

Refining The Narrative Turn: When does story-telling become research?

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Abstract

The narrative turn has generated interest in several disciplines, along with a range of methodological approaches that claim to represent narrative research. Some of these can only be generously termed "research," while others give little more than a nod to "narrative." As narrative research matures, its boundaries must be more clearly defined. This paper examines definitional issues and proposes three criteria for good narrative research; arguing first, that in-person data collection should use appropriate initiating prompts while giving the story-teller sufficient time and freedom to present a coherent narrative; second, that data analysis should address not only the content, but also the form of the narrative; and third, that interpretation of data should acknowledge the context of the story-telling, as well as its narrative intent. The process of boundary definition will be further clarified by exploring the possibility of co-authorship between researcher and story-teller and the treatment of the researcher's own narrative.

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Introduction

French literary theorist, Roland Barthes, coined the term “intertextuality” to argue that each new text is in conversation with all texts that have gone before. As an author I live in fear that I will forget to acknowledge someone for a key insight or, worse, claim an idea as mine that was presented by someone else. So let me offer a simple disclaimer here: few, if any, of the ideas I intend to present are original. I am indebted to scholars I have never met and never read, as well as those, like Catherine Reissman, whose work we all know has contributed a great deal to our understanding of what is, and what is not, narrative research.

I hope this presentation will help clarify the boundaries of narrative research, and will limit myself to these definition issues, noting that it will eventually be both interesting and necessary to explore not just what is, but what is *good* narrative research.

What is Narrative?



Narratives are fundamental (some might say unique) to human life. As meaning-making creatures, we look at the stars and see pictures; then we use those pictures to predict floods. As Fisher (1984) put it, we are “homo narrans,” hard-wired to see meaning. This explains our tendency to see pattern both where they are (the Nile floods when Sirius rises with the sun) and where they are not (Salem witch trials, superstitions).

Narrative “creates a cosmos out of chaos.” The origins of the word will resonate for researchers because, while its more recent root in Latin, *narrare*, means “to relate, explain, account...make acquainted,” that root finds its root in the Greek term Gno - “to know” (a lifelong urge for most researchers – to understand or “know” what is going on).

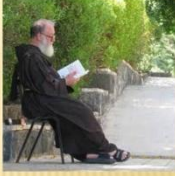
The narrative approach is perfectly suited to understanding the post-modern world. It is especially relevant those of us who claim only limited confidence in objective reality and universal truths.

Apart from that, it’s fun!

The Narrative Turn

THE NARRATIVE TURN

- ✦ A brief history
 - ✦ Hermeneutic studies
 - ✦ V. Propp 1928 *Morphology of the folktale*
 - ✦ Russian formalists & post-formalists (Bakhtin's "heteroglossia")
 - ✦ 19th cent. Semiotic analysts (Saussure)
 - ✦ 1970s spread to humanities & social sciences



Here, I will offer brief history of narrative analysis (relying heavily on Barbara Czarniawska's work). In this history we can find approaches that will inform and enrich our research.

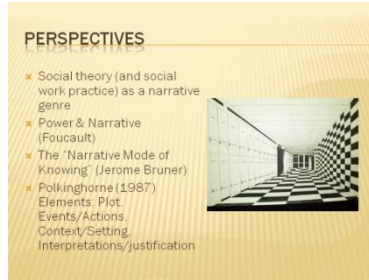
Some date the **origins** of narrative analysis in literature to hermeneutic studies of the Bible, Talmud and the Koran – monks, particularly those who took vows of silence, had plenty of time for reading. The hermeneutic approach, as you are aware, takes the position that both whole and part must be understood in order to master a narrative. This calls for an iterative analysis that zooms from whole to part and back, a method familiar to most qualitative researchers.

Contemporary narrative analysis begins with the Russians, in particular with Vladimir Propp's 1928 work, *Morphology of the Folktale*, which offered a detailed analysis of Russian folk tales. Russian formalists and post-formalists like Mikhail Bakhtin continued the tradition. Bakhtin introduced the notion of "heteroglossia" or multiple voices within a single narrative – this too, has implications for our analysis because, as you know very well, multiple voices can come from a single narrator. (Our understanding of the self as multifaceted)

Another stream, of linguistic analysis dates to 19th century Europe and the semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure and his contemporaries.

The spread of narrative interest to humanities & social scientists is relatively recent, dating to 1970s when Historian Hayden White raised the claim that historians don't discover history, they rewrite it ; likewise, Richard Harvey Brown spoke of a "poetics for sociology" (1977) Walter R. Fisher (1984) pointed out centrality of narrative in politics; Donald Polkinghorne (1987) did the same for psychology; Laurel Richardson (1990) for sociology; and Deirdre McCloskey (1990) for economics. To the extent that by the 1990s narrative analysis had become relatively common in the social sciences.

Perspectives on Narrative Research



Four perspectives inform narrative research in the social sciences:

- 1) First, we can view social theory, social policy and social work practice as a narrative genre – and thus as appropriate topics for narrative research;
- 2) Second, Foucault alerted us to the power dynamics involved in discourse/narrative, calling upon us to challenge or at least identify dominant narratives – this harkens a bit to Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia – when we recognize and value multiple voices we destabilize the authoritative – hence narrative research is applied to bring forth the narratives – the voices of the vulnerable (in our case, vulnerable elders). An understanding of power dynamics that also informs the process of data collection.
- 3) Jerome Bruner contrasted a “narrative way of knowing,” with a “logico-scientific mode” For Bruner the narrative mode involves organizing human experience using the assumption *intentionality*. In contrast to the view of underlying forces that people may or may not be aware of, the narrative approach seeks to understand intentions (along with causal attributions) – so a narrative researcher may look at how people explain their own motives, as well as how they approach the challenge of explaining why - This has implications for how we collect stories and where we turn out focus.
- 4) Polkinghorne (1987) built on Bruner’s conceptualization, and drew our attention to the elements of narrative: plot, events and actions, context and setting, and interpretations and justification; all of which merit consideration in narrative research.

Defining Features of Narrative Research



Space for Tales (Narrative researchers observe and/or participation in the construction of narratives. That is, we create (or we visit) a space for tales.) Some of us do this through conversations with people we might call “respondents.” Some look at other spaces: correspondence, emails, facebook postings, chat groups, policy documents.

In-person data collection uses initiating prompts and gives the story-teller sufficient time and freedom to present a coherent narrative. We enable our respondents to tell their own stories, and we don’t interrupt to tell it for them. (forgive digression in a prescriptive mode)

Consistent with the literary tradition of “reader response study” we pay attention, not only to what is told but to how it is received. We observe ourselves as “close readers”, recording and taking into account moments of disbelief, empathy, involvement, identification.

Attention to Plot and Language (Data analysis addresses not only the content, but also the form of narrative)

Catherine Reissman and Lee Quinny locate the qualities of “good” narrative research in the data analysis process, arguing that it requires: detailed transcripts, as well as analysis that addresses language, narrative form, and purpose.

Borrowing from the hermeneutic tradition, analysis of data attends to the whole and to the parts – to the plot and the language.

Plot: we look for consistencies, inconsistencies, impossibilities (I have found it helpful to seek a respondent’s help in constructing a timeline of complex events)

In looking a language we can consider:

- ✦ Words as unit of analysis – a look at vocabulary – what words, for instance, older adults use when referring to death – Consider: Euphemisms, Profanity, Exclamations

- + Clauses or “stanzas” – we tend to go here naturally, to sentences or clauses – notice Invitations (“you know”) and passive constructions “I was involved..” the use of metaphor

Interpretation of data acknowledges the context of the story-telling, as well as its narrative intent

Context and setting are important (and often neglected) elements in narrative research. Acknowledging the context involves noting, not just where the story is told, but also interpersonal dynamics were present. (See, for instance: the guarded subject)

Narrative intent has two aspects:

First, we must ask why the story is being told. What is the motivation of the teller? This will shape what is told.

Second, human narratives are marked by intention, a sense of purpose, a “narrative quest.” We seek to describe it and at the same time, must query the coherence and integrity of a narrative, which can get dicey.

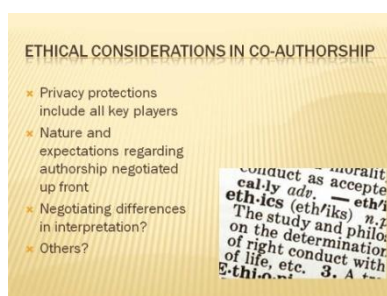
The nature of the relationship between respondent and researcher is, or can be, particularly close, an exchange of secrets. How do you manage differences of interpretation? What if your interpretation might be offensive to your respondent?

Narrative Research Processes (connecting practice & research)



This diagram offers a quick overview of the process of narrative research, with a framework developed by Barbara Czarniawska. Often narrative researchers stop after the fourth step, providing an interpretation or even a simple summary of what the narrative says. But the subsequent steps all provide opportunities to extend and deepen our analysis.

Ethical Considerations in Co-Authorship



Authorship represents one of the few clear boundaries in the current practice of narrative research. We, the academics, author the texts. Any questioning tends to revolve around which academic will be first, which academic will be included. Only recently have I begun to ask whether the story-teller herself might participate as author of her narrative.

This arose when I found myself seriously questioning the veracity of a narrative. In a series of three long interviews the story kept changing and my discomfort with the power dynamics of the interviews grew. The respondent struggled to interpretation her experiences and I struggled with inconsistencies in the narrative she was so eager to present. When I sat down to write I simply couldn't. At first, I thought it was because facts were garbled, but eventually I realized that she and I differed in our interpretations and without her collaboration I risked distorting her narrative.

What to do when blocked? Start over. I have received ethics approval for a project in which I will co-author stories with parents of transgendered young adults. I did this to challenge the power dynamic so often present when the authoritative researcher presumes to author a respondent's tale. In the process so far, several ethical considerations have arisen:

- Privacy concerns for persons mentioned
- Nature & expectations regarding authorship
- Differences in interpretation

This project is a work in progress, and I am sure other issues (ethical and otherwise) will arise as it proceeds.



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