MICHAEL BAMBERG  Guangdong University of Foreign Studies and Clark University

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 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 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

\[^1\] 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 our 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 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 contradictions, 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. 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 ques-
tion 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,
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 nar-
atives 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 exist-
tence. 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 fam-
ily interactions and Langellier and Peterson’s
(2006) research on joint storytelling perfor-
mances 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 pro-
cesses in which individual family members con-
strue 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 iden-
tity formation as young men, occasional discus-
sions of family conditions have documented that
the same three strategic dilemmas are to be navi-
gated in order to bring off a sense of who they are:
(a) navigating one’s sameness and one’s differ-
ence 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) constructedness 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) uncovering 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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REFERENCES


