**Narrative in Qualitative Psychology:**

**Approaches and Methodological Consequences**

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**Chapter 3**

**Introduction**

Giving narrative and narrative analysis a prominent place within the overall frame of doing qualitative inquiry requires proceeding on two – if not three – tracks that do not necessarily run parallel: On the one hand, we may want to determine with more clarity which aspects of our engagement with qualitative methodologies we value most, i.e., why we approach our research question(s) qualitatively. Simultaneously, we may need to clarify why narrative? i.e., which aspects of narrative inquiry we deem particularly relevant in our overall qualitative approach, and which ‘definitions’ of narrative we embrace as productive in pursuit of more specific research questions. As a third potential track, we may need to specify the particular kind of narrative analysis, i.e., how we define our unit(s) of analysis of what we tackle empirically – in concert with how we do it, so our analysis not only makes sense to others but can also be followed in pursuit of their own research questions. And although theoretically, and maybe also in principle, the sequence of steps (first, why and how qualitative, next, why and how narrative, and third, what kind of analytic procedures) should follow exactly this kind of top-down reasoning, it typically doesn’t work that way. First, working through the options of qualitative approaches and picking one over the other is by no means simple or straight forward; and the same holds for definitions of narrative and deciding which approach might be more attractive and productive. Second, and especially as beginners, we typically don’t enter psychology research having taken Qualitative 101 as our startup course and from there move on and survey different approaches available. Rather, we enter working with narratives from somewhere in the middle – having seen or being attracted by others’ work with narratives in how they approach particular research questions. Or, we even enter from hearing and seeing actual narratives performed in real life settings that we found intriguing and worth following up analytically – only realizing later that we bought into hidden assumptions with regard to narrative and qualitative frameworks that early on just felt right and above suspicion.

Having successfully assisted undergraduate and graduate psychology students to engage in qualitative research for over twenty-five years now, it still comes as a surprise how often the potential of narrative methodologies goes unrecognized. Students, particularly newcomers to qualitative inquiry, when facing analytic work with documents, interview data or naturally occurring conversations that are full of storied accounts, are commonly rely on surfacing the data in terms of their content, and thereafter fall back on quantifying the thematic content across the data collected. This chapter is designed to help forge helpful pathways through the thickets of choices we have when engaging in narrative inquiry under the premise of qualitative inquiry as our overarching umbrella. As such, it attempts to bridge chapters 1 (Camic), 2 (Barker & Pistrang) and 6 (Murray). In addition it will show connections with other qualitative methods in this volume as discussed below. We will start with a brief consideration of two questions: First, what forms do qualitative (narrative) data take, and where do we find that data; and second, having made decisions with regard to what counts as valid (narrative) data to pursue our investigations, what are the implications with respect to what to do with those data, i.e., how to analyze them? We will work through these two questions in the first part of this chapter, before turning in a second part to five methodological guideposts for qualitative inquiry that will serve as yardsticks to evaluate potential merits and drawbacks for narrative approaches. The chapter will end with a somewhat critical perspective on how we might be able to broaden future work by incorporating narrative research into a more critical and inclusive endeavor.

**Narratives as qualitative data – units of analysis**

***Narratives/stories – what are they made of?***

Before discussing narratives as qualitative data and how to analyze them as qualitative data within the frame of psychological research, a brief excursion into what narratives are and what makes them potentially interesting may be necessary. I will start by discussing four simple stories – all consisting of the same ‘events.’1 (Table 1). However, what is different is their sequence as well as their contribution to what can be called *story-hood* (prototypical or ‘well-formedness’). For story A, we want to make the argument that all five propositions follow sequentially, i.e., form a cohesive and an overall coherent whole. Story A starts with a state description of *lacking* a potentially desirable object, and ends with a state description of *being satisfied*. *Not having* (*candy*) in this context is interpretable as posing a problem that is followed by three action clauses, depicting intentional actions to solve the problem; resulting in the final state description, the positive evaluation: problem solved. Story B still makes sense as a (kind-of) story, though there is less overall coherence. For instance, ‘feeling good’ doesn’t necessarily result in ‘going to the store.’ And ‘not having’ as a result of ‘having eaten it up’ is no surprise and not particularly note- or tell-worthy. Thus, although still following a story-format (starting and ending with state descriptions), Story B qualifies as less of a prototypical story construction (and somewhat <more> boring) when compared with Story A.

---insert Table 1 here---

Story C refers to the same sequence of events as Story A, in spite of the fact that the sequence of clauses seems scrambled. However, this is possible due to the way speakers of English can make use of tenses and aspectual markers to still signal the order of events in the story-world even if the order of clauses does not follow their canonical order. Nevertheless, the sequential arrangement of clauses in Story C may be chosen to contribute to the interpretation of a particular grounding, i.e., making particular events as foregrounded – and as such may signal how a speaker positions these events with regards to one another. In contrast to Stories A-C, story D is hard to make sense of. It contains a lot of ambiguity and would require a lot of inferences (i.e., harder interpretive efforts) to come to a somewhat cohesive and coherent interpretation. While it is possible to interpret Lee’s journey to the store as a consequence of being out of candy, the rest of the clauses just don’t follow – at least not easily. It should be clear that all stories (A-D) are fictional, and that I chose deliberately to construct Lee as a third-person other, rather than insinuating that the state descriptions of Lee’s lack of candy and their (final) satisfaction might be interpretable as disclosures of a first-person’s interiority.

While these are most likely not the kinds of data analysts will have to deal with in their psychological research, the following four points will be relevant for the arguments to follow: First, narrative is a discourse mode that orders events in a temporal sequence, where characters and locations (places) are placed into this sequence of unfolding events, allowing the navigation of constancy and change. Second, not ‘everything’ is expressed in language (or, if visual means of event presentation are picked: visual means). What this implies is that storytellers pick and choose events they deem relevant, but they also leave gaps: most of it remains unsaid. For instance, what is not mentioned in stories A and C is how long it took Lee to get to the store – ten minutes, three hours, a year; whether Lee got there on foot, by taxi, or by plane; what happened when Lee consumed the candy, how long it took to consume it, and so on. All of this information could have been unpacked and tied into the unfolding sequence as state and/or action descriptions – showing that it is up to speakers deciding which events they choose to tell in their story; and that different speakers consequently may tell what they assumed to have happened quite differently – as the same narrator may choose different events, and tell their story at different occasions to different audiences differently. Third, the language chosen to construct characters in place and time, so that stories can come to existence, is not chosen without method or conscious decision – it is intentional; and the language used is not a transparent or direct window into narrator’s minds, emotions and identities. And finally, as the examples discussed above could demonstrate, there is a close interplay of form and content in the construction of stories – though in total disregard of a context in which these stories actually might have served a communicative and relational function.

***Narratives as stories in context***

Returning to narratives as qualitative data, it should be noted that both qualitative and quantitative data gathering procedures take data out ‘of their context.’ Both are looking at certain aspects of the world as relevant for their research questions, setting other aspects of the world aside as not relevant. The difference between them, however, is that gathering qualitative data does not aim to turn them into numerical values, and that aspects of the contexts of data collection are considered to be highly relevant (see Harding et al., chapter 12 for an example and discussion about mixed-methodologies). The reason for being open to context is simple: For once, having no hypothesis that allows researchers to *a priori* strip what is considered irrelevant for the hypothesis to be tested, the analysis of contextual factors becomes an important – if not a central – part of the investigation. Second, as a consequence, qualitative analysis typically works in depth, i.e., from a set of data moving inside-out – to understand how context is constitutive to the data and to our understanding thereof. If this may still sound somewhat mystic, here is a simpler formulation of the same idea: Qualitative data come as situated data – they are situated in immediate and micro-local contexts, in communal and cultural contexts, and last but not least in historical contexts. Qualitative data only exist due to their contextual nature; and therefore, these contexts are considered to be highly relevant to the phenomena we study and for our analytic work with them (see Wasburn et al., chapter 9, for a discussion about situational analysis).

With regard to the general study of narratives and the use of narratives in psychological research, we follow up from the above premise that narratives occur in contexts. The fact that researchers have tried to differentiate and distinguish between narrative and story, between storytelling and narrative practice, between life story, life history, and biography, between master and counter or alternative narratives, and between other dimensions of oral performance should not confuse us at the moment. In the following we will subsume all of them simply under the header of ‘narrative’ because they all share three dimensions that lend themselves to be accessed analytically. Narratives, and here we follow Murray’s directives in chapter 6 of this volume, are considered first of all to be an interactive activity or discourse mode (in contrast to other discourse modes such as descriptions or argumentations). To qualify as narrative, they first of all need to meet particular structural constraints – i.e., conveying a temporal contour that gives meaning to a sequence of events or happenings; typically performed in oral or visual modality. Now, with regard to analyzing or working with narratives, we are confronted by three options: (i) to analyze their form and structure, which has a history in linguistic and literary investigations; or (ii) to analyze their content, which typically is the center of interest for research in the social and human sciences. As a third option (iii) narrative research can also center on or around the circumstances in which narratives are put to use, and attempt to analyze the functions they serve; i.e., following up on the question as to why the construct of narrative form and the construal of narrative characters in time and space (content) were put to use in a particular context; as well as including the potential uptake by the audience or viewer. To put this differently, the latter approach pursues the question: what is being accomplished by telling a particular narrative at a particular point in time and making a past event relevant to a particular audience? Of course, it is possible to draw on and connect these three analytic perspectives (form, content, and function) in our interpretive business of answering our particular research questions. We will have to return to these options and their consequences in due course.

***Shifting narratives – stories, memories, experiences***

As foreshadowed in chapter 2 by Barker and Pistrang and explicated in chapter 6 by Murray, psychologists seem to be particularly interested in the middle-part, i.e., the contents of narratives, and here in the way narrators thematize themselves. Realizing around the mid-sixties that aging as a research field was gaining recognition as a *social problem*, which in turn opened up new funding resources for socio- and psychologists, and culminating in the emergence of the new field of lifespan psychology, researchers revived early explorations of life histories, life stories, and biographical approaches (cf. Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918-20), and catapulted the biographical interview into the center as a new wave of qualitative research (see Murphy, Arxer & Belgrave (2010) for an overview). While the type of interview technique originally was left relatively unstructured in order to open the floor for interviewees to structure their responses in their own (subjective) ways, the biographically *centered* interview soon became an added instrument to explore participants’ experiences of a narrower scope, such as divorce (Riessman, 1990), particular types of illness or disease (Kleinman, 1988), or even more specific issues, including the employability of former refugees in New Zealand (Greenbank, 2020). The central argument here for engaging in qualitative inquiry still is upheld, namely that the quality of particular kinds of experiences could be better captured and understood when narrated in the context of individuals’ life constructions – their childhood, upbringing, and experiential background up to the point of the interview. In addition, biographic approaches to lives and lived experience can be supplemented by autobiographic and autoethnographic writings, in which narrators write about themselves and critically take on culturally dominant discourses or master narratives within which they see themselves constrained and unfolding. While these analytic approaches use the construct of narrative to explore the construct of life – or of particular aspects of life (types of experience - such as divorce, illness, etc.) – some psychologists have argued that it is actually memories that encapsulate experiences and surface in the form of narratives. In other words, the full life-story as well as the biographically *centered* interview elicits memories which arguably reflect interviewees’ experience, and as such may lead researchers to their interviewees’ identities and sense of self (cf. Smorti, 2011).

This is not the place to take on this line of argument or be critical, but it should be noted how the unit of analytic interrogation gradually began to change: first, narrowing the three analytic options (form, content, function) to converge mainly into an analysis of content; next, moving the analysis from narratives in large (which would include third- and second-person narratives) to center on first-person disclosures only (i.e., excluding stories about others); from there to life-story biographies (which automatically are taken to be stories or narratives); to becoming typically elicited in biographic interviews (where the interview became the unit of analysis); and from here to *theme centered* interviews (e.g. divorce, where arguably *the theme* became what’s being analyzed). Overall, simple stories or narratives as the original unit of inquiry mutated into constructs that were deemed to ‘sit’ inside of participants’ interiorities, and particular types of interviewing techniques were deemed in turn to be able extracting these aspects of interviewees’ internal constructs. Another way of conceiving the ways narratives have analytically been appropriated in qualitative research is in terms of a change from narratives *told* to memories people *have* – which are taken to stand in as proxies for experience that people *had* – which in turn are taken as proxies for the phenomena we are interested to explore and better understand – e.g. divorce, illness or having been abducted by extraterrestrials. Noteworthy in this context are attempts to develop research interview procedures that strongly resemble psychoanalytic and deep interview techniques aiming to reveal unconscious meaning and intrapsychic processes by adopting an interviewer stance close to identical to that of a therapist (cf. Kvale, 2003).

In the early days of collecting qualitative data in the form of personal documents (letters and autobiographies) and narrative interviews, the reporting of this kind of data largely refrained from deep analysis and interpretation, and arguably tried to let the data ‘speak-for-themselves.’ For instance, the classic *The Polish Peasant* (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918-20) contained only little commentary, let alone deeper interpretive analysis, of the rich ethnographic data that form the most part of the book. One of the reasons was to keep record of aspects of social life and to document change, as well as preserve voices that otherwise would be lost. In a second wave of working with biographies and life story data, qualitative researchers began to condense and paraphrase the collected documents/data, trusting that their reports - at times co-published with their participants – were preserving the gist of their interviewees’ experience and sense of who they were. However, a critique of these reports could show how interpretive categories were smuggled into such attempts of condensing and modifying that were not necessarily those of the interviewees but showed traces of second-order categorial analysis. Subsequent debates of what kinds of categorization were appropriate stirred up discussions around issues of methodology and epistemological positions – such as discussed earlier in chapter 2 under the headers of realism, phenomenology and constructivism – and less so also positivism. It also should be noted that two other theoretical approaches began to take hold and gain prominence in work with narrative data – in the form of (i) psychodynamic and (ii) discourse analytic theorizing; the former, and here particularly psychodynamic interpretative frames, to view the interview as opening interviewees’ narratives as a window into their unconscious sense-making; and discourse analysis (see Potter, chapter 7) as a method to approach and analyze the interactive context in which narratives surface – including interview contexts.

**Guidelines for Qualitative Research Using Narratives**

Having been tasked by the American Psychological Association to establish guidelines and reporting standards for qualitative research (Levitt, H. M., Bamberg, M., Creswell, J. W., Frost, D. M., Josselson, R., & Suárez-Orozco, C., 2018), we started out developing a number of criteria that differentiate between qualitative research agenda. And since our guidelines were appearing in the new edition of the APA Manual side-by-side with the guidelines for quantitative research (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2019), and since psychological researchers are more likely to have some familiarity with the guidelines that had been developed and in place for decades for quantitative research only, the idea was to make the new guidelines relevant in terms of their new implications. I recently attempted to condense them into five general principles (Bamberg, 2020, p. 244, having been originally inspired by Marecek, 2003) that in principle could serve as guideposts for qualitative inquirers. Using them here in an elaborated form for this chapter, they will form the backdrop against which to work up and compare a number of narrative approaches and their implications for doing analytic work:

1. allowing for inductive (non-hypothesis-testing) methodologies
2. allowing subjectivity and experience into research
3. interrogating the outsider perspective and allowing a blurred (though reflective) stance on the researcher–researchee divide
4. aiming for insights/findings that have ‘real-life implications’ – allowing for civic/social engagement of researchers
5. taking language seriously – i.e., *allowing* intentional and cultural practices – as well as body and emotions (as more than mental <reflective> processes)

***Inductive – and generalizable***

Investigations of narrative form alongside with narrative structure were historically typically not inductive or exploratory – though we should add: not anymore; because originally the development of categories to qualify instances of narratives very closely followed comparative-inferential procedures, having a lasting tradition in the discipline of narratology (literary history and literary theory). However, these days academic work on structures and forms of narratives typically builds on more or less well-established canonical cases (such as that used for the purpose of illustration above) to demonstrate what non-linear, disjointed narratives look like, how they are put to use, and how they are made sense of by readers, viewers and audiences in large. Within literary analytic and critical traditions, this line of inquiry has led to the inductive development of widely accepted categorial distinctions, for instance, between literary genres (Frye, 1957) or folk and fairy tales (Propp, 1927).

More relevant for psychological work with narratives are, as we established above, and as laid out in more detail in chapter 6 (Murray), inductive procedures in working up categories of themes in single narratives (or narrative interviews) and establishing content categories that are abducted from comparisons across narratives/interviews. According to Hammersley (1989), it is Blumer’s (1979) critique of Thomas & Znaniecki (1918-20) relatively loose use of categorial distinctions and their interpretive theorizing that led to the development of Grounded Theory (see Griffiths chapter 10) – which can be considered the first explicitly inductive and scientific approach to qualitative data. Collecting narrative data and “sifting” through these data in order to compare and contrast narratives to ‘find’ commonalities (and differences) is an intrinsically inductive process, codified in what thematic and content analytic procedures are trying to accomplish. When it comes to the use of categories to code – and this holds for any form of data – we should be aware that we may be using these categories as hypotheses – looking into and *testing* whether these categories play out in quasi-numerical values that can further differentiate between qualitative data sets. And although there is nothing wrong in following these kinds of procedures, we strictly speaking enter the broad field of hypothesis testing. To summarize, qualitative interpretive work on the content of narratives and/or narrative interviews customarily does not try to import pre-conceived codes or categories. Rather, it approaches narratives (typically as texts) from which the interpretation of the interpreter emerges – bracketing and delaying interpretive categories as long as possible – and beginning to reflect on categorial assumptions as soon as they are recognizably ‘kicking in.’ This kind of interpretive procedure follows the hermeneutic tradition of working with texts: The interpreter attempts to approach the meaning of texts by cycling through a number of methodical steps, and typically reapplies these steps several times. Each cycle brings what has been learned in the previous cycle to the next cycle. However, a full and total understanding is never reached – only approached. And although the interpretive process always starts from a kind of pre-understanding and brings background assumptions into the interpretative engagement, bracketing, i.e., setting these assumptions aside and delaying the use of interpretive categories, serves as a guidepost to what is recently discussed under the header of trustworthiness (cf. Levitt et al, 2018).

Analyses of functions of narratives, i.e., entering the interpretive territory of an assessment of why narrators chose to share their story, i.e., why a particular content was given a particular (story) format, and why it was shared in the here-and-now of an ongoing interaction, is for obvious reasons the most bracketed interpretive commitment. In other words, the process of reaching an interpretation of how the participant’s response – including their narrative form and content – contributed to answering our research question, will have to be the result of a slow inductive process in working with the data, in which the interpretive framework (whether it may be psycho- or discourse analytic, hermeneutic or phenomenological) is laid open and documented in the analytic section of our report.

***Allowing subjectivity and experience***

Seeking to understand participants’ experience and how they make sense of themselves and the world, commonly falls into the domain of phenomenological approaches (see Smith and Fieldstone, chapter 8 ) – often relying on narratives and/or interviews as data for analytic work. Frequently, making the claim for narrative theorizing starts with the statement that stories in human interaction are universal and ubiquitous – implying, all we need to do is listen. True! So, why being selective with regard to participants and engaging them in storytelling situations that we claim to be relevant to our research question? Why not just – seemingly simply – listen in, in everyday and mundane conversations that just happen? Well, a number of narrative researchers, especially those following ethnographic, interactionist and conversation-analytic orientations, claim to be doing exactly that. For them, storytelling events (narrative practices) are the empirical domain in which participants *are* subjects and express their subjectivity ‘naturally’ by engaging in their daily business – though always constrained by socio-cultural and institutional forces that limit, but also as we argued elsewhere (Bamberg & Wipff, 2020a), enable communication and storytelling. The fact that they talk about past events in which they figured as actors or experiencer – or simply as bystanders – is not necessarily central to our analytic work with stories. Rather, any storytelling activity, including narratives about others, or the sharing of well-established tales, is analyzable as narrative. We, as ethnographers or interaction analysts, *experience* our participants as subjects *in the experience* or recording or interacting with them; and it is this ‘experience’ that forms the unit of analysis. To clarify: First-person narratives, i.e., instances of storytelling in which narrators thematize themselves are special cases. However, their analysis follows the same procedures as third-person stories that thematize others (as Lee’s story above). What is analyzed is the construction of characters in the there-and-then of the temporal contour of the story – and how they are contextually made relevant for the here-and-now in the interaction.

Having spelled out this theoretical argument, this does not mean that interviews are ruled out as sites for the gathering of qualitative data, or that they are ‘unnatural.’ Rather, it calls for the analysis of interviews as interactive settings, and as such, they form the units of analysis. The fact that interviewees may share stories about themselves, and may reflect on their memories or experiences, does not, per se, make these accounts more subjective or privilege them as experiential. Imagine, for instance, the stories we tell about the actions (and non-actions) of our students: those stories may be more colored by our subjectivity and experience – and more ‘telling’ about ourselves – than stories we tell about ourselves. To sum up, there is more to narratives and qualitative work with narratives than the typical assertion that narratives – thereby privileging the content of personal first-person narratives – preserve the experience of narrators and express their subjective ways of making sense. Though not incorrect, this assertion confines the analysis of subjectivity and experience to the level of content of narratives, without interrogating why this particular content had been framed in the particular narrative form, and been shared – at a particular moment – in the interview interaction.

***Questioning/interrogating the outsider perspective – roles of reflection and reflexivity***

As exemplified in a number of narrative approaches presented by Murray (this volume), qualitative data do not exist independently from a researcher’s perspective. This may sound radically relativistic, as if narrative research generates its own data, but any research interest and subsequent question is formulated within a historical, societal and communal setting, and as such brings perspectives to the business of inquiry. Therefore, it is incorrect to attribute an inbuilt ‘research-bias’ to qualitative narrative research, because this would presuppose the possibility of an ‘unbiased,’ birds-eye perspective from which narratives can be approached and made sense of. However, as already touched on in the previous section, the bringing to bear of interpretive categories can (and should be – as much as this is possible) bracketed; and here we face a spectrum of options: ethnomethodological, ethnographic narrative methodologies assume a different relationship to be optimal for the generation of interpretative categories that are supposed to surface in their work with the data collected. Even in participatory designs, research traditionally takes place in between the categories that are practiced by the members of a community and the researcher’s perspective.2 Empathy also has been proposed as an important precondition in general for qualitative inquiry, but particularly narrative inquiry, and here especially for the elicitation of quality data so that participants’ subjectivities are able to ‘speak’ and can become heard. This seems to be an interesting but also potentially complicated argument, because it is widely accepted – in narratological circles (as ‘narrative empathy’ – cf. Green, 2007) as well as among communication researchers (as ‘emotion transportation – cf. Green & Brock, 2002) – that narratives, especially of personal experience, rest on and proliferate an overall empathetic stance. This may complicate narrative analysis, because it calls into question how the collection and analytic work with narratives from, for example, earthquake or tsunami survivors can be attended upholding the same standards as for narratives from rapists or pedophiles.

To begin with, recognizing the multiple and complicated entwinement between researcher and participants raises questions about the interpretive authority that go beyond discussions about *insider* and *outsider* or *emic* and *etic* perspectives. In response, this complexity enforces a deep and continuous reflection of the researcher’s motives, cultural expectations and subjectivities that are brought into the process of data collection as well as into the analytic process of working these data up into *generalizable interpretations*. The original plan, the values and intentions imported into the study will have to be explicitly acknowledged and shall be closely monitored throughout. Furthermore, decisions to highlight certain interpretations in the final reporting and not others may deserve equal attention in the form of critical reflection – moving reflection and reflexivity into a key role in the process of conducting narrative research (cf. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Barker & Pistrang, this volume; Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Riessman, 2015).

***Aiming for insights/findings that have ‘real-life implications’***

Teaching *Qualitative Methods* to undergraduate psychology students – sixty per semester – over two decades – centering around doing ethnography and narrative analysis, the question was asked repeatedly: what is it good for, and why do we need to learn this? And, interestingly, though only in recent years, some of our best students began to slight what they learned as *just* another way to interpret and make sense of – psychology and maybe life and maybe even world; but not contributing to making a difference, i.e., change. And my answer used to be: ethnography and narrative analysis are alternative methodologies – and as such add to your repertoire of choices when we have to work up data; they serve as tools to enable you to ask your own research questions, collect your own data, and perform analyses along the lines learned. Plus, there is a certain transferability to be able to work with other methods on different problems. I gathered my answer was operating with the premise that it was ‘the problem’ researchers were investigating that would give them the opportunity to leave a mark on their surroundings, making a difference, and contribute to change. However, there may be more that we may be able to accomplish.

Upfront, there remains the premise that narrative inquiry with populations that are underserved would significantly help in shifting the spotlight toward issues of equity and social justice (cf. McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2017; Palacios, Salem, Hodge, Schanche Hodge, Albarran, Anaebere & Hayes-Bautista, 2014). However, the integration of populations who have been on the fringe of qualitative research thus far may not be sufficient either. Therefore, and in conjunction with the imperative to move toward more diversity in work with vulnerable populations, I would like to orient readers toward a shift in analytic emphasis as well. Out of recent work with counter narratives, i.e., narratives that are “intended to counter background assumptions that support another alternative narrative” (Bamberg & Wipff, 2020a, p. 80), the call has emerged to make use of positioning analytic procedures (see next section below) that are able to micro-analytically, in depth, explore how dominant master narratives can be interrogated and subverted in narrative practices.

***Taking language seriously as culturally embodied and intentional practices***

*To take language seriously* is undoubtedly a vague recommendation that requires some unpacking, starting with two common misconceptions of language: (a) language as distorting true feelings and intentions, and (b) language as a transparent window into people’s inner thoughts and determinations. First, a common and precarious mis-conception in some quarters of qualitative theorizing claims that language – especially the actual wording and its performance – are surface and epiphenomena that stand in between people’s true feelings and thoughts, i.e., what they would have liked (intended) to express, and what actually comes across and is understood by others. This mis-conception of language and communication as distorting people’s ‘true’ intentions then is likely to be used to disqualify analytic approaches that center on or around the actual language used by participants as ‘linguistic’ or ‘discursive’ analyses that do not get to the bottom of people’s ‘true’ determinations. A second and similar simplification starts from the opposite premise, holding language to be a transparent window into the phenomena under qualitative scrutiny. The transparency metaphor falls in line with our folk belief that we use language to read each others’ minds, i.e., with little effort to be able to figure out what they intend to communicate. Thus, so the argument continues, what qualitative analysis should focus on is what people mean – which is transparent from what they say, i.e., does not require additional analysis. While there is no doubt that debates over these issues will continue, setting up approaches that scrutinize language use will increasingly allow researchers to recognize the merits of microgenetic processes in the business of meaning production and of microanalytic approaches to work these processes up and lay them open for readers of our research.

Thus, the guideline of ‘*taking language seriously*,’ calls for a principal shift in the unit of analysis from formal and content aspects of story-production to how form and content are tied together in the service of navigating and managing interpersonal relationships. Consequently, it is most prominently displayed in acts of story performance, i.e., the minutiae of its telling, which have also been termed *narrative practices* (cf. Bamberg, 2020); and it is through these minutiae that story tellers position a sense of how they intend to be understood by others. Additionally, the way third- or first-person characters are positioned inside the story becomes a function of story performance (cf. also Bamberg, 1997). Positioning analysis as a principled form of narrative analysis, building on Davies and Harré’s original article (1990), posits that storytellers engage in a continuous navigation process between having faith in and maintaining existing background assumptions (also called *master narratives*) on one hand, and testing or re-scripting – up to the possibility of challenging and openly countering – them on the other. Both aspects of story performance – being complicit and countering – are at work in narrative practices simultaneously and always in concert. An analysis of them can lay open how they are at work and result in micro-discursive practices that without question require analysts to go beyond the analysis of words, grammar and semantics. Hitherto largely neglected aspects of bodily interactive performance features (e.g. paralinguistic qualities such as intonation, pauses, and also visual elements such as posture, gesture, gaze, facial expressions) have become central to the analysis of how narrative practices are enacted. This turn to regarding and analyzing language as *culturally embodied* and *intentional practices* finds support in recent interrogations of the traditional affect-language divide, postulating that both language and affectivity unfold jointly and dynamically in situated relational settings (cf. Slaby, Mühlhoff & Wüschner, 2019; Wetherell, 2012); where they are rehearsed and polished in daily narrative storytelling practices from childhood on.

**Conclusion**

This chapter went out to set up a larger background from where the roles of narrative and narrative research may be considered more central to qualitative inquiry than just being one method amongst others. First, it may have become apparent how narrative research cuts across the other three families of qualitative inquiry that Barker and Pistrang in chapter 2 set apart from narrative approaches. These were: thematic, language based, and ethnographic approaches; and evidently work with narratives is woven into each of them – often centrally – and cuts across them all. Second, one of the central feature of narratives, namely their ability to configure the temporal dimension of human experience (past, present and future) confers a privileged status vis-à-vis other approaches for the analysis of stability, continuity, and change – one of the central aspects of human and organizational identity formation. Third, expanding the focus of narrative in qualitative research from what is represented in stories in terms of content to the relational function of the use of narratives in interpersonal relationships provides a powerful argument for devoting analytic endeavor to achieve a deeper understanding of users’ relational context and experiences. And finally, as I tried to argue above, incorporating aspects of bodily performed narrative practices as substantial facets into narrative analytic projects will help to develop more detailed analytic concepts for how dominant master narratives can be interrogated (cf. Bamberg & Wipff, 2020b) and subverted in and through the stories research participants share – in everyday performances as well as in institutional practices such as research interviews, police interrogations or doctor-patient and therapist-client interactions. As such, this chapter aimed to provide an additional link between the introductory chapters and subsequent chapters, and in particular to prepare readers for chapter 6 (Murray), which provides an excellent diversification and exemplification of aspects raised in this chapter.

**Footnotes**

The term ‘event’ is used here as expressed in form of a proposition/clause: it typically depicts an actor and an action (“Lee went to the store”), in contrast to a happening, or a state (“Lee had no candy”).

2 See however attempts to break away from this form of navigation between insider and outsider perspectives by what runs under the header of “complete-member ethnography” (cf. Coffey, 2018) as well as claims by autoethnographers (cf. Bochner, 2014).

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Table 3.1 *Four simple stories: The same event*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| STORY A  1) Lee had no candy at home  2) went to the store  3) bought a package of candy  4) ate it all up  5) Lee felt good | STORY B  1) Lee felt good  2) went to the store  3) bought a package of candy  4) ate it all up  5) Lee had no candy at home |
| STORY C  2) Lee went to the store  1) after Lee had no candy at home  5) Lee felt good  4) after having eaten up all the candy  3) that Lee had bought | STORY D  2) Lee went to the store  1) Lee was out of candy at home  ?) Lee felt good  ?) Lee ate up all the candy  ?) Lee bought a package of candy |