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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 hetero 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 counternarratives, such as *The Paper Bag Princess*,¹ 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 discourse and narrative a somewhat formative power in the constitution of a sense of who-we-are, inasmuch as discourse and narrative are viewed as central to the interpersonal transactions we perform and the relationships that result from them. These kinds of discursive

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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.

1 and language-based frameworks typically fall
 2 under the headers of “constructivist” and/or
 3 “(social) constructionist” orientations, and
 4 their basic argument is that humans have
 5 evolved as talking our social and interpersonal
 6 relations—and thereby our selves—into being.
 7 There are stronger and weaker versions of these
 8 constructivist frameworks, which give more—or
 9 less—power to the role of language, discourse,
 10 and interaction in the construction processes
 11 of our identity and our sense-making activities.
 12 In addition, and probably more relevant when
 13 it comes to focus on the differences between
 14 the two contributions, there are assumed to be
 15 different agencies “at work” in the construction
 16 processes of our sense-of-who-we-are—as
 17 members in social and interpersonal relation-
 18 ships such as hetero-romantic partnerships and
 19 as members who constitute a sense of family.

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

46 The lens that focuses on the role of dis-
 47 course in constituting reality starts off from
 48 a different notion of the person—one that is
 49 more than a (more or less passive) reflector.
 50 The lens that gives discourse a constituting
 51 force simultaneously credits the person with
 52 the agency to use language in order to make
 53 world and/or to change it (see Bruner, 1991).
 54 In this latter view discourse is the toolbox that

1 speaking subjects use for the construction of our
 2 concepts and beliefs, which ultimately results
 3 in socially shared forms of sense making and
 4 ideologies. This distinction is compatible with
 5 the differentiation between capital-*D* discourses
 6 (also called dominant discourses or master
 7 narratives) and small-*d* discourses (the everyday
 8 forms of talk or small stories) (see Bamberg,
 9 De Fina, & Schiffrin, 2011; Gee, 1999). In
 10 the former, the person, their concepts, actions,
 11 and interactions—in short, the world as we *see*
 12 it—are *constructed*: the world, including our
 13 sense of who-we-are, are the product of the
 14 existing capital-*D* discourses; whereas in the
 15 latter, small-*d* discourses are used (in interactive
 16 settings) to construct a sense of self, of the
 17 other, and of the world, with us, the speakers
 18 or narrators, as agents who are agentively
 19 (and responsibly) involved in this construction
 20 process.

21 Obviously, both lenses in isolation present
 22 only a partial and incomplete picture of the
 23 agency direction of fit between person and
 24 world (and who is in control), because it would
 25 be erroneous to deny the person *any* agency
 26 (and responsibility) in his or her construction of
 27 world, as it would be ill fated to endow the person
 28 with ominous powers and deny the relevance of
 29 preexisting discourses and master narratives for
 30 the construal of self and others (see Bamberg,
 31 2005). In contrast, this contradiction is not easily
 32 resolvable, as both directions of fit lead to
 33 very different research methodologies, including
 34 potentially very different foci and outcomes;
 35 and as I have argued elsewhere, a simple
 36 division of labor with an appeal to their dialectic
 37 relationship is no solution to the problem (see
 38 Bamberg, 2008). Following up on Harrison’s
 39 argument regarding the continuing powers of
 40 the marriage plot, her approach clearly leans
 41 toward an orientation that privileges the view of
 42 the person as being constructed by the discursive
 43 forces of the marriage plot, where the marriage
 44 plot as the dominant discourse is given agentive
 45 powers, thus resulting in the conceptualization
 46 of the person as a passive undergoer. And it
 47 is not surprising that within this lens there is
 48 little space for counternarratives, as they require
 49 a more agentive speaker or narrator; and they
 50 also presuppose an existing repertoire—or better
 51 plural, *repertoires*—that enable them to subvert
 52 and counter dominant positions. Furthermore,
 53 Harrison’s version of the power of the marriage
 54 plot is one of continuity: Ever since early 54

1 modernity, from Austen in the 17th century
 2 until Fielding's worldwide reception only a
 3 decade ago, the marriage plot has maintained
 4 and probably even strengthened its ideological
 5 prominence. And it is fascinating to realize
 6 how what at first glance can be construed
 7 as counterpositions, such as Eugenides (2011)
 8 *The Marriage Plot* or Munsch's (1980) *Paper*
 9 *Bag Princess*, can be incorporated with little
 10 effort into the dominant ideology as ultimately
 11 supporting it.² It seems as if there is no breaking
 12 away from the marriage plot as the prison house
 13 of dominant discourse.

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

40 To clarify, I am not criticizing Harrison's
 41 incorporation of potentially critical counternar-
 42 ratives under the header of the “marriage
 43 master plot as faulty.” Her arguments vis-à-vis
 44 Eugenides' 2010 novel *The Marriage Plot* and
 45

46
 47 ²However, a more detailed and thorough analysis
 48 of existing dominant discourses and/or master narratives
 49 reveals that there are contradictions between existing capital-
 50 *D* discourses and that it is possible to poke holes into their
 51 seemingly omniscient powers. This is the point I tried to
 52 drive home in my discussion of *The Paper Bag Princess*
 53 (Bamberg 2004, 357–359, 362) and with our discussion
 54 of counternarratives to dominant master narratives around
 pregnancy (Talbot, Bibace, Bokhur, & Bamberg, 1996).

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

24 Building on Galvin and Braithwaite's review
 25 of Koenig Kellas's (2010) work on the topic
 26 of storytelling processes taking place in fam-
 27 ily interactions and Langellier and Peterson's
 28 (2006) research on joint storytelling perfor-
 29 mances as ways of “doing family,” we were
 30 given a glimpse of how discursive and narrative
 31 practices within family contexts can be explored
 32 in a detailed and productive way so that the pro-
 33 cesses in which individual family members con-
 34 strue a sense of self in particular family contexts
 35 are laid open and become visible. Although my
 36 own research with preadolescents and emerging
 37 adults has centered predominantly on their iden-
 38 tity formation as young men, occasional discus-
 39 sions of family conditions have documented that
 40 the same three strategic dilemmas are to be navi-
 41 gated in order to bring off a sense of who they are:
 42 (a) navigating one's sameness and one's differ-
 43 ence vis-à-vis others; (b) navigating in between
 44 continuity versus discontinuity across time; and
 45 (c) navigating a sense of self as agentive versus
 46 self as undergoer or victim (for more detail, see
 47 Bamberg, 2011; Bamberg et al., 2011).

48 In principle, there appears to be a difference
 49 between studies that pursue courtship and family
 50 relations in terms of plotlines or story lines on
 51 the one hand and as narrative practices on the
 52 other hand. The former typically work on the
 53 basis of interview data and analyze the temporal
 54 unfolding of particular cultural formations

1 such as motherhood (Andrews, 2004), divorce
 2 (Riessman, 1990), in vitro fertilization (Throsby,
 3 2004), and other symbolic orders relevant to the
 4 territory of family relations. The goal of such
 5 studies is to scrape out the implicit worldviews
 6 that individuals propagate through the stories
 7 they tell about their lives. A narrative practice
 8 approach, in contrast, focuses on how people
 9 interactively navigate a sense of who-they-are.
 10 This navigation process is discursively brought
 11 off in terms of how they differentiate themselves
 12 as the same, similar to, or different from others;
 13 how they present themselves as continuous
 14 or discontinuous across time; and how they
 15 navigate the two directions of fit: the world-to-
 16 person direction of fit, positioning themselves
 17 as undergoer, patient, or victim on one end
 18 of the continuum, and the person-to-world
 19 direction of fit, by use of which they position
 20 a sense of self as agentive, on the other end of
 21 the continuum.

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

48 Having had the opportunity to read Harrison’s
 49 and Galvin and Braithwaite’s contributions side
 50 by side, and seeing their remarkable differences
 51 in how they adopt and bring “construction” to
 52 the domains of romance and family, I now am
 53 able to elaborate a bit more on the differences
 54 between different types of construction within

the general discursive, narrative orientation. 1
 One strand of emphasizing the (social) con- 2
 structedness of human lives seems to be more 3
 interested in a critique of existing master 4
 narratives and their constraining effects on lives, 5
 especially if in pursuit of greater social justice 6
 and freedom. This approach to construction 7
 critically evaluates the availabilities of and 8
 the powers exerted by existing plots and 9
 story lines and how these have historically 10
 emerged. Harrison’s analysis of the marriage 11
 plot with its happily-ever-after implications is 12
 a case in point; Ru’s (1992) analysis of the 13
 emergence of family novels across Eastern and 14
 Western traditions and Hirsch’s (1989) un- 15
 covering of a plot absence of mother–daughter 16
 relationships in pre-20th-century fiction are 17
 other examples. 18

19 However, mention should also be made of
 20 the limitations of this way of approaching the
 21 constructive powers of discourse and narration,
 22 especially with regard to the ability (or better,
 23 *inability*) to draw on and create alternative
 24 discourses. This is where I suggested turning
 25 to a more pragmatic vision of construction with
 26 a more empirical concern for how discourse
 27 and narration are put to work by speaking or
 28 interacting subjects in their constructions of
 29 their everyday lives. Inquiry into the everyday
 30 practices of storytelling (also termed the
 31 *narrative practice* or *small-story approach*)
 32 can document how speaking subjects position
 33 themselves in interaction with others, bringing
 34 off, and in this sense practicing, a sense of
 35 who they are in their daily activities. It is
 36 my hope that bringing this approach to the
 37 field of family themes will help push forward
 38 our understanding of family relations and
 39 the role of language, discourse, and narration
 40 in them. 41

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