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*Narrative methodologies: subjects, silences,
re-readings and analyses*

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Introduction: narrative methodology matters

The importance of 'the narrative turn' is undoubted, witnessed by the mushrooming of popular as well as scholarly interest in lives and stories and the widespread academic engagement over the last few decades with the broad developments and issues covered by the term. The early observation that narrative analysis does not fit within disciplinary boundaries remains – indeed, it does not readily fit interdisciplinary ones either, although perhaps (like women's studies, cultural studies, postcolonial studies...) over time it may develop stronger boundaries and a programmatic framework.

The diversity of what is happening can be indicated by reference to the varied ways that the 'narrative turn' has been characterized, as the confessional and reflexive dimensions of social life within modernity (Beck et al., 1994), as theories and concepts around (re)discovering notions of agency (Atkinson, 1997; Plummer, 2001), as the activities of researchers in analysing visual and oral as well as written texts (Smith and Watson, 1996, 2001), as the core element in an interpretive and constructionist methodology (Riessman, 1993; Stanley, 1992), and as specific analytical techniques, an approach or technique (Lieblich et al, 1998; Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Such work mainly focuses on the social sciences, while Brockmeier and Carbaugh (2001) have more broadly indicated three main strands of developing narrative work: a literary approach to narratology and texts, an ethnographically-oriented social science approach, and a Bahktinian attention to temporality and intertextuality. However, paradoxically, this excludes not only philosophical and psychoanalytical theorizations of self and identity – Brockmeier and Carbaugh's own particular concern – but also other emergent and established approaches to narrative as well.

Narrative studies presently includes a number of divergent theories, approaches and methodologies; there are interesting issues in trying to delineate

the field and its boundaries; mapping its inclusions leads to sometimes surprising exclusions (the general ignoring of the role of feminist scholarship in putting narrative on the map being particularly startling); it remains a relative open intellectual space characterized by diversity but also fragmentation; and there have been some moves to ownership or at least to the right to name what the field consists in. This still relative openness is certainly part of its appeal for many, but at the same time it is accompanied by little shared sense of core concerns, of approach, and even of what 'narrative' is seen as. A consequence is that some very different approaches coexist within the frame of the enterprise called narrative. One important fault-line, for instance, concerns 'narrative studies' (signalling a focus on narrative as a particular kind of data or the content of this) as compared with 'narrative inquiry' (signalling narrative as a methodological and analytical approach by the researcher), with at points conflicting epistemological underpinnings, clashing theoretical presuppositions, and discordant methodological precepts. Another is that, while some proponents of a narrative approach perceive core ideas existing around narrative as unreservedly a 'good thing', others see more problematic features at work in the sometimes strong referential claims being made (eg. Tilly, 1984; Atkinson 1997; Plummer, 2001; Stanley, 2004; Riessman, 2008). There are, however, few sustained interrogations of these or other foundational aspects of the field to date.

Herman et al. (2005), among others, have indicated the need for a comprehensive overview. Their encyclopaedic approach sketches out the very wide range of inter/disciplinary ideas, approaches, concepts and methodologies that co-exist, and conveys a considerably fragmented and sometimes conflictual picture, rather than any emergent core to narrative studies. There is certainly much interesting narrative theory, but relatively little of the synthesizing work that has led to the now fairly extensive discussions of narrative methodology. However, attempts to introduce a more coherent approach have been developed, including, for example, in Josselson et al.'s long-standing yearbook series, and more recently Clandinin's (2007) handbook and Atkinson and Delamont's (2006) multi-volume collection of key readings on narrative methods (see also contributions from Bal, 1997; Omer and Alon, 1997; Crossley, 2000; Smith and Watson, 2001; Elliott, 2005). In addition, as the number of teaching texts (e.g. Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Roberts, 2002; Misztal, 2003; Elliott, 2005) increases, these indicate some emergent overlapping areas of engagement. However, while the interdisciplinary nature of the 'narrative turn' is repeatedly emphasized, such synthesizing moves often proclaim comprehensiveness but focus largely on the social sciences, and either background or ignore arts, humanities and science components of narrative studies (see, for example, Clandinin, 2007; and Stanley, 1992 and Plummer, 2001 for work which encompasses the arts and humanities as well as social sciences), and/or work within a predominantly Anglophone and Anglo-American framework (but see Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Humphrey et al., 2003).

The context in which this special issue is located, then, is one of increasing plenitude, the coexistence of different and indeed competing ideas, theories and methodologies; some moves to map the field which claim to 'know' its boundaries and exclusions; and relatively little synthesizing work across inter/disciplinary divides. And, while there are interesting gestures across this divide, there have been few attempts to develop sustained debate in an interdisciplinary middle ground, the aim of this special issue on 'Narrative Methodologies: Subjects, Silences, Re-Readings and Analyses'. Its timeliness lies in its conception as a means of facilitating interdisciplinary and international dialogue, of providing a forum for sustained discussion around narrative methodology as a common concern. Its contributors are located in anthropology, education, history, linguistics, literature, medical sociology, politics, psychology and sociology, provide conduits to different constituencies, and also share the conviction that methodology matters. The special issue is focused on methodology, not in the narrow sense of 'a method' or specific technique, but the wider one of a broad approach to inquiry which brings together and ensures reasonable fit between conceptual framework, epistemological underpinnings, theory, method, substantive concerns, the analysis of data and drawing appropriate conclusions from this. It intends to contribute to an interdisciplinary discussion of core themes and key issues by bringing together papers written from a wide range of inter/disciplinary and inter/national contexts, and which engage with the epistemological and other fault-lines existing around methodological issues in narrative inquiry widely conceived. Its contributors explore new theoretical and also substantive developments as well as methodological ones, doing so in a spirit of openness and debate about what narrative is and how best to develop its methodological aspects.

A range of ways of operationalizing a narrative methodology appear in the contributions to the special issue, as is appropriate given the spread of inter/disciplines, topics and analytical themes represented in it. But it is certainly not a case of 'anything goes', and there are some interesting constants across the diversity worth briefly highlighting. First, throughout the contributions, there is a strong shared sense that methodological issues matter: they are important because they are part and parcel of the interpretive and analytical activities of the researcher and significantly impact on *what* is known, not just how it is known. Second, the contributions also share an intellectual openness, a willingness to systematically engage in a rigorous reflexivity which opens up for inquiry – by the researcher, but also by their readers – precisely that nexus of germinal activities telescoped into the seemingly simple term 'methodology'. Third, while the contributors have varied responses to the ideas, theories and method/ologies associated with narrative approaches, all of them find this body of work, and even more so the broad 'narrative turn' in academic inquiry, highly enabling. It supports thinking 'outside the box', it encourages thinking in a creative way about the structure and content of stories and accounts and the moral and other claims made in these, and it situates the researcher within the

levels of interpretation involved. The researcher, then, is both narrator and narrated (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006: xli-xlii) in the contributions to the special issue, exploring this in ways which eschew self-narrating description ('I went there, did this/that, they did/not like me, it was hard...') and instead embrace analytical reflexivity and making the researcher's knowledge-claims transparent and accountable. And fourth, all the contributions share a sense of excitement and stimulation, of things being on the move in a field of academic work that is growing in stature as well as adherents and is characterized by a considerable vibrancy.

The first group of papers in the special issue appear under the heading of 'Un/narratable subjects', with the themes explored cohering around narratives and subjects and the role of the researcher in relation to both. The baseline idea of 'narrative' is not a given, an a priori; consequently, exploring not only how it is thought about but also how it is embedded in social practices is crucial to narrative inquiry. There are, however, good grounds for proposing that it should for (ethical, conceptual, epistemological) preference be conceived as processual, as an unfolding or becoming in social life. There are of course narratives which can and cannot be spoken, for narratable subjects are made and unmade, and the narratives that are available and can be spoken may be disabling as well as enabling. And as attention to the processes of producing non/narratable subjects indicates, narratives are always contextual, communal and relational, and there are always subjects making claims and counter-claims in, through and about the stories told and accounts made. Moreover, the boundaries between research and the rest of life are problematized in narrative inquiry, such that the researcher is seen to be inside, rather than outside with some supposedly god's eye view, an example of a new narratable subject being made in recognition of the felt-need for researchers to make ethically valid interpretations (and again, something which strongly draws on the frequently unacknowledged feminist input into narrative inquiry).

The second section of the special issue is entitled 'Research aporias and counter-narratives', with the contributions herein exploring the interface between 'life' and 'research'. In life, telling is the basic means of social exchange, the to-ing and fro-ing of stories and accounts. It is also characterized by paradox – telling is the spoken quotidian, but also contains the expected and unpredictable, ensuring that tension is central to 'making sense of it all'. In narrative research, moreover, the relationship between life and story comes under scrutiny, for lives are always 'read' and interpreted through the stories told, and untold, about them, so that the research encounter can be seen as an exaggerated and sometimes rather one-way version of a wider process by which stories and accounts are interrogated and evaluated as well as told and heard. But it is not always so one-way, for many research encounters are a site or locus for identity construction and are joint performances in this regard – and when they are less than equal productions, the power imbalance can

sometimes favour 'the researched' rather than the researcher. And relatedly, 'research' includes considerably more than face-to-face inquiries and encounters and always involves complex translations – from one language to another, but also from one context to another, from talk to text, from account to analysis. These translations matter in epistemological and methodological as well as other ways, for they are crucial to what is (re)presented and how it is read.

In 'Re:Readings', the third set of papers, issues concerned with 'how to know' are discussed. These include how to know about subjects-in-relationship-to-others and as located in particular contexts, including that of research. In a sense, all research involves 're-readings', of course, but particularly so when it is concerned with orthodoxies, well-rehearsed narratives, entrenched taken-for-granted truths, including academic ones. So, how to do it, how to re-read in an interrogative and analytical but also constructive way? In part, this is by comparing texts (written, spoken, visual...) against other texts, by relating texts to the contexts of their production and consumption, and also through the perspective of time passed and a new temporal location in doing so. In part, it necessitates recognizing that narratives are social practices; they are not just holders for these, and the local occasioning of narratives and its small stories (some of which are ethically and politically big stories) has to be seriously reckoned with. And, as with social practices generally, such tellings are versions, tied to a specific context, articulated to achieve particular purposes, and socially performative in character. In turn, this raises the crucial question of what can be known and how, and in particular how subjects can be known. One response among the many here is in relation to others in a context and as object as well as subject in these relational configurations.

The fourth and final section of the special issue, 'Meta-narratives and secondary analyses', features papers concerned with different kinds of secondary analyses within a broad narrative approach. 'Narratives R Us' might stand for the ubiquity or quotidian aspect of telling as a fundamental means of social interaction. The narrative form also imbues the seemingly non-narrative, including numbers, equations, surveys, measures of quantification which are thoroughly storied. "Two plus two equals four" is a simple case in point here, with the narrative potential of numbers even more powerfully brought home when thinking about this example as involving sequence, emplotment and denouement. 'Secondary analysis' is of course a form of re-reading, re-reading as re-analysing that which has already been subject to a research analysis, so that what comes under the gaze is both the original data and that which was done with it, interpretationally and analytically speaking. Sometimes, however, it is the framing provided by the in-the-making orthodoxies and tacit assumptions of a narrative approach itself that comes under scrutiny. Narrative inquiry has been up-front in recognizing that researcher's analysis is a (would be) meta-narrative which does indeed involve complex translations. However, the propensity for narrative inquiries to focus on small-scale qualitative projects

has meant that the fact that these also include translations between levels and types of analysis has remained largely unacknowledged, including that working on a larger-scale may involve notes, summaries and preliminary analyses rather than the original data. The methodological challenges are generally highlighted regarding secondary analyses in narrative research, then. Here the researcher has to think – and write – analytically about their own or other people's research and analytical activities, as well as the original context in which the data was produced and which framed it, and also how the previous analytic findings were fashioned and presented, from the perspectives and understandings gained from narrative inquiry.

The picture we have painted is of productive diversity with narrative research, albeit with fault-lines within the body politic, but which remains open. This is a situation of great opportunity. The special issue presents a large group of contributors sharing interests that they have labelled as narrative, engaging in productive dialogues with people who practice narrative research in a different way, and learning from each other. Taking advantage of these opportunities involves learning about other, different ways we could have done research and written about it, and we hope readers will find much to engage, contemplate, provoke, agree and disagree with in the contributions that now follow.

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