unenterprising as it is often made out to be (Curran 1986). The trends today are clear though. Western society is more individualised and privatised; individuals choose or must accept more risk and responsibility in their lives. Even as consumers we are targeted individually. Work has become more transient and enterprising in orientation. We are expected to be more flexible, self-reliant and entrepreneurial at work. Our organisations are changing and becoming less interested in looking after us; we have the 'freedom of insecurity' (Beck 2000: 53). Similar changes are occurring in political and social spheres, and there are many arguments about not just the extent and significance of these changes, but also whether they are good or bad (Sennett 1998).

Some argue (Giddens 1991; Rose 1996; Beck 2000) that the very way we think of being a person is also in the process of transition. As a result of these and other changes in the modern world we are able to, or must, create for ourselves a sense of self. We create our own narrative of who we are; we engage in identity work. We are entrepreneurs of the self.

The broad thrust of this argument is that our times have seen the erosion of many institutions that in the past provided the raw material for the cosseting and buttressing narratives by which people constructed their sense of who they were. If this sense of self is changing such that enterprise is the condition of all, then clearly theories that treat entrepreneurial agents as exceptional are less persuasive or useful (Chapter 2 explains the failings of mainstream economic and psychological explanations of the self in more detail). In societies where all are individuals, all are entrepreneurs, we need theories that can explain how people create themselves in society as unique individuals. This book explains how this is achieved in the case of two small business entrepreneurs: how Paul and John create their narrative self-identity. It treats them not as nascent Schumpetarian superheroes but as everyday exponents of our increasingly enterprising and individually orientated society.

I did not set out with this objective in mind, it emerged from doing the research itself. The original research was focused on how entrepreneurs learn (Down 1999a). As the research (conducted intermittently for two and a half years between 1996 and 1998) progressed the empirical materials I had collected through observation and interviews seemed to say much more interesting things about how Paul and John constructed and maintained a

coherent and consistent sense of who they were than they did about learning. Though as Chapter 4 will show self-identity and learning are not unrelated (Down and Reveley 2004).

As the research materials were read, prodded and played with (that means 'analysed' to the professional researchers among you) a sense of order seemed to establish itself around the concept of the narrative construction of self-identity. What made sense to me was the way Paul and John talked about their lives in stories and narratives. The chapter themes – *Relationships*, *Generations*, *Space* and *Clichés* – emerged from this analysis, via a process of either empirical (in that notions of 'relationships' and 'generations' seemed important to the way they talked about themselves) or conceptual ordering (in that the themes seemed to illuminate what they were saying about themselves). Other narratives, and other empirical and conceptual themes did not survive this process, and those offered in Chapters 3–6 do not claim to provide a complete story.

This ordering of my data seemed to throw up the most interesting questions, questions that had not been asked before; questions that might create more persuasive ways of looking at how individuals become (and how society makes) entrepreneurs; and what it means to the individual to sustain that entrepreneurial self.

Two forms of narrative emerged as relevant and useful characterisations of what was seen and heard at Fenderco. There were those stories that Paul and John told about themselves: the events and experiences of their lives. This is what Margaret Somers calls ontological or self-narrative (1994). There were also public narratives used in their talk. These refer to 'those narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, [and] to intersubjective networks or institutions' (ibid.: 619). These narratives are not the whole story though. As Somers argues,

> Because neither social action nor institution-building is solely produced through ontological and public narratives, our concepts and explanation must include the factors we call social forces [...]. The challenge [...] is to devise a vocabulary that we can use to reconstruct and plot over time and space the ontological narratives and relationships of historical actors, the public and cultural narratives that inform their lives, and the crucial intersection of these narratives with the other relevant social forces. [ibid.: 620]

From this perspective self-identity is not a categorical essence, tightly held within individuals separate from society. It is a mutable achievement in time, space and through relations with others. Somers along with others (Giddens 1991; Jenkins 1996) have all attempted in various ways to explain the self within a dynamic processual account of society. Self and society are not separate entities in these schemes but different aspects of a social whole.

This book responds in part to Somers' challenge and seeks to produce a clear and useful vocabulary describing the processes inherent in creating entrepreneurial self-identity. This is the overall purpose and value of the work presented here. It is to understand how the entrepreneurial self-identities of Paul and John work in practice. To make explicit some of the self-identity construction and maintenance processes which take place in Fenderco.

In so doing this study and associated work (Down 2002; Down and Reveley 2004; Reveley, Down and Taylor 2004) contributes to our understanding of certain phenomena categorised as knowledge. The book fills certain gaps, and in part responds to certain specific omissions and deficiencies of previous research, particularly in regards to the lack of interpretive empirical research into entrepreneurs and small businesses, as I mentioned earlier. Discussion of the position of this research in regards extant knowledge can wait for the following chapters (especially Chapter 2). What might be useful now, having identified the broad purpose of this book is to identify which audiences or academic disciplines might be interested.

That this identification is necessary is testament to the increasing specialisation of professional practice. There are academic disciplines that would totally reject the assumptions – or more likely, not find in it much value – about individual human beings this book makes. In the next chapter I acknowledge that the genetic and psychophysiological basis for knowing who we are, are fundamentally important, but a different matter from how self-identity is socially mediated and understood. It may come as something of a surprise to some, but recent advances in the scientific understanding of the mind have lent support to those social scientists (many of whom populate this book) who argue that the self is a narrative construction, an abstract 'illusion' created through the evolutionary emergence of consciousness (Dennett 1993).

It is true that some these of these advances also challenge many of the shibboleths of social science and philosophy (see Gray 2003 for instance for a speculative and challenging polemic against universal notions of morality and ethics, based on the new realities of an illusionary and elastic narrative self), but there is some agreement on the basic concepts of self-construction (contrast Giddens's (1991), and Dennett's (1993) notions of self-identity for instance). This book does not attempt to marry social and natural science, though. My task is more specialised and modest.

It is specialised in the sense of how academic knowledge is organised both paradigmatically, and into specific disciplines. Partly through personal temperament and in part through a desire to appeal to a broad audience, I take an eclectic rather than a dogmatic view of incommensurability – the supposed incompatibility of theories. Theoretical purity in the social sciences is often an immature indulgence that creates much misunderstanding, to say nothing of unnecessary and circular debate. Nevertheless this work is situated within,

intended for, and articulated with its assumptions in mind, a largely social science audience. More exactly this book operates within the organisational studies and the entrepreneurial and small business fields. And a glance at the references (something that you, if you are an academic, would have already done no doubt) will show where I have situated myself within the disciplines and sub-disciplines that study entrepreneurs, work and organisations.

But in many ways all this really means is that I am trading in fashions (as when I managed bands) and telling of society in a particular way (Becker 1986b). To produce intelligible, situated and legitimate knowledge the author and the reader need at least to understand which paradigm is being operated within. We both need to understand and agree on a few 'very basic, taken-for-granted understandings that form a frame for the conduct of "normal science"' (Giddens 1976: 136). Hopefully, from what has been written so far (I feel as though I have just handed out my intellectual 'business card') this is now clear.

SOME BASIC AND PROVISIONAL DEFINITIONS

There is much, no doubt, which remains unclear. In addition to simply stating what the topic and contribution might be, and to which audiences the book is aimed, the manner in which certain basic ideas, concepts and words are defined should perhaps be provisionally addressed. In this way further boundaries framing this book and the claim to knowledge it makes can of necessity be put in place.

First a general point should be made. The ideas and explanations contained in this book do not offer an abstract theory or technical vocabulary for explaining its topic. The analysis and description in this study draws on the '"mutual knowledge" [that] represent[s] the interpretative schemes which both sociologists and laymen use, and must use, to "make sense" of social activity [and] generate "recognisable" characterisations of it' (Giddens 1976: 161). Neither abstract scientism nor arcane and baroque theoretical deconstruction of everyday terms, only to use them anyway, feature in this work.

There is though a need to engage with definitional debates and avoid the over-simplification that lay terms are often dammed for in academic writing. There are three aspects of this book that need to be at least provisionally defined. These are: what I mean by naming Paul and John 'entrepreneurs', what is meant by 'narrative' and what is meant by 'self-identity'.

The last of these will be dealt with first and simply by saying that self-identity is addressed in detail in Chapter 2. For now the limited and perfunctory understanding that it is something that individuals create through

narrative expression via their engagement with society that was sketched earlier will suffice.

What does need some limited clarification is my characterisation of Paul and John as entrepreneurs. The most important aspect of this particular definitional quagmire (see Dibben 2000: 269, for a short and wise discussion of the 'facile debate' over these definitional issues) is that it should be immediately sidestepped. Thankfully the distinction between the terms small business, owner-managers, managers, entrepreneurs and so forth is not a particularly important one in this book beyond their having the status of 'what-everybody-knows' (Silverman 1970: 6). This is not to say that the book is not interested in entrepreneurs and small firms, nor does it ignore previous studies into how people construct an entrepreneurial self (for example Cohen and Musson 2000; Kets de Vries 1977), but it is not the project of this book to refute the theories of other paradigms and disciplines.

In order to address the problem of understanding the narrative processes of self-identity it is not necessary to have a firm and static definition of social roles or categories. I am not interested in what Paul and John *really* are because I argue that what they *really* are is something that they flexibly construct from a combination of the available narratives. That they do claim to be entrepreneurs and define aspects of their self-identity in this way is what is relevant in this book. It is how they narratively go about using talk about being an entrepreneur that interests this investigation.

Finally the term narrative is used to refer to that which is spoken and forms a story, or part thereof. An alternative term 'discursive practice' (Collinson 1992) is on my reading at least, broader and more inclusive[2] in its approach to human utterance. Empirically the term narrative also implies a focus upon the linked and holistic aspects of human speech and action, rather than the much more detailed and minute examination of human speech typified by conversation analysis or semiotics. Thus in this book what Paul and John say and do is part of their story, their self-narrative.

These short outlines are clearly inadequate. The emphasis on narrative, self-identity and of *what* Paul and John are identifying with when they call themselves entrepreneurs are important and raise variously important theoretical issues. Some of these debates are engaged more fully at various points of the book. To say more now would mean a far more elaborate explanation of the approach to self-identity adopted in this book than would be appropriate.

CONCLUSION, STYLE AND PLAN OF BOOK

This chapter has been purposively brief. I have introduced the broad purpose,

the main characters of the story and pointed out which audiences might find this work interesting and useful. Some boundaries around my topic have been created through provisionally characterising basic terms and concepts. It is brief also because the impact and substance of this book is very definitely and correctly held within its depths. Ethnographic research does not tend to discover earth-shattering facts. Rather insights emerge through the recounting and mediation of the 'original' experience. The reader cannot easily just know what the point is from reading the introduction and conclusion (though I hope they are nevertheless a reasonable guide) but must engage with the story as it unfolds.

But unfold it does. And before explaining how the book proceeds I should like to say something about the style in which it is written and the spirit offered. The social science concepts of self-identity are not especially accessible as far as much of the literature is concerned. If I have not done justice to the theoretical subtleties of the writers I support, or harm to the theorists rejected, then it is a mostly inadvert consequence of a desire to maintain readability. I have written elsewhere (Down 2001a) that social science normally struggles to stay in the best-seller lists when it comes to writing popular non-fiction books. This is a shame and it doesn't have to be so. I have tried hard, to the best of my ability, to write about social science theory clearly and simply and to keep Paul and John's inherently interesting story in the forefront. An educated lay reader interested in entrepreneurs and the nature of self-identity should not feel excluded. If this stylistic orientation alienates some academic colleagues then they in my view should examine the purpose that specialist, technical and theory-jargon serves in their field: books are for reading not impressing.

Finally I should outline how this book is structured. The next chapter explains the notion of self-identity and why and how it is useful in researching entrepreneurs. In addition to Chapter 2 explaining the purpose of the empirically based Chapters 3–6 it also establishes the approach to thinking about self-identity I take in this book, which, as outlined above draws upon the work of Somers (1994), Giddens (1991) and others (Jenkins 1996; Sennett 1981; Taylor 1989).

Chapters 3–6 address Paul and John's narratives. The sequence of these chapters loosely follows a narrative chronology based on the formation and consolidation of Paul and John's entrepreneurial venture. These chapters tell a story, characters are developed, settings described. This is not a novel though and I do not shy away from interpretation and analysis; this is an academic work, albeit one that favours readability over theoretical muscularity.

Chapter 3 focuses on the formation and nature of the social relationships in the new firm and the changes in those relationships as the firm becomes established. It looks at the relational dimension: the manner in which they

discuss and act towards others and each other and the effect this has on how they create and maintain an entrepreneurial self-identity.

In Chapter 4 – which deals with how events in their past employment histories led them to form Fenderco – the manner in which Paul and John talk about being part of a generation of engineer managers provides an example of the temporal dimension of self-identity narratives (see also Down and Reveley 2004).

Chapter 5 addresses the spatial dimension of how Paul and John construct and maintain their self-identities. It reflects on *where* the narratives as a whole take place and the meaning these narratives of social space have (again, as with Chapter 4 focusing mostly on the present and on events in the immediate past).

In Chapter 6 the empirical analysis turns towards a particular form of language. The way in which Paul and John use public narratives based on entrepreneurial clichés is examined. This chapter lays somewhat askance to the narrative chronological ordering, but in addressing the broader issue of the use of language in creating an entrepreneurial identity it fittingly brackets all of Paul and John's work lives, reflecting even on the distant past and the possible futures.

The final chapter synthesises the themes that emerge throughout the book and brings together some central arguments. It answers the question: what have we learned about entrepreneurs through the notion of narrative self-identity? In so doing I inevitably seek also to broaden the analysis beyond the parochial concerns of empirical research. I briefly explore the relevance of this study to considerations of enterprise in society more generally.

It turns out that what we learn about the entrepreneurs in this story, Paul and John, is that entrepreneurship is a fairly mundane affair. The manner in which individuals – well these individuals at least – create themselves as entrepreneurs is not that mysterious but to a large part based on the strategic mobilisation of narrative resources: something we all do in creating a self-identity. Paul and John use these resources to facilitate entrepreneurial action and provide coherence to their sense of self in a situation (running an entrepreneurial business) which is often fraught with uncertainty.

We learn that their strategy has certain consequences to them as individuals and to the people around them. To maintain this particular entrepreneurial sense of self they end up having to control more than just their business. Relationships to each other and employees, interpretations of past events, the locations they inhabit and the language they use are all controlled, co-opted and marshalled to achieve the coherence they need for their entrepreneurial self-identity.

We also learn that creating an entrepreneurial sense of self and using the narrative resources that help shape that self is something that is easily

changed: when circumstances and contexts change self-narratives change too.

Overall this study suggests that we should talk of entrepreneurialism and enterprise in quieter voices. In our rush to heap praise on the impossibly heroic entrepreneurial protagonists that seek out the holy grail of enterprise generated prosperity, or alternatively condemn the pursuit and proliferation of "enterprise" as some monstrous destroyer of civic cohesion, we have lost sight of the durable everyday nature of this activity. It turns out that rather than being superhuman Paul and John are just ordinary folk: this book shows how enterprising activity and the narratives that support it create ordinary, believable, everyday entrepreneurial selves.

NOTES

1. A 'Methodological Appendix' explores the details of the research at the end of the book.
2. Some might say the term is overly inclusive in that it is associated with the notoriously all-encompassing term discourse. See Reed (1998) for a critique of the use of the term discourse in organisational analysis. Reed implies that language and power become omnipotent and over-bearing aspects of human organisation when viewed through the totalising concept of discourse. Discursive practice is used on occasion in this book but only when referring to the broader aspects of human utterance it implies, in contrast to the term narrative.