

# 1

## The 'Narrative Turn' in Social Studies

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### A brief history

One of the most quoted utterances proclaiming the central role of narratives in social life comes from Roland Barthes (1915–1980), the French semiologist and literary critic:

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting ... stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives ... Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself. (Barthes, 1977: 79)

Transnational, transhistorical, transcultural: indeed, even the interest in narratives dates from much earlier than the 1970s. The beginnings of narrative analysis can well be placed in the hermeneutic studies of the Bible, Talmud and Koran. Contemporary accounts usually begin with the work of a Russian formalist, Vladimir Propp, who published his *Morphology of the Folktale* in 1928, meticulously analyzing what he saw as the underlying structure of Russian

folktales. Russian formalists and then postformalists such as Mikhail Bakhtin continued to develop narrative analysis, but it first received wider recognition in 1958 when Propp's book was translated into French and English. It has been the second English edition, that of 1968, which has met with great attention within and outside literary theory.

The contemporary literary study of narrative, claims Donald E. Polkinghorne (1987), has its origins in four national traditions: Russian formalism, US new criticism, French structuralism, and German hermeneutics. Going even further back in time, much of linguistic and narrative analysis can be traced to the disciples of two comparative linguists: the Pole, Jan Niecislaw Baudouin de Courtenay (1845–1929), and the Swiss, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913).<sup>1</sup> The Soviet revolution put an end to the cooperation between the East and the West, but émigrés such as Roman Jakobson (linguist), Tzvetan Todorov (literary theorist), and Algirdas Greimas (semiologist) continued to develop the East European tradition in France, while Mikhail Bakhtin and others persevered in their efforts behind the Iron Curtain.

What all these movements had in common, and contrary to traditional hermeneutics, was their interest in texts as such, not in the authors' intentions or the circumstances of the texts' production. Such was the main tenet of the New Criticism, as represented by Northrop Frye and Robert Scholes, who looked not only for universal plots but also for the evolution of the narrative in history. The French narratologists, such as Tzvetan Todorov and Roland Barthes, were more under the influence of the structuralism of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who had early read Propp. Lévi-Strauss, along with the US linguist Naom Chomsky, looked for the invariable structure of the universal human mind. Another criticism (but also extension) of traditional hermeneutics came from Germany. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) is best known as a promoter of contemporary hermeneutics. Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss went further, creating their own reception theory; Iser especially puts emphasis on the interaction between the reader and the text (Iser, 1978). Among all those there was, and is, the formidable presence of Paul Ricoeur, who took into consideration those aspects of various schools that related to his main interest: the relation between temporality and narrative (Ricoeur, 1984; 1986).

This interest in narrative spread beyond literary theory to the humanities and social sciences. Historian Hayden White shocked by claiming that there can be no discipline of history, only of historiography, as historians emplot the events into histories instead of 'finding' them (White, 1973). William Labov and Joshua Waletzky espoused and improved on Propp's formalist analysis, suggesting that sociolinguistics should concern itself with a syntagmatic analysis of simple narratives, which would eventually provide a key to understanding the structure and function of complex narratives (Labov and Waletzky, 1967: 12–13). Richard Harvey Brown, in a peculiar act of parallel invention, spoke of 'a poetics for sociology' (1977), seemingly unaware that Mikhail Bakhtin had postulated it before him (Bakhtin, 1928/1985).

By the end of the 1970s, the trickle became a stream. Walter R. Fisher (1984) pointed out the central role of narrative in politics and of narrative analysis in political sciences; Jerome Bruner (1986) and Donald E. Polkinghorne (1987) did the same for psychology; Laurel Richardson (1990) for sociology; while Deirdre McCloskey (1990) scrutinized the narrative of economic expertise. By the 1990s, narrative analysis had also become a common approach in science studies (see, e.g., Curtis, 1994; Silvers, 1995).

### **Enacted narrative as a basic form of social life**

One of the reasons for an eager espousal of a narrative approach in both the humanities and social sciences might be that it is useful to think of an enacted narrative as the most typical form of social life (MacIntyre, 1981/1990: 129). This need not be an ontological claim; life might or might not be an enacted narrative but conceiving of it as such provides a rich source of insight. This suggestion is at least as old as Shakespeare and has been taken up and elaborated upon by Kenneth Burke (1945), Clifford Geertz (1980), Victor Turner (1982), Ian Mangham and Michael Overington (1987), and many others.

Let me then begin with the basic tenet of Alasdair MacIntyre's philosophy: that social life is a narrative. It is usually assumed that social life consists of actions and events, where the difference between the two is as assumed intentionality of actions. In many social science texts, however, the term 'action' has been replaced by or used as an alternative for 'behavior'. In my own field, 'organizational behavior' is a term that is taken for granted – unproblematic even for otherwise critical authors and readers. But is there any reason to argue about the difference between 'action' and 'behavior'? There is, if we recall that the notion of 'behavioral sciences' goes back to eighteenth-century empiricism, in which the 'sense-datum' was proposed as the main unit of cognition and the main object of scientific study. Were we to describe our experience in terms of sensory description only, 'we would be confronted with not only an uninterpreted, but an uninterpretable world' (MacIntyre, 1981/1990: 79). Such a world would indeed be a world of 'behaviors', both meaningless and mechanical, because if sense-data were to become the basis for the formulation of laws all reference to intentions, purposes, and reasons – all that which changes behavior into a human action – would have to be removed.<sup>2</sup>

MacIntyre and many other advocates of a narrative approach to social phenomena limit the concept of action to human beings: 'Human beings can be held to account for that of which they are the authors; other beings cannot' (MacIntyre, 1981/1990: 209). In Chapter 6 I show that such a limitation is not necessary but, at present, let us remain with the authors who were interested in grasping human conduct via the notion of narrative. Thus Alfred Schütz

(1899–1959) pointed out that it is impossible to understand human conduct while ignoring its intentions, and it is impossible to understand human intentions while ignoring the settings in which they make sense (Schütz, 1973). Such settings may be institutions, sets of practices, or some other contexts created by humans – contexts which have a history, within which both particular deeds and whole histories of individual actors can be and have to be situated in order to be intelligible.

The concept of action in the sense of an intentional act occurring between actors in a given social order (Harré, 1982) can be further related to three relevant traditions of thought. One is literary hermeneutics as represented by Ricoeur (1981), who suggested that meaningful action might be considered as a text, and vice versa. Meaningful action shares the constitutive features of the text; it becomes objectified by inscription, which frees it from its agent; it has relevance beyond its immediate context; and it can be read like an ‘open work’. The *theory of literary interpretation* can thus be extended to the field of social sciences.

The second important tradition is that of *phenomenology*, introduced into the social sciences by Alfred Schütz and his pupils, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Phenomenology’s encounter with US pragmatism produced two offshoots that are relevant to the present context. One is symbolic interactionism as represented by Herbert Blumer and Howard S. Becker. Another is ethnomethodology as developed by Harold Garfinkel, Aaron Cicourel, and Harvey Sacks. Their inspiration was taken up with particular success by the British sociologist, David Silverman (see, e.g., Silverman, 1975; Silverman and Jones, 1976; Silverman and Torode, 1980).

*Ethnomethodology* is significant here because it introduces the notion of accountability as a central concept in the understanding of social action. Accountability is the main bond of human interactions; indeed, the main social bond. Conduct can be treated as an action when it can be *accounted for* (before, simultaneously, or after the act – Harré, 1982) in terms that are acceptable in a given social setting. People spend their lives planning, commenting upon, and justifying what they and others do. Although some of this takes place in imaginary conversations conducted in people’s heads, most takes place in ‘real’ conversations with others.

A limitation of traditional ethnomethodological thought is that it has difficulty in explaining the connections between different rules of accounting that appear to be ascribed to specific situations. A ‘conversation between lovers’ runs along a different script from a ‘conversation of a teenager with her angry mother’, but conversations between lovers and between teenagers and their angry mothers occurring in the same place over the same time period tend to resemble one another. How is this possible? Latour (1993b) suggested that ethnomethodology could explain *sociality*, but not *society*: there is nothing to fix various actions, to make situations repeatable. For him, technology is such a fixing and connecting device. In the example above, movies and TV have done a

lot to propagate appropriate conversation scripts, for lovers and for teenagers. Speaking more generally, it is reproduction technologies that permit locating present conversations in history – that is, in past conversations.

Observing how conversations are repeated and how they change permits their classification into genres, as in literary criticism. One of the most central contemporary genres is that of life story: biography or autobiography. Although that which Elisabeth Bruss (1976) called 'autobiographical acts' existed as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they were regarded as private documents. 'Biography' became a recognized term after 1680, but the term 'autobiography' was found in English texts only in 1809 (Bruss, 1976). It is therefore appropriate to pay attention to this genre of narrative, looking for a clue to understanding other modern genres. Its common characteristic is that a narrative of an individual history is placed in a narrative of social history (be it a family or a nation) or even in a history of the narrative.

As to the first narrative (that of an individual history), its importance is connected with the fact that in order to understand their own lives people put them into narrative form – and they do the same when they try to understand the lives of others. Thus actions acquire meaning by gaining a place in a narrative of life. 'Living is like writing a book' is a saying known in many languages.

This sounds as if people could tell stories as they please and, in so doing, shape their lives as they see fit. This is actually a typical criticism of social constructivism: that it conceives the world as a collection of subjectively spun stories.<sup>3</sup> But we are never the sole authors of our own narratives; in every conversation a *positioning* takes place (Davies and Harré, 1991) which is accepted, rejected, or improved upon by the partners in the conversation. When a new head of department introduces herself to her collaborators, she tells them how she wants to be perceived. Their reactions will tell her how much of this has been accepted or rejected, what corrections have been made, and how the members of the group want to be perceived by their new boss. But the end of the introductory meeting does not end the positioning thus begun; this will continue as long as these people work together, and even longer in the history they will tell later.

What is more, other people or institutions concoct narratives for others without including them in a conversation; *this is what power is about*. Some people decide about other people's jobs, their livelihoods, their identities. But even as puppets in a power game, people are still co-authors of history – that other enacted dramatic narrative in which they are also actors.

How can individual narratives be related to societal ones? To understand a society or some part of a society, it is important to discover its repertoire of legitimate stories and find out how it evolved – this is what I have called above a history of narratives. Thus, as MacIntyre reminds his readers, the chief means of moral education in pre-modern societies was the telling of stories in a genre fitting the kind of society whose story was being told. In the process

of socialization or, as anthropologists call it, enculturation, young people were helped to attribute meaning to their lives by relating them to the legitimate narrative of the society to which they belonged. Thus the main narrative of, and in, heroic societies was epic and saga, whereas the genre of city-states was tragedy, both reflecting and expressing the prevalent stance toward human fate and human community.

Although neither of these cultures (the heroic societies nor the Greek city-states) was exactly unitary or consistent, MacIntyre nonetheless claims that it was only medieval cultures that first encountered the problem of multiple narratives on a global scale – with many ideals, many ways of life, many religions. How, then, could anybody tell a particular story? To begin with, it is obvious that every age hosts many competing narratives (indeed, periodization itself belongs to one story or another) and, in principle, one could choose to relate such a story to any of them. On the other hand, it makes sense for interpretive purposes to speak of a dominant or prevalent narrative genre at any one time – what is called in science the mainstream.

The novel, for instance, is regarded as the most characteristic genre of modern times. Kundera (1988) places Cervantes together with Descartes among the founders of the Modern Era. Other new genres emerged in modernity, such as the above-mentioned biography and autobiography (both a consequence of the modern institution of personal identity), while others changed their character so that a ‘modern poetry’ emerged, for instance. Thus when we read Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), the forerunner of modern ethnology, we know that we are reading a philosophical treatise and that it is not a modern one. In this sense genres are like any other institutions, or maybe all institutions are like genres: ‘A literary institution must reflect and give focus to some consistent need and sense of possibility in the community it serves, but at the same time, a genre helps to define what is possible and to specify the appropriate means for meeting an expressive need’ (Bruss, 1976: 5).

If we add instrumental needs to expressive needs (or better still if we remove any divide between them), social theory and social practice can be treated as special genres of narrative situated within other narratives of modern (or post-modern) society. Social sciences can therefore focus on how these narratives of theory and practice are constructed, used, and misused. But before moving on to concrete examples, we will examine the present understanding of the concept of narrative in social sciences and humanities. Two such perspectives are especially relevant: seeing narrative as a *mode of knowing* and narration as a *mode of communication*.

### **Narrative as a mode of knowing**

Knowledge is not the same as science, especially in its contemporary form. (Lyotard, 1979/1986: 18)

In 1979, the Conseil des Universités of the government of Quebec asked French philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard, to write 'a report on knowledge in the most highly developed societies' (Lyotard, 1979/1986: xxv). In his report, Lyotard contrasted the narrative form of knowledge, typical of the non-modern type of society, with that modern invention – scientific knowledge. There is a peculiar relationship between the two, he said: while science requires narrative for its own legitimation (there has to be a story to tell why scientific knowledge is important at all), it repays the favor in poor coin.<sup>4</sup> Not only does it refuse to perform the same service and to legitimize narrative knowledge (with the possible exception of structuralism and formalism in literary theory) but also it fiercely denies narrative its legitimacy as a form of knowledge and, above all, demands that the question of knowledge status and legitimation remains taken for granted, unexamined. Paradoxically, however, as the grand narratives of legitimation lost their privileged status, narrative and science both came back into the light of scrutiny.

One of the authors to take up this scrutiny was Jerome Bruner, who compared the *narrative mode of knowing*<sup>5</sup> with the logico-scientific mode, also referred to as the paradigmatic mode of knowing (Bruner, 1986). The narrative mode of knowing consists in organizing experience with the help of a scheme assuming the intentionality of human action. Using the basic concepts of literary theory, Polkinghorne (1987) followed Bruner's lead in exploring the narrative, an attempt that I will discuss here at length in order to point out its interesting tenets.

*Plot*, says Polkinghorne, is the basic means by which specific events, otherwise represented as lists or chronicles, are brought into one meaningful whole. 'The company suffered unprecedented losses' and 'the top managers were forced to resign' are two mysterious events that call for interpretation. 'With the company suffering unprecedented losses, the top managers were forced to resign' is a narrative. The difference lies in the temporal ordering and thus in a suggested connection between the two. As the example indicates, some kind of causality may be inferred but it is crucial to see that narrative, unlike science, leaves *open* the nature of the connection. A law-type statement such as 'when a company suffers losses, its managers resign' invites falsification or verification on a statistical scale, but not a re-making and negotiation of meaning, such as: 'Are you sure? I've heard they started losing when the managers resigned, as they took their customers with them?'

What is considered a vice in science – openness to competing interpretations – is a virtue in narrative. This openness means that the same set of events can be organized around different plots. 'The top managers were forced to resign when it became clear that the company's losses were covered up for a long time' or 'The top managers were forced to resign even if the auditors were to blame' gives the same chain of events a different meaning. In 2002, the year of the Enron, World Com and Arthur Anderson scandals, such tentative plots were found daily in the media.

Polkinghorne also discusses a special type of *explanation* that is possible within a narrative, where the 'motives' can be reconciled with 'causes' in an interpretation of action. Within the logico-scientific mode of knowing, an explanation is achieved by recognizing an event as an instance of a general law, or as belonging to a certain category. Within the narrative mode of knowing, an explanation consists in relating an event to a human project:

When a human event is said not to make sense, it is usually not because a person is unable to place it in the proper category. The difficulty stems, instead, from a person's inability to integrate the event into a plot whereby it becomes understandable in the context of what has happened ... Thus, narratives *exhibit* an explanation instead of demonstrating it. (Polkinghorne, 1987: 21)

Notice also the implicit differentiation between an 'event' and 'an action': the latter is an event that can be interpreted, made sense of, by attributing intentions to it. 'A flood' is an event but 'a flood due to the poor quality of cement used in the dam construction' is quite another story. While a logico-scientific text would have to demonstrate and prove the difference between the two, a narrative can simply put the elements close to one another, exhibiting an explanation: 'As water sprang in all directions, the engineer looked up and saw the growing hole in the dam.'

While it may be clear that narrative offers an alternative mode of knowing, the relative advantage of using this mode may remain obscure. Bruner (1990) points out that in narrative it is the plot rather than the truth or falsity of story elements that determines the power of the narrative as a story. A narrative which says 'The top managers resigned and then it rained a whole week' (i.e. a narrative with no plot or an incomprehensible plot) will need some additional elements to make sense of it, even though the two events and their temporal connection may well be true and correct in themselves. Bruner (1990: 44) calls this the narrative's *indifference to extralinguistic reality*, which is compensated by an extreme sensibility to the reality of the speech (i.e. the occasion when the narrative is presented). 'The top managers resigned, and then it rained the whole week' may produce an outburst of hilarity when, for example, told on a sunny day by the new CEO to his board of directors. There are no structural differences between fictional and empirical narratives, and their respective attraction is not determined by their claim to be fact or fiction. The attractiveness of a narrative is situationally negotiated – or, rather, arrived at, since contingency plays as much a part in the process as esthetics or politics. This negotiation takes place even when readers are reading in solitude – a sleepy reader will find a text less attractive than an alert reader, etc.

Is there no way to tell the difference between a fictional and factual text, between *belles lettres* and social science, for that matter? There is, and to explain it I will borrow from Tzvetan Todorov, the Bulgarian-French literature theorist and linguist with a great interest in social sciences – his concept of a *fictional*

*contract* (1978/1990: 26). In this tacit contract between the author and the reader, the authors plead: suspend your disbelief, as I am going to please you. In what can be called a *referential contract*, the researcher pleads: activate your disbelief, as I am going to instruct you. It goes without saying that if the scientific author manages to please the reader as well, it is a bonus.

In the mean time, the lack of structural differences between fictional and factual narratives is suspected to account for most of their power. Narrative thrives on the contrast between the ordinary, what is 'normal', usual, and expected, and the 'abnormal', unusual, and unexpected. It has effective means at its disposal for rendering the unexpected intelligible: 'The function of the story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern' (Bruner, 1990: 49–50). This is possible because the power of the story does not depend on its connection to the world outside the story but in its openness for negotiating meaning. 'This is a true story' and 'This never happened' are two ways of claiming genre affiliation, but genre affiliation does not decide whether a story is found interesting or not. *Se non è vero è ben trovato* (even if it's untrue it is still beautifully put), says an Italian proverb.

As narratives explaining deviations are socially sensitive, a form of story whose power does not reside in the difference between fact and fiction is convenient for such sensitive negotiations. One or many alternative narratives are always in the offing. In Enron's story, the blame and, consequently, the part of the Villain, was given in alternative versions to the US government, to Enron's executives, to auditors, or to all of them. The events acquire a meaning by the application of abduction (a guess, a tentative plot), which introduces a hypothetical connection – just like a hypothesis but still claiming openness. Yet another story might offer a better or more convincing explanation, without ever challenging the truth or falsity of the story elements. There is no way of deciding between different stories except by negotiation: between the writers (as in a public debate), between the writer and the reader (where the writer tries to get the upper hand but the reader has the last word), or between various readers, as in a private conversation. Stories, claims Bruner, are 'especially viable instruments for social negotiation'.

This 'method of negotiating and renegotiating meanings by the mediation of narrative interpretation', it seems to Bruner, 'is one the crowning achievements of human development in the ontogenetic, cultural and phylogenetic sense of that expression' (1990: 67). The human species developed a 'protolinguistic' readiness for the narrative organization of experience. This primitive disposition of the child is encouraged and elaborated in the course of life, exploiting the richness of the existing repertoire of stories and plots. An adult person will enrich, challenge, and continue this repertoire.

The analogy between the enculturation of a child and an acculturation of an immigrant or a new employee is obvious, but I want to carry the point even further. Even scientists become scientists with the help of narrative. Graduate

students read mountains of books on methods, like this one, but when they want to submit their first paper to a referee journal, they ask a colleague who has already published: 'How did you go about it?' The method books are accompanied by growing numbers of biographies and autobiographies, and they themselves are richly illustrated with stories.

It is not difficult to admit that narrative knowledge is ubiquitous in all social practices. Managers and their subordinates tell stories and write stories, to one another and to interviewers, be they researchers or journalists. So do doctors and patients, teachers and pupils, salespersons and customers, coaches and football players. The genre of autobiography – personal and organizational – is steadily growing in popularity, while the older types of stories – folktales, myths, and sagas – acquire new forms thanks to new technologies and new media.

A student of social practices re-tells narratives of a given practice and constructs them herself, first and second hand. Nevertheless, she cannot stop here as, by doing that, she will be barely competing with the practitioners themselves, and from a disadvantaged position. She must go further and see how the narratives of practice unfold. This interest can lead her to a stance espousing the ideas of logico-scientific knowledge, as formalism and structuralism tended to do, or those closer to the poststructuralist edge of the spectrum of narratology. I shall introduce both types but, before that, we will look at another use of narrative – narration as a communication mode.

### **Narration as a mode of communication**

Narration is a common mode of communication. People tell stories to entertain, to teach, and to learn, to ask for an interpretation and to give one. When US political scientist, Walter Fisher, read MacIntyre's work, he suddenly understood that his own work in the area of communication had stemmed from a conception of the human being as *Homo narrans* (Fisher, 1984). From this emerged an attempt to combine the narrative and paradigmatic modes of knowing in what he calls a *narrative paradigm* of communication.

The narrative paradigm is based on a notion of *narrative rationality* (Fisher, 1987), in contrast to the conventional model of formal rationality whereby human communication is supposed to follow the rules of formal logic.<sup>6</sup> Rationality as redefined by Fisher involves the principles of *narrative probability* – a story's coherence and integrity – and *narrative fidelity* – a story's credibility established by the presence of 'good reasons' (i.e. 'accurate assertions about social reality') (Fisher, 1987). This redefinition of rationality, he claims, provides a radical democratic ground for a social-political critique, inasmuch as it assumes that everybody is capable of narrative rationality. Unlike the traditional notion of rationality, it also allows for interpretation of public moral argument (see also R.H. Brown, 1998). Fisher demonstrated the use of his concepts in his

analysis of the nuclear war controversy as a public moral argument (1984) and of the political rhetoric of Ronald Reagan (1987).

Fisher's claim that 'all forms of human communication need to be seen fundamentally as stories' (1987: xiii) can be regarded as both narrower and more extensive than MacIntyre's conception of narrative. According to my reading of the latter, narrative is the main form of social life because it is the main device for making sense of social action. Thus it either subsumes communication as a kind of action or makes it redundant (everything is 'communication'). However, if one insists on preserving the notion of communication to denote a special kind of social action, it becomes clear that there are other forms of human communication than narrative. Fisher has himself enumerated several: technical argument, poetic discourse, or such speech acts Gumbrecht (1992) called description and argumentation.

Some discourses or speech acts may aim at the destruction or at least the interruption of the narrative. The Dada movement in art provides an extreme example of an experiment in human communication which opposed the storytelling mode and yet we make sense of it by placing it in the narrative of Modern Art or, alternatively, in the narrative of European history at the moment when post-World War I frustration was at its height (Berman, 1992).

Fisher also wants to conduct a 'criterial analysis' of narratives: it is not enough for him to see narrative as good or bad *for the purpose at hand*, to paraphrase Schütz. Consequently, he rejects pragmatism while sharing many of its ideas. His understanding of rationality is still geared to the *application of criteria* rather than the *achievement of consensus* (Rorty, 1992). This means that, while espousing the narrative mode of knowing, Fisher does not want to abandon the paradigmatic (logico-scientific) one; hence his expression 'the narrative paradigm'. There must be a priori criteria for what is good or bad in telling stories. This requirement recalls the argument in Habermas (1984) that there must be a set of criteria for a good dialogue external to the dialogue itself. Fisher does, in fact, acknowledge his debt to the German philosopher.

I am dwelling on this issue to warn the readers that I adopt a new pragmatist view. Consequently, while sympathizing with many of Fisher's ideas, I do not espouse his overall purpose: 'It is a corollary of the general pragmatist claim that there is no permanent ahistorical metaphysical framework into which everything can be fitted' (Rorty, 1992: 64). I do not accuse Fisher of planning to come up with such a framework but his criteria certainly look as though they could be fitted into one. Pragmatically again, it is possible to envisage many situations in which the construction of such criteria might well serve a particular purpose. Once they have received a special status, however, they will end up as 'principles' and 'criteria' usually do: obstructing their own change or reform.

The notion of an 'ideal speech situation', coined by Habermas (1984), achieved wide resonance in organization theory and practice, especially as a way of improving organizational communication (Gustavsen, 1985). A similar

success can be predicted for Fisher's ideas, which lend themselves well to consultancy purposes: with a list of 'conditions for a good narrative', organizational communication can surely be improved. And yet understanding of organizational reality, such as informs the present book, indicates that such an effort is impossible. 'An ideal speech situation' and 'a good narrative' are things that have to be locally negotiated, and those are valid only for a given time and place. They are results not preconditions of organizational communication. Some claim that this phenomenon of the constant construction of society is in itself local and temporal and belongs to 'late modernity' or 'postmodernity'.

### **Is there room for narrative in a postmodern society?**

While there is general agreement that the epoch in which we now live is different from that which is called 'modernity' (although it is not yet sure how, as epochs are best named after they ended), there is disagreement about the type of reflection that has been called 'postmodern'. For some, 'postmodern' is merely a description of a school of architecture and any other use of the word is unwarranted. For others, 'postmodern' means a pretentious, hermetic vocabulary, plaguing mostly the humanities, but recently also the social sciences. In this text, 'postmodern' is applied to a kind of social reflection that is characterized by three tenets:

- 1 It refuses the correspondence theory of truth, according to which statements are true where they correspond to the world on the basis that it is impossible to compare words to non-words (Rorty, 1980).
- 2 Consequently, it challenges the operation of representation, revealing the complications of any attempt to represent something by something else.
- 3 And, therefore, it pays much attention to language (in a sense of any system of signs – numbers, words, or pictures) as a tool of reality construction rather than its passive mirroring.

It might seem, however, that this text goes against the grain of what is one of the main tenets in the postmodern reflection – that is, that 'history has come to an end' (Fukuyama, 1992) or that the grand narratives – of progress, of emancipation, and recently even of economic growth – have been abandoned (Lyotard, 1979). Answering Lyotard on behalf of the pragmatists, Rorty claims that 'we want to drop *metanarratives*, but keep on recounting edifying first-order narratives' (1992: 60). History may be dead but only if we were attached irrevocably to one specific version of it. Abandoning the modern metanarrative of emancipation does not mean giving up the longing for narratives that we happen to like in a benign ethnocentrism which values our own way of life but relinquishes the idea of 'modernizing' other people who are 'underdeveloped', 'premodern', or in some other way different from us. A quest for a good life extends to becoming a

quest for a good society, excluding a missionary zeal which forces other people to adopt our point of view but including a readiness to listen to other people and their narratives so that we might include them in our own narrative if we happen to like them (Rorty, 1991). And Lyotard agrees: it was only the narratives of legitimation, the 'metanarratives,' which were exposed to the postmodern critique: 'the little narrative remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science' (1979/1986: 61).

The question then arises as to whether it is in fact possible to construct any shared concepts, whether it is possible to have a conversation, an exchange of narratives – without recourse to a metanarrative of some kind. In answering this, MacIntyre (1981/1990) emphasizes the unpredictability of an enacted dramatic narrative of life and history. Such construction is never finished and in the negotiation of meaning the results are for ever uncertain. The old metanarratives sinned in their ambition to end a conversation by trying to predict its outcome. If a canon is already known, there is nothing left to talk about.

The narrative structure of human life requires unpredictability and this is, paradoxically, why the alleged failure of the social sciences (namely, their failure to formulate laws and consequently the failure to predict) is in fact their greatest achievement. According to MacIntyre, this should be interpreted not as a defeat but as a triumph, as virtue rather than vice. He adds provocatively that the common claim that the human sciences are young in comparison with the natural sciences is clearly false, and they are in fact as old, if not older. And the kind of explanations they offer fit perfectly the kind of phenomena they purport to explain.

Unpredictability<sup>7</sup> does not imply inexplicability. Explanations are possible because there is a certain teleology – sense of purpose – in all lived narratives. It is a kind of circular teleology because is not given beforehand but is created by the narrative. A life is lived with a goal but the most important aspect of life is the formulation and re-formulation of that goal. This circular teleology is what MacIntyre calls a *narrative quest*. A virtuous life, according to him, is a life dedicated to a quest for the good human life, where the construction of a definition of a 'good life' is a process that ends only when a life comes to an end. Rather than being defined at the outset, a 'good life' acquires a performative definition through the living it of. A search looks for something that already exists (as in a 'search for excellence'); a quest creates its goal rather than discovers it. The proponents of means–ends rationality defend the notion of the a priori goals, while the pragmatists declare it to be impractical. A narrative view gets rid of the problem by reinstating the role of goals as both the results and the antecedents of action. Whole communities as well as individual persons are engaged in a quest for meaning in 'their life', which will bestow meaning on particular actions taken.

Therefore a student of social life, no matter of which domain, needs to become interested in narrative as a form of social life, a form of knowledge, and a form of communication.

There is an apparent difference between MacIntyre and Fisher, on the one hand, and another advocate of a narrative approach, Richard Harvey Brown, on the other, as regards the role of narrative in contemporary society. The first two celebrate narratives whereas Brown sees them as an endangered species: 'Narrative requires a political economy and collective psychology in which a sense of lived connection between personal character and public conduct prevails' (1987: 144). This condition, Brown claims, is rare in contemporary western societies, where personal character has become separated from public conduct (see also Sennett, 1998). The difference is misleading in that both MacIntyre and Fisher feel there is a need to celebrate narrative precisely *because* there is a rift between private and public discourse, *because* the language of virtues has become obsolete (MacIntyre, 1981/1990), and *because* a public moral argument has become an oxymoron in the light of emotive ethics (Fisher, 1984; 1987). All three authors – and indeed most of the adherents of the narrative mode of knowing, whether or not they call themselves such – are vitally interested in constructing a public moral discourse which avoids nostalgia trips to the past (especially to totalitarian pasts) and does not stop at denouncing the postmodern fragmentation. They may differ in their view on the ultimate purpose (emancipation for Fisher and Brown, a quest for virtues for MacIntyre, and a fight against cruelty for Rorty), but there is always a moral vision in their theories.<sup>8</sup>

### About this book

Figure 1.1 depicts various uses of narrative and its analysis in social science studies, simultaneously announcing the contents of this book. Thus Chapter 2

#### Field of practice

- Watch how the stories are being made
- Collect the stories
  - Provoke story telling
    - Interpret the stories (what do they say?)
      - Analyze the stories (how do they say it?)
        - Deconstruct the stories (unmake them)
          - Put together your own story
          - Set it against/together with other stories

Field of research

concerns the ways in which stories are made in various fields of practice (including scientific practice, although this field receives more attention in Chapters 8 and 9). Chapter 3 concerns story collection, while Chapter 4 shows that interviews allow all three activities, being an observation of how stories are made, an opportunity for story collection, and a possibility to provoke

storytelling. Chapter 5 introduces a general framework of text interpretation. Chapter 6 illustrates structuralist ways of analyzing texts, whereas Chapter 7 introduces poststructuralist and deconstructivist ways of reading a text. Chapter 8 offers examples of readings of scientific texts, while Chapter 9 discusses issues important in writing a scientific text. Chapter 10 discusses the consequences of narrativizing social sciences.

Chapters 2–9 have a similar structure: they begin with a general introduction of a given aspect of a narrative approach, continue with one or more examples of well-known works illustrating this very aspect, and end with a detailed example of a given textual operation. Examples are often taken from my own work, not because it is exemplary but because it permits me to take liberties impossible to take with texts of other authors. Chapters 1–9 end with one or more 'exercises' whose aim is to create material that can be used in exemplifying the contents of the next chapter. The readers can replace the exercise material with their own field material. Chapter 10 does not contain an exercise as the exercise is the reader's own text – to be created. All chapters end with a 'further reading list' that might serve as a guide among the long list of references to a reader who wants to deepen his or her introduction to the narrative approach to social sciences.

### EXERCISE

#### Exercise 1.1. my life so far

Write a chronological account of your own life. (If you are working in a group, decide from the start whether you want to share your biography with the others. A conscious censorship works better than a subconscious one.)

### FURTHER READING

Bruner, Jerome (1986) *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Czarniawska, Barbara (1997) *Narrating the Organization. Dramas of Institutional Identity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Fisher, Walter R. (1987) *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value and Action*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.

Nash, Christopher (ed.) (1990) *Narrative in Culture: The Uses of Storytelling in the Sciences, Philosophy and Literature*. London: Routledge.

Mitchell, W.J.T. (ed.) (1980) *On Narrative*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Polkinghorne, Donald E. (1987) *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*. New York, NY: SUNY Press.

**Notes**

- 1 For a short description of their work see, e.g., *The New Encyclopædia Britannica* (1990): Micropædia, Vol. 1: 969; Vol. 10: 427.
- 2 This feat was, of course, never accomplished, although seriously attempted. The best example of lingering ambiguity is the famous – and infamous – psychological notion of ‘attitude’ which, by insisting on preserving the mechanical together with the intentional, promised much and gave little.
- 3 For a review of criticisms against social constructionism, and a defense, see Czarniawska (2003a).
- 4 Richard Harvey Brown (1998) shows how Descartes and Copernicus created acceptance for their scientific apparatuses by placing them in ‘narratives of conversion’.
- 5 An interesting tautology, as Bruner points out: ‘narrative’ in Latin probably comes from *gnarus* (‘knowing’).
- 6 Here once again one is reminded of the ethnomethodological redefinition of rationality as a rhetoric to account for social actions (Garfinkel, 1967).
- 7 Unpredictability is far from total: there are predictabilities that we ourselves create (as in timetables); there is predictability in statistical regularities; there is knowledge of causal regularities in nature and social life.
- 8 This should not be taken as moralizing; the authors’ interests mentioned here lie in improving the discourse on morality not in telling people or nations what they should do with their lives.