

Stories of Narrative: On Social Scientific Uses of Narrative in Multiple Disciplines

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This paper explores how narrative is understood and used by scholars in multiple disciplines to investigate social scientific issues. This is not, however, a traditional literature review. It is a report on an empirical study that involved systematic methods of data collection and analysis. The data in this case are scholarly literature on narrative, and an inductive analysis reveals three emergent themes. The first is the general tendency to view narrative as a formative mechanism in the construction of self and reality. The second addresses the ways narrative is conceptualized in terms of linguistic features, including structural and formal qualities, and how these features are studied in relation to social interaction. The third theme addresses how narrative is understood and employed as a method of social research. This paper contributes a valuable resource on narrative studies for scholars working within multiple disciplines.

1. Introduction

Scholars of narrative understand that narratives are often both complex and revealing. They are linguistic structures: they are syntax and semantics; they are plots and characters; they are sequences. Narratives are also substantive, in that they are what we say: they are phrases; they are colloquialisms; they are loaded. Narratives, too, are contextualized within their construction: what they depends on when and where they are said and, of course, by whom. Narratives are ripe and fertile: they are simultaneously products of individual and society and individual and society are their products. Narratives are social: they are local and national and global; they are feminine and masculine and all other positions possible. This laundry list of narrative's qualities is not exhaustive—narratives are these things and many more—but even a list this brief implicates the limits of disciplinary narrative studies.

It suggests that scholars interested in narrative must traverse disciplinary boundaries to do their work comprehensively. For example, we must consider simultaneously how sociolinguists theorize identity by studying linguistic practices; how anthropologists and sociologists speak to how local narratives

* I would like to thank Leslie Irvine, Kira Hall, Martha Gimez, and Janet Jacobs for their help with this paper.

resonate with or resist global ones; how social psychologists relate narrative to the construction and maintenance of selfhood; and how cultural studies implicates narrative in the discursive formation of salient social categories such as “heterosexual” or “poor.” If narrative is to be richly understood, its students must seek out and conduct research that crosses disciplinary boundaries.

This paper provides a valuable resource for narrative scholars interested in crossing these boundaries. I explore how narrative is contemplated and used by scholars in multiple disciplines to investigate social scientific issues. Using a systematic method of data collection and analysis, I focus on three predominant themes on the uses of narrative. The data in this case are scholarly literature on narrative, and an inductive analysis reveals these themes. The first is the general tendency to view narrative as a formative mechanism in the construction of self and reality. The second addresses ways narrative is conceptualized in terms of linguistic features, including structural and formal qualities, and how these features are studied in relation to social interaction. The third theme addresses how narrative is understood and employed as a method of social research. My ultimate aim is to encourage interdisciplinary studies of narrative by pointing to existing connections as evidence not only of the feasibility of this type of work, but its fruitfulness.

While loosely united as social scientists, the authors I have referenced work in several different disciplines. These disciplines are characterized by varying theoretical and methodological assumptions. Psychologists, for example, are generally interested in individual psychological processes, which may or may not be socially relevant or influenced, while sociologists place a primacy on society even when examining individuals. There are also substantive differences within disciplines. There are sociolinguists who pay little or no attention to social context when studying identity; others suggest it cannot be ignored. Intra-disciplinary difference is magnified in a field like social psychology, which requires qualifiers such as *psychological social psychology* and *sociological social psychology* to delineate critical even contradictory methodological and theoretical differences. A psychological social psychologist might run laboratory experiments to test theories of cognitive processes in simulated social settings, while a sociological social psychologist might study ethnographically the ways homeless people create meaningful relationships—two very different pursuits, both social psychological. Variation in the social sciences is complicated further with the inclusion of newer fields like cultural studies, where disciplinary traditions do not formally exist and are often objects of cultural critique.

Altogether “social science” is a category that contains innumerable similarities, differences, and contradictions. And it is important to acknowledge, particularly when researching across these disciplines, that social scientists may have little more in common with each other than their shared title. For the purposes of this analysis, then, it is necessary to recognize that the authors I have referenced here, housed in different disciplines, are influenced by their larger disciplinary concerns. I have found that the differences in disciplinary

traditions—complicated, messy, and prohibitive in other ways as they are—have not prevented the emergence of a great deal of similarity in narrative studies across the social sciences. In fact, the heart of my argument is that at least in three important ways there is a great deal of consensus on the social scientific uses of narrative, regardless of disciplinary differences. Therefore, I have avoided discussing disciplinary traditions when talking about a particular author's work. Instead, I have highlighted how authors' works can be understood apart from their disciplinary moorings and as part of a larger, cohesive discourse on narrative. In other words I have given narrative center stage and have kept disciplines off in the wings.

A final note before I proceed, the majority of the work reviewed is social psychological, but I hesitate to call it that because of the disciplinary implications. A clarification intended to stress subject matter, and not knowledge territories, lets me make a distinction between social psychology as the general study of individual and society and Social Psychology as a codified academic discipline. To be clear, my concern is with how social scientists address narrative's place in the on-going relationships between the individual and society.

The remainder of this essay is devoted to discussing research methods and analytical strategies employed in this project, presenting a summary presentation of the data and analysis, and concluding with closing thoughts.

2. Methods

This essay is more than a literature review. It is a report on data that is systematically collected and analyzed. The data in this case are literature on social scientific uses of narrative, and the analysis reveals existing interdisciplinary linkages in narrative studies. An objective of this essay is to present an important collection of narrative work to scholars who aspire to an interdisciplinary approach. In this way this project is a literature review. I also draw conclusions about narratives specifically and narrative research in general based on close analysis of the data. For this reason—the treatment of this project as an empirical case study—I am compelled to summarize my methods.

My research here is mostly limited to the social sciences for two simple, yet complex reasons, which are practical and methodological limitations. Narrative is so widely studied in the social sciences, and in its original home in the humanities, that exhaustive coverage is an unreasonable expectation. It would be impossible to review all that has been said about narrative given its enormous popularity. Furthermore, all researchers either deliberately or indirectly exclude relevant data. Ethnographers cannot talk with all groups of people that may shed light on similar meaningful practices. Similarly, demographers cannot use all data sets to understand the ebbs and flows of migration. It is, perhaps, an implicit assumption in all research that some data are necessarily excluded.

The disciplinary literature analyzed here met an important initial criterion. My generic research interests are relationships between individual and society, subjects most commonly addressed in the social sciences. Accordingly, I mostly limited my research to literature in the social sciences. Specifically, I mined anthropology, cultural studies, psychology (including cognitive psychology), social psychology (including sociological and psychological forms), sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and sociology for data on narrative. Treatment of narrative in the humanities went largely unconsidered, except in such cases where literary scholars located their work in larger social scientific discussions. The most obvious absence is work on narrative as fiction.

My search was even more narrowly focused on theoretical rather than empirical studies. This decision was guided by the want to understand what can roughly be referred to as the state of narrative studies across disciplines. I sought articles that summarized and synthesized narrative scholarship, often including references to empirical studies, offer a review of the treatment of narrative in specific fields. The empirical studies included here, such as Penelope Eckert's (2000) ethnography of high school girls, offer rich overviews of narrative studies, often as introductions to their research. I also present case studies that exemplify theoretical ideas conveyed in this essay, though the focus remains narrative in general, even when specifically applied to case studies.

Having established these boundaries of selection, I employed two data collection strategies: theoretical and snowball sampling. These collection techniques are common among qualitative researchers, who are less likely than quantitative researchers to sample randomly. Their popularity is in large part due to their potential to produce ample data. Researchers use this approach when they have good theoretical reasons to search for data in particular places. Guided by the aforementioned two key assumptions, I began reviewing literature in the usual fashion: searching social scientific databases, following bibliographic trails, and asking narrative scholars for their recommendations. Formally the latter two methods of data collection are examples of snowball sampling, the practice of gathering data upon recommendations of others, usually research participants who are connected to potential participants. Each of these practices yielded bountiful data, ultimately generating a data set consisting of forty-one journal articles, books, or book chapters.

The data was analyzed using a strategy consistent with a grounded theory approach (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001; Glaser and Strauss 1967). This involved a recursive practice of data collection and analysis. Data were sampled, reviewed, and initially loosely coded. I revisited and revised these categories as I collected more data. During this process, codes were assigned to emergent themes or, in other words, commonly held assumptions about narrative across selected disciplines. I ceased data collection when codes were solely recurrent instead of original. This is also a practice consistent with a grounded theory approach.

I began with numerous codes that whittled the data down to six categories and ended with three master categories, which were produced by collapsing

smaller categories into larger ones. In essence, I created three dominant categories containing thematically related subcategories. Initially, all varieties of narrative theories or propositions were documented as they appeared. For example, if a particular author discussed narrative time, then her work would be categorized as “narrative time.” Eventually, commonalities among categories began to appear. For example, discussions of narrative time and linguistic variation were grouped under a large category, in this case the linguistically-oriented category *forms and features*. Data were similarly coded and categorized until no new themes emerged. Six themes emerged as recurrent and were labeled as follows: poststructuralism and structuralism; narrative construction of self; narrative construction of reality; narrative forms and features; narrative as interaction; narrative as method. Based on additional theorized similarities, these were reduced to three categories: narrative construction of self and reality (NCSR); narrative forms and features (FAF); and narrative as method (METH). These three “master” categories and their subcategories are the focus of the next section of this essay.

3. Uses of Narrative by Analytical Theme

In this section, I present a detailed overview of the data and my analysis by discussing the data in thematic sections according to emergent themes. I begin with the largest section on narrative and the social construction of self and reality (NCSR), followed by a discussion of narrative as linguistic structures (FAF), and concluding with narrative as a method of research (METH). In each section I outline the explicit meaning of the category and offer examples from the literature. I also present important discourses surrounding each theme, including commentary by proponents and opponents of these positions. I will not present in the body of the paper the arguments of every author analyzed; therefore, I have included a table (see appendix) that classifies authors by coded category. If an author or authors contribute to multiple categories, they are listed under each heading (e.g. Riessman 1993 is located in all three master categories, so her name appears three times in separate columns).

Before covering narrative’s shared intellectual ground, let me speak to one of its most divisive, indecisive, and potentially pressing dilemmas: namely, arriving at an exact shared definition of narrative. As much work as has gone into defining narrative (for further discussions see Bruner 1991; Leiblich 1994; Miller 1995; Ochs and Capps 2001) there has also been a great deal of disagreement: these disagreements are sometimes ideological and political (Who gets to decide what is and what is not a narrative and what are the consequences of such decisions?); sometimes they are analytical (Should narratives meet some strict criteria, such as possessing a beginning and end, notable events, cultural themes, and so on?); often, they are some confounding combination of each of these and more (If narratives must contain sequenced events, what about non-sequential talk told by people who do not or cannot tell sequential narratives, as in the chaos

narratives of terminally ill narrators in Arthur Frank's [1995] *The Wounded Storyteller*). Such an innocent question commands dizzying, sometimes insidious responses. But it or versions of it are asked repeatedly because it seems reasonable for researchers and theorists to want conceptual clarity. Lacking clarity, ambiguous terms risk devalued explanatory power. Thus, failure to reach an agreement on narrative's definition could be the most pressing issue facing narrative scholars.

Or a consensus definition could be unimportant. This assertion may border on unfounded speculation (or treason to some), but it seems likely that one reason for this lacuna is that it is not vital to narrative studies to have a shared, concise definition. Narrative studies are thriving without one, so clearly the explanatory value of narrative is not lacking. I think a better approach to this "problem" of narrative can be found by considering the question rather than the answer, specifically the type of question and the type of knowledge it is capable of producing.

A definition of the term discourse is also hard to come by and contentiously contemplated. In a book devoted to defining critical terms in literary theory, Paul Bove (1995) writes an essay on why discourse should not be defined, essentially refusing the task at hand. The thrust of his argument is that discourse cannot be reduced to some meaningful essence. He begins justifying his contrary position by critiquing the question, taking the poststructuralist position that it comes out of existing "interpretive models of thought" that discourse studies seek to explore (53). In other words, one cannot ask innocently what something is, as I previously suggested. Questions of this nature are born out of knowledge systems and power structures that dictate the limits of reasonable thought, of reason itself. It is only "reasonable" to ask what something is insofar as reasonable thinking falls within the boundaries of established modes of thought preserved in the power of institutions. It is reasonable to ask for a definitive version of discourse (or narrative) because contemporary thought values essential meanings (Bove 1995, 53). *What is the meaning of life?* Discourse studies are less interested in essential meanings; instead, they focus on "functional and regulative" (52) properties. For example, the question is not "what is discourse?" Instead, we should ask, "what does it do?" Or, as Bove (54) suggests, what are its social and regulative effects? How does discourse function and how, as an analytical concept, does it discipline ways of thinking?

This essay offers a similar way of thinking about narrative. It ignores the essentialist question "what is a narrative?" in favor of entertaining possible functions of narrative. It also does not address the epistemological dimensions of narrative studies, although this might be fertile ground for future research. Instead, it concentrates on locating commonly held assumptions about what narrative does and can do.

3.1. Narrative Construction of Self and Reality (NCSR):

The so-called “interpretive turn” in the social sciences has led scholars to question radically canonical ontological and psychological assumptions¹. Social reality is no longer assumed objective, and the notion of a ‘core’ self is also suspect. Theoretical understandings of ‘reality’ and ‘self’ are pried from the hands of Enlightened modern theorists and thrust into the spinning Technicolor world of postmodernism, where, in the minds of some radical theorists, they are fictions or fossils. For the most part, however, scholars have opted not to annihilate these categories, in favor of deconstructing them to see what else can be learned about ‘reality’ and ‘self’.

One of the most common and fruitful ways people have (re)envisioned self and reality is through the lens of narrative. Narrative is not only seen as formative material for self and reality, but in some cases, a bridge between the two: between individual and society. The locus of the argument is that social reality exists because of human action, as do individual selves. Communicative action is particularly critical. Narrative as a form of communication, implicating what is said and how it is said in this process, then, is seen as being an essential conduit for the development of self and reality.

The narrative construction of self and reality is not always addressed simultaneously, which was a reason for originally coding these two separately. So I will first review them separately, beginning with narrative and selfhood. Next I will address narrative and social reality. Third, I will add a section that qualifies the first two and adds to the overall theme by stressing each of these phenomena as types of interaction, narrative processes that must be enacted. The separation of these themes reflects my attempt to organize this section and not their empirical or theoretical differences. I will conclude this section by returning to the prevalence of these ideas in narrative studies and considering the few voices of dissent it faces.

3.1.1. Narrative Construction of Self

Without reviewing the entire social history of the ‘self’ as a concept (see Hewitt 1989), I want to point to a key development in the maturation of this concept, which is a generic shift away from social psychological notions of the self as a “core” entity, an object lodged psychologically or sociologically in the individual. Modernist understandings of the self that sometimes figuratively, and sometimes literally, envision the self as an essence have been rejected by scholars

¹ This is also sometimes referred to as the “discursive turn,” indicating a pointed focus on language. Each references a marked move away from positivism, modernism, and objectivism, and an inclination to consider social realities differently.

looking to move away from essentialist social psychology and toward perspectives that stress the constructed nature of selfhood. This involves rejecting the idea that the self presupposes the social and thus social relations are guided by the internal drives of individual actors. The interiorized self (Harre 1989) is a misleading fiction². Instead, selfhood is not betrothed to the individual; it is a social accomplishment. It requires the negotiated actions of individuals not only for its development, but also for its continued existence.

There is no predominant theory of the constructed nature of selfhood, and there is disagreement among those who take this as canonical to social psychological studies. However, there is a great deal of consensus that narrative is a primary mechanism in the social construction and maintenance of self. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) suggest that selves are storied beings, the result of continued narrative practices that are undeniably social. Bucholtz and Hall (2005, 585), also arguing against organic “core” notions of selfhood, suggest that “identity [self] is the “product rather than the source of linguistic practices.” Here Bucholtz and Hall (2005) rely on the concept of emergence to argue that selfhood, as well as culture and language, emerge during processes of interaction. It does not preexist interaction, but comes out of social performances. Telling narratives—practices that rely on linguistic as well as relational skills—is one way selves come to be.

3.1.2. Narrative as Interaction

It is critical to the proposition that selves are the products of narratives not to obscure the obvious point that narratives are products of narration, and that narration is a social activity. Narratives cannot take on a reified quality, whereby they make us. They are creations, as much as we are. With an awareness of the performative nature of narrative self-construction, narrative scholars have paid considerable attention to unveiling how the telling of a narrative is just as important as the narrative produced. One of the more interesting developments to come out of this line of thinking is an interrogation of the putative differences between narrative and narration, or doing and saying. Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont (2003, 108), write that the “strict dualism between ‘what people do’ and ‘what people say’” held by researchers is at best unhelpful and at worst untrue. Their point is that human actions are made understandable through narration; we tell stories of our actions to render meaningful what we have done. Doing is saying. Furthermore, narratives come into being by acts of telling. Saying is doing. This second point emphasizes the interactive side of narrative

² There are some who argue that the self in general is a fiction and no longer a salient social psychological concept.

and makes room for theorizing how narrative forms of action result in the creation of selves and social relations.

Holstein and Gubrium (2000) outline a few generic strategies people employ to actively narrate identities. *Narrative linkage* (108) is the first type. This involves weaving threads of coherence into stories that unify “biographical particulars” (108) and situational considerations³. Narrators link present narratives to past and anticipated future ones, for example, to establish or maintain a consistent, desired self presentation. *Narrative Slippage* (109) references how narrators actively avoid (or employ) expected story lines or types of narrative. For example, narrative slippage occurs when individuals can claim the status “victim” but do not, when a story of victimization would be believable and accepted. Instead, they may draw on qualitatively different discourses to narrate more (or less) favorable identities, such as “survivor”. This concept points to the agentic nature of narration, revealing how culture does provide means of narration, but individuals make decisions on what offerings they will use and for what reasons. Finally, *narrative options* (110) describes how potential story lines are built into narratives, giving authors and audiences opportunities to accommodate the contingencies of narration. Holstein and Gubrium present an excellent empirical example of this concept in a narrative taken from an ethnographic interview of a student in a parent effectiveness class in a residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed children (110-2). The student, a mother, is asked whether she is like her parents in disciplining her children. Her response supplies her a great deal of wiggle room:

It depends. When my kids are really bad, I mean really bad, that’s when I think how my mother used to do with us. You know, don’t spare the rod or something like that in those days? But, usually, I feel that Mother was too harsh with us and I think that kind of punishment isn’t good for kids today. Better to talk about it and iron things out that way. Still, like I say, it depends on how you want to think about it, doesn’t it? (from *Tanya* quoted in Holstein and Gubrium 2000, 111-2).

Tanya leaves open the narrative option for either aligning herself or distancing herself from her mother. Narrative options also speak to the agentic quality of narration and, like the previous strategies, this one reveals how narrative actions

³ Holstein and Gubrium’s concept is similar to Jerome Bruner’s (1990, 15) idea of “context sensitivity and negotiability,” which assumes that narratives must relate to the context in which they are told and should be negotiable. The difference here is that Bruner uses his concept to define what a narrative should be; Holstein and Gubrium explicitly focus on the active creation of narratives, the focus of this section.

are contextual and contingent. Thus, the narrative self is also contextual and contingent.

These concepts exemplify how narration can be studied and understood as a process of self-construction. Narratives told become storylines in the biography of self, one that is constantly under review and revision. This points to a triadic reflexive relationship with the self emerging between narration and narrative. Of course, what type of self emerges and exactly how it does so is open for empirical as well as theoretical investigation.

3.1.3. Narrative Construction of Reality

Bucholtz and Hall (2004, 382) have developed a set concepts similar to Holstein and Gubrium's, except their intention is to articulate how social relations are created during linguistic acts of self-construction. They refer to these acts as *tactics of intersubjectivity* (382). I want to present one of the three sets of tactics—*adequation and distinction*—to exemplify how social relations, including group memberships and communal identities, are the result of linguistic actions. Adequation refers to “the pursuit of socially recognized sameness” (383). A blending of the words equation and adequacy, adequation requires narrating a reasonable likeness of others. In doing so, narrators must highlight available similarities while diminishing the significance of remarkable differences. Adequation, then, refers to similarity among groups of people—nationalities, ethnicities, religions, and so on—and they are active creations rather than stable social categories. Building generally on Bourdieu's analyses of the production and reproduction of class differences, Bucholtz and Hall (384) articulate distinction as “the mechanism whereby salient difference is produced.” Similar to adequation, distinction involves selective punctuation of differences at the cost of recognizable similarities. Thus, distinction is the active pursuit of difference even when evidence of similarity is available. Using the concept of distinction, we can see how detrimental social differences that are often classified as inequalities are partially created and maintained as a result of narrative actions.

Bucholtz and Hall theorize connections between linguistic strategies for identity construction and social relations constituted in part by these strategies. To put it another way, people tell stories to themselves and others and, in the telling, they create themselves and each other. They also create the very social realities in which they live. This is the narrative construction of reality. The proposition is that reality owes its existence in some or all part due to the narrative activities of people. It also assumes that narratives are ontological building blocks. In other words, reality is constituted by narration and consists of narratives.

On the narrative construction of reality, it is necessary to make a distinction between moderate positions on reality construction and more radical ones. A moderate position on the narrative construction of reality, one that is more complimentary to theories that assume the existence of objective realities, is that narrative constitutes a type of reality. Jerome Bruner (1991, 4) proposes that

“narratives...are a version of reality” and are different from logical, scientific realities that are verifiable empirically. Narrative realities, according to Bruner, can achieve a likeness of reality, but do not exist in any verifiably objective way. Only social validation determines the authenticity of narrative realities.

Not everyone who theorizes the ontological functions of narrative assumes a difference between narrated realities and objective ones. J. Hillis Miller (1995, 68) proposes an alternative way of thinking by presenting two possible versions of reality construction: one that suggests narrative creates reality, and one that argues it reveals it. The latter proposition implies the preexistence of a world that narrative can bring into focus. Narrative translates blurry, incomprehensible realities into clear and meaningful ones. On the other hand, to suggest that narrative creates reality is to suspect the world does not presuppose narrative; narrative presupposes the world. The performative rather than clarifying function of narrative is reasonably considered a radical ontological view, one that stands in contrast to Bruner’s theory of versions of reality and other theories that assume the existence of objective realities. Regardless of disagreements over what types of realities owe their existence to narrative, there is a great deal of consensus that narrative and narrative activities produce consequential realities.

3.1.4. NCSR: Popularity and Dissent

It is truly striking to consider how overwhelmingly common the sentiment is that narrative is essential to the formation of social reality, including the emergence and maintenance of self. What might be more remarkable than this is how few disagree with this proposition (see Craib 2000, 64-74 for a scathing, but largely unconvincing critique). Critics are less likely to engage in narrative studies directly, preferring to criticize the aforementioned interpretive turn in general. Theories of narrative are but one part of a larger disagreement. Interestingly, the most formidable and fruitful critiques have come from people wanting to present non-discursively oriented ontological and psychological theories. In these cases, the argument is not that narrative is not an important way that self and reality come to be, but that it is not the only way. Nonetheless, the ontological and social psychological function of narrative is widely accepted and broadly used. If this is to continue, however, narrative researchers will have to consider seriously whether the role of narrative in the formation of the individual and society is overstated and, if other constructive processes are at work, how narrative can be seen in concert and/or opposition to them.

3.2. Narrative Features and Forms (FAF)

Consideration of the features and forms of narrative is at once focused on narrative structures and types of narratives and, simultaneously, on the nature of their existence. Attention is paid to types of narratives: personal, local, cultural, canonical, and other forms. How narratives are composed and with what materials

are also important here. The grammar of narratives, paralinguistic qualities, and other formative features are investigated. Unlike narrative studies that end with structures, research addressed in this section treats structure as suggestive of social psychological processes, such as identity work. A related, larger theoretical concern underscores much of this work, guided by the questions, “Are narrative structures underlying entities, existing prior to human use or do they arise out of interactions?” How these questions are answered affects considerably how narrative structures are studied and what can be learned from them.

I present this thematic section in three parts. First I discuss scholarship that argues narratives do contain universal, underlying structures, which can be found through structural analysis. I juxtapose this work with the work of those who assert that narrative structures do exist and are important objects of study, but that they are not essential things. Narrative structures emerge during particular occasions of interaction—be they local or otherwise—and their existence depends on human action. I categorize the first position as a “structuralist” argument and the second as “poststructuralist”. I do recognize that there is more to these two categories of thought than what I am presenting here; however, I am only interested in their views on narrative structures. Third, I look at work in this category that examines narrative features and forms, without regard for the nature of structures.

3.2.1. Narrative and Structuralism

The thrust of a structuralist discussion on narrative is that certain indelible aspects of narrative, such as sequential order, morals, or plots, exist as universal structures. It is upon these structures that all narratives are built: they are essentially foundational. Chatman (1978) refers to essential narrative components as “deep structure,” and “surface manifestation” occurs when stories are built upon them. Variation in stories (or surface manifestations), even across cultures, is explained as mere differentiation, different spins of the same yarn. As Mandlar (1984, 22) suggests, “stories have an underlying, or base, structure, that remains relatively invariant in spite of gross differences in content from story to story.” There are versions of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* told in different languages and times, by different people in different ways, but the core of the story does not change: regardless of the telling, it is still a tale of tragic destiny.

It is important to consider that a structuralist argument envisions narrative structures existing at different levels of abstraction. Deep structures are abstract analytical concepts, while surface manifestations (content) exist empirically. For example, William Labov (1972) has famously argued that narratives are comprised of a series of clauses. A fully-formed narrative is comprised of an abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result or resolution, and a coda (363). These clauses are abstract categories that can take empirically different forms. An abstract may foreshadow death by poison, for example, or

good fortune from good deeds, but it will introduce audiences to forthcoming stories either way.

The structuralist's task is to reveal these structures through detailed narrative analysis, often involving parsing a narrative according to some criteria. For example, James Gee (1986) proposes examining narrative data for the following structures: lines, stanzas, strophes, and sections. Each of these units is defined in specific structural terms. For example, lines are short, simple clauses that typically begin with a conjunction and are syntactically and semantically related to lines around them (396). According to these specifics, a narrative is sectioned out into lines, as well as the other units. Again, this method is an attempt to reveal analytically existing structural properties. And, to be clear, the analysis is only a means to a larger theoretical end.

Gee (1986, 2), like other structuralists, suggests that it makes sense that there is a great deal of cultural variation in the surface matter of stories.⁴ What also makes sense to Gee is that there should be very little variation in the structure of these stories across languages. He states that

[I]t seems hardly likely that there isn't a great deal in common with the production of language in context across cultures, given that the same human brain, with its processing strengths and limitations, is producing this language in all cases (393).

Here is the heart of the structuralist argument: the human brain is the same in all people, and the human brain is the source of language and, thus narrative. Therefore, the human brain must produce similar narratives for all people. If this is so, then these similarities can be found. Their location is possible through structural analysis—in its many varieties—and so the location of a universal element of human cognition is similarly possible. Narrative structures are cognitive structures, so cognitive structures can be revealed by looking at narrative structures.

Structuralists make claims about the universality of narrative structures and connect their existence to universal psychological processes. The general contentious issue here is whether these universal, underlying linguistic structures exist and, thus, can be located using structural analysis. Moreover, if we accept the structuralist position on the existence of deep structures, we are compelled to consider their additional, more significant point: that these structures commonly

⁴ Gee uses the term 'discourse' similarly to Chatman's 'surface manifestations'. For the sake of consistency, I have stayed with Chatman's term or a version thereof.

bond all of humanity in an essential, organic way. Human brains are made of the same matter, and so are our stories.

3.2.2. Narrative and Poststructuralism

An informative way to transition from structuralism to poststructuralist narrative studies is to examine Barbara Hernstein Smith's (1981) treatment of the putative universality of the Cinderella story. Many structuralists (as well as other social scientists and literary scholars) have cited this as an actual example of a deep structure; rags to riches stories exist universally. Smith, however, questions whether these stories share enough to merit common categorization and whether deep structures actually exist or whether they are actually the products of a particular type of knowledge, namely structuralism. Her responses are decidedly anti-structuralism and lend themselves to poststructuralist thinking, although I am not sure whether Smith would claim such classification.

The deep structure of Cinderella is the theme of "rags to riches." This story can and has been told in a variety of ways. Smith makes the wonderful, if not obvious argument that these variations often result in stories being markedly different. It is a stretch, she argues, to claim structural similarity when content changes so dramatically. She cites an Icelandic "version" of Cinderella, where the "prince" and "Cinderella" invite the wicked stepmother to their ship for dinner; they serve her salted meat, which is the flesh of the wicked stepsisters that they just killed (1981, 212). This is certainly a grim version, but it is hardly comparable to the version of the brother's Grimm. It could still be a rags to riches story, but it could also be a story of the savagery of human nature. This is an interpretive decision that the analyst must make: it is not self-evident in the data.

This second point—that analysts make interpretive decisions—is critical to Smith's position. Not only do analysts make interpretive decisions, they do so within disciplinary boundaries. Smith writes that

[a]ll of us—critics, teachers and students of literature, and narratologists—tend to forget how relatively homogenous a group we are, how relatively limited and similar are our experiences of verbal art, and how relatively confined and similar are the conditions under which we pursue the study of literature (1981, 213).

This is the lesson that feminists and others have passed on and that Smith applies to structuralism: all knowledge is situated. Theories of universal structures come from a particular group of people, structuralists, working in similar academic institutions and disciplines. Thus, if a majority of literary scholars read all possible versions of Cinderella and share the conclusion that they are structurally the same, one could assume this to be true. Or one could assume that the theorized commonality of the stories more likely reflects the commonality of the theorists. Rather than considering the intellectual merits of structuralism, then, it might be

more revealing to consider how this theory has been used, by whom, and for what reasons.

Whether Smith identifies as a poststructuralist is not important. Her critique of structuralism echoes Foucault's (1981) interrogation of the regulative functions of disciplines and, more importantly to narrative studies, his principles of specificity and exteriority (1981, 127). Foucault, preeminent among poststructuralists, warns against considering the preexistence of discursive structures:

[w]e must not resolve discourse into a play of pre-existing significations; we must not imagine that the world turns towards us a legible face which we would have only to decipher (127).

This principle of specificity is buttressed by the principle of exteriority: that discursive explorations, including narrative studies, should not focus inwards to some mythical core of language; rather, they should remain externally concerned (Foucault 1981, 127). This denial of interior structures of language and focus on what exists externally is what guides poststructuralist narrative research.

Poststructuralism is aptly named, as it moves beyond structuralism but retains some of its character. Particularly, poststructuralist narrative scholars do examine narrative structures to study social psychological phenomenon, but they do so without heavy claims to universal cognitive processes. They discuss how structural qualities of narrative emerge during processes of interaction and how the uses and characteristics of these structures, such as how certain phrases are sequenced, are contextually dependent. Groups may develop certain styles of narration that are marked by structural similarities, but they are the creators of their stories, not solely the creations of them.

This departure from structuralism allows scholars to discuss how, as Bucholtz and Hall (2005, 585) propose, "identity is the product rather than the source of linguistic practices." This position contradicts prior views of identity that suggested, for example, being a man encouraged speakers to tell masculine narratives. Instead, telling "masculine" narratives is one way that people perform and become the category "man." This also suggests that identities are not stable categories but malleable and relational social accomplishments. Not surprisingly, similar thought exists surrounding discussions of the formation and maintenance of selfhood and other social realities, as referenced in the previous section. The guiding proposition is that identities and selves and other forms of social reality emerge in the processes of social relations, including narrative acts.

Not all research that avoids the essentialization of narrative claims to be poststructuralist. As well, not all poststructuralist researchers entertain questions regarding narrative structures. However, the debate between structuralists and poststructuralists is very important for narrative researchers, who are inevitably going to deal with structural questions. Some may choose to move beyond these issues, but ignoring them is not likely or recommended.

3.2.3. Narrative Structures and Types

It is possible to consider narrative structures, as well as its other features and forms without considering their essence. For example, conversation analysis (see Heritage 1984; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974) examines linguistic and paralinguistic aspects of narratives, such as narrative sequencing, turn-taking, and changes in vocal inflection, without assuming a structuralist or poststructuralist stance. However, these scholars have their own thoughts on the essential nature of narrative, which also do not go unchallenged. Conversation analysts argue that it is at the microscopic level of ordinary talk that the mechanisms of social reality construction are found (Holstein and Gubrium 2000, 89). Others have predictably refuted (or revised) these claims, suggesting that such a narrow focus excludes too much of social life to be so formative. Regardless, the features and forms of narrative remain fruitful topics for social scientific investigation.

Concentration on narrative features might include sociolinguistic variation studies, where the researcher explores styles of speech, including prosody, lexicon, or syntax (Eckert 2000, 1). Penelope Eckert explores ethnographically sociolinguistic variation among adolescent girls in a high school in New Jersey. Her theoretical aim is to bridge linguistic studies of structures with social studies of practice (44). She writes that variation is a linguistic process that is “inseparable from social process” (44). The “jocks” and “burnouts” of Belton High narrate meaningful social realities by employing particular styles of narration. Niko Besnier (1992) also bridges the linguistic with the social in his examination of reported speech practices of Nukulaelae, “a predominantly Polynesian” group of people on a “small and isolated atoll of the Tuvalu group” (164-5). Reported speech, Besnier argues, is often explored solely for its linguistic or grammatical qualities. Besnier uses reported speech, the authorial practice of directly or indirectly quoting others, to explain how the Nukulaelae satisfy the need to communicate affectively in spite of prohibitions against doing so. Again, the focus is on how structural features of narratives are actively created and, most importantly, how these features reveal social processes.

Studies of narrative structures and social practices are plentiful. So, too, is research on forms of narratives. By “forms of narrative” I refer to identifiable types of narratives. These are sometimes divided into analytical binaries such as personal/cultural, everyday/dramatic, local/national.

Personal narratives can vary from those present during everyday conversations to ones given during life story interviews. Cultural narratives reveal social meanings shared by a group of people. Jerome Bruner (1991, 19) theorizes a connection between personal and cultural narratives called “narrative accrual.” Narrative accrual occurs when personal narratives amass into larger cultural narratives, taking on the qualities of collective sentiments.

Narrative forms defined geographically (e.g. local and national) are similar to the previous set. Local narratives might be the shared stories of smaller

groups of people, even within nations, and national narratives are the stories of supposedly unified nations. National narratives may and often do contradict local narratives, but they must retain some resonance with local ones. This is why national narratives often manifest in generalities, potentially applicable and appealing to various groups. National narratives, often products of mass media, attempt to maintain a hegemonic dominance over local narratives (Jacobs 2004), because their function is to maintain existing social relations, which are in large part narratively formed. Ronald Jacobs' (2004) study of narrative and public culture references the 1992 uprising in Los Angeles to show how national narratives shaped local understandings. Particularly, national narratives colored the incident as either a localized problem of chaotic violence or the expected outcome of the Rodney King trial, where one racist cop, Mark Furman, or a racist jury could be blamed. Competition from non-national narrators who might have attributed the incident to institutionalized racism and poverty was rendered largely impotent.

Narrative forms are also referred to as dramatic (textual) or everyday (conversational). Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps (2001) propose that these types of narratives are different in three important ways: process of construction, prevalence, and ontological function. Unlike dramatic narratives that are thought to be systematically and intentionally constructed, everyday narratives take on more chaotic qualities. They are often collaboratively produced in unscripted instances of interaction, with authors changing positions with audiences sometimes unexpectedly. The messiness of everyday narration offends the sterility of dramatic narrative construction. Everyday narratives, according to Ochs and Capps (2001, 3) are far more ubiquitous than dramatic ones, marking a clear difference in the prevalence of the two. Finally, a qualification combining the first two, the hazards of everyday narratives and their abundance suggest that they play a more dominant role in sense-making activities. Therefore, everyday narratives are a primary ingredient in the making of social realities; dramatic, scripted, rehearsed, controlled narratives offer secondary contributions. Whether these distinctions—or any distinctions—between everyday and dramatic narratives hold up is questionable. However, their differences are typically met with few objections from scholars or general audiences.

I conclude this section by demonstrating a connection between each section in this thematic category “narrative as structure.” With or without a theory of the existence of narrative structures that presuppose social relations, narrative researchers have richly explored, as Barbara Johnstone (1990, 77) puts it, “how storytellers make use of the resources of grammar to make statements about, and to manipulate, social relationships in their stories and in the world” (77). If we expand Johnstone’s “resources of grammar” to include additional narrative resources (linguistic structures as well as types of narratives), we can see the type of recursive relationship between individual and society that social psychologists strive to understand. Individuals create narratives in particular ways by drawing on resources, such as existing cultural narratives. Likewise, the cultural narratives

of any society have their genesis in personal narratives, taking on forms and meanings created by individuals. The assumption here is that individual and society are in an on-going dialogic relationship. Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim argue that

[C]ultures are continuously produced, reproduced, and revised in dialogues among their members. Cultural events are not the sum of the actions of their individual participants, each of whom imperfectly expresses a pre-existent pattern, but are scenes where shared culture emerges from interaction (1995, 2).

What these authors refer to as the “dialogic emergence of culture” is synonymous with my claim that individual and society exist in a recursive relationship whereby the narrative construction of reality occurs in part at the level of structural narrative usage. One important implication of this assumption is obvious: narrative studies are critical to understanding the emergence and continued existence of social life. Exactly how to use narrative to answer this core social scientific question is not so obvious.

3.3. Narrative as Method (METH)

In this section, I consider researchers’ uses of narrative methods to collect data, how narrative data is analyzed, and ancillary methodological considerations. Some of the items discussed here will be relevant to other methods of research, particularly qualitative methods. However, this section addresses discussions of research that refer explicitly to narrative as a type of method. This is consistent with my desire to represent as genuinely as possible the data on narrative. Of course, as Riessman (1993) and others point out, honestly representing narrative data is hardly a simple task.

This thematic section can be separated into three smaller categories: 1) narrative as a method of data collection, 2) narrative as a method of analysis, and 3) methodological issues in doing narrative research. These can be separated for purposes of summarizing, but these matters are closely related. Narrative methods are used to generate narrative data that can be subsequently analyzed in a particular way. Guiding and sometimes inhibiting these processes of collection and analysis are ethical and methodological issues that all narrative researchers are likely to encounter. So, I’ll treat these categories separately to begin with but conclude with thoughts on their interrelations and the implications for narrative studies in general.

Narrative as a method of data collection is best exemplified by William Labov’s groundbreaking work (1972). Labov devised a method for collecting narrative data that involved asking participants a leading question, such as “When was a time where you nearly experienced death?” Labov, however, was

uninterested in the empirical intricacies of near-death experiences. These questions were mere means for extracting narratives, which would be analyzed not for their content but their structural features. The key feature of this approach is that narrative content (what is said) is a secondary concern to form (how it is said). This approach is dissimilar to interviewing methods where the object of exploration is the substantive details of participants' narratives. Instead, as Riessman (1993,2) argues, this method produces data that speaks to how narratives are composed, what narrative resources are used, and how narrators convince audiences of authenticity. Gubrium and Holstein (1998 cited in Holstein and Gubrium 2000, 104) refer to these as dimensions of "narrative practice." They write that this term characterizes "the activities of storytelling, the resources used to tell stories, and the auspices under which stories are told." Narrative method, then, can be considered a method of observing narrative practices.

Narrative analysis involves the ways researchers draw theoretical conclusions from narrative data or, in other words, how specific narrative practices are conceptualized. Leslie Irvine's (1999) narrative study of Codependents Anonymous groups reveals how group members use the vocabulary of the group to construct a "codependent" self. Loseke (2001) also writes about how "battered women" sometimes draw on cultural narratives (formula stories, in Loseke's term) to tell an acceptable story of victimization, which is needed to secure services in domestic violence shelters. In each case, the narrative practices of individuals are revealed and conceptualized theoretically. Loseke and Irvine's analyses of narratives reveal how self and identity are accomplished using narrative.

Riessman (1993, 13) proposes that narrative analysis is one of five stages of narrative research. In fact, it is just one stage in the process of representing narrative experiences. She proposes five stages (or types) of representation: 1) attending, 2) telling, 3) transcribing, 4) analyzing, and 5) reading. This methodological assertion begins by assuming that researchers attend to experience selectively. We cannot make sense of everything around us, so we make sense of some things. Our choices largely reflect who we are, including social positions we occupy (gender, sexuality, age, and so on). Experiences are then told to others, a process that is also infused with subjectivity—ours and our audience's. The character of narratives depends on who is listening (or reading), as much as who is telling. Researchers often transcribe the telling of experiences, and it is commonly assumed that the act of transcription is unproblematic. Voices are turned into words. But, as Bucholtz (2000, 1463) demonstrates, "the transcription of a text always involves the inscription of a context." Transcribing requires interpretive decisions, from deciding how narratives will be transcribed (With or without temporal indicators? With or without notations for changes in vocality?) to what will be transcribed (Will the whole narrative be transcribed or just parts? Will utterances be included?). Riessman and Bucholtz's point is that transcribing is no neater, no less objective than the other levels of representation. Of course, neither is conducting a narrative analysis. To make matters more complicated,

audiences that read narrative research make up Riessman's (1993, 14) fifth level of representation, thereby adding additional interpretive contingencies to the subjective mix. All of this leads to the conclusion that narrative researchers must be aware that their tasks are inherently charged with subjectivity and lodged in particular social relations.

They are also charged with being less than scientific, an offense that sometimes threatens exile from the academy. Narrative research is often confronted with claims questioning its validity as a method of social science research. "Given that much of it moves beyond the realms of realism and positivism," social scientists ask, "what criteria exist to judge credible narrative work?" Riessman (1993, 65-68) proposes these possible criteria. The first is persuasiveness. The question asked to audiences that included research participants and like scholars is this: Are the data and analysis persuasive? Participants may judge how their voices are represented, empirically and analytically. Other scholars can consider how the research fits in with other similar literature. If both parties are persuaded, then one criterion for validity is met. Next, akin to persuasiveness is correspondence. Do theories derived match the data? Again, this question should be asked of participants and other researchers. Finally, the work may be judged valid if it can be useful to future research. This usefulness is determined by related researchers who, presumably, would consider the previous standards of validity.

Riessman's proposal, although not entirely unique to narrative research, does provide a solid initial stance for defending against accusations from social scientists that narrative should, figuratively speaking, go back where it belongs—in the arts, not the sciences. It also rightly avoids one of the least convincing complaints about narrative research: that people lie. Ian Craib (2004) uses the academic euphemism "bad faith narratives" to shroud his complaint about lying in sophisticated language. I admit to finding his tongue-in-cheek comment that his "mother may have been a better psychologist than [Jerome] Bruner for she could tell the difference between a life lived and a life as told" (65) humorous. However, the sentiment—that a true reality exists and it is experiential—is not as welcomed. The fatal flaw in this argument is that it fails to leave the confines of positivism and realism to critique narrative research on its own terms. Criticisms of this kind do not advance narrative research; they only undermine it. At best, they allow narrative a place in the softer side of academia.

I am not suggesting that theories of narrative go unquestioned by outsiders. In fact, I think it is vital for both narrative and non-narrative scholars to interrogate theories of narrative, such as narrative's relationship to the construction of reality. Our methods of research and our analytical techniques should be continually scrutinized and, if necessary, revised. My point is that critiques should be constructive; they should be guided by the objective of advancing narrative studies and, consequently, enriching social scientific knowledge.

Returning to Craib's concern about lying, a valid methodological question would be, "How do narrative researchers consider the truth or falsity of narrative data?" Richard Bauman (1996) handles this question in a way that results in a work of innovative narrative research. Bauman argues that the issue of truth is presented as a typological problem: one type of narrative is the truth; lies are another type. Instead, Bauman proposes that the question is ethnographic. "What is needed," Bauman (1996, 161) writes, "are closely focused ethnographic investigations of how truth and lying operate as locally salient storytelling criteria within specific institutional and situational contexts in particular societies." This is exactly what he does with his study of expressive lying among dog traders—lying, like telling the truth, is one way narrative lives are lived. This type of response should be the archetype for constructive reactions to legitimate critiques.

4. Conclusion

This essay points to studies that implicate narrative in the formation of reality and in the creation and maintenance of selfhood. It also summarizes how narrative as linguistic structures and forms are used by individuals to create meaningful social relations. Finally it addresses how empirical and theoretical knowledge of narrative is generated and how this knowledge can be valued in the social sciences. It does not come close to clarifying narrative's definitive character, and may in fact make the question "What is narrative?" even harder to answer. Hopefully, it discourages the question altogether, in favor of inquiring into the social function of narrative. Only a few answers to this question have been presented here. So many more answers—some contradictory, some complementary—are to be found both within disciplines and between them.

With this essay, I have hopefully provided a helpful resource for students of narrative who prefer to cross disciplinary boundaries rather than stay within their own territories. I have done this by providing a synthesis of narrative scholarship and references for additional research. If my analyses and summaries are believable, researchers have an invaluable tool for future investigations. If they are not, the data is available for alternative considerations.

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Appendix

Authors by Master Code

FAF	NCSR	METH
Briggs and Bauman 1992	Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont 2003	Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont 2003
Bruner 1991	Bruner 1991	
Bucholtz and Hall 2004	Bucholtz and Hall 2004	Bauman 1996
Bucholtz and Hall 2005	Bucholtz and Hall 2005	Bucholtz 2000
Chatman 1978	Foucault 1981	Graves
Gee 1986	Harre 1989	Gubrium and Holstein 1998
Foucault 1981	Holstein and Gubrium 2000	Holstein and Gubrium 2000
Harre 1989	Johnstone 1990	
Holstein and Gubrium 2000	Maines 2001	Jacobs 2000
Johnstone 1990	Mancuso 1986	Labov 1972
Jacobs 2000	Miller 1995	Lieblich 1994
Labov 1972	Neiser 1994	Maines 2001
Heritage 1984	Oaks and Capps 2001	Irvine 1999
Maines 2001	Polkinghorne 1991	Loseke 2001
Mancuso 1986	Riessman 1993	Neiser 1994
Mandlar 1984	Sampson 1989	Oaks and Capps 2001
Mannheim and Tedlock 1995	Sarbin 1986	Riessman 1993
Sacks, Schegloff, and Jackson 1974	Schafer 1981	Sampson 1989
Besnier 1992		
Ochs and Capps 2001		Schafer 1981
Polkinghorne 1991		
Riessman 1993		
Loseke 2001		
Smith 1981		