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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

and content on the one hand, and as a contextual activity that serves a variety of purposes on the other, seems helpful not only for authors positioning their contribution within the broad field of narrative inquiry (NI), but also contributes to a clearer vision of NI as an emergent field of inter- and trans-disciplinary studies. While investigations of story form and story content have relatively clear textually defined units of analysis, an analytic perspective that aims to investigate what stories are used for complexifies the definition of the unit that is actually analyzed. The emphasis in this entry will be placed on the latter, since this is where NI over the last 25 years has gained currency, especially within the realms of the humanities and the social and life sciences.

Following this line of argument, NI typically attempts to investigate the experience, values, and sense-making as reflected in stories; and approaches a deeper inquiry into these stories with an analytic eye. As such, NI is more than retelling (or paraphrasing) people's stories. However, this leads to the question of how the construction of other people's stories can effectively be differentiated from the construal of those stories by those who conduct the inquiry; and even more so, how the process of inquiry can be documented and methodically laid open to others who not only hear or read the interpretation of narrative inquirers, but also are able to follow the procedures for how new insights were gained when conducting NI.

A closely related question can be raised regarding whether storytelling in and of itself qualifies as NI. The answer, though, is not necessarily straightforward, because any construction of strings of events—whether pieced together as an argument or as entertainment, and whether about events in the world the way we believe they happened or constructed as fictional—presupposes a certain amount of reflection. But we should note that other communicative activities, such as descriptions of a landscape, giving directions in the form of a recipe or route, and a multitude of nonnarrative activities, also require reflection; most often even a certain analytic stance. But these activities typically do not qualify as inquiry. Thus, doing inquiry and reporting inquiry, even if the (experiential) voice of the person having done and reporting the inquiry is experientially woven into the fabric of the report, and even if it reads like a story, have to be explicated as inquiry. Telling the experience of the person or team having engaged in inquiry does not automatically qualify as NI; it requires a further documentation of the particulars that made this inquiry "*narrative*."

Inquiry "*on*" narrative

Narrative form

Inquiry that attempts to determine the structural aspects of narrative has a longstanding tradition in narratology, the discipline that grew out of the study of literary (typically fictional) texts. From a linguistic and communicative angle, NI follows up on two structural dimensions of narratives, one trying to explain how a sequence of linguistic units (clauses/propositions), if properly connected, add up to become a story; the other also inquiring into the sequence of units, but units that contribute conceptually to the formation of a beginning, a middle, and an ending. The first type of inquiry follows up on

how propositions are linguistically marked to form cohesive sequences; with one type of clause (typically action clauses) depicting what has happened, and another type of clause (also called "evaluative" clauses) stepping out of the sequence and "evaluating" what is happening from an event-external perspective. However, a linguistically formed sequence of events, including an evaluative stance, does not automatically form an overarching structural whole. This is where the second type of structural inquiry kicks in, working with the assumption that narrators have in mind an overall conceptual whole consisting of a number of structural units that also follow a sequential order: starting with an (optional) abstract, followed by an orientation (or setting or exposition), followed by the complication (also called problem or crisis), maybe an action or action orientation toward a resolution, resulting in the resolution (or occasionally failure), which then is ultimately finished up by a coda (or closure). The orientation takes the recipient into the there-and-then of the story world, where actions take place, and the coda takes them back to the here-and-now of the telling situation.

Both approaches to the investigation of structural ingredients of stories originally evolved from inquiry working with monologic texts or transcripts. Although for both approaches striving for clear, cohesive ties and good coherence is ultimately in the service of recipients' comprehension, the main purpose of the story is to encode information. Furthermore, the way the information is structured is relevant for the understanding of the information by its recipients. The linguistic-cohesive and conceptual-overall structures of the story are functions in the service of the theme, the overall plot, and the content. It is as if the content and its organization are central to the narrator's concern, and they follow the linguistic and cognitive conventions that are appropriate to encode this content in order to pour it into "narrative form."

Narrative content and thematic inquiry

To assume that speakers, when intending to tell a story, start by thinking up a particular topic or theme—that is, what they are about to say—that then, subsequently, is poured into language–specific forms, and then into the form of narrative, is a stark simplification. This raw notion of "content" nevertheless seems to run through a number of general analytic orientations that guide what is commonly assumed under the headers of content analysis and thematic analysis. Inquiry into what is said, and into what the content is about, typically has two purposes; the first is to explore particular thematic fields, such as illness, divorce, suffering from depression, having undergone transformative life events, or being romantically involved, to name a few. Another purpose is to explore the person—that is, the author—"behind" the talk: how they have experienced illness, divorce, and the like; or, being more cautious, how they look back and "discursively" make sense of their experience. Inquiry pursuing these goals makes use of documents, research interviews, group meetings, or everyday conversations, and does not necessarily rely explicitly on narratives. Nevertheless, inquiry that takes off from this orientation often embraces or borrows a loose definition of narrative or story with the intention of identifying the storyline or plot that is assumed to work "from behind," organizing the experience that is of interest to the inquirer in the textual or conversational material collected. Whether or not the label "narrative" is thought to fit this type

of inquiry is part of a larger discussion regarding the boundaries and determinants of narrative.

Some thematic inquiry defines itself explicitly as NI, due to its focus on the explicit analysis of narratives that surface in documents, interviews, group discussions, or everyday conversations. Sorting through larger sets of data and identifying the themes that surface in the stories told in these data sets is one strategy. Another strategy has been to identify the themes covered in larger narratives ("big stories") such as life stories or autobiographies. A third way of doing thematic inquiry with an explicitly narrative focus is the collection and subsequent thematic comparison of large sets of participants who share storied experiences on a particular topic (e.g., first stories, such as the first kiss, first home, first day of school, etc.). NI with this orientation is typically a first cut or procedure to be followed when dealing with large data sets, often followed by a more qualitative form of inquiry that goes deeper into the functions that such narratives serve.

Inquiry "with" narrative

Narrative function

Why people tell stories and the impact of their stories on recipients are topics that have been tackled from different angles. The two major traditions of NI orienting to what stories *do* in human communication start from opposite perspectives. One tradition employs narratives as macrolevel sense-making tools and investigates in a top-down fashion how they play themselves out in more specific narrative practices, where they may *materialize* as specific stories. This type of NI assumes that the identity of people, organizations, or brands is essentially made up of the stories they tell (and the stories others tell about them), and that the goal of NI is to search and uncover the frames (master narratives) that organize identity. In contrast, a second tradition starts in a bottom-up fashion from particular, specific narrative practices, often even only fragments of stories or stories that are expected but never surface (Bamberg, 2011), and scrutinizes them under the header "Why-this-story-here-and-now?" This type of inquiry takes off from actual storytelling behavior, situated typically in interactive moments, and follows up on the performative cues that narrator and recipient share in storytelling practices. The assumption here is that stories only become meaningful units due to the interactive orientation within which stories emerge. This type of NI pursues the same questions as the first approach, namely how storytelling works in communication and what function stories serve. However, it more specifically asks: What do people accomplish by breaking into storytelling mode, while they have choices to use other ways to communicate? In the following, I will lay out these two kinds of doing inquiry with narratives in more detail.

Top-down: from master narrative to its manifestations: Apart from more general claims that storytelling is part of the human genetic endowment, and that we are "storytelling animals" (Gottschall, 2012), narratives have been argued to serve an important epistemological function (Bruner, 1990), inasmuch as they strongly impact

on the organization of our sense-making abilities: Building on the "ingredients" of storytelling, namely that storytellers typically coordinate characters in space and time and bring these three dimensions (character, space, and time) into a coherent unit (of beginning, middle, and end), storytelling practices can be said to have evolutionarily brought off what is considered to be the "modern mind," as well as assisted in our individual socialization to become competent storytellers and recipients. Philosophical inquiry is hotly debating whether, and if so to what degree, storytelling practices could have resulted in what we consider "modern mind-reading abilities," that is, attempts to constantly search for underlying motives (others' and one's own) for actions, events, and even happenings where there was seemingly no human agency involved. Another interesting debate is kindled by disagreements on how much empathy and mind-reading abilities are grounded in culture-specific narrative traditions and socialized in our cultural narrative practices, as against growing out of a general and universal genetic endowment.

Another important function that is investigated within top-down approaches to NI is the role of narrative in social/interpersonal relationship building. Stories are argued to more deeply affect story recipients, especially emotionally, and to be more prone than other discourse modes to enhance interpersonal closeness and intimacy. The function of disclosing personal stories is well documented not only for the process of getting to know each other and establishing mutual trust, but also for therapeutic purposes and for one's general personal well-being. It may not come as a surprise that this function of storytelling has been picked up and developed further in marketing and branding research, where the emphasis is on the consumer's emotional connection to the story that is told by the brand, with the product becoming seemingly irrelevant. Consumers are asked to make an emotional connection to the brand via the story, which *is* the brand—or at least comes across as the authentic voice (identity) of the brand. To take a US instance, the Budweiser Clydesdale Super Bowl commercials are excellent examples of creating emotional ties between brand (Anheuser-Busch InBev) and potential consumers, with the product (beer) primarily invisible. NI is in the midst of exploring this relationship between brand storytelling, narrative empathy, and narrative transportation, that is, the persuasive powers of storytelling in reaching the hearts of its recipients.

However, stories are not necessarily persuasive and taken to be authentic simply due to their nature in being a story. In addition to transporting and immersing the story recipient into a story world of relatively consistent beliefs and emotions, a story has to be a good story; it has to be told and performed in the right way. This is where NI has started to shed new light on the connection between the strategic function of ideological and political storytelling and citizens' political actions—or nonactions. Emergent narratives around the candidacy of people running for office, as well as strategies to pursue or justify political actions (e.g., the "War on Terror" narrative; Hodges, 2011), are abundant and have become an important new field for NI. Studies within this realm typically do not stop their inquiry with illustrations of first instances and their reproductions, but document the slow process of early candidates, their revisions and reshapings, how they become mediatized; enter the everyday talk of citizens as master or dominant narratives; and ultimately feed voting behavior and citizens' political actions. The often

simultaneous and parallel emergence of counternarratives has led to interesting debates as to the nature and mutuality of dominant and counternarratives, and as to how the field of NI intersects with neighboring domains such as discourse studies and critical discourse analysis (Bamberg, 2004). And it is here where we hit on competing narratives and the problem of how to construe their worth for individuals and communities—large and small.

In sum, whether NI explores the epistemological or the social-relational-interpersonal functions of narrative, addresses the role of narrative in branding and marketing, or tackles the realms of politics and ideologies, it should be noted that this type of inquiry operates with the terms "narrative" and "story" as general macrostructuring devices. In other words, when NI aims to investigate what narratives actually do, that is, their worth in how they are put to use to affect recipients, narrative and story are used in a metaphorical sense. Analysts may target actual stories surfacing in the form of texts or visual narratives; their starting point and their aim for empirical work, though, is the exemplification of a domain (typically a discursive domain) that is structured *like* a narrative: It entails beginnings, middles, and ends; it follows a plot or storyline; and the characters in these plots are clearly defined as protagonists or antagonists with regard to the values that connect into a coherent unit. The goal of this type of inquiry, then, is to unveil the underlying master or dominant narrative that serves as framing device and to shed new light on existent phenomena that thus far have not been sufficiently illuminated.

Bottom-up: from specific narratives to underlying currents: A second approach of NI, also focused on narrative function, exploring what stories accomplish and how they work in human communication, starts from concrete storytelling situations. This bottom-up approach examines the way stories actually happen in real-life situations, and begins its investigation microanalytically, targeting the question: Why this (particular) narrative here-and-now? The guiding assumption behind this approach is that narratives are not accidental or random slips, but serve intended purposes. This is particularly evident in narratives in interaction, where narratives were originally "at home," and from where they migrated into written formats and big stories such as novels, biographies, and life stories. Thus, stories typically are not pointless; and narrators break into storytelling mode for purposes—often pursuing several aims simultaneously. As mentioned earlier, stories may serve the function of eliciting the story recipient's empathy, engaging, convincing, entertaining, altering their behavior, or even fooling and deceiving them. Some of these functions we often are able to read off of the story-text: The way characters are portrayed and how the teller's evaluations shine through orient recipients as to how to empathize, align, and affiliate, and how to construe where the teller is headed; that is, to form an opinion as to why the story was shared. Most often, however, the text, in the form of cuing its recipients with regard to what is supposed to be accomplished, is not sufficient for reading the teller's mind for why they broke into storytelling mode, and why-this-story-here-and-now. This is where a certain familiarity with culturally shared storytelling conventions, that is, practices that are circulating in communities of interpretation (Fish, 1980), becomes particularly relevant. In addition, contextual cues (in terms of how the story was embedded in the ongoing conversation), including

bodily microcues, act as guideposts for story recipients to their construal of what is going on in the interaction and their subsequent conversational move following up on the story.

To illustrate how this kind of NI proceeds, let us briefly compare the apologies of two eminent public figures following a marital infidelity that had surfaced in the press. John Edwards gave a televised briefing in the form of a one-on-one interview on August 8, 2008, to ABC reporter Bob Woodruff; Mark Sanford held a public press briefing on June 29, 2009, followed by seven minutes' Q&A. Both briefings are available on the Web (ABC News, 2009; C-Span, 2008), including the transcripts. Edwards and Sanford both chose to employ a number of personal stories, and the questions for this type of NI are: Where exactly did they break into storytelling mode, what was the motivational goal for telling the story, and is there a way to judge whether these goals actually were accomplished?

While elsewhere a full analysis has been presented (Bamberg, 2010), to make the case here, I will only provide a short synopsis. Edwards broke into narrative and delivered a short account of his life: He told how he started out as a highly agentive young boy, whose agency was diminished when swept into politics early in his life. And although he tells a story of change (from innocence to celebrity status), he claims that this change is only visible on the outside; in his core he still is the same innocent young boy of his childhood. His choice of alignment is with celebrities who are facing the same danger when forced to adopt this lifestyle at an early age, appealing to story recipients' understanding, empathy, and forgiveness (for more detail, see Bamberg, 2010). Sanford also starts to account for his life course and depicts himself as highly agentive and entrepreneurial from when he was young. His story, in contrast to Edwards's, is one of constancy: He still is the same, he claims, and his strong agency will help him take charge and work through the challenges that his affair had brought upon him and his family. While calling on and aligning with his recipients' experience that affairs can start "innocently" and seemingly have their own dynamics—that is, handing a good amount of agency over to them as causal factors—he repeatedly claims responsibility as the agentive center for having found his soulmate, keeping his family together, and continuing with his political mandate.

Both stories were said to be crafted well, and rhetorically Edwards's narrative is more concise and convincing—in spite of the seeming contradiction of having changed but still being the same. In contrast, Sanford was characterized in subsequent news reports as "rambling" and overall as "not well together." However, on blogs that started the same night these briefings aired, bloggers showed no empathy for Edwards and characterized him as slimy and inauthentic, while Sanford was given credit as "speaking his heart" and deserving a second chance. In order to more fully understand these reactions, the visual display of their storytelling performance has to be taken into account. While Edwards's performance was fluent and his gaze continuously directed to his interviewer, Bob Woodruff, Sanford's delivery of his stories was disfluent, displaying various extended breaks and hesitation phenomena; and his gaze was repeatedly—particularly at crucial moments in his confession—directed downward, coordinated with pausing, as if attempting to avoid eye contact with recipients. In addition, his gestures and facial expression (repeatedly wiping his eyes) could be read

as displays of a humble and genuine stance. Overall, his self-presentation seemed to come across as genuine and authentic.

What we can learn from these observations is not surprising: Storytelling plays an integral role in apologies, because it is central to the admission of wrongdoing for the purpose of taking a potentially threatened relationship back to where it was before; that is, restoring one's former identity. Telling the sequence of events that have led to the transgression typically draws the recipient into the story and is more likely to elicit empathy, "understanding," and forgiveness. Breaking into story, the teller can take the opportunity to navigate their identity in three ways. (1) Tellers have the opportunity to lay out how they have changed (hopefully for the better now) or to what degree they are still the same as before (and the transgression should not have had any relational impact). Navigating this change–constancy dilemma is highly relevant for rebuilding a relationship that is threatened. (2) Tellers can navigate their involvement: To what degree were they agentively involved, or accidentally drawn into the events—maybe even as a victim? The navigation of agency is relevant for the admission of responsibility and guilt (or innocence); and if successfully navigated, may open the path to forgiveness. (3) Tellers can navigate their affiliations and alignments with others, especially the recipients of their story. Navigating the differences and conformities regarding the perspective and values of others is the third level, a way to be trodden carefully in order to make good on what has potentially been damaged.

Implications

NI that aims to understand how and why narratives are placed in particular contexts, how they are understood, and how recipients align (or disalign) with these stories or their tellers is marked by a radical shift of what is taken to be the unit of analysis. While NI that investigates the form and thematic contents of narratives works with the "text" as the basic unit, NI that ventures into narrative functions finds itself in the precarious situation of having to investigate "contexts." This of course opens up the debate as to which aspects of the context are relevant, and how to analytically lay out and document how the analysis proceeded in its attempts to arrive at narrative interpretations. While the metaphors originally introduced of inquiry "*on narrative*" and inquiry "*with narratives*" may have been heuristically productive, this distinction should not be taken to imply that one first has to determine the ingredients of narrative or strive for a definition. Neither should work "*with narratives*" be taken to imply that narratives have become tools or windows into people's minds. Thoughtful and careful future inquiry both "*on*" narrative and "*with*" narratives can mutually spur and benefit from one another. Furthermore, more theoretical inquiry is needed that digs deeper into the interface between macrocontexts, within which master narratives (and dominant discourses) are circulating, and microcontexts, within which we investigate the functionality of concrete storytelling practices and aim to answer the why-this-narrative-here-and-now question. In each case, however, NI, in order to be taken seriously, may be well advised to abstain from sweeping definitions of narrative, and lay open the process of interpretive work in as much depth as possible.

SEE ALSO: Discourse Theory; Drama; Hermeneutics; Identity; Interpretation; Meaning; Myth; Narrative; Narrative Rationality; Performance; Semiotics; Symbolic Convergence Theory; Text

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Narrative Rationality

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Narratives, or stories with a plot and characters who interact over time, are important parts to every tradition of communication. The ubiquity of narrative use among human