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A New Model for Classification of Approaches to Reading, Analysis, and Interpretation

During the last 15 years, the concepts of narrative and life story have become increasingly visible in the social sciences. Gradually they have earned a place in the theory, research, and application of various disciplines, among them psychology, psychotherapy, education, sociology, and history. Citing Kuhnian terminology, some have termed this historical evolution "the narrative revolution," while others have viewed it as a manifestation of the demise of the positivistic paradigm in social science (Bruner, 1990; Sarbin, 1986). The use of narratives in research can be viewed as an addition to the existing inventory of the experiment, the survey, observation, and other traditional methods, or as a preferred alternative to these "sterile" research tools. Either way, narrative methodologies have become a significant part of the repertoire of the social sciences.

Concomitant with the rise of the narrative paradigm and the growing number of narrative research reports (see publications in the *Journal of Narrative and Life History* and the series *The Narrative Study of Lives*¹) has been a noticeable need for studies dealing with narrative methodology in social science. In fact, the use and application of this research method seems to have preceded the formalization of a philosophy and methodology parallel to the practice. Frequently, moreover, narrative study has been criticized as being more art than research: It seems based predominantly on talent, intuition, or clinical experience; defies clear order and systematization; and can hardly be taught.

We believe that the future development of the field of narrative research requires a deliberate investment of effort in the elucidation of working rules for such studies. These would necessarily focus on approaches to analysis of narrative material and the development of techniques that could be employed in relevant studies. This book tries to address this need.

At first glance, such aims are in stark contradiction to the basic tenets of the narrative approach. Narrative research (which will be defined later in this chapter) differs significantly from its positivistic counterpart in its underlying assumptions that there is neither a single, absolute truth in human reality nor one correct reading or interpretation of a text. The narrative approach advocates pluralism, relativism, and subjectivity. Nonetheless, we believe that researchers are responsible for providing a systematic and coherent rationale for their choice of methods as well as a clear exposition of the selected processes that have produced their results. These aspects of narrative research can and should be taught and learned.

This book deals with the methodology of life-story research. It will focus on the stage of reading the text, analysis of data, and topics often absent or neglected as a main focus in the publications on qualitative research. Our aim is to instruct the reader in reading, analysis, and interpretation of life-story materials through a presentation of a new model for the classification of types of readings and a demonstration of techniques and procedures used by us in our empirical work. Although we hope to convince the readers of the wealth and significance of narrative research, we do not see our presentation in this book as a final prescription or cookbook for doing narrative studies but as a perspective on the current state of the art with its unfolding possibilities. The book is aimed at a wide spectrum of readers—scholars, students, and researchers interested in narrative study of lives—yet it is written by three psychologists, so that our terminology and examples are drawn mainly from our field. We hope that this presentation will introduce new ideas and methods for researchers' use and encourage readers to contribute their own creativity to this developing field.

WHAT IS NARRATIVE RESEARCH?

While qualitative studies freely use the terms *narrative* and *narrative research*, it is quite rare to find definitions of these terms. Webster's (1966) defines a *narrative* as a "discourse, or an example of it, designed to represent a connected succession of happenings" (p. 1503). *Narrative research*, according to our definition, refers to any study that uses or analyzes narrative materials. The data can be collected as a story (a life story provided in an interview or a literary work) or in a different manner (field notes of an anthropologist who writes up his or her observations as a narrative or in personal letters). It can be the object of the research or a means for the study of another question. It may be used for comparison

among groups, to learn about a social phenomenon or historical period, or to explore a personality. Our proposed model can be used for the analysis of a wide spectrum of narratives, from literary works to diaries and written autobiographies, conversations, or oral life stories obtained in interviews. Naturally, such studies belong to several disciplines: literature, history, psychology, anthropology, and so forth.

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, published literature and electronic sites, reports, and databases all point to the conclusion that the use of narratives in research has grown tremendously in the last 15 years. In the fields of psychology, gender studies, education, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, law, and history, narrative studies are flourishing as a means of understanding the personal identity, lifestyle, culture, and historical world of the narrator. This is clearly presented in Figure 1.1, which demonstrates the significant rise in the number of publications in the field.

The figure has been reproduced from the Internet "Resources for Narrative Psychology" site (Hevern, 1997) and is based on a database of 2,011 bibliographical resources—articles, book chapters, books, and doctoral dissertations—located using the keywords *narrative and life history*, *narrative and psychology*, *storytelling and psychology*, and *discourse analysis*. The distribution of these items by year of publication is also illustrated in Figure 1.1.

This wealth of material can be roughly classified into three main domains, according to their contributions to the field.

Studies in Which the Narrative Is Used for the Investigation of Any Research Question

This category is the most common and varied, and includes the majority of work in narrative research. Narrative inquiry may be used as a pilot study in the process of formation of objective research tools, or in a combined strategy of using objective surveys for a larger sample and narrative methods for a smaller group to provide more in-depth understanding. In some cases, however (as in the research presented in this book), the entire evaluation of a real-life problem may be tackled by a narrative approach (see Greene, 1994).

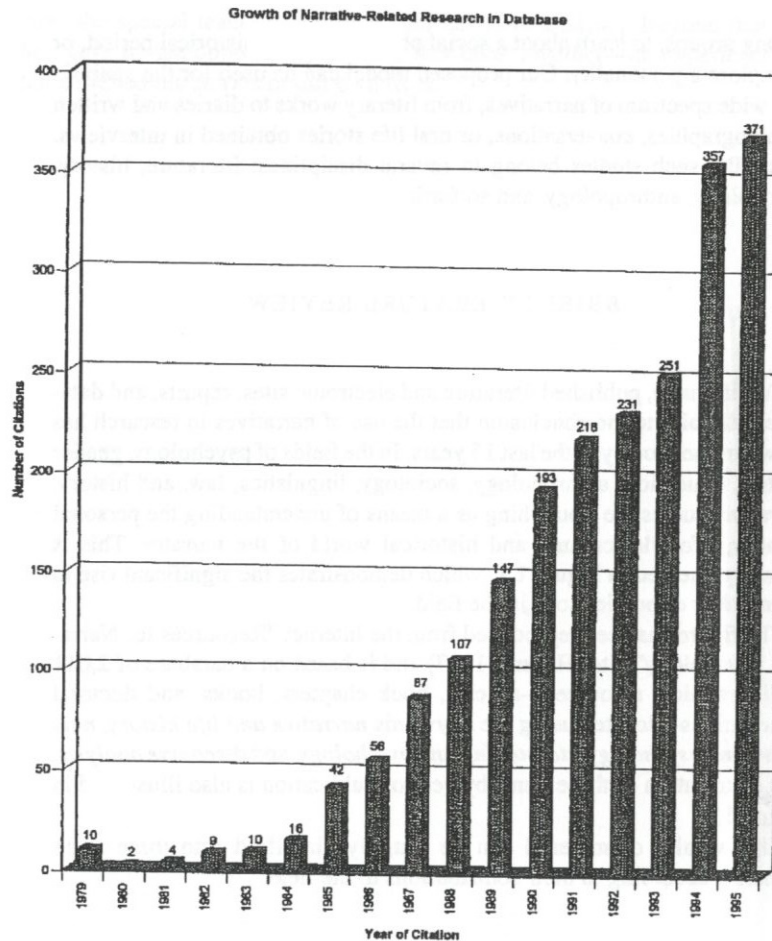


Figure 1.1. Resources for Narrative Psychology

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In psychology, education, and medicine, narratives are used for diagnosing psychological and medical problems or learning disabilities (Capps & Ochs, 1995; Herman, 1992; Wigren, 1994).

In many studies in sociology and anthropology, the narrative is used to represent the character or lifestyle of specific subgroups in society, defined by their gender, race, religion, and so on. From a social, cultural, or ethnic

point of view, these social groups frequently are discriminated-against minorities whose narratives express their unheard voices. (On women's issues, see, for example, Gluck & Patai, 1991; Josselson, 1987; Personal Narratives Group, 1989. On girls' voices, see Gilligan, Lyons, & Hammer, 1990; Gilligan, Rogers, & Tolman, 1991. On Palestinian women, see Gorkin & Othman, 1996. On gay life, see, for example, Curtis, 1988; Plummer, 1995.)

Narratives are also used in developmental psychology and sociology to study special age groups and cohorts in society. Many studies concentrate on children's narratives as a method for studying their cognitive and social development (e.g., Nelson, 1989; Sutton-Smith 1986). Thompson (1994) uses narratives to study adolescents, and Kemper, Rash, Kynette, and Norman (1990) and Koch (1990), for the study of aging. Other work adopts narrative research for investigating specific periods or transitions in the life cycle: for example, Farrell, Rosenberg, and Rosenberg (1993) on the transition to fatherhood; Riessman (1990) on divorce; Murray (1992), Ochberg (1994), and Wiersma (1988) on careers or vocational development; Lieblich (1993) on the transition of immigration; and so on.

In cognitive sciences, the narrative method is employed to study memory, development of language, and information processing (Hartley & Jensen, 1991; Neisser & Fivush, 1994).

In applied work, clinical psychology uses the narrative in the context of therapy. Restoration, or development of the life story through psychotherapy, is considered the core of the healing process. (Epston, White, & Murray, 1992; Omer & Alon, 1997; Rotenberg, 1987; Schafer, 1983; Spence, 1986; and others).

The studies mentioned above demonstrate that narrative inquiry can be used in both basic and applied research. Because research methods should be always selected to best fit the research question, when researchers are asked by various social agencies to address real-life problems, to contribute their expertise to public debates or decisions, it may be advisable to approach people whose lives are relevant to the issue in an open manner, exploring their subjective, inner experience on the matter at hand. Narrative methods can be considered "real-world measures" that are appropriate when "real-life problems" are investigated (Bickman & Rog, 1998).

Studies That Investigate the Narrative as Their Research Object

In this category we refer to work about the narrative itself rather than narrative as a means for studying other questions. Studies of this kind are

prevalent in the theory of literature, communication, and linguistics, and relate to different facets of the story, its nature, structure, or quality (Frye, 1957; Rimmon-Keenan, 1989). Many of these studies are focused on formal aspects of the narrative rather than its contents, such as the structure of the story, the development of the plot, or various linguistic aspects of the narrative. (See, for example, Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Labov & Waletzky, 1967.)

Studies on the Philosophy and Methodology of Qualitative Approaches to Research and, Among Them, Narrative Research

Although these topics are connected, much more has been written on the philosophical perspectives represented in narrative research than on its methodology. Among the most important philosophical contributions are those made by Bruner (1986, 1990, 1996) on the narrative as one of the two human modes of cognition; by M. Gergen (1992), K. Gergen (1994a), and Giddens, (1991) on postmodernism, identity, and the narrative; and on a variety of philosophical issues by Alasuutari (1997), Fisher-Rosenthal (1995), Howard (1991), Mitchell (1981), Polkinghorne (1988), Runyan (1984), Sarbin (1986), Widdershoven (1993).

Emphasis on the subject of narrative methodology as a primary concern, comprehensive models for analysis or reading of narratives, and work on the classification of methods is relatively rare in narrative research. Some relevant papers have been written within larger works on qualitative research methods (Denzin, 1978, 1989; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Riessman, 1993). Researchers have proposed specific tools for focusing on certain aspects of the story or for reading a story as a whole. Meaningful contributors of this kind are, among others, Gilligan and her coworkers (Brown et al., 1988), Linde (1993), and Rosenthal (1993). Our review of the literature, however, located almost no comprehensive models systematically mapping the variety of existing methods of reading narratives.

Two recent publications do provide, nonetheless, a wider perspective on various aspects of narrative research. Ochs and Capps (1996), citing more than 240 publications, present an extensive review of the work in this field focusing on the relation of narrative and the self. Mishler (1995) proposes a typology for the classification of narrative studies according to their central research issues. His typology includes three categories or perspectives on the narrative: *Reference and temporal order* refers to the relationship between order of events in real time and their order of narration; *textual coherence and structure* deals with linguistic and narrative strategies for

the construction of the story; *narrative functions* relates to the wider contexts of the story in society and culture. Our own model, which aims to systematize various readings, analyses, and interpretations of narrative research, will be presented later, after we have introduced our basic theoretical position.

OUR THEORETICAL POSITION

Why should one conduct narrative studies? Put differently, what is the place of the narrative about oneself (self-narrative), or life story, in psychology today?

People are storytellers by nature. Stories provide coherence and continuity to one's experience and have a central role in our communication with others. Our theoretical position, based on some of the literature reviewed above, is that along with its interest in the *behavior* of humans and animals, and its goal to *predict* and *control*, the mission of psychology is to *explore* and *understand* the *inner world* of individuals. One of the clearest channels for learning about the inner world is through verbal accounts and stories presented by individual narrators about their lives and their experienced reality. In other words, narratives provide us with access to people's identity and personality. In the same manner that many theorists, notably Freud, formed their views about mental life, the personality, and its development—from "case studies" of women and men in psychotherapy—so too can the researcher interested in normal identity construct it from self-narratives gathered in research interviews (McAdams, 1990).

In the forefront of psychology and sociology today, Bruner (1991, 1996), Fisher-Rosenthal (1995), Gergen (1994b), Gergen and Gergen (1986), Hermans, Rijks, Harry, and Kempen (1993), McAdams (1993), Polkinghorne (1991), and Rosenthal (1997), among others, advocate that personal narratives, in both facets of content and form, *are* people's identities. According to this approach, stories imitate life and present an inner reality to the outside world; at the same time, however, they shape and construct the narrator's personality and reality. The story *is* one's identity, a story created, told, revised, and retold throughout life. We know or discover ourselves, and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell.²

Not everybody fully adheres to this view, however. In the summary of their introductory chapter to their excellent handbook of qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) contend, "The field of qualitative research is defined by a series of tensions, contradictions and hesitations"

(p. 15). The crux of these tensions is the nature of "truth," "knowledge," and "research"—topics that are far too deep and broad for our work in this book. Against the postmodern views presented above, one may still find, in current scholarship, realistic, essentialist, or historical perspectives that examine the story, or any verbal account, as a (better or worse) representation of internal and external reality. Within this contested domain, our position takes a middle course. We do not advocate total relativism that treats all narratives as texts of fiction. On the other hand, we do not take narratives at face value, as complete and accurate representations of reality. We believe that stories are usually constructed around a core of facts or life events, yet allow a wide periphery for the freedom of individuality and creativity in selection, addition to, emphasis on, and interpretation of these "remembered facts."

In the context of life-story research in psychology, the broad issue of the linkage between story and reality can be translated to (among other things) the relationship of self-narrative and personal identity, which "resides" in the hidden domain of inner reality. Life stories are subjective, as is one's self or identity. They contain "narrative truth" (Spence, 1982, 1986), which may be closely linked, loosely similar, or far removed from "historical truth." Consequently, our stand is that life stories, when properly used, may provide researchers with a key to discovering identity and understanding it—both in its "real" or "historical" core, and as a narrative construction.

A life story that is provided in an interview (or any other particular setting) is, however, but one instance of *the* life story, a hypothetical construct that, for two reasons, can never be fully accessed in research. This is so, first of all, because the life story develops and changes through time. When a particular story is recorded and transcribed, we get a "text" that is like a single, frozen, still photograph of the dynamically changing identity. We read the story as a text, and interpret it as a static product, as if it reflects *the* "inner," existing identity, which is, in fact, constantly in flux. Moreover, each procured story is affected by the context within which it is narrated: the aim of the interview (for example, getting a job or participating in a study), the nature of the "audience," and the relationship formed between teller and listener(s) (for example, Are they similar in cultural background, or of the same or different gender?), the mood of the narrator, and so forth. Hence the particular life story is one (or more) instance of the polyphonic versions of the possible constructions or presentations of people's selves and lives, which they use according to specific momentary influences.

Notwithstanding the debates about its factual grounding, informative value, or linkage to personal identity, the life story constructs and transmits individual and cultural meanings. People are meaning-generating organ-

isms; they construct their identities and self-narratives from building blocks available in their common culture, above and beyond their individual experience. The constructivist approach, as advocated by K. Gergen (1991) and Van-Langenhove and Harre (1993), for example, claims that individuals construct their self-image within an interaction, according to a specific interpersonal context. We join these scholars in our belief that by studying and interpreting self-narratives, the researcher can access not only the individual identity and its systems of meaning but also the teller's culture and social world.

SOME BASIC FEATURES OF CONDUCTING NARRATIVE STUDIES

The use of narrative methodology results in unique and rich data that cannot be obtained from experiments, questionnaires, or observations. We refer the readers elsewhere for the issues of how to formulate a research question, build the research tools, and collect the data.³ This advantage of the narrative study also generates its main quandaries, which stem from the quantities of accumulating material, on the one hand, and the interpretive nature of the work, on the other.

In spite of the fact that most narrative studies are conducted with smaller groups of individuals than the sample size employed in traditional research, the quantity of data gathered in life stories is large. A single case study may be based on several hours of an interview, and many more hours are required for listening to its record and transcribing it to a written text. There are often hundreds of pages of exact transcription of an interview. Even when researchers limit the breadth of their questions, or the time of the interview, or use written narratives, the quantity of material in such studies is always surprising. Moreover, no two interviews are alike, and the uniqueness of narratives is manifested in extremely rich data. The global structure or organization of the interview may aid the researcher in providing a preliminary order or orientation, yet narrative materials can be analyzed along myriad dimensions, such as contents; structure; style of speech; affective characteristics; motives, attitudes, and beliefs of the narrator; or her or his cognitive level. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the data are influenced by the interaction of the interviewer and the interviewee as well as other contextual factors. These dimensions and influences are often hard to detect in the first reading, and the meticulous work of sensitive reading or listening is required for gaining understanding

pertinent to the research questions. Even after long experience in conducting narrative research, every new text retains the air of an enigma, a vivid mystery that generates a mixture of excitement, challenge, and apprehension.

Another feature of narrative research concerns the place of hypotheses in the study. The investigator usually has a research question or general direction that leads to decisions regarding the selection of interviewees or tellers as well as the procedures for obtaining the story. However, in narrative studies, there are usually no *a priori* hypotheses. The specific directions of the study usually emerge from reading the collected material, and hypotheses then may be generated from it (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Furthermore, the work that is carried out is interpretive, and an interpretation is always personal, partial, and dynamic. Therefore, narrative research is suitable for scholars who are, to a certain degree, comfortable with ambiguity. They should be able to reach interpretive conclusions—and change and rechange them, when necessary, with further readings.

Working with narrative material requires dialogical listening (Bakhtin, 1981) to three voices (at least): the voice of the narrator, as represented by the tape or the text; the theoretical framework, which provides the concepts and tools for interpretation; and a reflexive monitoring of the act of reading and interpretation, that is, self-awareness of the decision process of drawing conclusions from the material. In the process of such a study, the listener or reader of a life story enters an interactive process with the narrative and becomes sensitive to its narrator's voice and meanings. Hypotheses and theories are thus generated while reading and analyzing the narratives, and—in a circular motion as proposed by Glaser and Strauss's (1967) concept of "grounded theory"—can enrich further reading, which refines theoretical statements and so on in an ever growing circle of understanding. Thus the construction of an identity by an autobiographical story, and the process of theory building by empirical research, parallel each other.

In its most prevalent forms, narrative research does not require replicability of results as a criterion for its evaluation.⁴ Thus readers need to rely more on the personal wisdom, skills, and integrity of the researcher. Yet interpretation does not mean absolute freedom for speculation and intuition. Rather, intuitive processes are recruited in the service of comprehension, which examines the basis for intuiting and should test it repeatedly against the narrative material. Interpretive decisions are not "wild," in other words, but require justification. While traditional research methods provide researchers with systematic inferential processes, usually based on statistics, narrative work requires self-awareness and self-discipline in the ongoing examination of text against interpretation, and vice versa. Needless

to say, these attributes of narrative studies mean that they are highly time-consuming for the researcher.