

# Context and Discourse in (Exemplary) Narrative Research

Amanda Barusch, MSW, MFA, PhD

Department of Sociology, Gender, and Social Work, University of Otago, New Zealand

Address correspondence to Amanda Barusch, MSW, MFA, PhD, Department of Sociology, Gender, and Social Work, University of Otago, Dunedin 9054, New Zealand. E-mail: [amanda.barusch@otago.ac.nz](mailto:amanda.barusch@otago.ac.nz)

**Decision Editor:** Judith G. Gonyea, PhD

Anya Ahmed (2015). *Retiring to Spain: Women's narratives of nostalgia, belonging and community*. Policy Press, Bristol, UK, 208 pp., \$115.00 (cloth).

Anya Ahmed traces the origins of her book to a conversation she had in 2000 with two friends who decided to move to Spain. I imagine this topic will resonate for many of her readers, as intellectuals are crossing national (and other) borders with greater ease and fluency, raising questions of belonging to a new level. It certainly piqued my interest, as did Dr. Ahmed's superb application of narrative theory and methods.

The boundaries of narrative research are still hazy, despite the outstanding contributions of Barbara Czarniawska (2004), Kate de Medeiros (2014) and Carol Reissman (2008), who have mapped the terrain with insight and precision. A few years ago, I weighed in briefly to argue that the hallmarks of narrative research were three fold: data collection that allowed respondents the time, structure, and freedom to compose a coherent narrative; data analysis that addressed both content and discourse; and interpretation that acknowledged context and intent (Barusch, 2012). Those interested in gerontology's narrative turn will find *Retiring to Spain* exemplary in these and other respects.

Dr. Ahmed lectures on social policy at the University of Salford, UK. Her longstanding interest in belonging and community underpinned this interpretive study of the retirement odysseys that landed 17 working-class women on the Southeastern coast of Spain. Most of the women in this group belonged to a club, the "Silver Ladies," made up of British retirees in a Spanish housing development. Some, disappointed with their experiences in Spain, intended to return to the UK. Ahmed's introduction came through her longtime friends, who had joined the club. Acknowledging this as a "convenience sample," Ahmed successfully conveys what she terms the "wider resonance" of their stories (p. 33) through her treatment of theory and context.

One of the most appealing aspects of this book is Dr. Ahmed's adept blending of social and literary theory. She positions her work within migration studies, describing her respondents as "lifestyle migrants." Then, Ahmed references iconic plots from literary studies to suggest that her respondents are engaged in a quest (or adventure) to retrieve a sense of community they have lost. For them, modern Britain has been transformed by immigrants (strangers from strange lands) whose presence undermines community. Ahmed is not insensitive (as some of her respondents

seem to be) to the irony of seeking refuge from strangeness in a foreign country.

Returning to literary theory, Ahmed introduces nostalgia as a "chronotope." Adapted from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, this construct describes a powerful narrative feature that unites time and space. Here, nostalgia points to lost time and lost space: a romanticized Britain of years gone by. Ahmed can't resist a bit of policy critique. Without offering specifics, she suggests that nostalgia informed the British government's misguided treatment of community as a cure-all for social ills. Her argument that nostalgia motivated her respondents to emigrate is spelled out in considerably more detail.

The work is thoroughly contextualized in its historical moment which, Ahmed explains, allowed working-class retirees from the U.K. unprecedented opportunities for overseas retirement. The women in her sample moved to Spain well before the Great Recession, when the pound was particularly strong and the Maastricht Treaty had established the right to cross national borders within the EU. The rise of mass tourism and affordable air transport contributed to this trend, as did aggressive (and haphazard) development and marketing of new housing developments on the coast of Spain. At the same time, family caring roles, while important, were no longer the primary locus of women's identities.

So, without arguing that her respondents are in any way "typical" or "representative," Dr. Ahmed positions them within a well-defined theoretical and historical context; leaving the reader to determine whether their experiences are relevant beyond the bounds of the Silver Ladies club. This decision might be influenced by Dr. Ahmed's treatment of her respondents' discourse, which is characterized by careful attention to narrative intent and linguistic devices.

Ahmed links her understanding of narrative intent to the notion of "positioning" through which a speaker establishes (and constructs) her identity. She sees her respondents negotiating "how they want to be known" (p. 30) through the stories they tell. She notes the central intention of any narrator to tell a story that is, at a minimum, coherent and plausible. Then, in an especially acute observation, she notices that the narrative end point (either staying in Spain or returning to the UK) shaped her respondents'

perspectives in complex and subtle ways. Thus, Ahmed revealed the delicate interaction between discourse and belief.

Dr. Ahmed applies a fine-grained analysis to her respondents' discourses. Tracing her treatment of linguistic devices to both Derrida and Czarniawska, she sets out to describe the roles played by several approaches: *apologia* (defense against real or actual accusation); *eulogy* (praise, commendation); *hyperbole* (exaggeration for emphasis); *hypothyposis* (vivid description); *irony* (or inverted meaning); and *mimesis* (imitation of another). Ahmed also uses the deceptively simple device of counting. Within extended quotes, she counts the number of different reasons for moving to Spain, the number of things to enjoy there, reasons not to feel belonging in Spain, how social life can be there. The effect underscores the complexity and emphasis according to such topics. Ahmed also examines her respondents' uses of allusion and metaphor to good effect. One is left with the impression that she has meticulously extracted every bit of meaning and every possible interpretation from her respondents' utterances.

I have deliberately foregrounded aspects of this book that I find uncommon in narrative research: its integration of social and literary theory; its careful attention to the role of intent in shaping narrative; and its close reading of discourse. I am afraid this gives short shrift to the actual content of her interviews, which is thoroughly compelling.

To touch on it briefly: the first four chapters are devoted to the theoretical, structural, and historical context of the women's narratives. Dr. Ahmed turns to "Lived Experiences" in subsequent chapters. In Chapter Five, she examines the process of leaving the UK, considering motives, barriers, and decision-making. Chapter Six compares the real experience of life in Spain with the Spanish idyll her respondents had constructed. Chapter Seven

focuses on belonging, particularly the social networks the women did (and did not) join after emigration. Chapter Eight examines how respondents negotiated family relationships from a distance. Then Chapter Nine turns to end-points: how they are located and how they influence narratives retroactively. In closing, the book returns to its chronotope: nostalgia, and troubles our pat notions of community and belonging.

Unfortunately, this exemplary volume is quite expensive, and I'm afraid the copy editing was not up to par as the book is peppered with minor errors. I lay these problems at the doorstep of the publisher. Nonetheless, I hope academic libraries will adopt this volume, because *Retiring to Spain* is an outstanding resource for scholars with an interest in older women, in retirement, or in narrative methods.

doi:10.1093/geront/gnw045

*Amanda Barusch is a professor at the University of Otago. A longtime gerontologist, her recent work applies narrative methods to unravel complex familial relationships and critique public discourse on social issues. Many of her writings are available on her website: [www.amandabarusch.com](http://www.amandabarusch.com).*

## References

- Barusch, A.S. (2012). Refining the Narrative Turn: When does storytelling become research? *Gerontological Society of America*, Nov. 16, San Diego.
- Czarniawska, B. (2004). *Narratives in Social Science Research*. Sage Publications, Newbury Park, California.
- de Medeiros, K. (2014). *Narrative Gerontology in Research and Practice*, Springer Publishing, New York, New York.
- Reissman, C. (2008). *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. Sage Publications, Newbury Park, California.