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1 What is narrative research?

Starting out

A. Introducing narrative research

Narrative research has become a very popular field in contemporary social sciences. It promises new fields of inquiry, creative solutions to persistent problems, a way to establish links with other disciplines such as cultural and literary studies, enhanced possibilities of applying research to policy and practice, and a fresh take on the politics of social research (see, for instance, Andrews et al., 2013 [2008]; Andrews et al., 2004 [2000]; Andrews et al., 2004; Elliott, 2005; Emerson and Frosh, 2004; Freeman, 2009a; Herman, 2009; Hyvarinen et al., 2010; Lieblich et al., 2004; Patterson, 2002; Riessman, 2008; Smith and Watson, 2010; Trahar, 2009; Wells, 2011). This book aims to introduce you, step by step and with contemporary examples, to narrative research in the social sciences. It will give you an overview of a range of narrative methods, their strengths and difficulties. It will show you what narrative research offers, as well as its difficulties. It will do this by drawing on work from a variety of social science disciplines, in theoretical and applied fields, across diverse topics, from health and the internet to politics and sexualities, and in a number of different national contexts.

'Narrative' is a term used very broadly in everyday life, as well as in literary studies, cultural studies, psychoanalytic studies, history, fine art, socio-legal studies, criminology, philosophy, management, computer game studies and film theory. While our book will at times draw from these different fields of study, it does not attempt to do justice to them. It focuses on contemporary narrative work within the field of social research. The authors of the book are sociologists and psychologists. Some of us have also published in the fields of social work, health, education, politics, media and psychotherapy. The book reflects these areas of experience and concern, from which we draw for our examples.

What is narrative research? assumes no existing expertise. We want readers to be able to build up their understandings from simple to

broader, more complex issues, across the course of the book. Throughout, we are going to base our arguments on narratives themselves – on stories that will provide you with clear demonstrations of the points we are making. In the early chapters, we also list new terms as we introduce them, to give you a good sense of some of the vocabulary around narrative research.

The group of researchers who wrote this book are members and associates of the Centre for Narrative Research, at the University of East London. We all have strong interests in doing narrative research and considerable experience in conducting it. None of us, however, started off knowing how to do it. Often, it was difficult to find out what to do, how to choose between the many options available and how to justify our choices. Narrative research was exciting and fruitful, producing many new insights, but it also threw up intractable problems at every step. This is the book we would have liked to have had at our side as we started doing narrative research ourselves.

The first chapter gives you an overview of what narrative research is, and the definitions of narrative; how narrative researchers go about doing narrative research; where we find narratives; and where narrative research itself comes from.

Chapter 2 introduces you to some important contemporary terms, concepts and debates which you will often hear in relation to narrative research, to give you an idea of concerns that cut across the field. These debates are about narratives versus stories; coherence and incoherence within narratives; the co-construction and performance of narratives; narratives and reflexivity; and counter-narratives.

In Chapters 3 and 4, we provide some case studies of contemporary narrative research, to which we return later in the book. Chapter 3 provides three short summaries of how narrative research is conducted across different media: by paying attention to the body, as well as speech; within visual media and within new, online media. These focuses are important, because the working of narratives across and between media is a strong concern of contemporary research. Chapter 4 presents case studies of narrative research on three different themes: violence and abuse, sexualities and power, and politics. This chapter speaks to another current preoccupation within narrative research: with narratives' significance for personal and political understanding and action.

Chapter 5 discusses the uses of narrative research. What possibilities does it offer to us as researchers, and what are its limitations? The chapter

focuses on how narrative research addresses little-known phenomena, and whether and how it allows a 'voice' for those phenomena; what it tells us about people's lives; what it can tell us about people's thinking; and narrative research's relations to social and political worlds. It then briefly provides exemplars of narrative research's usefulness in two areas where it is very frequently turned to: health research and research on difficult or 'sensitive' topics.

Our final chapter, Chapter 6, spends more time exploring the challenges of narrative research. It starts with some summary guidelines about how to do narrative research, and then proceeds to some questions about ethics, truth and the impact of research, that go further than the 'what is' and 'how to' questions that we have been addressing earlier.

We start the book, however, by exploring some more fundamental questions about what narrative research is, and how we can start to answer those questions, by looking at a particular story.

B. What is narrative research?

Key new terms: *Narrative, narrative research, analysis of narratives versus narrative analysis, narrative inquiry.*

We are going to start off by defining some key terms in the narrative research field. The best way to do this, in a book about narrative research, is to start with a narrative: one told by President Barack Obama.

President Obama is well known for using stories skilfully within his speeches. His campaigns have also deployed personal stories to convey important aspects of policy and to mobilize activists. Obama's presidency, and especially his first electoral win, were, in addition, important elements in the United States' highly racialized national narrative, and in broader narratives of globalization and transnationalism. This first win generated positive responses worldwide to Obama's family story of migration, vicissitude and success, as well as to the story of an event unthinkable till very recently: the arrival of an African-American President, of African background, in the White House. It is for these reasons that we draw here on a story from Obama's first campaign, in order to demonstrate some of the salient features of contemporary narrative research, which spans 'stories' from personal to political levels, which takes in stories told in local, national and international contexts

and which pays attention to the power relations structuring stories and shaping responses to them.

In March 2008, during his first election campaign, President Barack Obama gave a powerful, effective speech which is now commonly called the 'race speech', or the 'more perfect union' speech. Obama made the speech in Philadelphia, where the US Constitution was written. He began and ended with the idea of a 'more perfect union' within the nation that appears in the Preamble to the Constitution. He made this speech at a time when many Republicans, and some Democrats, were calling for him to reject the angry, 'God damn America' approach to issues of race and racism of his former pastor, Rev Jeremiah Wright (Obama, 2008). At the end of the speech, Obama told what he called a 'story' (you can see the speech here on Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrp-v2tHaDo>):

There is one story in particular that I'd like to leave you with – a story I told when I had the great honor of speaking on Dr. King's birthday at his home church, Ebenezer Baptist, in Atlanta.

There was a young, 23-year-old woman, a white woman, named Ashley Baia who organized for our campaign in Florence, South Carolina. She had been working to organize a mostly African-American community since the beginning of this campaign, and one day she was at a roundtable discussion where everyone went around telling their story and why they were there.

And Ashley said that when she was nine years old, her mother got cancer. And because she had to miss days of work, she was let go and lost her health care. They had to file for bankruptcy, and that's when Ashley decided that she had to do something to help her mom.

She knew that food was one of their most expensive costs, and so Ashley convinced her mother that what she really liked and really wanted to eat more than anything else was mustard and relish sandwiches. Because that was the cheapest way to eat. It's the mind of a nine year old.

She did this for a year until her mom got better. So Ashley told everyone at the roundtable that the reason she joined our campaign was so that she could help the millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents too.

Now Ashley might have made a different choice. Perhaps somebody told her along the way that the source of her mother's problems were

blacks who were on welfare and too lazy to work, or Hispanics who were coming into the country illegally. But she didn't. She sought out allies in her fight against injustice.

Anyway, Ashley finishes her story and then goes around the room and asks everyone else why they're supporting the campaign. They all have different stories and different reasons. Many bring up a specific issue. And finally they come to this elderly black man who's been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he's there. And he doesn't bring up a specific issue. He does not say health care or the economy. He does not say education or the war. He does not say that he was there because of Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, 'I am here because of Ashley'. (applause)

'I'm here because of Ashley'. By itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough. It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children.

But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. And as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the two hundred and twenty-one years since a band of patriots signed that document right here in Philadelphia, that is where the perfection begins. Thank you very much, (applause) thank you, thank you, thank you.

(Our transcription)

We can use Obama's Ashley narrative to understand a number of key concepts in narrative research.

First, what is a *narrative*? A broad, inclusive definition is that a narrative is first of all a set of signs, which may involve writing, verbal or other sounds, or visual, acted, built or made elements that similarly convey meaning. For a set of such signs to constitute a narrative, there needs to be movement between signs, whether this occurs in sound, or reading, or an image sequence, or via a distinct spatial path, that generates meaning. Because a narrative progresses in this way, it does not only expound, but explains; it is therefore distinct from description.

Narrative must also carry some particular, rather than only general, meanings. Because of this particularity, a narrative is not a theory; it is narrower and more tied to specific conditions. And because narratives build up human meanings (rather than, as in scientific equations, models

and theories, the meanings of the physical and natural world), there are going to be social and historical limitations on where and when they can be understood, and by whom (Squire, 2012).

There are many definitions of narrative, as you will see within this book. Such definitions may focus on stories as accounts of temporally ordered events, or as developing or expressing personal identity, or telling about the past, or making sense of mental states or emotions, or having particular social effects, or demonstrating formal linguistic properties. Often, the definitions contain more than one component; many definitions overlap; it is not easy to put them into neat categories. Our definition here is very broad. You may want to think about qualifications of it as you read further in the book.

The narrative excerpted from Obama's speech, above, has both oral and written forms. Obama delivered the narrative as a speech, but it was also written in two ways. The speech was written out beforehand, almost as delivered (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2008/03/18/text-of-obamas-speech-a-more-perfect-union/>), and we have transcribed the story as it was delivered, above. In both spoken and written narratives, you can hear, or read, the meaning building up. It is not just a description. It starts from Ashley's love for her mother and her early difficulties and struggles. It moves to her growing sense of wanting to fight injustice broadly and collectively, and then to the effects that Ashley's own story has in bringing others together. It ends by understanding these connections as the starting point for a 'more perfect union' in the United States (Squire, 2012).

We can relate Obama's Ashley narrative, point by point, to the broad definition of narrative that we are working with in this book. The account moves across time and accretes meaning as it goes. It is particular; it is not a general theory of political action and social change across racialized boundaries. Its meanings are also specific to a certain historical and social context. It is hard to understand without some knowledge of Obama, or of US history. US readers brought up with the US Constitution and civil rights struggles, probably read it differently, and perhaps better, than non-US readers.

Obama explicitly declared that his account of Ashley was a 'story'. In his speech, he called it 'the 'story . . . that I'd like to leave you with today' (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2008/03/18/text-of-obamas-speech-a-more-perfect-union/>). How is a story different from a narrative? Some narrative researchers distinguish between recounted sequences

of events, which they call *stories*, and organized, plotted, interpreted accounts of events, which are, for them, 'narratives'. From this perspective, we could say, going back to Obama's account, that Ashley told a story about her mother, while Obama made a narrative out of that story and the older African-American man's response to it. We are going to look at this distinction in more detail in Chapter 2. For the moment, we can note that Obama certainly put another level of symbolic work into Ashley's story in order to turn it into the 'Ashley narrative' of his political campaign. And so, because of the narrative characteristics of this account, and because Obama himself framed it as having narrative qualities, even though he himself called it a 'story', the account seems like good material for narrative research.

Narrative research, sometimes also called *narrative inquiry*, involves working with narrative materials of various kinds. Sometimes, they already exist, for instance, if you are studying a video game, a novel, a film or a speech of the kind you have just read. Sometimes, the narrative materials come into existence as part of the research. In this second case, the researcher might ask their research participants to *produce* stories. These could be spoken life stories, or photographic self-portraits, or day-by-day journals of events. Alternatively, the researcher may collect material that will likely *include* narratives without explicitly asking for them, for instance, by asking research participants to write about their personal experiences, or asking them to draw a family tree, or simply encouraging them to talk at length about their opinions about something that matters strongly to them.

Whether you find or produce the narrative material, the second aspect of narrative research or narrative inquiry involves analysing that material, trying to categorize or interpret it. This is *analysis of narratives*. You can analyse narratives without actually taking their narrative character into account. For example, you could do a quantitative content analysis of words related to 'race' and to other themes in the Ashley narratives and in other narratives in Obama's speeches, and look at the relations between these themes by comparing word frequencies. Or, if you wanted to examine these relations more deeply, you could do a qualitative content analysis of 'race' and related themes in this and other stories told by Obama. *Narrative analysis*, however, involves analysing narrative aspects of stories, not just analysing stories in any way you choose. Most narrative researchers are keen to examine stories *as* stories, so we will be concentrating on

narrative analysis, rather than just the analysis of narratives, in this book (Squire, 2012).

C. What do narrative researchers do?

Key new terms: *Narrative truth and truths; narrative resource, narrative theme; naturalism and constructionism; narrative structure, content and context; narratology; programmatic and pragmatic narrative research.*

There is a great diversity of approaches to narrative research. Some researchers are interested in what stories say about people and the world. In that case, they may be concerned about the *truth* of stories, by which is meant, their accurate representation of physical realities. However, researchers may also be interested in narrative meanings that include psychic and social realities. They may then be dealing with a number of different narrative *truths* (Andrews, 2007, 2014; Freeman, 2003; Riessman, 2008). In all these cases, they are often concerned with stories as *resources* for research – that is, with what stories can tell them about the narrators and their worlds. In addition, though, they will often take stories themselves as the *themes* of research (Plummer, 2001), addressing how narratives work, and how they affect people's understandings and actions in the world. In these cases, narrative researchers will usually be less concerned with the truth or truths of stories, even if they think such truths exist. Jane Elliott has described this dichotomy in narrative research as an epistemological division between *naturalist* (i.e. narrative as resource) and *constructionist* (i.e. narrative as theme) approaches. 'While the naturalist view is that the social world is in some sense "out there," an external reality available to be observed and described by the researcher' (Elliott, 2005: 18), the constructionist approach aims to explore how meaning is constructed in narratives in relation to available cultural, social and interpersonal resources (see also Esin et al., 2013).

In the case of the Ashley narrative, for instance, we might not be too concerned about the truth of what Ashley said, or even about what really went on at the meeting. That is, we might not be that interested in the narrative as a resource, as a naturalistic account of what happened to Obama or to Ashley. We might instead be concerned, first, with *narrative structure*, the narrative's grammar or syntax, how it fits into Obama's speech's broader narrative of the United States as a country pursuing 'a more perfect union' and how it works at the end of the speech to bring

together the arguments and narratives that come before it. For the old man's 'I am here because of Ashley', Obama says, is the point 'where our union grows stronger'. This concern with the structure or grammar of narratives, their linguistic or thematic organization, is particularly strong in relation to written and media narratives, where it has a long history and strong current presence in literary and cultural studies, and where it is often called *narratology*.

Secondly, we might be mostly interested in the *narrative content*, themes or meanings, such as the personal, family and national histories, struggles and resistances that the Ashley narrative conveys. An important aspect of such work is to distinguish it clearly from thematic or content analysis in general. Narrative thematic analysis focuses on themes that develop across stories, rather than just on themes that can be picked out from stories (Ndlovu, 2012; Riessman, 2008).

Thirdly, we might analyse the *narrative context*, how the Ashley narrative works and what it does, both in relation to the audiences hearing and reading the speech and within the broader narrative of the first Obama election campaign and US politics at that time, to counter the narrative of Obama as a 'black' candidate and to constitute Obama as a candidate of all the people. Taking this contextual approach, we can understand the Ashley narrative as a moment or event which had a strong effect on its local and its media audience. Moreover, we can trace many historical and present lines of storytelling around nation, racialization, family and politics to and from that narrative (Mishler, 1995; Riessman, 2008; Squire, 2005). Again, when looking at narrative context, researchers are analysing how context works in a specifically narrative way, that is, across narratives as they develop, rather than just at how context works for a narrative as a whole, or at a particular point within a narrative.

Of course, these structural, content and context-focused approaches are not mutually exclusive. Most narrative researchers who are interested in narrative content, for instance, address narrative context, as well. As we indicated earlier, it is not really possible to understand the content of Obama's Ashley narrative, for example, without some sense of its wider context.

In addition, there are many approaches within each category, as well as many that cut across two or three of these categories. Some researchers want to call their own approach by a particular name, and they will articulate in what ways they consider this to be the 'right' approach,

usually stressing a particular theoretical or methodological framework. We could call this way of working, *programmatically* narrative research. However, many researchers are interested in using more than one approach. They take what might be called a *pragmatic* direction, choosing theories, methodologies, data and modes of analysis that are not unique to any one approach, although also often trying to make sure at the same time that they are aware of the theoretical and methodological commonalities and differences between the approaches.

We are going to return to the different ways of approaching narrative research often, and in more detail, throughout this book. For now, we want to suggest that you try to keep the distinctions between different approaches in mind, and to be conscious of possible contradictions. What we are hoping is that once you have familiarized yourself with narrative research through this overview, you will be able to include narrative research, or elements of it, in research projects you undertake, with a clear sense of why you are doing so and why you have chosen those specific elements.

D. Where do we find narratives?

Key new terms: *Spoken and interview narratives, recording, transcripts, written narratives, moving and still image narratives, new media narratives, activity narratives, object narratives, emotional narratives, bodily narratives, paralinguistic narratives, sound narratives; small and big stories; top-down and bottom-up narrative analysis.*

From the approaches to narrative analysis and the definitions of narratives that we have considered so far, you can see that narrative materials can be found in a number of very different media. Perhaps the most obvious forms of stories, for social researchers, are *spoken narratives*, very often obtained as *interview narratives*, alongside their *recordings* and *transcripts*, and *written narratives*. There is a lot of diversity even within these fairly straightforward categories. For instance, some stories are more fragmentary than others, particularly in their spoken versions, and might not 'count' as stories for all researchers, although increasingly, fragmented stories are, as we shall see later, becoming part of the main materials of narrative research. Recordings may involve sound or audio-visual technologies. Decisions about level of detail in transcription are difficult to make and can give rise to some quite different narrative material. Written

narratives come in many forms and are strongly affected by particular socio-historically shaped technologies and genres.

Beyond the words themselves, there are also a great many symbols around narratives to which narrative researchers are increasingly trying to pay attention. Researchers interested in linguistics and conversation analysis often include silence, voice pitch and timbre, and other paralinguistic elements such as laughs and sighs that accompany oral narratives. Increasingly, they use video so that they can also analyse eye, head, hand and body movements in their analyses. This material often has great power and is especially good at conveying a kind of *emotional narrative* (L.-C. Hydén, 2013), as we shall see later when we consider the role of the body in narratives (Chapter 4, Section A). For some researchers, this kind of material, whose symbolic meanings are often quite mobile, is also the place to look for the *unconscious narratives* which appear within spoken or written material as a kind of subtextual, 'silent' narrative, which therefore invite particular debate about how, if they are there at all, they can be interpreted (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000).

Many narrative researchers are interested in the place that visual, auditory and physical materials more generally can have within stories. However, there is considerable debate over whether a still image, or an object, or a sequence of music can be said to be a narrative in itself. A piece of music may, of course, have a narrative title, or describe, sonically, successive elements of a narrative. A photo or keepsake on a mantelpiece may be part of someone's 'family story', or may become, within a research context, part of a broader narrative (Harrison, 2002; Radley and Taylor, 2003). The case is even clearer with moving or sequenced-image materials like comics, theatre and dance, film and television, and internet texts. These materials have pictorial narrative progressions built into them and often (though less so with dance) support the image or object narratives with words. There is a great deal of extremely useful research within cultural and media studies on visual and object narratives, on which social researchers are only just starting to draw (Krauss, 1993; Mulvey, 2006; Turkle, 2007). We will consider these debates further when discussing visual and new media narratives later on (Chapter 3, Sections B and C).

Some researchers have argued that patterns of activity that are symbolically structured – for instance, getting, making and eating food; playing games; taking care of people – also have a narrative structure (Seale, 2004). Even walking around your ordinary environment could be said to have the

attributes of an everyday narrative. Some buildings such as factories, shops, museums, temples, mosques and cathedrals are set up and used in ways that entrain people into a narrative experience of progression through them (Ryan, 2004). Interest in what we could call activity narratives (Squire et al., 2013) has led to increasing inclusion of ethnographic or observational elements within narrative research. For example, Wendy Luttrell's (2003) work with young pregnant women, in a high school class in a low-income US urban area, involved the young women making images of their lives in a classroom setting, and the researcher doing interviews, but also the researcher recording her ethnographic observations of the classroom, including the processes of image-making, recording how the images were later collated and displayed, and reflecting on her own involvement with the project. All this material, together, formed the research narratives (see, similarly, Esin and Squire, 2013).

Narratives can also be said to inhere in the phenomena that surround and support their more obvious manifestations. Context is in an important sense part of narrative, since it is what enables narrative to be understood. Thus, personal narratives can be taken to include the current and past historical, social and cultural narratives within which they are situated, and which at least partly produce even the most intimate personal narrative account. We can see this contextual contribution to narrative within Obama's Ashley narrative, which draws so directly on the Preamble to the Constitution. More broadly, when reading Obama's narrative of Ashley, a young white woman, and an older African-American man, both working within the Obama campaign, we ourselves, as readers, necessarily draw on context: on historical narratives of racialized segregation in the United States, the civil rights movement, slavery and abolitionism.

In a logical extension of this understanding of the multiple locations of narratives, many narrative researchers have started to examine explicitly intertextual, hypertextual or transmedial narratives that include a number of different, linked narratives, in varieties of media, and that stretch, sometimes, across historical time and social situations. David Herman (2004, 2013), for instance, has described the 'storyworlds' that accrete around phenomena such as alien invasion, specifically, the successive twentieth-century iterations of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* story in book, radio, film and comic form. Obama's 'more perfect union' speech, and the Ashley narrative within it, can easily be seen to belong to the US political 'storyworld' of the Constitution and its consequences, and to the

enormous, overlapping but importantly distinct, 'storyworld' of 'race' in the United States.

We have spent a little time considering where we might look for narratives. But *where* we think narratives are depends, to a large degree, on *what* we think narratives are and how we think they should be studied. Researchers who are interested in 'small stories' told during everyday interactions, for instance (Bamberg, 2006), are not going to be so interested in extensive interview narratives, which appear in a very specific, non-everyday context. They may, however, be extremely interested in the new media where such everyday narratives now occur, such as mobile phone texts and blog posts. Researchers interested in 'big stories', like full biographical narratives told by individual narrators, often over a long period of time, may not be too concerned about stories commonly told in popular media and other cultural forms, even if these seem quite similar to the material they are studying, because they are interested in personal meanings more than sociocultural genres.

On the other hand, research materials themselves also importantly shape what we think is narrative. Most narrative researchers would say that they aim to start from and to be respectful of their data, rather than approaching the data with a set idea of what counts as narrative. Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson (2000), for instance, were so struck by the gaps and contradictions, as well as paralinguistic expressions of emotions expressed during participants' spoken narratives in their fear of crime study, that they felt they had to make them a central part of their analysis. Alexandra Georgakopoulou found so many apparently 'fragmentary' story starts within her social media small stories that she had to analyse them, even though her previous narrative analyses had focused on fuller, though still naturally occurring and often apparently incoherent, small stories.

A correlate of all this is that there is an interaction between *top-down*, deductive approaches to narrative research, drawing on definitions of narratives which tell us where to find them and what they consist of, and *bottom-up*, inductive research approaches, responsive to data of different kinds, which are useful in extending our sense of where narratives occur, and what they are. These extensions of our understandings of narrative materials mean that we often cannot be too definitive about what narrative research *is*. The interconnections and overlaps between narrative and other materials, narrative research and other research, are multiplying, rather than decreasing, in narrative research.

This diversity may be the future of narrative research. But what are the origins of that research?

E. Where does narrative research come from?

Key new terms: *Event narrative, structural linguistics, poststructuralism, postmodernism, positioning, polysemy, subjectivities, the unconscious, intertextuality, transmediality, rhizomes, narrative forces, anti-positivism, humanist psychology, cognitive psychology, philosophy of mind, narratives' effects.*

The origins of narrative research are many and complicated. This section reviews the historical origins of contemporary work, clustering them in some broad-brush categories to help us think about the shape of the contemporary field.

Narrative research is often said to originate with 1920s Russian formalist linguistic approaches to stories, for instance, Vladimir Propp's categorization of the functions served by narrative units within fairy tales. Propp counted 31, following 'Once upon a time . . .', and also claimed they occurred in an invariant order. This tradition is quite hard to tie to contemporary narrative work in a social research context, because it was not concerned, except at the broadest level, with the social functioning of stories. However, it influenced later psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic attempts to analyse the functional 'grammar' of spoken stories. In particular, it contributed to the work of William Labov, which describes what it claims is the universal form of *event narratives*, that is, spoken first-person narratives about past events that happened to the teller. Such stories, Labov says, are distinguished by (a) clauses that follow each other in time and (b) 'evaluative' material that makes sense of these happenings, telling you why the narrative matters (Labov, 1972, 1997; Labov and Waletzky, 1967; Patterson, 2008). Obama's Ashley narrative belongs to this category. There are key narrative clauses where progression happens in time, for example, when Obama says, 'Anyway, Ashley finishes her story *and then* goes around the room and asks everyone else why they're supporting the campaign' (our emphasis). And Obama explicitly evaluates what his narrative means at its end: 'that single moment of recognition . . . is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger'. Other kinds of speech, and narratives in other media, do not belong to this fundamental category of human narrative, for Labov.

But as many researchers have pointed out, people tend to work with much larger definitions of narratives. 'Event narratives', for instance, are not everyone's preferred way of telling stories; such preferences may be gender and culture specific. Moreover, stories about events that happened many times, stories about what could happen in the future and stories about what happened to other people are part of our common narrative repertoire, even though they do not fall within Labov's definition. Obama could have told his very effective Ashley narrative even if he had not been at the meeting with Ashley, for example. In addition, 'event narratives' are very hard to separate out from the material around them. Though we have treated the 'Ashley narrative' as a separate part of the speech, you can see that the 'coda' of the narrative, linking it to the US Constitution, is quite long, perhaps not really part of the narrative, in Labov's terms. It also relates crucially to material that came before the 'event' narrative (Patterson, 2008). Despite these issues, the Labovian framework is still used, often in an adapted way, to analyse some kinds of narratives, and also as a starting point for people developing other ways of defining and investigating narratives (Bell, 2009; Mishler, 1995, Patterson, 2008; Riessman, 2008).

Somewhat later than the Russian formalists, structuralist linguistics, as developed by Saussure particularly and also by Barthes, Levi-Strauss, Todorov and Genette, studied narratives as sets of symbols with inter-dependent and mobile relationships to each other, rather than simply as symbols with straightforwardly available one-to-one meanings. Many narrative researchers within the social sciences still draw on this work, and use it to maintain a focus on the language of stories, as well as their meaning and how they work within social groups (see, for instance, Barthes, 1977; Todorov, 1990). In analysing Obama's Ashley narrative, we are drawing on this tradition when we note the ways in which explicit pairs of terms in the narrative, such as 'white' and 'black', 'woman' and 'man', 'young' and 'older', operate to mutually construct each others' meaning. We are also working within that tradition if we examine how the narrative sometimes evokes and sometimes shifts the usual chains of meaning connoted by these terms – how it contests associations of whiteness with privilege and discrimination, for instance, at the same time as calling up associations between the working white poor and political consciousness.

The later *poststructuralist* and *postmodernist* intellectual movements took these arguments about the relationality of signs further, to suggest that symbol systems do not exist in a formal, independent way. Their

characteristics of interconnection and undecideable meanings also appear within the subjectivities that make and are made by them, and across all of the social and cultural formations within which these subjects live. While these ideas were most influential first within humanities disciplines, where they quickly affected theorizations of narrative in, for instance, film, literature and history, they also strongly affected social sciences (e.g. Gergen, 1991; Henriques et al., 1984). This happened both at the level of 'small story' analysis, where narrative social research is now often related to conversation and discourse analysis (e.g. Abell et al., 2004), and within larger-scale work on life stories, which frequently draw on contemporary literary, cultural and social theory (Freeman, 2006; Riessman, 1993). In examining the Ashley narrative, for example, an analysis drawing on these approaches might look at how the narrative reconstructs larger US histories of constitution and nation in the light of contemporary racialization. It might focus on the assertion, 'I am here because of Ashley', spoken in the voice of the older African-American man, repeated in Obama's voice, repeated also, as we read, in our own, and tying our own subjectivities into the larger reconstructions that the narrative makes. It might also address the abject, food yet not-food sign of child poverty in this narrative, the mustard and relish sandwich, a linguistic element that nevertheless calls up for many listeners a bodily reaction of disgust.

Today the work in narrative research that is most allied with this perspective is probably that which looks at large- and small-scale *positionings* of narrators, narratives and audiences, and how they are constituted by discourses of power and knowledge. Such work often also operates with a constructionist view of how narratives work to make and relate subjects (Esin et al., 2013). It would be interested in how Obama's Ashley narrative, for instance, is positioned within a whole set of other narratives, and how it both calls on and constitutes certain kinds of political subjects as its audiences. As well as Obama, the 'I' who is speaking, and who is subtextually identified with both Ashley and the older man, there is 'you', an audience hearing a story told by an African-American presidential candidate, which was first told in honour of Martin Luther King, but also 'we', who are all both Ashley and the elderly man, a 'we' who all need education, jobs and health, and who can all come together in the heritage of the Constitution.

A number of other ideas connected with poststructuralism and postmodernism affect contemporary narrative work. Researchers generally understand narrative language as having multiple meanings or

being *polysemous*. They look for multiple *subjectivities* in play in stories (Riessman, 2008; Squire, 2005). They think of past, present and future as co-present in stories (Freeman, 2009a). They may be interested in the inexpressible or incomprehensible *unconscious* elements of narratives and their psychoanalytic meanings (Frosh, 2002; Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Wengraf, 2001). They explore the *intertextualities* and *transmodality* of different forms of narratives (Abell et al., 2004; Davis, 2011; M. Hydén, 2008; Phoenix, 2008), spoken, imaged, acted out in our lives, lived in bodily experiences, broadcast in popular media, performed by institutions (L.-C. Hydén, 2013; Harrison, 2002; Herman, 2013; Ryan, 2004). All these concepts are powerful within contemporary narrative research and derive from an eclectic set of postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches.

Some researchers, again following work in the humanities, draw on the philosophy and social theory of Deleuze and Guattari, with its eclectic use of metaphors from natural and physical sciences, to suggest that personal, social, cultural and political narratives are not lines but networks with many starting points, directions and ends, a little like the extensive, tangled underground 'rhizomes' or root networks of fungi. They propose that narratives exist within specific fields of forces that contain them. When such a field is broken, this disjunctive event sets the narrative on a 'line of flight', like an object freed of gravity moving unimpeded through space, only to be caught again within other fields (Cavarero, 2000; Sermijn et al., 2008; Tamboukou, 2010c). Taking on this approach, Obama's Ashley narrative could be understood as having many different starting points and complex, intertwined, rhizomatic lines of analysis, such as the account of Ashley, the old man, the white audience, the black audience, and Obama himself, the story of the election, the story of the Constitution, the story of racialization in the United States. And 'I am here because of Ashley' could be understood as the disjunctive event breaking the existing field of *narrative force*, bounded by conventional narratives of racialization and political polarity, to generate another set of narratives.

Many of the conceptual moves sketched above have been very fruitful in freeing up ways of thinking about narrative, narrators, and audiences, within social research. However, the question of whether narrative can be understood politically within these traditions, something that is often important to narrative researchers, remains difficult. Can analyses of power and resistance in narratives be robustly supported? Do they really lead anywhere? Do the qualifications of subjectivity, agency and action

that now characterize much narrative research lead to an infinite array of interpretations that paralyse action?

A rather different history within social sciences themselves has also contributed to narrative research's present state (Andrews et al., 2004/2000; Rustin, 2000; Squire et al., 2008). Many authors point out that post-war *anti-positivism* in the social sciences, in Wright Mills's *Sociological Imagination* (1959), for instance, as well as earlier work concerned with understanding the fine grain of people's lives rather than large structures, such as Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–20), became part of a groundswell of humanist-oriented social sciences from the 1950s onward. This move happened partly at least in response to a political situation in which broad-brush empirical and theoretical understandings of society did not seem to be leading to expected or productive outcomes (Stanley, 2010).

At the same time, *humanist psychology* became more significant, both clinically and academically, acting against the reduction of psyche to dependent variables, measurable in experiments, or to unconscious factors knowable only by an inducted elite. This kind of psychology included an important narrative strand (Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986). The humanist narrative psychology school viewed lives as actively storied in ways that help us understand people socially and emotionally, and linked stories to agency. The two major figures within this tradition used by narrative researchers today are probably the philosopher Ricoeur's (1984) work on narratives as making human sense of time and the psychologist Bruner's (1990) work on narratives as 'stories we live by'. Humanist-psychological narrative research also exhibited a tendency to draw on 1950s critic Northrop Frye's Aristotelian account of narrative genres of comedy, tragedy, romance, irony as human universals, at precisely the time when literary theory was questioning the validity of all literary categorisation, and of the Eurocentrism shaping these particular categories.

Work within this tradition is more theoretically sophisticated now. Social theorists have questioned the culturally and politically specific, and often discriminatory, assumptions attending concepts of the 'human' (Foucault, 1994) and 'experience' (Scott, 1992) and thus have put in question some of the key assumptions of the humanist-psychological approach to narrative research (Henriques et al., 1998/1984). Kenneth Plummer's (2001) 'critical humanist' narrative research is informed by Foucault's ideas about the constructed nature of human experience, and the power relations that

operate both ways in any situation, as well as by a commitment to exploring stories' emancipatory actions. However, the impetus in such work to value narratives as knowledge, reconstructions of experience, and foundations of progressive personal and social change remains.

Cognitive psychology, which tends to treat language as a conduit to thought and sometimes, brain function, and functionalist understandings of language within analytic *philosophy of mind*, has produced some very different approaches to narratives within psychology and philosophy, respectively. These approaches are now often borrowed back into narrative research by more literarily inclined narrative scholars (Fludernik, 2010; Herman, 2004; Ryan, 2004). This cognitively inflected approach focuses on 'what stories do' socially, but also in terms of our thinking, an approach that brings some promised insights from the 'sciences of mind'. At the same time, it returns literary approaches to narrative to a relatively straightforward account of the activities of narrators, readers and hearers. The approach often draws on a fairly traditional narratology that looked at narrative forms but also at how readers experience these forms. It applies these ideas outside of the literary texts where they originated. It also ties what is in texts, and readers' responses to them, to patterns derived from cognitive psychology thought to underlie narratives and to cognitions of a making-sense variety which are themselves thought to be built by narratives. In some ways, it relates to prior linguistic work on narrative, for instance, that of Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Gee (1991), which grounded narrative forms in underlying cognitive structures. This current work deals in some quite different ideas about who and what narrators, audiences and narratives are, but it tends to come together with the earlier linguistic approaches around views of language as relatively transparent, subjects as held together cognitively and experientially, and narrative as a universal sense-making device tied into other cognitive and social abilities (see also Hutto, 2012, for a critical take on this work).

In the above case, the urge to understand narrative moves narrative research inward, towards synthesizing an understanding of narratives and what they do, rather than outward, towards understanding *narrative effects* in relation to broader social and political worlds. These outward concerns are however very common within narrative research. Contemporary researchers are frequently very interested in what narratives do politically, either the political power of the individual, or the political power of narratives as structures, discourses, technologies or assemblages. Narratives

are frequently seen as means of cultural transmission and ethical education for human subjects generally, but also in, for instance, the specific literature on contemporary witness narratives around trauma, refugee narratives and the *testimonio* stories of people in South America subject to state violence (Azarian-Ceccato, 2010; Beverley, 2004; MacIntyre, 1984; Van de Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela, 2007). Plummer (2001) suggests that the rise of the 'autobiographical age' is evidenced in the importance of personal speech and writing in anti-slavery campaigns, working-class struggles at the turn of the twentieth century, feminist, lesbian and gay rights campaigns civil rights (Polletta, 2006) and anti-colonial independence struggles throughout the twentieth century (Andrews, 2007; Selbin, 2010). Many narrative researchers, drawing on Judith Butler's (2005) work, now suggest that narratives always involve efforts at ethical positioning, although these efforts are inevitably flawed and incomplete. Narrative research itself is similarly imbricated in ethical positioning. Throughout this book, we will see the close relation of much narrative research with emancipatory social practice, a relation driven both by the stories themselves and by narrative researchers' engagements with them.

In a sense, though, we could say that the role of narratives is always a palliative one. Narratives never make change by themselves, and they frequently have a short-term impact that goes nowhere. The most empathetic of narratives may also be objectivizing. Narratives also often exist in a kind of unspoken alliance with a 'policing' address to social problems, as in the twin commitment to telling the stories of the nineteenth-century poor in UK cities and quantifying the poor, sympathizing with them and stigmatizing them (Himmelfarb, 1984). Narrative research does not 'give voice' to oppressed, let alone excluded people. It is more that people give their voices *to* the research (Portelli, 2010), not always with the consequences they want, and that narrative researchers then tell their own stories about the research, and sometimes about themselves. Should we still consider narratives, and narrative research too, as ethically sound projects, even when they are so compromised?

Here, we encounter one of the more difficult contemporary debates within narrative research, and one which is inevitable, perhaps, given this field's intimate involvement with the stuff of people's lives, and the ambiguous relationships between 'research' and 'practice'. Later on, we return to the issue of what narrative research may achieve, both in terms of what the research itself does and in relation to the participants who lend their

stories to the research (Chapter 5, Sections A, B and D; Chapter 6, Sections D–I).

In the next chapter, we provide a sample of contemporary arguments within the narrative field that build on the discussions we have just outlined. To do this, we describe five current narrative research debates, of quite different kinds, which you will often encounter when reading and doing narrative research.