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# Why narrative?

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This article addresses recent contestations of the role of narrative inquiry in the field of identity analysis and in qualitative inquiry more generally. In contrast to essentializing tendencies in the field of narrative inquiry (which have been contested under the headers of narrative *exceptionalism*, narrative *imperialism*, and narrative *necessity*), I am reiterating my proposal to theorize narrative inquiry as *narrative practice* (formerly ‘small story approach’) within which narratives and narrative inquiry present a more modest but thoroughly viable contribution.

**Keywords:** identity dilemmas, narrative exceptionalism, narrative imperialism, narrative necessity, narrative practice

Let me start with the question whether there is some basic agreement or lowest common denominator (maybe also in a least sophisticated jargon) among people working *on*, *with* or *through* stories for why narrative.<sup>1</sup> Probably we would agree that our shared interest lies, broadly speaking, in what people do when they engage in storytelling:<sup>2</sup> Why they use stories in the first place and what they accomplish through storytelling that is different from other kinds of “spoken or unspoken activity” (Atkinson, 2010, p. 661). So we typically may take a closer look at (i) where and how people “break into storytelling mode,” i.e., how storytelling differs from what was going on and/or talked about before; (ii) how storytellers manage their telling in terms of the formal (structural) properties of how they weave place, time and characters (content) into plot-like themes, how they manage to hold the floor throughout their storytelling activity, and keep their audience engaged; and (iii), how storytellers end their storytelling activity and return to the here-and-now of the story-telling situation.<sup>3</sup> In brief, and as a form of common agreement, we, as narrative inquirers, are interested in how storytelling activities are (contextually)

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embedded, what they consist of, and how we can take their form, content, and context as cues toward an interpretation what the particular story meant — what it was used for and what functions it was supposed to serve.

But why center on stories and storytelling activities? Why not other speech activities or genres, such as descriptions of people, objects or places, rationally laid-out arguments (in monologues or as interactions between people), lists of objects or events (as in route directions, recipes, or in cv's), or profiles/inventories of personality characteristics (as in online dating or on other social network sites). What is so special about stories that narrative inquirers feel they owe a privileged status over other speech (and non-speech) activities? Surveying cumulatively recent journals and edited volumes, the narrative terrain seems to have become increasingly contested (see for instance the debates following Anderson, 2006, and Thomas, 2010; the discussions around Sartwell, 2000, 2006; and Strawson, 2004; and in addition contributions that surfaced in previous issues of *Narrative*, cf. Eakin 2005, 2006; Phelan, 2005; and in *Narrative Inquiry*, cf. Atkinson & Delamont, 2006; Bamberg, 2003, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006; Juzwick, 2010; Rymes, 2010; Westlund, 2011; Woods, 2011). Since there is no space to work through these contestations in more detail, I will only sketch the reasons that narrative researchers have claimed for their endeavors in the recent past.

Apart from the claim that narrative is ubiquitous, and plays a central role in literate traditions and literary theory, narrative researchers typically focus on narrative form and narrative content as legitimatizations for narrative inquiry. Narratives are about people (*characters*), who act (*events*) in *space* and *time*; typically across a sequence of events (*temporality*). The narrative form (structure) is said to hold the content together (what the story is about — its plot) and sequentially arrange the story units (*orientation, complication, resolution, closure*) into a more or less *coherent whole* (cf. Bamberg, 2012 for more detail). The characters are typically presented from a third- or a first-person perspective. However, when a first-person perspective is taken to refer to the speaker, as usual for *personal narratives*, narrative inquirers begin to divide into different camps: those who continue to apply the same interpretive procedures as when dealing with other stories, treating storytelling as an activity like other speech activities that deserve to be investigated in their own rights; and those who treat these kinds of first-person stories as self disclosures that reveal aspects of the speaker's autobiography and subjectivity, i.e., as speakers' answers to the who-am-I question (cf. Bamberg 2011a). It is precisely at this point, that narratives for some narrative inquirers become the privileged, exceptional genre that serves the purpose of *identity* inquiry like no other (speech) activity; and it is typically here that references kick in to claims by Bruner, MacIntyre, Polkinghorne. Sarbin, Taylor and others with regard to *narratives' life-like tendencies* or *life's narrative tendencies* (cf. Bamberg, 2006 a); where

it seems to be assumed that the stories we tell about ourselves is how we conduct our lives — is *who we are*.<sup>4</sup> While watered-down versions of narrative exceptionalism draw on parallels between narrative core concepts such as the construction of *characters* in *space* and *time*, or particular (cultural) storylines and life themes (e.g. accomplishments and accidents, childhood and family relationships, illness, love, and turning points) which may serve the functions of scaffolds for socialization<sup>5</sup> and lives to-be-lived, stronger versions of the exceptionality thesis anchor narrative as a key concept in human evolution (e.g. Easterlin, 2012), human existence and reflexivity (e.g. Atkins, 2008; Freeman, 2011), and the human mind and intentionality (e.g. Herman, 2009; Schachter, 2011). Arguments against the universality of a stronger exceptionality claim were raised by Sartwell (2000) and Strawson (2004), who caution that not everyone may share the compulsion to weave their lives into a coherent story, and have led to suggestions to look elsewhere for illuminations of “the rich and messy domain of human interaction” (Woods, 2011 a, p.402). Our own critique, that biographical accounts are typically the artifact of (psychotherapeutically rooted) interviewing strategies that orient participants to withdraw from everyday social-interactive encounters of small-story telling, and ponder (if not ruminate) as a monad over the meaning of one’s life (cf. Bamberg 2006 a; Bamberg & Zielke, 2007), has resulted in suggestions to re-orient narrative inquiry toward a more general scrutiny of *narrative practices* (Bamberg, 2011c).

Let me take the remainder of this contribution to sketch out what this re-orientation vis-à-vis everyday storytelling practices looks like, how it affects the study of identity, and how narratives/stories can be dealt with more adequate and realistically within this type of narrative inquiry (cf. for more detail Bamberg 2011c). My focus will be on three realms of identity construction within which narrative practices may play a role, but where they contribute in an optional and supplementary fashion to the exploration of sense of self and identity. I will end my contribution with brief recommendations for a more modest though nevertheless quite effective narrative inquiry.

The three realms of identity construction are best regarded as dilemmatic spaces; spaces where actors (usually speakers) have choices that require a good deal of navigation. First, in our daily practices, we continuously mark ourselves as different, similar or same with respect to others. Integrating and differentiating a sense of who we are vis-à-vis others is a process of moment-to-moment navigations, and stories about self and others are good candidates to practice this from early on. However, stories are not the only candidates. Descriptions, practical reasoning or theoretical discourses may be equally important discursive practices for developing and changing the membership constructions that divide and unite people along affiliations and alignments in terms of being *just like them* (*belonging*) — or different (as in being *special* and *unique*). The second dilemmatic space often

is termed ‘agency,’ and although it seems as if agency is something that we *have*, even if only in the form of a *capacity*, I am suggesting to view it along the lines of navigating the sameness↔difference dilemma as a space where we navigate two directions of opposing fit: one from world-to-person and the other from person-to-world: While it is possible to view a sense of who we are as passive recipients of influences (typically from biological or outside forces such as parents, teachers, or culture), it also is possible to view world as a product of self (where the self is constructed as highly agentic).<sup>6</sup> The navigation of agency↔passivity/reciency as a dilemmatic space becomes particularly relevant in presentations of characters as involved and responsible — as for claims to success and self-aggrandizement — versus denials of culpability in mishaps or wrongdoings. Again, narratives about (past) actions are good candidates to find and practice navigations of this sort; though other speech (and non-speech) activities also lend themselves to accomplish these navigation processes. Third, when relating past to present, we can either highlight constancy, i.e., declare that we still are the exact same person; or we can present ourselves as having undergone some gradual (continuous) changes or radical (discontinuous) breaks resulting in a different, new persona — changes we can frame in terms of having been transformed, having grown, developed, deteriorated, fallen apart... The dilemma of how to navigate the connection of a sense of who we used to be with how we want to position ourselves for the here-and-now is often seen as closely coupled to issues of acquiring or developing self-worth, having deteriorated and become useless, and of striving for (or losing out on) the life one would like to live.<sup>7</sup> Again, the question forces itself to mind whether storytelling is an exceptional territory without which it would not be possible to navigate the constancy↔change dilemma, since it also seems to be possible to contrast past and here-and-now by way of simply stating non-narrative claims.

Before revisiting this last statement and reposition storytelling cautiously as more than just a good candidate for accounting for constancy and change, let me briefly summarize the argument thus far: First, identity and sense of self are lumped together as made of actions in our daily practices and routines that contribute to becoming answers to the who-am-I question.<sup>8</sup> Second, three realms (spaces) have been unhinged as particularly interesting and relevant for answering the who-am-I question in terms of navigating between two opposing alternatives: (i) sameness↔difference between self and other; (ii) world↔person direction of fit; and (iii) constancy↔change across time, where the first two require choices that do not have to account for temporal dimensions. Third, identity claims within these different realms can be made (and usually *are* made) by way of different actions, with discursive inter-actions (largely defined) in the domain of the everyday somewhat central, but not exclusive. Fourth, when it comes to the role of narratives/storytelling for the construction of identity, there is no reason to give

this type of activity any special or exceptional status over other discursive (and non-discursive) actions, although storytelling practices serve as good resources and opportune practice grounds for (i) positioning characters in relation to other characters (sameness↔difference), (ii) for positioning characters as agentive or as recipient (world↔person direction of fit), and (iii) for accounting for changes in the main character's history that did or did not occur (constancy↔change). Note that in all this, it doesn't matter whether speakers disclose events or actions of their own lives (let alone tell their whole life-stories); whether they tell events of other people's lives; or whether they refer to fictional characters. Rather, the way these characters are constructed and positioned in the there-and-then of the story-world indexes the way speakers/actors position a sense of coming across in the here-and-now — as when answering the who-am-I question. And it is participation in these practices that may result in a sense of who we are, where "telling our stories" is something quite mundane — nothing to be elevated or glorified into special status.

Having clarified and somewhat downgraded the role of storytelling in the construction of identity, and I think it is necessary to state this as clearly and with the least jargon possible, there nevertheless seems to be something special when it comes to identity-claims with regard to change (or constancy). Claims that one no longer is the person one used to be, that one has changed, but also claims that one is still the same, as in "*nothing changed*" (cf. John Edwards' confession, Bamberg, 2010), most often are responded to by "*how come — tell me?*" and seem to require some kind of explication or accounting. It is here, interactively, where storytelling activities typically kick in and serve the function of navigating that in spite of changes, one still may be trustworthy (cf. Bamberg, 2010, in press).

When it comes to privileging storytelling as exceptional space for identity practices, it appears that navigations of the constancy↔change dilemma have been lavished with more attention than the other two identity dilemmas. While identity navigations between sameness↔difference and between the two directions of fit of the person↔world dilemma do not require diachronicity as an essential prerequisite, navigations between constancy↔change do require the correlation of two events in time — which some narrative inquirers take to be the minimal definition of a story (cf. Labov & Waletzky, 1997). Ongoing discussions of the relevance of time and temporality as core concepts in narratology (cf. Freeman, 1998; Herman, Phelan, Rabinowitz, Richardson & Warhol, 2012; Ricoeur 1984) further corroborate the relevance of diachronicity/temporality and document how easily this distinguishing characteristic can be carried over into analogies between narrative theorizing and psychological continuity theories where change and the maintenance of constancy are taken to be the real challenges to personhood (cf. Schechtman, 2001).

It is interesting to see how this kind of ‘temporal continuity claim’ has recently been pushed further into something much stronger, what Strawson has termed the “ethical narrativity thesis” (Strawson, 2004). For instance, Freeman (2010) argues: “it is only ... through narrative reflection ... that one is able to move, surely and securely, in the direction of the good” (p.208), and Frank (2010) states similarly: “without stories, there would be no sense of action as ethical” (p.665).<sup>9</sup> Atkins (2008) elaborates the ethical narrativity thesis somewhat by taking agency out of the practical realm (space) of world↔person navigation, fusing it with diachronicity into what she calls ‘agency continuity’ to become the core component to narrative identity. It seems that Bochner (2010, this issue) wholeheartedly would underwrite this perspective by declaring the work with narratives as distinctly essential to explorations into the condition of human finitude, human suffering and human happiness — making it “autoethnography’s ethical calling” (Bochner, 2012).

In sum, what the claims to narrative exceptionalism have in common is the attempt to endow the person with something like a “*narrative essence*”<sup>10</sup> — something that anchors narrative ‘deep’ in the existence of the person, and ties the person and his/her existence to narrative as the roots of the human condition. In contrast, and as I have laid out elsewhere in more detail, when people engage in storytelling — whether they are about whole lives or a moment that is captured in four seconds (Bamberg, in preparation), whether these stories are about others or whether they topicalize/thematize moments of the life of the speaker (as in self-disclosures), whether they are fictional or not — when engaging in storytelling, people point indexically to how they anchor their position from where they want to be understood. Of course, these positions are situational, and they may change from one interactional setting to the next; but they are constitutive of social practices and repertoires (first with others in interaction, then, in a secondary fashion, in writing, or in rare occasions of talking to oneself). Shifting the emphasis in narrative inquiry from the contents of self-disclosures to narrative practice and identity navigation (Bamberg, 2011c), no longer requires claims of narrative exceptionality or necessity and positions its status as a viable but more modest approach to identity research within the larger field of qualitative inquiry.

## Notes

1. People working *on, with or through* stories covers practitioners (e.g. physicians, lawyers, counselors, consultants or therapists), storytellers (e.g. novelists, biographers or autobiographers, including autoethnographers), and story analysts (such as ethnographers <*again*, including autoethnographers>, memory researchers, historiographers and researchers in the general

fields of sense of self or identity). Thus, I conceive of the field of narrative inquiry rather broadly and prefer to enter from its spoken traditions — rather than written.

2. In order to shift the focus onto storytelling, I use *narrative* and *story* as synonyms.
3. Note that what usually is captured by the truistic definition of narratives — that they have a beginning, a middle, and an end, here is redescribed in terms of storytelling activity. Consequently, what reader-response criticism attempts to capture in literary theory, in oral narrative inquiry is first of all the immediate context of interaction, where stories usually are directly ‘responded’ to—e.g. they are validated or modified in *second stories*, but also potentially disregarded and treated as irrelevant to the ongoing activity (cf. Jefferson, 1978, p. 229).
4. One often-quoted passage may suffice: “self is a perpetually rewritten story ... in the end we become the autobiographical narratives we tell about our lives” (Bruner, 1987, p. 15).
5. Hutto’s *narrative practice hypothesis* is a case in point here, suggesting that storytelling functions as a socialization practice into children’s ability to ‘read’ others’ thoughts and feelings, and make sense of their actions (cf. Gallagher & Hutto, in press).
6. On July 13, 2012, when Barak Obama publicly declared: “*If you’ve been successful, you didn’t get there on your own*”, he appealed to the world-to-person direction of fit and the role teachers and social networks play in making young people successful (Obama, 2012); while the Romney-For-President and Ohio Business Entrepreneurs organization chose to insist on the opposite navigation technique, according to which individual actions lead to success as the product of a person-to-world direction of fit with individualism and uniqueness at its core (Romney, 2012).
7. It should be noted that navigations of the previous two dilemmas are not void of evaluative stances. Navigating, and thereby bringing off a sense of self, vis-à-vis others and vis-à-vis the world↔self-direction of fit (*agency*) are by no means neutral.
8. Note that this definition of practical identities — with daily in situ and in vivo human interactions as the empirical site where identities are brought off and practiced — contrasts starkly with identity or sense of self as human essences to be researched in their interiorities (cf. also Bamberg, 2011a; 2011b).
9. see also Schachter’s contribution, this issue.
10. As in Bruner’s (1990) original distinction between *narrative* and *paradigmatic* knowing — a distinction he withdrew twelve years later (Bruner 2002).

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