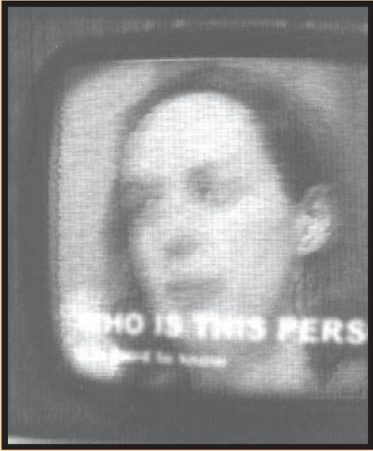


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# The Uses of Narrative



*Explorations in  
Sociology, Psychology,  
and Cultural Studies*

*It all began very  
to write our life  
them to one another  
in doing so we  
understand the deed  
which we were*

Molly Andrews, Shelley Day Sclater,  
Corinne Squire, *and* Amal Treacher  
*editors*

*The  
Uses of  
Narrative*



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*Explorations in  
Sociology, Psychology,  
and Cultural Studies*

**Molly Andrews, Shelley Day Sclater,  
Corinne Squire, and Amal Treacher**  
*editors*

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# Foreword

## Narrative's moment

*Norman K. Denzin*

We live in narrative's moment (Maines 1993: 17). The narrative turn in the social sciences has been taken. The linguistic and textual basis of knowledge about society is now privileged. Culture is seen as a performance. Everything we study is contained within a storied, or narrative, representation. Indeed, as scholars we are storytellers, telling stories about other people's stories. We call our stories theories.

The essays and editorial commentary in this volume brilliantly advance our understandings of the implications of the narrative turn. The editors and their co-contributors are clear on these points: persons are constructed by the stories they tell. The self is a psychosocial, narrative production. There is no dualism between self and society. Material social conditions, discourses and narrative practices interweave to shape the self and its many identities. Narrative's double duty, as the editors note, is complex; self and society are storied productions. This is why narrative is a prime concern of social science today.

Narrative is a telling, a performance event, the process of making or telling a story. A story is an account involving the narration of a series of events in a plotted sequence which unfolds in time. A story and a narrative are nearly equivalent terms. A story has a beginning, a middle and an ending. Stories have certain basic structural features, including narrators, plots, settings, characters, crises and resolutions. Experience, if it is to be remembered, and represented, must be contained in a story which is narrated. We have no direct access to experience as such. We can only study experience through its representations, through the ways stories are told.

The editors wisely inform us that what we take narrative and story to be determines how it will be collected and studied. (Ian Craib notes that narrative, or story, can be defined so broadly that the term applies to any and everything a sociologist or psychologist might want to study.) If stories are defined as a form of narrative, then stories can be obtained through structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, free association methods and collectively produced autobiographies. Methodologically, narratives-as-stories can be subjected to content, discourse, cultural, literary, psychoanalytic, formal, structural, semiotic and feminist analyses. Of course pre-existing

narratives can also be examined, for example the Princess Diana interview analysed by Abell, Stokoe and Billig in Chapter 12. On the other hand, stories can be connected to larger narrative structures. Examples of this form of inquiry can be found in Wolkowitz's analysis of the memoirs of the wives of US nuclear weapons scientists (Chapter 7), and Walters' study (Chapter 3) of heterosexual and gay wedding and family narratives.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1963) and Holstein and Gubrium (2000: 103) remind us that as social constructions, stories always have a larger cultural and historical locus. Individuals universalise, in their singularity, the unique features of their historical moment. Narratives of the self, as temporal constructions, are anchored in local institutional cultures and their interpretive practices. These practices shape how self-narratives are fashioned. Various contributors in this volume examine the realities shaped by such specific cultural narrative forms as the official death certification procedure (Seale, Chapter 2), print news journalism (Jacobs, Chapter 1; Freeman, Chapter 5; Wolkowitz, Chapter 7; Konopasek with Andrews, Chapter 6), children talking with adults (Smith, Chapter 11), and autobiographical speech (Wengraf, Chapter 8; Malson, Chapter 10; Hollway and Jefferson, Chapter 9).

Storytellers have agency and self-reflexivity. Their stories are temporal constructions which create the realities they describe. Stories and lives connect and define one another. However, narratives come in many different forms: contradictory, fragmented, grand, local, institutional. The editors note that narratives can reveal forms of repression that operate in the social world. At the same time, narratives can function as forms of bad faith, concealing these self-same processes of repression and injustice. Many of the contributors to this volume elaborate these connections and concerns.

The three major sections of this volume trace the interconnections between narrative, culture, life history, and different forms of discourse. In Part I, Jacobs, Seale, Walters and Craib treat culture and civil society as complex productions, stitched together through interconnected semiotic, emotional, linguistic, and narrative acts. In Part II, Freeman, Konopasek with Andrews, Wolkowitz and Wengraf trace the relationship between life histories and narratives, showing how critical life events are given meaning within various narrative schemes. Influenced by Foucault, the chapters in Part III by Hollway and Jefferson, Malson, and Smith, Abell, Stokoe and Billig show how humans with agency actively negotiate the meanings that are brought to their life situations.

In their concluding chapter Bradbury and Day Sclater emphasise how the essays in this volume see narratives as cultural productions, as manifestations of life histories, as sites where agency is played out. Indeed, subjects inhabit narrative, even as the self, in its private, public, and gendered versions is constituted in narrative. And in their narratives people push against prevailing systems of discourse, including those connected to sexuality, family, work, labour, race, intimacy, politics, ageing, unemployment, death. Of course narratives do not establish the truth of such events, nor does narrative

reflect the truth of experience. Narratives create the very events they reflect upon. In this sense, narratives are reflections *on* – not *of* – the world as it is known.

And so at the end of this valuable and most timely collection we see how the narrative turn forces the social sciences to develop new theories, new methods and new ways of talking about self and society. This new language will reveal how the individual and the social are opposite sides of the same coin, to use Charles Horton Cooley's metaphor (1902: 110).

It remains to reflect on where narrative might go next. Borrowing from Peter Brooks, William Kittridge reminds us that our lives are 'ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories we tell or hear told, those that we dream or imagine or would like to tell . . . We live immersed in narrative' (1996: 157). The stories we tell help us wrestle with the chaos around us, helping us make sense of the world when things go wrong.

### Selves, narratives and sacred places

We live in stories, and do things because of the characters we become in our tales of self. This narrated self which is who I am, is a map. It gives me something to hang on to, a way to get from point A to point B in my daily life. But we need larger narratives, stories that connect us to others, to community, to morality and the moral self. At the dawn of a new century we need new stories.

Speaking of Montana and the West, Kittridge says we need new narratives based on new and different ways of performing Montana. Kittridge is asking for narratives that embed the self in storied histories of sacred spaces and local places. We need to invent new stories for ourselves 'in which we live in a society that understands killing the natural world as a way of killing each other . . . We need a story in which the processes of communality and mutual respect are fundamental' (1996: 142). We need stories that encourage us to 'understand that the living world cannot be replicated . . . We need stories that will drive us to care for one another and the world. We need stories that will drive us to action' (1996: 164–5).

This is where narrative must go next. And thus do the contributors to *Lines of Narrative* chart the future for all of us.

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# Introduction

*Molly Andrews, Shelley Day Sclater, Michael Rustin,  
Corinne Squire and Amal Treacher*

## Narrative intersections

This book aims to provide a contemporary profile of sociologists' and psychologists' work on narrative. It clarifies the views they share and the issues that divide them, and points to the value such work has for generating new ways of conceptualising and investigating the social world. Adopting a distinctively 'psychosocial' approach, the book draws together examples of narrative theory, methods and research from North America, Western and Central Europe and Australia, to provide the reader with an overview of this increasingly popular field. Narrative's double meanings, at once modern and postmodern, seem to allow research in this field to avoid many of the limitations of more traditional sociological and psychological approaches, and in particular to challenge the conventional dualism between individual and society. Using narrative, the 'self' can be located as a psychosocial phenomenon, and subjectivities seen as discursively constructed yet still as active and effective. Material social conditions, discourses and practices interweave with subjectively experienced desires and identities and people make choices, reconstruct pasts and imagine futures within the range of possibilities open to them. This is the realm where sociology overlaps with psychology and neither the 'social', the subject matter of traditional psychology, nor the 'individual', the subject matter of conventional psychology, is privileged. Rather both are constructed in relation to each other, not in the 'outer' realm of society and culture, or the 'inner' realm of personality characteristics, but in a distinct, 'psychosocial' zone.

If we are constructed by stories, or are storytellers by nature, or perhaps both, then narrative must, surely, be a prime concern of social science. Yet the 'story' of narrative in the social sciences is long and complicated. Since the 1970s, the study of narrative has been a point of intersection, even cross-over, between the social sciences and the humanities. In the social sciences, narrative is one element in a broader cultural and linguistic 'turn' through which recognition has been given both to the shaping effects of cultural environments, and to subjective experience. The growing status of qualitative methods in sociology and psychology is a compelling indication of this

## 2 Introduction

'turn'. Today, ethnography, biographical case studies, discourse and conversation analysis, semiotics and social constructionism, as well as more narrowly focused narrative studies, are all commonplace, even mainstream parts of these disciplines.

In the humanities, especially in literary and cultural studies, studies of narrative have, in contrast, served to objectify or formalise research. Literary and cultural critics had previously relied on implicit and intuitive procedures, whose affinities with 'creative' forms of writing and art they valued. During the 1960s, this intuitive approach began to seem insufficient. One factor was the greater international exposure of cultures to one another – an early consequence of 'globalisation'. Another was the emergence of 'new' voices within national societies, as social change movements such as civil rights, feminism and gay rights achieved some measure of cultural democratisation. The literary and cultural-critical mainstream was attacked for its anglocentrism, for being middle-class, for its uncritical humanism and individualism and for a 'high-cultural' bias against the plethora of new cultural forms – film, radio, television, journalism, popular fiction. In place of trained sensibility, literary and cultural studies now became dominated by theories and analytic procedures which it was hoped would bring some conceptual order to the expanding cultural field. These theories and procedures were trawled for in many different places – in the interpretive ethnographies of US sociology, in several varieties of Marxism, in structural linguistics, in discourse theory, in hermeneutics – and in the idea of 'narrative'.

So, just as the social sciences were discovering the importance of 'subjectivity', the humanities were starting to celebrate the advantages of 'objectivity' – the application of formal concepts and methods to cultural artefacts of all kinds. One can see this process as a kind of reintegration of the sciences and the humanities, after a long post-Enlightenment period in which they were sharply counterposed. To the horror of many traditional humanist scholars, the humanities came to be approached in a quasi-scientific way while, to the equal horror of many partisans of 'science', cultural and social perspectives were increasingly deemed integral to sociology and psychology. At the same time, the social sciences became affected, in a kind of reverse transmission, by the formalist enthusiasms of the humanities, and the humanities themselves were subject to a barrage of 'backlash' scholarship reinstating the authority of intuition.

The study of 'narrative' is on the rise at a late and complex stage in this intersection of the disparate disciplinary approaches. Narrative researchers attempt to produce formal theories of culture and society. But because stories also seem to have intimate and important connections with the nature of human experience, narrative research incorporates other dimensions – notably those of historical time and subjectivity – that were in danger of being left out of other language- or discourse-based research. As this portmanteau account of narrative research suggests, the field is a wide one. Part of this book's concern is to explore the field's extent, and the parameters that define it.

## Defining narrative

Contemporary social-scientific definitions of narrative are extremely variable. In general, narrative is taken to mean a sequence of events in time (Berger 1997). Thus defined, 'narrative' includes much more than what we think of as the usual materials of social-scientific narrative research: spoken, often personal stories, like those explored in many of the chapters in Parts II and III of this book. 'Narrative' must take in writing – fiction and documentary writing, which have clear time sequences, but also explanatory writing, where narrative sequence lies in the causal succession that a text proposes, as in Wolkowitz's and Jacobs' chapters. Narrative includes image sequences too, as well as still images which imply event sequences while only showing a moment of them, as Abell *et al.* and Walters' chapters demonstrate. In addition, 'narratives' are now often taken to include sequences of actions: the living out of story structures in everyday life described by Seale.

The term 'narrative' now also extends to cover phenomena beyond verbal, visual or acted 'texts'. Sociologists and psychologists working with both personal and media narratives tend to assume that these narratives bear a strong resemblance to the structure and content of the lived, social world, as in the chapters by Freeman, Wengraf, and Konopasek with Andrews in this volume. Some contributors, like Malson, also claim that individual 'stories' contain elements of cultural meta-narratives, stories that are much more significant than the apparent narrative totalities in which their elements appear. Moving in the reverse direction, from the personal narrative towards the intrapsychic rather than towards cultural formations, Hollway and Jefferson argue that some autobiographical narratives express, to an interpretive researcher, a 'story' of unconscious affect, spelled out in the associations, gaps and idiosyncrasies of language rather than in its overt narrative content and structure. This book, by paying attention to the variety of narrative forms at stake in the social sciences, aims to disestablish conventions that make stories of human lives, or – in the psychological, literary and cultural-studies tradition – narratives with idealised linguistic, fiction or filmic forms, the canonical centre of narrative analysis.

## Narratives and methods

What we take to be 'narrative' determines how narrative will be studied. From the definitional differences discussed above flow considerable differences in narrative methodology, which manifest themselves across the chapters. The first way in which narrative is commonly studied is by obtaining stories through individual interviews. Even here, though, anomalies arise. The stories produced by Smith's group interviews with children, who are rather rare participants in narrative interview research, raise questions about the power relations of 'narrative' interviews, who usually get to tell their stories, and the place of the researcher. Hollway and Jefferson, seeking to

#### 4 Introduction

theorise the psychosocial subject, found traditional interview procedures wanting and developed their own Free Association Narrative Interviewing method. Konopasek's collectively produced autobiographies, generated by a kind of written 'interview' with self and others, may lead us to ask about the textual and collaborative nature of other, apparently simpler autobiographies, where individuals seem to be sole authors of their own life stories and as such accountable only to themselves. Seale's parallel investigations of the 'narratives' derived from semi-structured interviews and from ethnographic observations render permeable the boundaries between these methods, so that actions become stories to be 'listened' to, and stories 'acts' to be observed.

If, moreover, we examine how even the more traditional interview material is analysed, we see an instructive span of categories. For Wengraf, the narrative method *is* the analysis: stories told within a life history interview tell their own significance to a sensitive reader who can hear the 'told story' as opposed to the facts of the 'lived life'. Other contributors venture away from interview data more explicitly, Hollway and Jefferson perhaps most controversially when, drawing from psychoanalysis in their analytic procedures, they uncover 'narratives' of unconscious affect. In so doing they challenge some conventional but rather fragile distinctions between social-scientific and psychoanalytic interpretation. Moving in the other direction, Freeman and Malson deploy larger understandings of cultural narratives within which they situate individuals' stories. To do this, Malson works explicitly from a discourse-analytic perspective that allows her to set up in advance analytic categories based on previous research as well as on what she finds in the data. Freeman relies rather on comparisons with literary models. For both, stories 'mean' more than they say. Contributors to the book have well-formulated modes of analysis to demonstrate this richness of meaning, and use concepts of triangulation and reflexivity as checks on their interpretive range.

The second way in which social scientists commonly study narrative is by analysing pre-existing written, visual or spoken stories. In a sense, such studies have a 'partial' method, because they work with found texts. In Wolkowitz's case, even selection is obviated because the texts in the category that interests her, memoirs of the wives of US nuclear weapons scientists, are small in number. However, these are not methodologically unproblematic narratives; Wolkowitz has to contend with the possibility that they are 'ventriloquised' rather than authentically authored. Other contributors must develop principles of selection, as in Jacobs' careful empirical assessment of all news coverage of the Los Angeles uprisings, or Abell *et al.*'s choice of what they argue is a single but iconic and culturally defining televisual moment – Princess Diana's *Panorama* television interview. As with the interview studies, these text-based contributions deploy analytic methods drawn from a range of fields, with varying explicitness; given their objects of study, it is not surprising that they borrow more from the methods and theories of literary and cultural studies. Jacobs makes explicit use of categories of

literary form and Abell *et al.* deploy a functionalist discourse and conversation analysis, also influenced by cultural-studies precedents for the analysis of broadcast narratives. Wolkowitz makes implicit reference to conventions of written stories, memoirs specifically, and Walters conducts a wide-ranging address to the cultural dynamics of Othering and assimilation as played out in popular media stories of lesbian and gay relationships and parenting, which again draws creatively on emergent traditions of cultural-studies analysis.

Narrative methodologies exemplify the uneasy yet productive fusion between increasing formalism in the humanities – as in Jacobs' deployment of literary-critical categories to understand popular media – and increasing subjectivism in the social sciences, as with Wengraf's interpretive reading of life stories. Yet the methods also indicate the blurred nature of this distinction, in for example Walters' reliance on an entirely implicit methodology for her cultural analysis, or Smith's use of the rhetorical structure of drama to understand her interviews with boys. Such disciplinary crossovers seem one of the most helpful and hopeful aspects of the narrative research showcased here. For where social-science and cultural studies collide in the study of narrative, as they inevitably will, researchers have to make difficult choices between methods that do not need to be justified or even explicated – which are still, in the main, used within cultural studies – and methods obliged to justify themselves rigorously, if not scientifically, as social-scientific methods still in general must. The resulting confrontations between different approaches to method have considerable value in developing ideas of what narrative analysis means, while acting, again, to destabilise conventional concepts of what social-scientific research on 'narrative' entails.

## Narrative, construction and culture

How has the 'discovery' of narrative influenced the social sciences, and what fields of investigation does it open up? To answer this question, we need to distinguish between understandings that are products of the 'cultural turn' in general, and those that are specific to the study of narrative. What has followed from the 'cultural turn' is a recognition that the forms in which experience is encoded, accounted for and represented help constitute that experience. This recognition displaces the idea that there are realities of nature, society and individuals wholly independent of the languages and cultural patterns through which they are represented. It makes problematic what was formerly taken for granted and thus invisible, namely the way in which representations construct and form part of realities.

The contributors to this book are clear that stories always have a 'cultural locus' (Denzin 1989: 73) without reference to which they cannot be understood. The chapters consistently concern themselves with this 'top-down' (Berger 1993) perspective on narratives' significance: how narratives derive from specific cultural loci, how they can be described with reference to these cultural locations, how culturally particular forms of narrative are routed

through individual narratives and narrating subjects, and how apparently 'personal' stories impact back on the culture (Plummer, 1995). While the chapters in Part I are especially preoccupied with the confluence of narrative and popular culture, similar concerns appear in Part III, where contributors address the discourses, the structures of power and knowledge, within which stories are told, and the discursive effects those stories themselves have.

What is narrative research's specific contribution to the 'culturalist' or 'constructionist' perspective? Such research seems both to constrain and enable it. Narrative work does not examine the constructing effects of individual, symptomatic words, or silences, or cross-textual 'discourses': these all have to be placed in the context of a 'story'. However, a narrative is itself an accumulating construction. As you follow it, you hear meanings and realities accrue. In this sense, narrative research offers object lessons in the construction of the social world. A principal resource of the constructionist perspective has been its investigation of the patterns of representation which emerge in each field of study and through which different 'realities' are constituted, and such patterns are often dramatically obvious in the field of narrative. In this volume, contributors examine, for instance, the representations and realities effected by the specific narrative forms of official death-certification procedures (Seale), television celebrity interviews and sitcoms (Abell *et al.*, Walters), print news journalism (Jacobs), literary genres of fiction and autobiography (Jacobs, Freeman, Wolkowitz, Konopasek), children talking with adults (Smith), and autobiographical speech (Wengraf, Malson, Hollway and Jefferson, Freeman). From these investigations emerge valuable understandings of how particular narrative patterns interact with individual and social representations of the world.

### **Narrative, history and subjectivity**

Narrative theorists have accepted and have even been able to exploit the systemic concepts and procedures which followed the linguistic 'turn'. Their more unique contribution has been to draw attention to some specific dimensions of the process of cultural construction, those of history and human subjectivity. These dimensions have been an important corrective to the objectifying effects of formalist studies of cultural forms, which sometimes merely substituted a kind of 'culturalist' determinism for previously materialist ones.

Narrative is most generally defined as temporal sequencing of events. Paul Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1988), one of the most widely cited writers on narrative research, argues that human experience too is arranged and bound in time. Human actors cannot but engage with time, and therefore narrative, in their formation of desires, intentions, expectations and memories. As a consequence, the histories that human beings write are not the 'objective' accounts of events occurring across time that they seem to be; rather they

are, like fictions, creative means of exploring and describing realities. They follow narrative principles of 'emplotment'; they describe sequences of events with beginnings, middles and ends, and generate intelligibility by organising past, present and future in a coherent way. For Ricoeur, and for many other narrative theorists – Wengraf, and Hollway and Jefferson, in this volume, among them – this narrativity affects the speaking and writing of individual 'histories' too. Our time-inflected phenomenology places creating and maintaining meaning at the centre of all human activity. The 'first-order' activity of lives as they are lived is mirrored in 'second-order' activities of reflection, representation, accounting and storytelling. For Anthony Giddens (1984: xii–xxxvi), these second-order activities provide the resources for the 'first-order' world-making of each next generation – as, indeed, many contributors to this volume, such as Walters, Jacobs, Smith and Konopasek, would argue. For Zygmunt Bauman (1992), moreover, resistance to our narratives' unavoidable end, the inevitable fact of mortality, explains much in human work and culture, as Seale, Freeman and Craib might themselves say.

What, though, of subjectivity, agency and intention? Intentions give shape to our perceptions and accounts of what we and others do – for example, in the various forms of rationalisation and false consciousness named by Nietzsche, Marx and Freud. The narrative perspective makes possible the acknowledgement of this dimension of 'agency', both as reality and as belief, in the ways in which accounts of experience are framed. Narrative trajectories are, like agency, purposive; they move towards endings, they aim for closure. In writings throughout this book, people are helped to or barred from agency in narrative.

The contributors to this volume differ over the extent to which they believe stories and lives mirror one another. Is subjectivity contained within narratives, spoken through the cultural and social languages available, or is there more to subjectivity than the storied self? For Seale, there is almost nothing which is *not* narrative – but narrative is still not, for him, a sufficient description of every phenomenon. For Freeman and Wengraf, spoken narratives and life paths run in inexact, approximate parallel. Malson and Walters take it for granted that cultural and life narratives both reflect and resist each other, but they use the term 'narrative' broadly enough to take in non-linear metastructures like 'patriarchy' that would not be susceptible to conventional narrative analyses. Hollway and Jefferson propose a parallelism between spoken and unconscious narratives, but this latter notion again departs from conventional, verifiable notions of what a narrative is. Smith, Wolkowitz, and Abell and her co-writers register implicit reservations about the scope of narrative analysis by concentrating on theorising the narrative structures of particular spoken and written texts, with some cautious suggestions about their meanings and effects. Konopasek and Jacobs are interested in how individual and cultural narratives both derive from and feed into specific sociopolitical situations, but they avoid describing these conditions