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Narrative Practices Versus Capital-D Discourses: Ways of Investigating Family

I would like to start my commentary on Galvin and Braithwaite and Harrison by stressing the radical difference of the type of contribution we have in front of us. Galvin and Braithwaite have chosen the genre of a summary or overview. They outline current research traditions in family communication and summarize theories and methodologies that make discourse, talk, and narratives in and about families an interesting starting point for the exploration of family relations. As promised in the title for their article, they review both research that starts from the assumption that discourse reflects concepts, beliefs, and ideologies about family, and research that works with the assumption that discourse and/or talk constitutes our current assumptions. Overall, however, it appears as if the latter orientation, according to which “families are talked into (and out of) being,” takes dominance over the position that views discourse and narratives as representative or reflective of family realities.

In contrast to Galvin and Braithwaite’s review article of discursive or narrative approaches to family research, Harrison enters the discussion of family relations as a scholar of literature, as a literary critic and historian. She documents convincingly how over the past 250 years, literary form and literary content have created an alliance to result in a powerful complot that takes hold of how to make sense of heterosexual relationships, thus dominating our expectations in the realm of modern (hetero) love and affection. More specifically, she shows that these expectations are idealized and unrealistic; and when they enter into and feed existing family concepts and ideologies, they may lead to a sense of personal failure and exclusion. Created in early modernity, the “marriage plot” has maintained its grip as the dominant master narrative that organizes our ways of making sense of who-we-are in romantic relationships, which in turn feeds into our family expectations so that counter-narratives, such as The Paper Bag Princess, are unlikely to enter individuals’ modern imaginations, let alone become viable alternatives (see Bamberg, 2004).

Despite these two different entry points, both contributions start from a similar general orientation that probably is best characterized as a language-based, discursive, narrative framework, a framework within which language, discourse, and narrative take center stage for current understandings of family and family relations. Even more so, both contributions give discourses and narratives a somewhat formative power in the constitution of a sense of who-we-are, inasmuch as discourses and narratives are viewed as central to the interpersonal transactions we perform and the relationships that result from them. These kinds of discursive

1 The Paper Bag Princess is a children’s book by Robert Munsch (1980) that concludes with the female protagonist dancing into the sunset after having decided not to marry her prince and to live happily ever after.
and language-based frameworks typically fall under the headers of "constructivist" and/or "(social) constructionist" orientations, and their basic argument is that humans have evolved as talking social and interpersonal relations—and thereby our selves—into being. There are stronger and weaker versions of these constructivist frameworks, which give more—or less—power to the role of language, discourse, and interaction in the construction processes of our identity and our sense-making activities. In addition, and probably more relevant when it comes to focus on the differences between the two contributions, there are assumed to be different agencies "at work" in the construction processes of our sense-of-who-we-are—as members in social and interpersonal relationships such as hetero-romantic partnerships and as members who constitute a sense of family.

In the following, I use the two articles as a point of departure for teasing apart the different contributions that language, discourse, and narrative can make in researching the construction processes of relational identities, specifically in analytic orientations toward family-related topics. Let me start with a brief elaboration of the contrast between Galvin and Braithwaite's distinction between discourse as reflecting reality and constituting reality, as the two lenses may actually not be compatible when it comes to designing research orientations. The lens that highlights the role of discourse as reflecting reality, and the fact that people's talk reflects their underlying conceptions, is a traditional view that has inspired research methodologies that typically try to tap into these concepts by use of questionnaires, interviews, or experimental designs. A further assumption of work in this general orientation is that language and/or discourse is taken to be relatively transparent; that is, the analysis of the form and content of language offers a window into underlying meaning in ways that deliver new insights regarding the domain of inquiry—in this case, family.

The lens that focuses on the role of discourse in constituting reality starts off from a different notion of the person—one that is more than a (more or less passive) reflector. The lens that gives discourse a constituting force simultaneously credits the person with the agency to use language in order to make world and/or to change it (see Bruner, 1991). In this latter view discourse is the toolbox that speaking subjects use for the construction of our concepts and beliefs, which ultimately results in socially shared forms of sense making and ideologies. This distinction is compatible with the differentiation between capital-D discourses (also called dominant discourses or master narratives) and small-d discourses (the everyday forms of talk or small stories) (see Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin, 2011; Gee, 1999). In the former, the person, their concepts, actions, and interactions—in short, the world as we see it—are *constructed*: the world, including our sense of who-we-are, are the product of the existing capital-D discourses; whereas in the latter, small-d discourses are used (in interactive settings) to construct a sense of self, of the other, and of the world, with us, the speakers or narrators, as agents who are agentively (and responsibly) involved in this construction process.

Obviously, both lenses in isolation present only a partial and incomplete picture of the agency direction of fit between person and world (and who is in control), because it would be erroneous to deny the person any agency (and responsibility) in his or her construction of the world, as it would be ill fated to endow the person with ominous powers and deny the relevance of preexisting discourses and master narratives for the construal of self and others (see Bamberg, 2005). In contrast, this contradiction is not easily resolvable, as both directions of fit lead to very different research methodologies, including potentially very different foci and outcomes; and as I have argued elsewhere, a simple division of labor with an appeal to their dialectic relationship is no solution to the problem (see Bamberg, 2008). Following up on Harrison's argument regarding the continuing powers of the marriage plot, her approach clearly leans toward an orientation that privileges the view of the person as being constructed by the discursive forces of the marriage plot, where the marriage plot as the dominant discourse is given agentive powers, thus resulting in the conceptualization of the person as a passive undergoer. And it is not surprising that within this lens there is little space for counternarratives, as they require a more agentive speaker or narrator; and they also presuppose an existing repertoire—or better plural, *repertoires*—that enable them to subvert and counter dominant positions. Furthermore, Harrison’s version of the power of the marriage plot is one of continuity: Ever since early
modernity, from Austen in the 17th century until Fielding’s worldwide reception only a decade ago, the marriage plot has maintained and probably even strengthened its ideological prominence. And it is fascinating to realize how what at first glance can be construed as counterpositions, such as Eugenides (2011) The Marriage Plot or Munsch’s (1980) Paper Bag Princess, can be incorporated with little effort into the dominant ideology as ultimately supporting it.\(^2\) It seems as if there is no breaking away from the marriage plot as the prison house of dominant discourse.

However, I would like to throw up the question what might happen if we were to sharpen the lens of construction and start from there as our vantage point. On this view, we construct ourselves by claiming—and subsequently, navigating—positions, positions that either embrace dominant discourses or alternatively question, subvert, or even counter them. Taking this as an alternative orientation, the speaking subject is not a priori imprisoned in particular capital-D discourses or master narratives. Rather, whether and how a speaking subject positions him- or herself becomes an empirical question: It is perfectly possible that a speaker or narrator talks him- or herself (or others) into being by embracing a particular dominant discourse. However, as a detailed analysis can reveal, the speaker or narrator may choose a position that actually questions or is critical of dominant ways of making sense; and this can be more or less explicit, subtle or indirect. This was our attempt in unpacking the positions that pregnant mothers took in the face of being marked by the medical capital-D discourse as “irresponsible” (Talbot, Bibace, Bokhur, & Bamberg, 1996).

To clarify, I am not criticizing Harrison’s incorporation of potentially critical counter narratives under the header of the “marriage master plot as faulty.” Her arguments vis-à-vis Eugenides’ 2010 novel The Marriage Plot and

The Paper Bag Princess (Munsch, 1980) make perfect sense as long as they operate through the lens of master narratives, and as long as the goal is to illuminate the constraining forces of these capital-D discourses. This is the logic of the argument. However, it appears as if the analytic lens of viewing speaking subjects as prisoners of dominant capital-D discourses does not allow much of a counterspace to construct alternatives; and I would like to further suggest that, as illuminating as this orientation on the one hand may be, on the other hand, it may keep us from taking a closer look and from performing more detailed analyses of how and where alternative discourses may come to existence. This becomes more apparent if we take a constructivist lens vis-à-vis family discourses within which speaking subjects are viewed as more agentive and as positioning themselves with agency and responsibility for the way they use discourse and narration and call romance and family “into existence” in everyday “world-making” interactions.

Building on Galvin and Braithwaite’s review of Koenig Kellas’s (2010) work on the topic of storytelling processes taking place in family interactions and Langellier and Peterson’s (2006) research on joint storytelling performances as ways of “doing family,” we were given a glimpse of how discursive and narrative practices within family contexts can be explored in a detailed and productive way so that the processes in which individual family members construct a sense of self in particular family contexts are laid open and become visible. Although my own research with preadolescents and emerging adults has centered predominantly on their identity formation as young men, occasional discussions of family conditions have documented that the same three strategic dilemmas are to be navigated in order to bring off a sense of who they are: (a) navigating one’s sameness and one’s difference vis-à-vis others; (b) navigating in between continuity versus discontinuity across time; and (c) navigating a sense of self as agentive versus self as undergoer or victim (for more detail, see Bamberg, 2011; Bamberg et al., 2011).

In principle, there appears to be a difference between studies that pursue courtship and family relations in terms of plotlines or story lines on the one hand and as narrative practices on the other hand. The former typically work on the basis of interview data and analyze the temporal unfolding of particular cultural formations
such as motherhood (Andrews, 2004), divorce
(Riessman, 1990), in vitro fertilization (Throsby,
2004), and other symbolic orders relevant to the
territory of family relations. The goal of such
studies is to scrape out the implicit worldviews
that individuals propagate through the stories
they tell about their lives. A narrative practice
approach, in contrast, focuses on how people
interactively navigate a sense of who-they-are.
This navigation process is discursively brought
off in terms of how they differentiate themselves
as the same, similar to, or different from others;
how they present themselves as continuous
or discontinuous across time; and how they
navigate the two directions of fit: the world-to-
person direction of fit, positioning themselves
as undergoer, patient, or victim on one end
of the continuum, and the person-to-world
direction of fit, by use of which they position
a sense of self as agentive, on the other end of
the continuum.

In retrospect, the authors of both articles
contribute in relevant ways to research on family
themes from a discursive, narrative vantage
point — in theoretical as well as empirical
ways. Both go beyond (and above) traditional
routines of researching family relations from a
purely language-as-reflection vantage point that
privileges questionnaires and interviewing and
deals with language as a more or less transparent
window into underlying conceptualizations.
Both enter the field of family relations from an
angle that accentuates the constructivist powers
of discourse and narration, thus bringing into
stronger focus the lens from which lives are
constructed by preexisting forms of discourse
and narration on the one hand, and a lens from
which people are agentively constructing their
lives and themselves by interactively engaging
in discourse and narration on the other hand.
This general orientation, according to Lock
and Strong (2010), presents “a discernable and
important counter-narrative” (p. 9) to traditional
psychology and theorizing in the social sciences.
And I should add my conviction that this way of
theorizing family and family themes will become
increasingly influential as time progresses.

Having had the opportunity to read Harrison’s
and Galvin and Braithwaite’s contributions side
by side, and seeing their remarkable differences
in how they adopt and bring “construction” to
the domains of romance and family, I now am
able to elaborate a bit more on the differences
between different types of construction within
the general discursive, narrative orientation.
One strand of emphasizing the (social) con-
structedness of human lives seems to be more
interested in a critique of existing master
narratives and their constraining effects on lives,
especially if in pursuit of greater social justice
and freedom. This approach to construction
critically evaluates the availabilities of and
the powers exerted by existing plots and
story lines and how these have historically
emerged. Harrison’s analysis of the marriage
plot with its happily-ever-after implications is
a case in point; Ru’s (1992) analysis of the
emergence of family novels across Eastern and
Western traditions and Hirsch’s (1989) uncover-
ing of a plot absence of mother–daughter
relationships in pre-20th-century fiction are
other examples.

However, mention should also be made of
the limitations of this way of approaching the
constructive powers of discourse and narration,
especially with regard to the ability (or better,
 inability) to draw on and create alternative
discourses. This is where I suggested turning
to a more pragmatic vision of construction with
a more empirical concern for how discourse
and narration are put to work by speaking or
interacting subjects in their constructions of
their everyday lives. Inquiry into the everyday
practices of storytelling (also termed the
narrative practice or small-story approach)
can document how speaking subjects position
themselves in interaction with others, bringing
off, and in this sense practicing, a sense of
who they are in their daily activities. It is
my hope that bringing this approach to the
field of family themes will help push forward
our understanding of family relations and
the role of language, discourse, and narration
in them.

**AUTHOR NOTE**

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