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2 What's the story?

Five contemporary issues in narrative research

One of narrative research's most attractive features is that, as we saw in the first chapter, it is very diverse in its antecedents, in its present theoretical and methodological possibilities, and in its constant evolutions. As a consequence, many aspects of it are up for debate. In this chapter, we are going to give you a taste of some contemporary debates in narrative research, before going on, in the next two chapters, to provide snapshot perspectives of narrative research operating in some of its key contemporary fields.

The first debate, about whether an accurate or useful distinction can be made between stories and narratives, is perhaps the simplest one. However, as you will see, this debate, like those that follow, raises important broader issues that you may need to take into account when you are thinking about narrative research.

A. Is a narrative different from a story – and if not, why not? Stories, narratives, dialogue and co-construction

Key new terms: *Story, fabula, syuzhet, dialogic narratives, co-constructed narratives.*

So far, we have been treating 'story' and 'narrative' as if they are the same thing. For the rest of this book, we will continue to use these terms interchangeably. But we need to explain why we are going to do this, because, as mentioned in Chapter 1, some narrative researchers make a distinction between 'stories' as sequences of events and the discursive organization of events into 'narratives'. The Russian structuralist linguists of the 1920s, who founded contemporary narratology, insisted on this distinction between *story* or *fabula*, and *narrative* or *syuzhet*. In this account, Ashley's story about her childhood was a *fabula*, and Obama then constructed a *syuzhet*, out of it,

and out of Ashley's recounting of that story in the campaign group, and the elderly African-American man's reaction to it. The *fabula*–*syuzhet* distinction can, then, be a useful way of trying to talk about, for instance, Ashley's story as a kind of highly specific, not really plotted account of events, and Obama's retelling of it as a narrative with a specific pattern of progress through blameless suffering, through selfless action and collectivity, to redemption. 'Story' is, in this account, lower level, highly idiosyncratic and of less interest.

But in fact, Ashley's 'story' sounds as if it was not merely a recounting of events, but a highly structured 'narrative' selection and ordering of them, just as Obama's narrative was. Indeed, even the most spontaneous, rushed recountings of events, the most apparently obvious examples of 'story' or *fabula*, could be said to have the 'narrative' organization of the *syuzhet* or narrative built into them. We live and speak in cultures characterized by specific kinds of narratives. When we give an account of a sequence of events, it is inevitably narrativized, inflected by our narrative culture, even if it just seems like an immediate, individual and incomplete account, an inconsequential anecdote or 'story'.

What about material that seems to fall into the 'narrative' category of *syuzhet*? This apparently higher-order category could itself be read as a specific kind of 'story'. Obama's 'narrative', for example, is also a 'story' told at a particular moment in a political campaign. We always tell narratives to audiences, even if those audiences are only imagined, and there is usually more than one audience. In the case of this speech, Obama is addressing the US electorate, but also, to US social groups of different economic, age and ethnic backgrounds. Perhaps he is also speaking to the future, to political history. More personally, he might have had in mind his own family and friends and political colleagues, as well as ghosts of the past, like Abraham Lincoln. Narratives are always, therefore, *dialogic*, involving ongoing exchanges between narrators and their audiences.

This dialogic character of narratives means that they are always more particular, idiosyncratic and story-like than the notion of 'narratives' as plotted, organized and interpreted might suggest. Obama's big, carefully plotted 'narrative' about US history and politics is at the same time a much smaller campaign 'story' that negotiates the candidate's positions on 'race' within a highly racialized election campaign. You can see that negotiation happening more clearly if you look at how he delivers the speech to his audience: where he pauses to let the story resonate (around Ashley's decision about what to do for her mother; around her refusal to racialize her

situation; around the elderly Black man's response) and what he emphasizes to the watchers with his hands (the meanness of a young white child's poverty diet). The audience, as well as the narrator, makes the narrative when they interact with the words, but also with these wider aspects of their performance. More broadly still, the story is in a kind of conversation with other stories within similar forms of discourse: with Obama's other speeches, those of his opponents, and those within political history, all of which help to form it. In addition, Obama's narrative is inflected by the medium in which it appears. It depends on the cadences of human speech, but also on a whole host of other factors such as the power of amplification for the physical audience, and the importance of the visual channel, versus the relatively small amounts of information in the sound channel, that are characteristic of television.

This creation of the story as a *co-construction* of the narrator, the audiences and the media in which the story appears is characteristic of all narratives. For instance, written narratives are shaped by the writer or writers, and their actual, intended or imagined audiences, but also by writers' and audiences' levels of literacy, and by the medium of writing itself: what it provides, in terms of complexity, and the possibility of rereading and remaking meanings, and what it leaves out, for example, paralinguistic speech features such as laughter and sighs.

The co-constructed features of narratives, like their dialogic characteristics, cut across the 'narrative' organization of a *syuzhet*. And these contextual, 'story'- or *fabula*-related factors could be argued to be just as much part of what is going on in narrative materials, as are the 'narrative' elements of structure and progress.

Because of these problems and ambiguities, many narrative researchers suggest that the story/narrative, *fabula/syuzhet* distinction often breaks down and is not very helpful (Culler, 2002). So far, we have followed it, by not using the term 'story' where something more complicated might seem to be involved. We will not, though, be using the distinction any further in this book, although you will find it referred to or used within some contemporary narrative research. However, it is a distinction that can be helpful, if you want to contrast the 'what' of 'stories' (content) with the 'how and why' of 'narratives' (structure, context), and if you are prepared to view the second category of questions as occurring at a higher level. In addition, and more critically, the distinction can, as here, help us to understand that the same story or narrative is generated, dialogically

and co-constructedly, from different levels of interaction, within different social contexts and within different time frames.

Having put aside the distinction between 'narrative' and 'story' for the purposes of this book, let us look at another feature often said to define narratives: the coherence of 'good' narratives as against the incoherence of 'bad' or 'failed' narratives. This distinction is also being rewritten in contemporary narrative research.

B. Are all narratives, or all 'good' narratives, coherent?

Key new terms: *Coherence, foreshadowing, backshadowing, sideshadowing, conversational storytelling, supported storytelling.*

In classical literary narrative theory, there is a long tradition of stressing the *coherence* of stories. Such theory was, to a large degree, based on the study of written texts, in particular, pre-modern novels, for instance, those of Balzac and Tolstoy. These texts were often organized around a number of characters moving and acting in well-defined places and were temporally well ordered. This resulted in the idea that stories could be conceived of as if they form a unitary package of temporal linearity, thematic unity or completeness in terms of story characters. The idea was already questioned by literary modernists like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce who radically undermined the assumed coherence of time and space, letting the characters define both time and space subjectively. It was also more broadly questioned by postmodern theorists for whom both character and text became problematic categories, with characters' subjectivities no longer privileged and literary texts seen as occurring intertextually, at the intersection of many social and cultural texts (Culler, 2002; Spivak, 1996).

The idea of temporal coherence in narratives, specifically, has been questioned by literary theorists like Gary Saul Morson (1994) and Michael André Bernstein (1994) who both have pointed out that narratives routinely play with multiple options. Consequently, they have suggested terms like *sideshadowing*, *foreshadowing* and *backshadowing* as ways of displacing the idea of temporal linearity. Their idea is that the narration lets events cast their shadows over the narrator's present. Shadows of time can come from the front, letting future events cast over characters (*foreshadowing*); from the back (*backshadowing*) understanding in retrospect

how an event might have been foreseen; or from the side (sideshadowing) pointing to alternative courses of events and possibilities. Obama's Ashley narrative, for example, which started out life as a written text, and so has some affinities, in its structures of coherence, with other written narratives, begins with the backshadowing provided by the invocation of Martin Luther King; includes a sideshadowing (how Ashley could have reacted to her mother's poverty) and ends with a longer backshadowing to 1776, and the Declaration of Independence.

The idea of coherence becomes even more problematic in the study of *conversational stories*, that is, stories people tell in everyday situations. Researchers studying conversational storytelling like Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capp have pointed out that many conversational narratives are incomplete, and only get completed in and through the interaction between the participants in the storytelling event (Ochs and Capps, 2001). This is for instance typically the case when parents tell stories together with children. As Peggy Miller has shown, parents often *support* children's storytelling by posing questions and suggestions, in this way producing a story that adheres to the classical norms of coherence (Miller and Sperry, 1988). Therefore, narrative coherence can better be thought of as something storyteller and listeners can use as a resource in composing and telling a story, rather than as an inherent quality of stories.

People with certain kinds of brain injuries, or people suffering from, for instance, Alzheimer's disease, often have severe problems telling 'coherent' stories: they may jump between different points of time in the story or skip certain events without helping the listener; or they may tell the story or part of the story over and over again. In medical terms, these persons produce stories that are incoherent (L.-C. Hydén and Antelius, 2011). At the same time, research shows that if someone supports the storytelling of the person with the disability, a story that is experienced by the listener as more coherent will often be produced. This indicates the importance of understanding storytellers not as isolated individuals, but as participants co-constructing stories with others (L.-C. Hydén, 2011).

We can see that coherence and incoherence do not just exist as properties of stories or storytellers. They are present in the interactional telling and understanding of stories. The chapter's next section moves on to consider what is now recognized as the centrality of such interactions for narrative research.

C. Are all narratives co-constructed and performed?

Key new terms: *Performance, performativity.*

As we have briefly discussed in the section on the origins of narrative research, contemporary understandings and applications of narrative research largely ally with social constructionist arguments on the constitution of narratives, in which language, signs, cultural codes and the discursive positioning of tellers and audiences are viewed as in interplay. The debates around the co-construction and performance of narratives can be situated within this perspective.

Stories' co-construction and performance are increasingly becoming important aspects of narrative research. For it is clear that narrators and audiences work together to perform and understand stories in significant ways. This is not always a highly worked-out process, and sometimes it is not something we think about at all. Even then, stories are still a kind of performance of some or all of the following: the narrator, the audience, their interaction, and the social, cultural or moral worlds of the story.

Performance and performativity are two related concepts now commonly used in narrative research, which are linked to broader theoretical debates on the link between the construction of self and identity as well as narrative agency. The use of the concept of performance in narrative analysis is often based on Goffman's (1981) argument on identity as constructed by presentations of various parts of our self in an interaction with audiences. Within this framework, as social actors, we perform impressions of our identities for others through our narratives. We make decisions to perform desirable selves in response to the responses of audiences so as to accomplish an identity. Narrative *performance*, in this sense, is contextualized at multiple levels. It is situated not only within the immediate conversation with the present, imagined audiences and surrounding rituals but also within broader discursive practices that shape language, experience and conversation. This particular understanding of performance brings forward critical questions about narrative performance: Are all these performances intentional, and are they representative of a unified, stable self?

The debate around *performativity* provides a response to this question by highlighting the constitutiveness of performance, particularly in personal narratives. Identities are not expressed or represented by performance; they are made and remade by it. Within the complex and contradictory network of individual and social relations of power surrounding

identity and experience, performativity is a struggle over agency rather than being an expression of a pre-existing script about our identity and experience (Langellier, 2001). That is, when we perform our stories to audiences, we do not simply express the self and experience but constitute them by that performance. As in Judith Butler's (1990) well-known argument on gender and performativity, we do not simply perform gender roles, which are predefined in social structures and institutions. Rather, we construct categories of gender and associated relations of power by our performances of gender. It is through performativity that gender is constantly deconstructed and reconstructed, rather than it being a fixed social category.

As we have discussed in the previous chapter, narratives and their co-construction are not limited to the field of personal stories. Public and political narratives, narratives of social movements and social transformations, and narratives of social generations are also constructed and performed in interaction. Sometimes, with a pre-set narrative, like Obama's Ashley narrative, this construction is largely done in advance, in relation to predicted and imagined audiences. Even in this case, there was room within Obama's performance to his listening audience for elements of the narrative to be created interactionally, particularly through the narrator's reactions, in the timing and intonation of his speech and the elaboration of his gestures, in relation to the audience's responses. For our discussion of the co-construction process here, however, we focus on the co-construction of personal narratives in social research. Because this kind of research provides a kind of microcosm of 'context', with changing sets of power relations operating between the storyteller, researcher and broader audiences, it offers a relatively clear arena for the description of co-constructed, performed narratives.

Personal narratives obtained in social research are socially situated, that is, they are interactively produced, and they are interpreted in, and influenced by, the social circumstance of the research project, the teller's situation, and the interaction between researcher and teller. In this sense, a narrative is never the result of the teller's efforts alone. As we have seen, the term *narrative co-construction* is used for explaining this basic feature of narrative production.

All narrative co-construction and performance involve elements of reflexivity among narrators and their audiences. Reflexivity is often seen in social research as a kind of 'internal dialogue'. Narrative research offers

us the possibility of viewing reflexivity rather differently. From a narrative perspective, reflexivity appears as a dialogue between multiple narrator and audience voices, all performing selves, which are brought into mobile, temporary alliances that then dissolve and reform, repeating themselves but never exactly; differing, but never losing entirely their relation to previous story lines, previous narrative performances.

This perspective is extremely helpful when, as narrative researchers, we try to make sense of the unruly, criss-crossing stories that manifest themselves when we disaggregate and work in detail with even the most apparently straightforward interview material, both that of the participant and of the interviewer. What seemed at first a coherent account very quickly starts to appear as many accounts, often in contradiction, rarely internally coherent, intricately related, serving many different functions. Yet, to some degree, all this manages to hang together within the interview. Viewing such material as co-constructed, and as working performatively, allows us to make new sense of its complexities.

The possible disadvantages of this approach are:

- It may under-emphasize the activity of narrators and listeners or readers in making more or less coherent sense of narratives – something which is often important for them (see Section B in this chapter).
- The larger social context which also ‘co-constructs’ personal narratives may be less easy to analyse in this way, and so may get ignored.
- A fairly traditional idea of a narrating subject may still be at work, in a less recognized way, ‘behind’ performativity.

We can address these problems methodologically by paying close attention to them. However, conceptually, they are harder to solve, as incompatible concepts of selves and subjects may be in play.

D. Does narrative research always involve reflexivity?

Key new term: *Reflexivity*.

As researchers, we frequently come to reflect on the kinds of stories we are producing or consuming, their contexts and what they mean, as well as their personal significance. Such self-reflection is often termed ‘reflexivity’. We have also described it, above (Section C of this chapter), as a kind of ‘internal dialogue’. *Reflexivity* is apparent in the construction of stories in general. Obama’s Ashley story is self-conscious since the storyteller is

aware of the story's effects in other people's lives. It is not just an independent 'story' in itself, but a story artfully positioned in a certain political moment and in broader sociopolitical history. Forms of reflexivity can be apparent in many stories, particularly those where the storyteller refers to themselves.

Taking up the idea of reflexivity within research, narrative researchers often recognize themselves as active in the research process. Typical ways of being reflexive in research include:

- considering why one might seek to research a particular topic, at times by writing on one's own relationship with it; taking a position on the extent to which the interviewer ought to be actively shaping narrative texts and materials; reflecting on the influence of the presence of the researcher in research, particularly in interviews and field observations and considering how the research may impinge on the lives of the researched, during the research and in the dissemination of the research insights.

Reflexivity also has implications for how we conceptualize *narrative* research, specifically. For instance, taking on the idea that one has a story to tell of one's life experience implies a reflexive relation with narrative and, through it, with the self. In Obama's story discussed previously, the elderly man said, 'I am here because of Ashley'. This statement reveals narrative's reflexive possibilities. Simply, 'I am here' is descriptive of social experience, as the elderly man thus figured himself as present. But the statement is self-reflexive since the 'I' of the self and the 'I' of the statement are the same. It is therefore possible to make oneself subject to narrative and exercise its possibilities for establishing identity, relations with others and even, it seems, meaningful presence. Narrative researchers often focus on the instances and forms of such self-reflexivity in stories, reflecting on the kinds of subject positions that people seek to claim or reject, modify or resist. In addition, 'I am here' makes sense only given the social context within which it is uttered. Narrative then draws attention to active subjects laying claim to identities and giving meaning to social experiences, but not outside the historical and social circumstances in which they find themselves.

Not all narrative researchers are interested in or dwell on these matters however. Researcher reflexivity will be more or less important, depending on the aims of the research.

How do these reflective practices, which are also ethical practices, relate to ideas about narratives' relation to social and political change? Many contemporary narrative researchers are concerned to do work that is sensitive to political and social conditions, that describes them clearly, fully, or in new ways, and that may also contribute to understanding or even promoting progressive social change. This concern has led to considerable interest in the idea of counter-narratives.

E. What is a counter-narrative?

Key new terms: *Master narrative, counter-narrative.*

Master narratives structure how the world is intelligible, and therefore permeate the petit narratives of our everyday talk. If this is true, it follows that speakers generally and principally are compliant and only rarely engage in resisting or countering the grid of intelligibility provided by what is taken for granted (Bamberg, 2004: 361).

Henry Louis Gates has described *counter-narratives* as 'subaltern knowledge' and 'the means by which groups contest . . . dominant reality and the framework of assumptions that supports it' (Gates, 1995: 57). *Master narratives* and *counter-narratives* are not clear-cut, dichotomous categories, but rather are thoroughly interwoven with one another. Stories always sit in relation to other stories. The accounts that people do and do not tell are often carved within the framework of what they take to be a shared master narrative, regardless of how they position themselves in relation to it. Master or dominant narratives abound in all societies, functioning as the script by which members of the community are meant to fashion their lives. As Harris, Carney and Fine write:

Master narratives are often hard to see until you look under the covers – they are normally labelled as common sense and therefore become invisible in everyday life and academic productions . . . master narratives do exist, and their real-life presence/impact is experienced with particular clarity by those for whom they do not speak and about whom they do not speak . . . Master narratives set out guidelines for how stories should be told; how lives should be lived; how blame and merit should be allocated. (2001: 8–9)

Individuals and groups routinely articulate positions which lie outside the boundaries of that which is expected, the normative. However, as

Torre and colleagues write: 'critical stories are always (and at once) in tension with dominant stories, neither fully oppositional nor untouched' (Torre et al., 2001: 151). Even when people do offer potentially resistant, 'counter-narrative' storylines, they tend to do so in a way which implicitly acknowledges the dominant framework, and even strategically borrows from some of its components, while rejecting others. An example of this can be seen in one of the more popular defences of gay marriage, whereby long-term monogamous relationships are still upheld as the ideal, even while same-sex couples offer a variation on the traditional construction of marriage being between a man and a woman. A good instance is President Obama's argument in support of gay marriage, following his previous opposition to it, based on 'people' (of undefined sexualities) who are friends, family, neighbours and colleagues, who are in 'committed' relationships, raising children and fighting for the country, and thus, in all ways except one, conventionally responsible and therefore rights-deserving citizens. This is a counter-narrative, but of a very specific kind:

But I have to tell you that over the course of several years as I have talked to friends and family and neighbors, when I think about members of my own staff who are in incredibly committed monogamous relationships, same-sex relationships, who are raising kids together; when I think about those soldiers or airmen or marines or sailors who are out there fighting on my behalf and yet feel constrained, even now that 'don't ask, don't tell' is gone, because they are not able to commit themselves in a marriage, at a certain point I've just concluded that for me personally it is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same sex couples should be able to get married. <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/05/obama-comes-out-i-think-same-sex-couples-should-be-able-to-get-married/>

We might think of Obama's Ashley narrative as a counter-narrative, too. It gave an account of politics based on child poverty that was markedly at odds with the racialized political narrative then dominating the election campaign. However, here, too, we can see the associations that counter-narratives inevitably have with master-narratives. For the 'I am here because of Ashley' narrative grounded itself in the very generally articulated and accepted 'more perfect union' narrative of the United States' national formation and development.

While there is no consensus on the meaning of counter-narrative or counter-stories (see Bamberg and Andrews, 2004 for an extended discussion of this), scholars who use these terms do agree on the central importance of identifying master narratives and positions which fall outside what is assumed to be normative. Stories, then, are never only personal stories, but rather they are situated in relation to the stories of others, both known and unknown, and critically, they are located within, even while they might challenge, the expected norms of a social group. The potential for counter-narratives to open up new space is powerful:

... the power of master narratives derives from their internalization ... [But] how can we make sense of our selves, and our lives, if the shape of our life story looks deviant compared to the regular lines of the dominant stories? The challenge then becomes one of finding meaning outside the plotments which are ordinarily available. We become aware of new possibilities. (Andrews, 2004: 1)

Contestation is at the heart of counter-narratives, even while that which is dominant and that which is resistant are categories which are themselves forever in flux. A counter-narrative might not only be a different kind of story, but even a different way of telling a story. It is not necessary that the master narrative which is being resisted is articulated, and the more dominant it is, the more likely it is that it will remain implicit. However, when narrative researchers embark on projects with others with whom they do not share common cultural referents, it is possible that they will not be aware of the positional complexities of stories they are hearing.

Although the term 'counter-narrative' is often used to demarcate a political positioning which challenges the status quo, this is not always the case. Anders Brevik, the Norwegian mass murderer, offered a counter-narrative of multiculturalism in the justification he offered as explanation for why he killed 77 people. While he knew killing was wrong, he told the court that he did it 'in order to defend my country and my people'. In this reworking, the 2011 killings were both brave and selfless; Brevik is effectively transformed from being a psychopath into the role of national saviour. One sees here the political power of attending to positioning, and repositioning, in narrative research, vis-à-vis adopting other narrative frameworks (see Chapter 4, Section B, for other examples).

This chapter has introduced you to some general debates within narrative research, which are useful to bear in mind, in whatever field you are

working. The next two chapters give you snapshots of narrative research in action in a range of fields. The debates we have considered above play out across these applications. Not all of the debates affect every field, but you should be able to see each of them at work at various points across the two chapters.