N

Narrative

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From ancient myths and holy texts to the modern novel and even down to mundane, everyday storytelling activities, narratives are given a special status among the range of discourse modes that impact human identity—the way we experience life as communities, make sense in general, and more specifically of who we are as individuals. In order to make sense of identity, narratives, it has been argued, are woven into the fabric of how we differentiate between ourselves and others and weave our belonging into nations, cultures, communities, and individual selves. They also allow us to construe a sense of agency and embeddedness in structural constraints. And lastly, they are prime candidates to weave change and no-change—that is, being the same across time and place—into a coherent thread.

Whether doing work "with narratives" (as empirical data), or "on narrative" (as the topic of interest), it is necessary to lay out—if not define—what we mean when using the term "narrative." And the same must be said with regard to the use of related terms like "story," "storytelling," "plot," "drama," and the like. However, defining narrative is only useful for a researcher or theoretician when simultaneously being able to answer the question of what we are attempting to investigate as well as the purpose of the investigation. Thus, definitions of narrative have to be viewed as relative and flexible—within different contexts likely to be serving different purposes. With this caveat in mind, reviewing defining characteristics or recent works *with* and *on* narrative within the larger dimensions of human interaction, communication, and conversation becomes the task of narrowing down and surveying what and how narrative can contribute to theories and practical applications of narrative research in the broad field of human interaction and communication.

More than 25 years ago, Wlad Godzich (1989), in his foreword to Coste's *Narrative as Communication*, characterized both communication theory and narrative theory as "in poor shape" with regard to what they are and what they promise to accomplish

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(p. x); and he concluded that therefore, "it is ... unlikely that the grafting of two lame legs on the same body would produce a smooth running animal" (p. x). Today, many years later, and mainly speaking here with regard to narrative theories, the situation may be even more daunting and confusing. The "narrative turn" has progressed through the disciplines of the academy, and the literature on narrative has spread and invaded wide arenas of public and professional discourses. Handbooks, encyclopedias, and monographs on narrative and narrative theory are flooding the markets. And it appears that encyclopedias and handbooks that cover academic areas and subdisciplines within the social life sciences and humanities cannot afford to avoid including and covering narrative and narrative methods. The reasons for this "turn-to-narrative" are complex and require thorough contextualization in the newly emerging interests in language, interpretation, culture, and subjectivity that took shape over the second half of the 20th century in the broader sociopolitical landscapes of restructuring the academy and its disciplines.

In public and everyday English language, the term "narrative" competes—and is often used synonymously—with story. A broad way to distinguish different trends in narrative theorizing is to divide them into a textual/cognitive category, developing within structuralist traditions and their turn to place the formerly textual structures into the human mind; an alternative orientation is to start from human interactive practices and ground narrative in culturally situated practices. While the former typically work off definitions of story and narrative as nouns or products, the latter, by contrast, use verbs and activities as starting points. The subsequent discussion will start with the first orientation and subdivide this orientation into three traditions of theorizing: (i) narratives and stories as text, (ii) viewing narrative as a definitional criterion for life and mankind—that of *Homo narrans*, and (iii) expanding narrative to cover general research activities within the social life sciences and humanities—including the act of doing inquiry as well as reporting this inquiry in the form of oral or written reports. This section will be followed by a diverging vantage point that theorizes narrating as situated, cultural practices that also, but in a secondary and reflective turn, impact how humans make sense of themselves.

Narrative expansions: From texts to lives to research and reporting research

Narrative as text

To start with, theories of narrative and story have flourished in a strong tradition of being viewed as texts. Within this tradition of theorizing, written (and here especially fictional) texts are the prototype. Behind this way of theorizing stands a long-lasting acceptance of the authority of The Word: The written text, preserved in the spiritual/religious scriptures that go back to ancient traditions across the world, is taken to give sense and legitimize human histories, human existence, and the human condition. Of course, those scriptures have had their point of origin in oral traditions of storytelling. Nevertheless, their authority is largely due to the fact that selected

tales have turned into a *written* canon. In this process of canonization, literate elites, who had originally been trained to duplicate the correct texts, and, within limits, interpret them, also kept them alive as authoritative voices. Hermeneutics, originally the science of how to interpret (and uphold) these kinds of authoritative texts, particularly within the Judeo-Christian traditions, soared into a master discipline for text interpretation in general; it borrowed and transferred onto other newly emerging kinds of literary texts, and from here was able to expand into the larger interpretive framework for general human sense-making (*Verstehen*—in the traditions of Vico, Herder, and Schleiermacher). A debate that emerged in the 1970s between Gadamer, Habermas, and Apel attempted to provide a grounding of hermeneutic understanding that transcends self-reflection as the necessary provision for the possibility of critique and social change by providing a communicative/discursive underpinning for human sense-making.

Emerging alongside this broadening of interpretation from strictly textual exegesis to (universal) human understanding was a theoretical tradition that attempted to focus more exclusively on the ingredients of texts—structurally as well as thematically. Borrowing from structural linguistics under the influence of Saussure, this way of approaching and working with texts—in particular within the newly emerging tradition of French structuralism of the 1960s—developed into a new discipline, termed "narratology." With its goal of developing a science of literary textual analysis, and avoiding the messiness of subjective and ideological interpretation, the attempt was to focus on structure and form, and to develop and refine a terminology that could provide a scaffold for a vessel into which different kinds of story content could be poured. Ironically, the then prominent structural metaphor borrowed from linguistics came under attack from a Chomskyan cognitivist (and universalist) perspective, that posited the kinds of connections between elements of the text into the human mind in the form of a universal competence. Even more ironically, the recent turn within narratology to cognition—that is, attempting to move into human cognitive competencies—again comes at a time when the limitations of cognition as the new metaphor of the 1960s have already been widely replaced by communicative, interactionist, and practice-based approaches.

Nevertheless, the original working definition of narrative/story as text is alive and well—with long-lasting consequences. It has impacted in a number of hitherto unquestioned ways how linguists (and here especially sociolinguists), ethnologists, anthropologists, and increasingly also sociologists, have been working with orally collected narratives. Following the invention and use of tape recorders, and more recently in research with visual narratives, the audio- and video-recorded material is being transformed into written transcripts—textual forms that have become more and more sophisticated in terms of incorporating acoustic and visual cues (such as pitch, breath intake, length of pauses, as well as gestures, facial expression, and gaze). And even contextual aspects of where and how co-conversationalists are performing their roles in the interaction have become part of "the text" that is being readied to provide the empirical evidence to which the analyst/interpreter can point to back up their interpretations.

Narrative as life

A different framework, in contrast to the narrative-as-text metaphor, places less emphasis on the textual "*nature*" of narrative and storytelling, and instead claims the narrating competence to be the part that makes us human (*Homo narrans*). This view anchors human meaning-making in narrative, and typically comes in two versions—both of them considering narrative as *exceptional*. The weaker version appeals to the abundance and ubiquity of narratives and draws on the emergence of storytelling competencies in the process of human evolution. This attempt at developing definitional characteristics argues for narrative as having historically (and/or evolutionarily) moved into the framework par excellence for making sense of cultural, ethnic, national, and individual entities (and their differences) across time. The stronger version of the exceptionality thesis anchors narrative as a key concept for human existence and reflexivity and as ultimately responsible for the evolution of the human mind, intentionality, agency, and morality, and occasionally even extended into the realm of what counts as life-worthy or "the good life." Both weaker and stronger forms of the exceptionality thesis often refer back to the works of Bruner (1991, 2004), Fisher (1987), MacIntyre (1986), Polkinghorne (1988), Sarbin, (1986), and Taylor (1989)—works that originally strongly contributed to the turn to narrative across the humanities and social life sciences. What these works have in common is a critique of foundationalist orientations in the philosophy of science and an increasing embrace of subjectivity and lived experience as relevant to any form of human inquiry. In the wake of this turn, two originally distinct arguments became closely fused with each other. First, there was the assumption that human life is not only (retrospectively) made sense of by way of narrative, but it is *lived* narratively as well. In other words: life and narrative are fused into a unifying compound, where one is viewed through the lens of the other. Second, the way of exploring "otherness" became thrown into this mix. As recently put by Gergen, Josselson, and Freeman (2015): "To understand others … is to comprehend (or 'feel with') the stories by which they live" (p. 4); or, more succinctly: Narrative becomes synonymous with lived experience—which in turn becomes the (qualitative) method par excellence for exploring the experience and subjectivity of difference and otherness, up to the point of what makes life meaningful and live-worthy. This way of theorizing narrative and story as the prime tool to understand life may have been spurred by a new technique for doing narrative inquiry, which was the biographic, narrative interview.

Narrative as research, and research reports as narratives

In the wake of this broader turn to interpretation and subjectivity and with the assumption of an essential role of narrative for both interpretation and subjectivity, an interesting and noteworthy third and even larger claim vis-à-vis the powers of narrative slipped into the debate, one that purposely attempts to blur the boundaries between researcher (inquirer) and what is being researched (inquired). This blurring of the boundaries between researcher and researchee is nothing new, nor unique to narrative theorizing. Rather, it reflects a longstanding and rather productive debate within the emergence of qualitative inquiry in the social life sciences as an alternative paradigm

to the dominant traditions of survey research and hypothesis testing. Nevertheless, within narrative theorizing, this orientation borrows heavily from the life-is-narrative metaphor and argues: If the lives of the participants in a research project are organized by narrative, and if the lives of researchers, who attempt to research aspects of their participants' lives, also is organized in and through narrative, then the actual process of "being-in-the-field" and conducting inquiry turns into a blending of the narratives and the potential emergence of a new narrative (see Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Organizations such as schools, hospitals, or consulting firms are said to be "storytelling systems" (Boje, 2011). While this expansion of narrative into the research site opens up new and interesting research venues, such as the identities of brands, nations, and global organizations, a subsequent, and even more expansive move, intends to further blur the boundaries between researcher and what is being researched. This move claims that work in the field, resulting in what traditionally would be an oral or written report of the study—and published in the form of an article or a chapter—is a narrative as well. And the best way to present would be in the form of the researcher's very own (chronological) experience of coming to and being in the field (see, though, Baszanger & Dodier, 2004 for an extensive critique of this kind of "narrative ethnography").

Interestingly, within this framework, the actual work with narrative texts has largely fallen aside and been replaced by the "narrative" of the researcher. Here, the researcher either tells the story of their personal experience in the field, or—more reflectively and potentially critically—attempts to illuminate this experience and lend to it an exemplary status by employing second-order theoretical categories such as society, culture, community, and the like. Auto-ethnography, an offshoot of this framework, focuses even more strongly on the writing of the researcher/inquirer as a self-reflective tool that bears the potential to reframe previous personal experience in ways that connect with larger readerships in an empathetic fashion. In this respect, auto-ethnography simulates "life writing." Both embrace a particular genre of disclosure that comes across as frank and honest, and aims to evoke an empathetic emotionality on the part of their readers.

Narrative as communication

In contrast to nominal definitions of narrative and story, theories that approach narrating or storytelling as an activity, typically as one that takes place in the context of communication and interaction, bring to the fore dimensions thus far neglected. This is where the history of privileging written texts, and a cognitive narratology that treats narrating at best as the performance of something deeper and more relevant, are critically reviewed in terms of their shortcomings. The most prominent current theory that proposes to approach narrating and storytelling as interactive practices runs under the header of *small story theory* (Bamberg, 2011; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). While the argument of small story theoreticians originally critiqued the exclusive reliance of big story research on the biographic narrative interview in order to close the gap between story and life, recent debates have become more focused on a wider

range of theoretical differences. Most prominent are the roles of form and content that can be assigned to both traditions, and of equal relevance seems to be the way identity, sense of self, moral standards, and the meaning of a good life—the big questions within narrative theorizing—can be tackled equally well by these two approaches.

First, and with regard to the issue of form and content, small story theory starts from the assumption that narrative activities are embedded in previous and subsequent turns, that is, *interactive befores* and *afters*. The implication of contextualizing narrating and storytelling this way is that there is a conversational thematic and topical contiguity that is taken into account when considering why and how stories surface. Interlocutors monitor each other (and themselves) by asking: "Why this story here-and-now?"—that is, they try to figure out how and why some topic or theme, typically from the there-and-then of the story-time, is made relevant for the here-and-now of the communicative storytelling event in which the story is embedded. It is here that it becomes evident that shifts into storytelling mode are not random or accidental happenings; rather, interlocutors do assume that storytellings are intentional acts, acts that are relevant for what communicative business at hand is supposed to be accomplished. And the assumption is that the assessment of the interactional business necessitates a breaking into storytelling. This becomes more evident from situations in which narratives as intentional acts are vetoed, as in American courtrooms, when attorneys call for narrative answers from a witness, versus the desire—if not necessity—for narrative disclosure in therapy or intimate relationships.

Second, and equally relevant for small story theoreticians, narrating activities require a great deal of interactive negotiation. Shifting into storytelling is typically accompanied by the communicative bid to hold the floor for an extended turn, and toward the end of telling the story, cuing the interlocutors that it is their turn to respond. This is done, first of all, by bodily cues, such as the storyteller leaning into the conversation, accompanied by the interlocutors taking on a recipient position; then, toward the end of the turn, by reversing these bodily positions. What is of further interest is that these bodily cues are called into existence in order to index the interactive storytelling business at hand a good time before the verbal indices, such as "*I have a story*" or "*that reminds me*," are called on. Furthermore, other visual and supra-segmentational contextual cues typically are employed to signal the structural components of the story—or better, the delivery of what at a more abstract level can be taken to result in "*the story*."

Approaching narrative/story from a communicative practice orientation prioritizes the interactive relational business that storytelling activities accomplish. The assumption here is that participants in communities of interpretation (Fish, 1980), or communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), share a cultural understanding of narrative and story, not necessarily in the form of technical or theoretical second-order concepts, but due to continuous bodily and verbal practicing of their social interactions in mundane and everyday activities. Nevertheless, work with and on narratives within a communicative practice approach has to be theory guided in terms of the communicative work that narratives principally may be able to accomplish. While the communicative functions of storytelling may be manifold, such as to simply entertain, show regret, or to embellish an argument, the interpersonal functions of storytelling may be sorted around three ways of accomplishing identity-relational work.

First, in our daily practices, we mark ourselves as different, similar, or same with respect to others. Integrating and differentiating a sense of who we are vis-à-vis others takes place in moment-to-moment navigations, and stories about self and others are good candidates to practice this from childhood onwards. However, stories are not the only candidates. Descriptions, practical reasoning, or theoretical discourses may equally be good practices for developing and changing the membership constructions that divide and unite people along affiliations and alignments with others. A second identity component often is termed "agency." And although it seems as if agency is something that exists a priori in the form of a human capacity, it has been suggested that agency is better theorized along the lines of navigating the sameness–difference continuum—a space in which 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 positions a sense of self as highly agentive). The navigation of agency—passivity/recipiency as a dilemmatic space becomes particularly relevant in presentations of characters as engaged 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 borrow and practice navigations of this sort, though other speech (and nonspeech) activities also lend themselves to accomplish this type of navigation process. Third, when relating past to present, we can either highlight constancy—that is, declare that we still are the exact same person that we used to be—or we can present a sense of self as having undergone some gradual (continuous) or radical (discontinuous) change resulting in a different, new persona. 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 as who we are now is often seen as closely coupled to issues of acquiring or developing self-worth, or as having deteriorated and become useless. While identity navigations between sameness and difference and between the two directions of fit of the person-to-world dilemma do not require diachronicity as an essential prerequisite, it seems that navigations between constancy and change do require the correlation of two events in time—which some narrative inquirers take to be the minimal definition of a story (see Labov & Waletzky, 1997). Thus, it appears that navigations of the constancy and change dilemma make a good argument for the privileging of storytelling as a privileged space for identity practices.

Conclusion

Taking stock of whether approaching narrative as texts, as lifelike (i.e., as essential to lending form and meaning to life), or as giving seemingly (only) local answers to "why this story here-and-now," all three approaches pursue similar objectives which revolve around sense-making, understanding, and ultimately the question of human positioning vis-à-vis others and oneself, that is, issues of sociality and identity. However, when it comes to what exactly is meant by the term "narrative," and how the notion of the person is theoretically safeguarded, all three start from strikingly different positions.

It appears as if textual approaches and narrative practice approaches share a number of basic assumptions, but differ with respect to the following: While narrative-as-text positions locate the text, seemingly safely, between author and reader as the two poles between the text becomes meaningful due to a shared cognitive processing of information, practice approaches tend to ground the activity of storytelling in a dialogic process of interaction itself. The former is based on a shared though relatively abstract competency; the latter on communication as situated and lifelike practices. Consequently, both require quite different types of "narrative inquiry." The difference between narrative theories that equate narrative with life and the communicative practice approach lies in a different conceptualization of the person. In the former, the person is essentially monadic, but can rely on their self-reflective competency to "self-narrate," to split the *Homo narrans* into speaker and addressee in order to pose the questions of meaning, morality, and the good life. In narrative practices, these questions are already taken to be woven into the fabric of mundane and daily, though deeply communal, interactions, within which storytelling practices present special locations to try out and navigate a sense of who we are in potentially novel ways. Locating narrative and story within a communicative practice framework has potential repercussions for traditional theorizing. It does not strip stories and narratives of their formal/structural characteristics and definitely not of their content either. However, form and content are viewed as in the service of the relational and interactional identity business that narratives assist in accomplishing—closely related to and situated in communal practical communication—asking and trying to answer: *Why this particular narrative/story here-and-now?*

SEE ALSO: Drama; Hermeneutics; Identity; Interpretation; Myth; Narrative Inquiry; Semiotics; Structuralism; Text

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Narrative Inquiry

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In an editorial for the journal *Narrative Inquiry*, my collaborator Allyssa McCabe and I sketched out a preliminary definition of narration in terms of a unit for inquiry or analysis. We reasoned:

> narration can be an action as well as a product in the form of a text, film, dance, and the like. Central to narrating is the act of ordering for a number of different purposes. With narrative, people strive to configure space and time, deploy cohesive devices, reveal identity of actors and relatedness of actions across scenes. They create themes, plots, and drama. In so doing, narrators make sense of history, social situations, and themselves. (Bamberg & McCabe, 1998, p. iii)

Building on this attempt to establish a kind of unit that can help to delineate narrating from other (human) activities that do not fall under the header of narrating, we then went on to list a number of purposes that narratives may serve: "to remember or argue or convince, engage, entertain, or fool their audience" (1998, p. iii). This relatively simple, though artificial, division between narrating as the construction of form