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Approaches to Narrative Research

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Abstract

This paper outlines major social research perspectives on narrative, and proposes a pragmatics of narrative research. Narratives are an increasingly popular focus of social research. The paper critically examines narrative focuses, from the microlevel of event narratives, through narratives of experience, to larger cultural narratives. It investigates methods that address narrative syntax, meanings, and contexts. It looks at ethics; data selection, gathering, transcribing and analysis; and the drawing of local and more general conclusions from narrative research. It also explores the theoretical assumptions operating, often implicitly, within narrative research perspectives. As well as drawing on key research texts in the field, the paper uses examples from the author's interview studies of people's stories of living with HIV. The paper ends with some study questions, and a list of primary readings.

Key words: story, narrative, event, experience, language, identity, culture, HIV

Approaches to Narrative Research

1. What is narrative research?

In the last two decades, narrative has acquired an increasingly high profile in social research. It often seems as if all social researchers are doing narrative research in one way or another. Yet narrative research, although it is popular and engaging, is also difficult. How to go about it is much discussed. People working in this field are frequently approached by students and colleagues, in and outside academia, asking questions like, 'Should I request respondents to tell stories or not?', 'What happens if my respondents don't produce any narratives?', 'What *is* a narrative, anyway?' and, most regularly, 'What do I do with the stories now I've got them?' Narrative data can easily seem overwhelming: susceptible to endless interpretation, by turns inconsequential and deeply meaningful.

Unlike many qualitative frameworks, narrative research offers no automatic starting or finishing points. Since the definition of 'narrative' itself is in dispute, there are no self-evident categories on which to focus, as there are with content-based thematic approaches, or with analyses of specific elements of language. Clear accounts of how to analyse the data, as found for instance in grounded theory and in Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, are rare. There are few well-defined debates on conflicting approaches within the field and how to balance them, as there are, for example, in the highly epistemologically-contested field of discourse analysis. In addition, unlike other qualitative research perspectives, narrative research offers no overall rules about suitable materials or modes of investigation, or the best level at which to study stories. It does not tell us whether to look for stories in recorded everyday speech, interviews, diaries, tv programmes or newspaper articles; whether to aim for objectivity or researcher and participant involvement; whether to analyse stories' particularity or generality; or what epistemological significance to attach to narratives.

Despite these difficulties, many of us who work with narratives want to continue and develop this work. Most often, perhaps, we frame our research in terms of narrative because we believe that by doing so we are able to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change. By focusing on narrative, we are able to investigate, not just how stories are structured and the ways in which they work, but also who produces them and by what means, the mechanisms by which they are consumed, and how narratives are silenced, contested or accepted. All these areas of inquiry can help us describe, understand and even explain important aspects of the world.

1.1 Narrative's diversity

Narrative is a popular portmanteau term in contemporary western social research. The crowd of much-used summary and outline texts about narrative research (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004; Elliot, 2005; Freeman, 1993; Holstein and Gubrium, 1999; Langellier and Peterson, 2004; Mishler, 1986; Ochs and Capps, 2001; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Plummer, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993a, 2007; Roberts, 2002; Sarbin, 1986; Wengraf, 1999) exemplifies its popularity. So do the recent burst of empirically-based texts focused on specific studies (Andrews, 2007; Emerson and Frosh, 2004; McAdams, 2006; Mishler, 1999; Squire, 2007; Tamboukou, 2003), the rich crop of narratively-themed collections of essays (Andrews et al., 2004; Bamberg and Andrews, 2004; Brockmeier and Carbaugh, 2001; Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Clandinin, 2006; Patterson, 2002; Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992) and the increasing number of books addressing narrative in specific domains such as development, health, sexuality and social work (Daiute and Lightfoot, 2004; Greenhalgh and Hurwitz, 1998; Hall, 1997; Mattingley, 1988; Plummer, 1995; Riessman, 1993b).

Aside from this current ubiquity within social research, 'narrative' is also a term frequently heard in popular discourse. Often, these popular uses of the term work to connote a particularly acute understanding. Politicians or policymakers suggest they are doing their jobs well because they

pay close attention to people's everyday 'narratives.' Journalists claim a good understanding of events by spelling out for their audiences the underlying 'narrative.' Citizens are urged to achieve better comprehension of difficult circumstances by reading or hearing the 'stories' of those affected – for example, the World Health Organisation portrays the HIV pandemic to us through individual 'Stories of Tragedy and Hope' (http://www.who.int/features/2003/09/en/   ). In addition, however, the term 'narrative' is used descriptively in popular discourse, as it is in academic humanities disciplines, to indicate the line of thematic and causal progression in a cultural form such as a film or a novel. Here, 'narrative' may be a good thing – exciting, compelling, insightful – but it may also be criticised - as overcomplex, oversimple, too long, too conventional.

Both in popular culture and in social research, then, 'narrative' is strikingly diverse in the way it is understood. In popular culture, it may suggest insight into important biographical patterns or social structures – or, simply, good or less-good forms of representational sequence. In social research, 'narrative' refers to a diversity of topics of study, methods of investigation and analysis, and theoretical orientations. It develops different definitions within different fields, and the topics of hot debate around these definitions shift from year to year. [1]

1.2 Narrative's popularity

Why is narrative such a popular modality within social research? The narrative turn can be associated with many other social-scientific moves in the late 20th and early 21st centuries: turns to qualitative methods, to language, to the biographical, to the unconscious, to participant-centred research, to ecological research, to the social (in psychology), to the visual (in sociology and anthropology), to power, to culture, to reflexivity . . . the list is long and various. To look at the 'narrative turn' is to view a snapshot of what these turns have yielded, their limitations – and a little more.

First, interdisciplinarity, and interchanges between theory and practice. All the social-scientific 'turns' endorse the creative and problem-solving possibilities of interdisciplinary or cross-

disciplinary approaches and also, often, of work that feeds into practice as well as theory. However, narrative work has a specially strong interactive flavour. It draws on literary and cultural theory, as well as on story-research traditions within sociology, anthropology and psychology and on more recent addresses to narrative within for instance history, medicine, therapy and new media (Andrews et al., 2004; Bruner, 1986; Bury, 1982; Freeman, 1993; Greenhalgh and Hurwitz, 1998; Kleinman, 1988; Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 1993a; Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992; Ryan, 2003; Sarbin, 1986; White and Epson, 1990). Interdisciplinarity, and the melding of theory and practice, are projects with important historical, theoretical and methodological limitations, and narrative itself is a slippery notion, hard to pin down. Nevertheless, narrative seems to offer particularly broad access to different disciplinary traditions, and to have a high level of salience for fields outside as well as inside academia.

Second, work on narrative seems to let us combine 'modern' interests in describing, interpreting and improving individual human experience which underpinned much qualitative social science in the early and mid-twentieth century, with 'postmodern' concerns about representation and agency that drove the later 'turns', such as the 'turn to language;' and with a set of questions, broadly derived from psychoanalysis, about subjectivity, the unconscious, and desire, that accord at times with modern and at times with postmodern frames of thought. Whether such combinations are legitimate or useful is a question I shall address. Initially, however, it is important to recognize that much work on narrative suggests such syntheses are possible.

Third, an address to narrative enables us to extend our analyses to multiple levels of research. Such inclusiveness is sought by many other social-scientific 'turns'. To focus on narrative, however, is to bring *structures* of language into focus, with a plethora of attendant possibilities for linguistic, visual and even behavioural analysis. At the same time, narrative analysis takes seriously the *content* of texts, at levels ranging from individual phrases or images to discrete stories to larger 'stories' encompassing long and multiple stretches of talk, image or action. Narrative analysis also pays attention to the *context* of storytelling: to the real and assumed

audiences of narratives, their microcontextual co-construction between tellers and hearers (Mishler, 1986), and to narratives' broader ecological and fantasy contexts. Other qualitative research is of course often reflexive about contextual processes, but such considerations are embedded in narrative work: the notion of 'story' always entails 'audience' as well as 'storyteller'.

Fourth, stories often seem to function in narrative research as forms of politics, broadcasting 'voices' that are excluded from or neglected within dominant political structures and processes – as indeed stories have often done in recent western history, for instance in the writing and reading of 19th century accounts of working-class life, slavery, and women's experiences. The study of narrative seems to promise change, 'forc(ing) the social sciences to develop new theories and new methods and new ways of talking about self and society' (Denzin, 2004: xiii). Much recent work on narrative foregrounds this function (Fine, 2001; Bamberg and Andrews, 2004). The concerns with social, cultural and political discourses that characterize the social-scientific turns of the last few decades thus seem intimately connected with narrative, rather than having to be grafted on. Whether an association between social research and politics can fruitfully be pursued via this apparently transparent resolution within 'stories' is debatable; but 'story' does often seem to operate in social research and practice as a kind of Trojan Horse, an initial sortie carrying politics into the walled city of the personal.

As my qualifications of narrative research's contributions may indicate, it is full of difficulty as well as diversity. 'Story' is a problematic category in itself, defined in ways that veer from temporal or causal ordering (Todorov, 1990) to the making of human sense (Bruner, 1986) and applied to speech, texts, visual materials, objects, performances, even ways of living. Are they all the same, and would such inclusiveness reduce the concept of 'narrative' to triviality? Other debates within the narrative field are equally intransigent. Researchers argue the balance between the personal and cultural components of narrative; whether or not narrative has a redemptive human function; whether life events, or even life progress, can be 'read off' from the structure and contents of stories and what, in general, is the possible and allowable extent of interpretation; whether it

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makes sense to talk about stories' 'truth' and where such truth might lie; whether there is always something 'outside' the story, defined in terms of emotions, or the unconscious, or political or material reality, or an unsymbolisable 'real' and to what extent storytelling can be an effective means of personal or political change

1.3 Types of narrative research

On account of its popularity, diversity, and controversies, many accounts of narrative research explore, form by form, the field's different contemporary perspectives. This paper follows that precedent, using a tripartite division between:

- approaches focused on narrative syntax, or structure –concentrating particularly on influential work on the narrative syntax/structure of event narratives

- approaches focused on narrative semantics, or content – with a specific focus on the large number of semantic/content-based narrative approaches that assume a link between narrative and experience

- approaches focused on narrative pragmatics, or context– with a specific address to work on narrative and cultural genre, which is the author's own interest in this field

This categorisation was first applied to narrative social research by Mishler (1986), though it has precedents in psycho- and sociolinguistics. Because of the dominance of experience-centred approaches within contemporary narrative social research, the exposition and the criticism of these approaches occupies a large fraction of this paper. However, this does not signal its methodological or theoretical advantage.

At the end of the paper (section 7) there is a list of study questions which readers may find helpful to bear in mind as they read through the different sections, or as they do additional reading. Section 8 also lists a set of primary readings which are the most closely related to the arguments within this paper, and which are good places to start further research in this field.

2.0 Narrative syntax: Narrative as structure and theory

Narrative theorists have worked for a long time in literary and cultural studies on the structure or 'grammar' of narratives. Within social research, this work contemporarily focuses on different levels of narrative: the structure of co-constructed stories in conversation; of stories about specific events that happened to the speaker; of extended biographical narratives with identifiable plotline; and of personal stories that reflect the structure of culturally current narrative genres, for instance. As with all narrative approaches, such materials can usually also be interpreted from another perspective. Co-constructed conversational stories, and stories that reflect cultural genres, for instance, can be studied as products of interpersonal and cultural contexts (see section 4), rather than in terms of their structures. The plotlines of biographical narratives can be examined as expressions of experience (see section 3), rather than as narrative 'grammars'. I am going to concentrate here on the structural approach that addresses event narratives, because this approach is perhaps the most exclusively 'syntactic' of any in narrative research. Although it does involve a specific kind of narrative context, and although it makes some assumptions about narrative content and where it comes from, its structural focus is primary. The major account of such events narratives, that of the US sociolinguist William Labov (1972, 1997, 2001, 2002; Labov and Fanshel, 1977; Labov and Waletsky, 1967; see also Patterson, 2008), has also been extremely influential across the field of narrative social research.

2.1 What is an event narrative?

Labov's description of what a narrative is derived initially from stories told to him and his colleagues by African American informants in South Harlem in the 1960s and 1970s and applies primarily to spoken event narratives, told in natural situations. Such event narratives have, Labov says (Labov and Waletsky, 1967), a general structure that includes abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. For instance, a story told by someone coming late to an appointment might look like this –

I had a terrible time getting here. (abstract)

I started out an hour ago, and I only live a couple of miles away. (orientation)

I was standing at the bus stop for ages, and then when the first bus came it was full, and I had to wait another 20 minutes for the next one. (complicating action)

I was getting so worried; I really thought you'd be gone by the time I arrived. (evaluation)

Still, I got here in the end. (resolution)

I'll know to start earlier if we meet here again, though. (coda)

The abstract, of which there is sometimes more than one, describes what the story is about. The orientation sets the scene. Complicating action tells us 'what happens next', and is, for Labov, the element that defines talk as 'narrative'. A 'minimal' narrative must contain at least two clauses that are temporally ordered so that they cannot be reversed without losing sense. Evaluative clauses describe the human consequences of the event; the resolution gives an ending; the coda is a linking section that returns the story to the present. For a story to be more than a 'minimal' narrative, Labov wants elements other than the complicating action to be present. Evaluation is particularly important, as it tells you what the story 'means.' Labov (1972) suggests that this element can, like orientation, spread all through the story, and allows it many manifestations. For instance, pauses or sighs during the complicating action in the story above, might act evaluatively. Labov's earlier work was criticised for its concentration on evaluation, which is hardly exclusive to narrative, at the expense of complicating action, the defining stuff of narrative, which, once identified, could be left to one side. However his 1997 paper complexifies and expands the definition of clauses that qualify as 'narrative.'

Labov deployed examples from his African American informants to demonstrate the sophistication and subtlety of African American English, at a time when that language was an object of fierce educational and political debate. His analyses of specific stories are rich and highly nuanced. He is also able to make some generalisations about story skills – about the more extensive evaluations produced by older speakers, and by black versus white pre-adolescents for instance. Many who deploy his categories are interested in such general manifestations. Bell (1988) for example charts the increasing sophistication of women's stories about the serious reproductive

effects on them of an anti-miscarriage drug taken by their mothers, as the interviews progressed through their lives. More recently, Jordens et al. (2001), using a modified version of Labov's categories, find more complexity in narratives of cancer which described high levels of life disruption, than in those which described low levels of disruption.

While Labov's (1972), Bell's (1988) and Jordens et al.'s (2001) conclusions are carefully circumscribed, there is often questionable warrant for using Labovian categories to make judgements about communication or adjustment, particularly at the individual level. Labov himself remarks with surprise on the apparent requirement, in the therapeutic literature around bereavement for example, for narratives to be emotionally expressive – in his terms, to include explicit statements about emotions among their evaluative clauses – if individuals are to be judged psychologically healthy (1997). His research suggests that the most powerful stories, for listeners, are 'objective' accounts of events, almost like verbal movies (2002), which simply *assume* that common emotional evaluations of the stories will be made within the language communities where they are produced (1997). Working-class speakers tell these objective stories most frequently. We could, perhaps, argue that what constitutes a generalisable 'objective' narrative is more variable than Labov suggests, and can include emotion 'events'. Narrative sophistication is, though, Labov suggests, hard to quantify within representations; extremely variable in nature; and not necessarily correlated with social power or individual wellbeing. Sometimes, being a good storyteller is simply its own reward. Unsurprisingly, good storytellers feature consistently in Labovian arguments. Labov consistently distinguishes 'tall tales' storytelling from the ordinary everyday narratives which are his declared concern (e.g. 1997, 2002), but there seems to be some slippage between the two. Many of his informants are telling the truth, but also telling it exceedingly well.

2.2 Problems with the event narrative framework

As many researchers have pointed out, Labov's categorisation seems to restrict the 'story' category, not just through his definition of narrative clauses and his emphasis on the copresence

of all narrative elements, but also through his insistence on event narratives told monologically in natural situations. Stories that get told in reverse, in fragments, or collaboratively; stories about general events, thoughts, emotions or things that happened to other people, and stories told as part of conversations – including those with interviewers – are seen as other kinds of speech events. Written stories and narratives produced in other media are separate communicative events entirely. It has also been claimed that the kinds of stories Labov privileges are to some degree cultural- and gender-specific (see Patterson, 2008). The stories exhibited as evidence for these claims would not, though, count as Labovian 'stories'. It might also be that Labov's sophisticated interpretations of event narratives within quite minimal speech segments would produce more of such narratives even in speech that appears to use other narrative means.

For Labov, the personal event narrative claims a privileged place all forms of communication, because it replays, cognitively, an event that has become part of the speaker's biography (Labov, 1997), in ways that other forms of speech do not. Narrative is thus 'a method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred' (Labov, 1972, 359-60). Recently, Labov has taken this equation further, analysing stories by parsing their underlying event structures (2001). It is this 'narrative as replay' assumption that makes the social context – and content – of storytelling somewhat irrelevant. Labov is interested in the conversational contexts enabling narratives, but much more in the special place he thinks narratives have within conversational contexts – therapy and research included – as priority forms within human descriptive language (1997).

2.3 Narrative theory

Labov has also argued that narrative is not only description but explanation, a theory of causality (1997, 2001, 2002). A narrative is a way of accounting for events that balances the reportability that makes a story worth telling, with believability. After the orientation, the complicating action and evaluations of a narrative lead, he says, to its most reportable event, and so constitute a theory of that event (Labov, 1997). This account interestingly links Labovian narrative analysis

with research on the social effects of storytelling. Labov's examples of story-'theories' are micro-level morality tales that reassign blame away from its most obvious objects: away from a daughter whose father died in her absence (2002), and away from a white man testifying to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission who, as a member of the security forces, committed murder (2001), for instance. Other examples are story theorisations that shift blame towards a rich, drunk city-dwelling car-owner and away from the actual driver who had the fatal accident, his chauffeur (Labov, 2001) and away from a male interviewee who once barged the boyfriend of a girl he had talked to in a bar, and ended up with his throat cut (Labov, 1997) (though this story is also a theorisation of the limits of rationality). Discourse-analytic accounts of stories often produce similar descriptions of constructions of praise and blame (see Abell et al., 2004); but in these cases, it is the construction that is under investigation, not the relative merits of the arguments. In his analyses of underlying event structures, Labov sometimes turns detective to uncover objective evidence of narrative manipulation of events left out or misrepresented in a story – a procedure that seems unlikely to be adopted generally in the contemporary narrative research field (Labov, 2001).

2.4 Using the event narrative approach

Labov's work continues to be important in narrative research, for several reasons. Despite its assumption of fairly direct relationships between experience, cognition and representation, it turns our attention to language itself, not just what language 'means' – and social science work on narrative has a common tendency to move too quickly and easily from language to 'meaning'. In addition, Labovian categories are a useful starting point for defining what 'stories' are, a contentious but essential procedure. Moreover, personal event narratives do operate powerfully in people's talk as revisitings of certain key moments (Denzin, 1989), in which cognitive and emotional reliving is communicatively performed. Stories of dying and the death watch (Seale, 2004) are clear examples; Labov himself describes the most salient circumstances for such narratives as those of sex, death and moral indignation. In my own interviews with people in South Africa describing living with HIV, for example, the moment when they received a positive

diagnosis was often embedded in a Labovian kind of story, but that was rarely true for HIV positive people we interviewed in the UK, who were often longer-diagnosed and who had much greater access to medical treatment and social support. There is, too, some value in using Labovian categories as a guide to the narrative resources available to people in particular circumstances, and the possible material significance of those story resources. Among South African interviewees, for instance, elaboration of HIV acceptance and disclosure stories seemed to be related to having at least some treatment and support available. Telling such stories was also seen by professionals, and the tellers themselves, as related to social, psychological and physiological health. For a few years earlier, as demonstrated in Helene Joffe's (1997) account of South African social representations of HIV, HIV was subject to a pervasive 'othering,' within which a personal narrative of living with HIV could hardly be articulated.

Finally, Labov's more recent work introduces a conception of narrative as theory that seems to leave behind late-modern understandings of narrative as personal sense-making, in favour of it operating as a kind of contemporary politics. Looking at the South African narratives from this perspective, for instance, allows me to identify acceptance of HIV status as the 'most reportable event' for many storytellers, and the stories as theories of how such acceptance can occur. Such story-theories have considerable cultural and moral impact in a context where HIV has only recently become speakable, let alone explicable. More generally, it could be helpful to view other personal narratives as strategies for explaining events that are partially represented, or outside representation, and that stories drag into representation and some form of theoretical coherence.

3. Narrative semantics: Narrative, contents and lives

As we saw in the previous section, when we consider personal narratives as event-centred, we tend to neglect three important elements of narrative:

- Talk that is not about events, but that is still significant for the narrator's story of 'who they are.'

- Representation itself – the structure of written and spoken language, paralanguage, and visual images – which by its uncertainties and changeability, perpetually modifies stories, rather than simply reproducing them as records of actual happenings

- Interactions between storyteller and listener, researcher and research participant, in the co-construction of stories.

I am now going to describe a second type of narrative research, based on the collection and analysis of narrative content. This type of research thus focuses on the semantics, or meanings, of narratives. It is possible to do such research by applying standard content-analytic techniques to material that you consider stories, or to material that you have explicitly collected *as* narratives, for example by asking story-eliciting questions. However, this kind of approach loses, in analysis, the emphasis on sequencing and progression which defines narrative, and which characterise its materials and in some cases its processes. For a clearer perspective on narrative work that addresses content, I am going to focus on the much greater body of narrative work which can be called, following Wendy Patterson (2008), *experience-centred* narrative research.

As mentioned earlier, the section describing this work is considerably longer than the previous and following sections, because research falling under this heading is both large in volume and extremely diverse. Nevertheless, all this work rests on the *phenomenological* assumption that experience can, through stories, become part of consciousness. It also takes a *hermeneutic* approach to analysing stories, aiming at full interpretation and understanding rather than, as in Labov's case, structural analysis. This work does not provide analytic guidelines like those that researchers find useful in Labov's work. Instead, it offers a highly appealing conceptual technology. It is indeed the dominant conceptual framework within which current social-science narrative research operates. It is perhaps most often and widely related, across disciplines, to the work of Paul Ricoeur (1984), which provides a useful reference point for this section.

3.1 What is a narrative of experience?

The experience-centred approach assumes four important characteristics of narratives:

- Narratives are sequential and meaningful

- Narratives are definitively human

- Narratives 're-present' experience, in the sense of reconstituting it; as well as mirroring it

- Narratives display transformation or change.

3.1.1 Personal narratives as sequential and meaningful

In experience-centred narrative research; personal narratives are distinguished from other kinds of representations because they are *sequential in time* and *meaningful*. How can we apply such a vague definition? Experience-centred research expands notions of what is 'temporally sequential' and 'meaningful' beyond those found in event-centred research. It understands 'personal narrative' as encompassing *all* sequential and meaningful stories of personal experience that people produce within accounts of themselves. Such a narrative may be an event narrative, but it could also be a story that is more flexible about time and personal experience, and that is defined by theme rather than structure. It might address a turning point (Denzin, 1989) in someone's life, such as an illness, a realization about sexuality, or having children. It might address a more general experience, such as the continuing living-through of trauma and its consequences that Patterson's (2008) research investigated. It may go beyond the past-tense first-person recountings of events that interested Labov, to include past and future, as well as present stories. It may address generalised states or imaginary events, as well as particular events that actually happened. And it may appear in different places, across an interview or interviews, and in contradictory ways.

 A personal narrative could also, within the experience-centred tradition, be a life history or biography, produced over several interviews, many hours, perhaps even months and years, as in Molly Andrews's (1991) life history research with lifetime political activists. It could be the thematic

biography that results when someone tells, the story of an important element of their life, such as their chronic illness, or their career (Bury, 1982; Freeman, 2004). In these instances, the narrative's sequence and meaningfulness is guaranteed by the researcher's interest in a life, or a significant theme, but the material will probably include some 'non-narrative' language - for instance, description or theorising.

A personal narrative may also, from the experience-centred perspective, be the entire 'narrative' told to and with a researcher, a position that Cathy Riessman (2002) arrives at, when looking for ways to analyze her interviews with South Indian women about infertility. Here, sequence is embedded in dialogue, not just in what the interviewee says; and meaningfulness is located in interviewer-interviewee interaction, as well as the semantics of the interview material. Ricoeur (1991) indeed, describes this intersection of the life worlds of speaker and hearer, or writer and reader, as an inevitable and constitutive characteristic of narrative.

For some experience-centred narrative researchers, a meaningful 'personal narrative' can involve interviewing several people about the same phenomena, as with Elliot Mishler's interpretation of a man's story in the light of an interview with his wife (1986). Narrative research may also address written materials - published and unpublished, documentary and fiction - as with the diaries, letters, autobiographies and biographies that form the data for Maria Tamboukou's (2003) study of the lives of women teachers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There is, too, increasing interest in gathering and analyzing visual materials in narrative research, and often, combining the interviews around visual materials, as with Alan Radley's and Diane Taylor's (2003a, b) research on photo-diaries produced by people during hospital stays, accompanied by interviews with them on their return home; or Barbara Harrison's work on the contemporary meanings of photography itself, which involves interviews with people over recent photos, about how and why they took these particular images (2004).

Experience-centred narrative researchers are expanding the contexts, as well as the materials, that they include in their work. They may for instance include participants' and their own reflective written or oral comments on interviews, sometimes at the time, sometimes as a 'second take,' years afterwards. Andrews (2007) has done this often, something facilitated by maintaining longstanding research-based relationships with interviewees. Researchers may– as we shall see later in this chapter –look at hard-to-transcribe fragmentations, contradictions and gaps within narratives, as well as the words themselves; or at the paralanguage of for instance tone, pauses and laughter 'around' the words. They may, in addition, draw in contextual materials related to the research materials, such as the surrounding cultural and political narratives about femininity, reproduction and activism that Riessman referred to in her (2002; see also 2000) study of women's stories of infertility and stigma in South India.

Thus, Patterson's (2008) definition of experience-centred narratives, as 'texts which bring stories of personal experience into being by means of the first person oral narration of past, present, future or imaginary experience' and which may be fragmented and contradictory, is expanded by some in the experience-centred tradition to take in different, *non-oral* media, and at times, a considerable amount of *non-first person*, and even *non-experiential* material, which is contained within the overall sequential and meaningful experiential account.

How might this experience-centred concern with narrative as sequential and meaningful, affect how a researcher analyses their material - for instance, how I analysed my interviews with HIV positive people in South Africa, about support for living with HIV? In trying to analyse this talk, I have looked at narratives of particular events that seem likely to be highly meaningful - for instance, diagnosis or disclosure of HIV status. This approach turned out not to work for all the interviews. Some research participants spoke for a long time, but told no or very few obvious 'stories', let alone ones that fitted a strict Labovian definition. Since the research asked people about HIV support, the interviews clearly did not constitute entire life stories, or even entire stories of people's experiences with HIV. I could however, like Riessman (2002), look 'across' an

interview at the 'story' of living with HIV as interviewees told it, going backward and forward across time, sometimes general, sometimes specific, sometimes with diversions into other topics. That is, I could treat a whole interview as an 'HIV story'. People did, indeed, often use the interview to tell 'their' HIV story in this way. Michael (all names are pseudonyms), for instance, an HIV positive man in his twenties living with HIV, immediately began to tell a complex, detailed story of his life with HIV, which lasted around half an hour, and which he began like this:

> **Michael:** Firstly, eh, sh, should I start my story from '97 /is that where you want to start?/ yah I mean I started to know my status, started to, I mean started to know in '97.

Similarly, David, another young HIV positive interviewee, began with a continuous though shorter story of his life with HIV:

> **David:** My story I think it will be very short because er I've just known myself that I'm HIV positive just last month...

(see Squire, 2007)

In such circumstances, I would be contradicting the material if I did not treat the interview itself as at least one of the 'stories' being told

An experience-centred approach would also allow me to treat separate aspects of 'personal narrative' together. In my UK HIV research, where I have interviewed some research participants three or four times across 10 years, also about HIV support, I am putting together people's stories across these interviews, perhaps also including their comments on transcripts; emails; letters; my notes on telephone exchanges or brief conversations to arrange the interviews, the interview context itself, and visual materials that research participants have brought into the interview such as photographs and souvenirs. All these materials 'count' within an experience-centred approach

to narrative, though of course some may be more important than others in particular research situations.

3.1.2 Narratives as means of human sense-making

Experience-centred narrative researchers think that we are able to understand personal experience stories, because of narratives' second defining feature: narratives are the means of human sense-making. Humans are imbricated in narrative. Labov too thinks there is a special relationship between people and stories. For him, event narratives express in more or less invariant form humans' most vivid experiences, those of sex, death and moral injury. But the experience-centred approach assumes that sequential temporal orderings of human experience into narrative are not just characteristic of humans, but *make* us human. 'Time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode', Ricoeur (1984, 52) puts it. Adapting Socrates, he declares that the 'examination' of a life, without which life is not worth living, consists in the recounting of it (1991). For the psychologist Jerome Bruner, too, humans are, as a species, *homo narrans,* with an inborn tendency to tell and understand stories (1990). This perspective draws on the Aristotelian account of human morality as developed and transmitted through storytelling, specifically through its evaluative, or meaning-making, elements. All stories are thus, to some extent, morality tales (MacIntyre, 1984) More generally, stories are, because human, deeply social, not just because they always involve hearers as well as speakers, as Labov might argue, but because storytelling constitutes and maintains sociality (Denzin, 1989) If you tell your story to yourself, or to someone who does not comprehend, you are still speaking as a social being, to an imagined social Other who understands your tale.

At the same time, some experience-centred narrative researchers, particularly those influenced by psychoanalysis, think that important aspects of human sense-making escape narrative. Some aspects of experience, they argue can never be storied into sense. Some such researchers, such as Stephen Frosh (2002), present narrative as nevertheless an important route towards such unspeakable meanings. Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson (2000a, b) similarly for instance

refer to the 'emotional' rather than the temporal sequencing of stories, which offers a route into the logic of unconscious emotions.

How could these quite bold claims about the significance of personal narratives, affect research? It might lead me, for instance, to see personal narratives of HIV as crucial aspects of living with the condition. Certainly, many interviewees' strong engagement with the research suggested this may be the case for them. The argument is supported by three other areas of HIV's representation: the large amount of autobiographical writing and art about HIV/AIDS; the focus on personal issues of disclosure, 'speaking out' in much HIV politics (Crimp, 1988); starting perhaps with ACT UP's 1980s 'Silence = Death' campaign in the US; and the importance of first person testimony for popular understandings of HIV, from the public disclosure of well-known figures' HIV positive status, as with US basketball star Magic Johnson, to the moving speech at the 2000 Durban International AIDS Congress of a 12 year old South African child, Nkosi Johnson. But HIV also turns out a challenging phenomenon for the experience-centred approach. The stories of the interviewees in my South African research suggest that not all aspects of HIV experience can be raised – or resolved - within stories. Many stories contained moments of incoherence or silence in the face of experiences, such as the death of children, that were impossible to 'make sense' of . Moreover, while HIV has dramatic impacts on individuals' lives, it is also a condition with many different social, cultural and political meanings. 'Telling your HIV story' has variable significance, and may not always be, as the experience-centred approach suggests, the prerequisite for a personally, socially and ethically fulfilled life.

3.1.3 Narrative as representation and reconstruction

A third assumption of the experience-centred perspective on narrative, is that narrative involves some *reconstruction* of stories across times and places. Narratives can never be repeated exactly, since words never 'mean' the same thing twice, and stories are performed differently in different social contexts. (This slipperiness of meaning can be understood either structurally, in terms of changing nets of signifiers and signified, or from a more phenomenological and historical

perspective). For Ricoeur and Bruner, narratives convey experience through reconstituting it, resulting in multiple and changeable storylines (see Patterson, 2008). These uncertainties of language can even be understood as a route to the unconscious, if the unconscious is itself defined, following Lacan, as like a 'language,' and therefore existing, like stories, in and through the uncertainties of representation (Frosh, 2002)

Ricoeur describes narratives as jointly 'told' between writer and reader, speaker and hearer. In telling and understanding stories, we are thus working on the relation between 'life as a story in its nascent state' (Ricoeur, 1991: 29) and its symbolic translation into recounted narrative. Here we move towards what Mishler describes as the third element of narrative generally, that is, its *context* – beginning with the interpersonal context of the interview, but taking in broader social and cultural contexts also. In my South African research on experiences and requirements of support for living with HIV, for example, many levels of context were clearly in play. The interviewees were all black, mostly women, almost all working class or unemployed, and largely under the age of 30. Speaking to a white middle class female university researcher from the overdeveloped world, in most cases older than them, certainly affected the stories they told. But they were also speaking to the other potential hearers of their words, who would listen to archived tapes, or read papers or reports, or hear talks about the research. They were speaking, too, in the broader context of contemporary political and cultural contests over HIV issues in which they had little power but strong interests. At a time when they perceived little interest in hearing them outside existing local HIV communities, they were very concerned with what would happen to the research. They wanted the tapes archived. Sometimes, they spoke directly into the tape recorder, addressing the hoped-for future audience.

The interest in reconstruction and co-construction within experience-centred narrative research, leads some researchers to view any personal story as just one of many narratable 'truths'. Ricoeur, however, distinguishes narrative from reason. Stories are for him, as for Labov, a form of imperfect, 'practical wisdom'. They convey and construct moralities, but they are time-dependent,

caught in 'tradition', which for Ricoeur involves a varying balance between sedimentation and innovation. They are important sources of the 'truths' of a particular tradition, but they do not have the generality of theory.

By contrast, some experience-centred researchers view narratives as representing, fairly transparently, the realities that lie 'behind' experience. Some such researchers also assume that stories can represent the psychic realities of the narrator – including sometimes their unconscious elements -without much social mediation or co-construction going on. Researchers using the biographic-narrative interpretive method for instance, such as Prue Chamberlayne, Michael Rustin and Tom Wengraf (2002), expect to find in their interview transcripts both a story of an objective 'lived life' that can be corroborated by for example birth and death registers and newspapers, and a 'told story' that retails meanings specific to the narrator, including some unconscious meanings, relatively independent of the social context of storytelling. In stories about living with HIV, the 'lived life' might include date of diagnosis, medical history, and support services used. The 'told story' would consist of the speaker's narrative path through getting ill; getting tested; coming to terms – or not- with HIV, both consciously and unconsciously; telling others about their status or hiding it, and finding effective treatments and ways of living. The objectivity of the 'lived life,' and the asocial and potentially unconscious nature of the 'told story' can be questioned. However, for many researchers, this distinction offers a starting point for identifying and defining narratives.

3.1.4 Narrative as transformation

Fourthly, experience-centred research assumes that personal change or transformation happens across narratives, going beyond the formal 'resolution' required by Labov of event narratives. For Bruner, stories universally involve the violation of normality and an attempt, at least, at its restoration, through human agency. Thus the experience-centred approach, like the Labovian account, takes change and its attempted resolution as fundamental to narrative, but conceptualises it as involving personal themes, rather than spoken clauses. Michele Crossley

(2000), for instance, discussing gay men's stories of living with HIV over a long period of time, sees three separate kinds of story: one addresses HIV directly and comes to terms with it, even deploying a discourse of 'growth,' one minimizes or normalizes HIV's impact throughout; the third is propelled into mourning by the losses involved with HIV, and never makes its way out of it. This typology could not be applied easily to the stories told by our research participants in South Africa, partly because many had been diagnosed rather recently, but also because the stories 'changed' in much more diverse and less individualised ways. Personal narratives mapped transformation, but this was not always of a personal kind.

Since experience-centred research looks for change in personal narratives, it often becomes a project of improvement as well as understanding. Ricoeur suggests that by hearing a 'story not yet told,' the psychoanalyst offers the analysand the possibility of producing a better story, 'more bearable and more intelligible' (1991: 30). This is not just true of analysts and their clients. All hearers and speakers of stories are involved in such projects, including researchers and research participants. Experience-centred narrative researchers are therefore often interested in what constitutes a 'good' human story. Crossley for instance assesses the last, loss-focused story form she found in her narratives of long-term HIV survivors as the least adaptive. The emphasis on transformation thus leads to narrative definitions being associated with social and sometimes quasi-clinical judgements, an inevitable but sometimes controversial aspect of this research tradition, as we will see later. My own South African research was shielded from such dilemmas by my clear ignorance. I knew rather too little about the contexts of people's lives with HIV, or indeed about their preferred and usual ways of talking about the condition, to make assessments of how they 'should' talk about it, even if I had wanted to.

3.2 Obtaining narratives of experience

When we start looking at how we might obtain personal experience narratives, differences within the approach start to emerge clearly, depending on exactly what definition of narrative researchers adopt.

The range of materials that can be incorporated into experience-centred narrative research is, as we have already indicated – and in clear distinction from the event-centred research tradition- wide. There is one area of broad agreement: While some narrative researchers, predominantly those working in clinical or observational settings, will reconstruct narratives by writing notes at the time or afterwards, most view the sequencing and particularity involved with stories as requiring a less filtered record of their empirical material. This means that almost all narrative researchers will try to obtain a written, aural and/or visual recording of research participants' stories.

Researchers who take a broad view of 'narrative', and who are interested in narratives' co-construction within research and the many levels of context that form them, may use a number of such records - oral, written and visual texts, field notes, participants' and their own commentaries, alongside related cultural representations, and records of important realities in their own and their interviewees' lives. Riessman for instance (2000) situates her work on South Indian women's narratives of reproductive problems in relation to dominant cultural narratives of women's fertility and South Indian political narratives. The value of this becomes clear when she analyses an interview with Gita, a woman who positions herself as a political actor rather than an infertile woman, though also presenting the story of stigmatised infertility she hears around her (Riessman, 2002). Revisiting her materials several years on, Riessman (2005) includes more material about the interpersonal and intercultural context of the research, specifically about her own relation to gender expectations and post-colonialism, that led her to 'read' Gita somewhat exclusively, though not necessarily wrongly, as a heroine. Susan Bell's (1988) interview work on the experiences of daughters of women who took diethylstylbestrol, a nausea-reducing pregnancy drug which caused them long-term reproductive problems, began from a Labovian framework, which it adapted; it has now been extended to include the film and video diary work produced by some of the women. My own work has involved looking not just at people's personal stories but

also at popular representations of HIV, and, other popular representations that relate to people's HIV stories - in the UK, lesbian and gay 'coming out' stories, and romances; and in the South African context, stories of religious faith. This expansion of narrative 'materials' seemed essential if I was to write about a condition that was early on described as an 'epidemic of signification' (Treichler, 1988) as well as of illness.

Researchers who view narratives as relatively unmediated expressions of personal experience, such as Chamberlayne and her colleagues (Chamberlayne et al, 2002), may see context as important, but they tend to treat it separately from the personal story, and to pay most attention to obtaining reliable records of research participants' narratives. Researchers who are highly interested in context may also concentrate on personal stories, if these seem the most practical or effective means of researching particular issues. Spoken personal testimony has, in itself, a strong cultural currency, with powerful effects, constituting, in the 'west' and beyond, what Kenneth Plummer (2001) calls an 'autobiographical age.' This is, indeed, why my own research focused on gathering such narratives. In South Africa in 2001, people living with HIV often felt unable to talk openly about their status. Even in politics and popular media, HIV was minimised or referred to other countries or other people, rarely owned publicly. In this context, many of our research participants saw the interviews as a way of 'speaking out' for themselves and others.

Ethical issues also affect what kinds of experience-centred narratives are collected. In South Africa, I audio recorded interviews in community organisations' offices, treated research participants as expert informants about HIV support and asked no questions about modes of infection, 'risk behaviours' or HIV as a medical condition. These constraints on the content and context of people's narratives, offered research participants an assurance of anonymity that visual recordings, or audio-recordings in domestic settings or clinics, could not. They provided a framework for referrals, should people want to access more support. And they clearly distinguished the research from studies of people's medical ignorance and personal inefficacy. Similar issues of anonymity, confidentiality, referrals and implicit pathologisation might arise when

gathering event narratives. However, research that collects longer 'experience' narratives is likely to encounter them more often, especially when it extends its definitions of 'materials' to include diverse media and extensive contextual elements.

Finally, experience-centred researchers interested in what is not clearly represented in narratives, may aim to include such elements within their materials, usually concentrating on verbal material, but sometimes also on writing or visual images. Hollway and Jefferson (2000a, b), for example, studying fear of crime in northern England through long, open-ended interviews, were concerned not just with what people said, but with contradictions, silences, hesitations and emotionally marked aspects of people's talk. As we shall see in the next section, such 'non-representational' elements are harder to specify, and thus both to record and transcribe, than symbolic language or images; they also present large problems for narrative analysis.

3.2.2 The processes of experience-centred narrative research

How is experience-centred narrative research carried out? As with the Labovian tradition of research on event narratives, general guidelines for qualitative research apply (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Seale et al., 2006). However, different definitional emphases again lead to divergent approaches. I shall concentrate on oral interview research, the commonest form; research on experiential images and writing shows similar variability, but also require more specific considerations that we cannot enter into here (see for instance Harrison, 2004; Seale, 2004; Tamboukou, 2003).

Event-centred narrative researchers gather corpuses of stories. Experience-centred narrative researchers are more likely to aim for a certain number of interviews or interviewees. Researchers who study life narratives, or who aim for fully biographical accounts of at least parts of interviewees' lives, tend to use small numbers of interviewees, sampled theoretically, often on an opportunistic and network basis, with little randomisation within this sampling frame. Interviews may involve several meetings and last many hours, but involve relatively small numbers of

participants – 15 for instance in Andrews's (1991) life history study of older political activists. Hollway and Jefferson (2000b) generated two interviews per participant and (like Mishler, 1986) interviewed family and other networks. Their total of 37 participants included around a third in family groupings. Notes on the interviews and their contexts will usually be made roughly concurrently. Broader contextual material, if collected, may be gathered beforehand – as in approaches influenced by oral history – or in parallel, as with Riessman's South Indian work.

Researchers who are interested less in biography, more in narrative themes and their experiential commonalities and differences across groups of individuals, tend to use larger interviewee numbers, and quota sampling and a degree of randomisation, within a still- theoretical sampling frame. Interviews here are typically one or two hours in length. In my research in South Africa, for instance, I wanted to examine how people talked about HIV in differently resourced situations, and how gender might affect such talk. Interviews with 37 people in different sites were a way both to look across local variabilities in resources and to obtain a reasonable number of male interviewees (eight), since men were, as in many interview studies, less likely to volunteer.

Pragmatic and ethical considerations are important, again, for sampling. It may be difficult for some participant groups to find time or personal resources for long interviews- for instance, in HIV research, if interviews are conducted far from home, or if participants have health problems. With sensitive research topics, it can be hard to recruit a sample for qualitative interviewing. The resultant small number of participants may, out of the researcher's concern to learn as much as possible from this group, be asked to participate in more intensive research, perhaps using a life-history or biographical approach.

Most experience-centred narrative interviewing is semi-structured. Within this format, researcher involvement shows a continuum, depending on where the researcher thinks 'narratives' live. If you place the story within the person, you may simply ask for 'their story,' intervening as little as possible. Hollway and Jefferson's (2000a) 'free association narrative interviewing' for instance,

concerned with narrators' emotional sequencing of their stories, is highly participant-centred. Somewhat like an analytic session, it allows silences and other awkwardnesses that may be difficult in a research – or indeed a conversation - context, and that may also present problems in terms of researcher's and participant's power within the research process. Some researchers constrain such open processes by asking for instance for a family or career 'story,' and allowing 'active listening' that is, nonverbal responses by the researcher at conventionally appropriate points. (Chamberlayne et al., 2002).

If you assume that reality is to some degree separate from personal story, you may triangulate, asking interviewees about real events, or looking for evidence of them elsewhere, for instance in newspaper reports (Chamberlayne et al., 2002). If you want to gather and analyse full biographical accounts, you may ask questions about 'conventional' aspects of lives, if they are not spontaneously covered, and about events marked by the speaker as important but not expanded on (Wengraf, 2004). If you are convinced of the importance of narratives' co-construction, you will engage throughout in active narrative interviewing, an interaction that even may be understood as conversation or co-research. If context is assumed to be a large aspect of research, you may, like Riessman in her South Indian work, be particularly alert to social and political contexts as they affect the ongoing interview. In my South African research, the country's post-apartheid, developing-world context of political change and activism, alongside continuing structural disadvantage and poverty, high HIV prevalence and low treatment access, were often referred to, but were highly salient even when implicit.

If you want to collect and study stories that are clearly about particular experiences, you may want to elicit them, with formulations like, 'can you give me an example…' or 'tell me more about when…' If, however, you see 'narrative' more broadly as the whole interview, or as a wider representational formation of which the interview is a part, you may not be concerned with gathering obvious 'stories.' You might even see such a procedure as skewing the research. In

asking South African interviewees about HIV support, I deliberately avoided such formulations, so as not to force individualisation and particularisation in people's talk.

Research need not stop with the first interview. You may return for chronological follow-up, a longer story, or to check facts, examine interpretations, or explore highly emotional issues. Hollway and Jefferson use second interviews to return to points in their first that their theoretical frame pointed to as significant: contradictions, silences, hesitations, and strong or unusual patterns of emotion. Less formal post-interview interactions can also be viewed by those who see personal narratives as more historically and socially extensible, as chances to give interviewees more power over the materials; to enable them to 'look back' historically and to continue the conversation: For Andrews and other life history researchers, such interactions can extend over decades.

A final word on ethics is needed. Most qualitative research, modifying ethical considerations developed initially for quantitative, often medical research with 'human subjects,' contains guarantees about the time-limited availability of materials. This may not be appropriate for narrative materials with which interviewees are heavily invested – and this is particularly the case with experience-centred work, even though it may well also affect the kinds of materials collected in a more structural, Labovian research. Many of our South African research participants for instance would not have agreed to participate without being convinced of the long-term survival of their interviews. However, the quantitatively-derived ethics codes of many universities, in combination with the codes of professional bodies such as the British Psychological Society, British Sociological Association and ESRC, should provide extensive participant rights over the interviewing research process, and over materials such as tapes and transcripts. These rights may be more significant for experience-centred narrative research than for the more limited data of event narrative research

3.3 How do we analyse narratives of experience?

In Labovian narrative analysis, defining categorizing and assessing the 'evaluations' that give meaning to event narratives is difficult   Analysing the human meanings of experience-centred narratives is clearly going to be an even more controversial project.

3.3. 1 Transcription

Some researchers work with their auditory records without transcribing; and visual materials are particularly problematic to 'transcribe'.   Interview transcriptions are probably the dominant manifestation of empirical materials in narrative research, and even here, there is considerable debate about how to obtain them. Conventions vary widely. Within the Labovian tradition, there is a clear sense of what needs to be recorded in order for analysis to proceed; extended debate about level of transcription is not required. However, some conversation and discourse-related transcripts are highly detailed, including prosodic, paralinguistic and other nonverbal features, such as nodding, laughing, pause length and emphasised and drawn-out words and syllables. In such cases, narratives' meaningfulness is assumed to be connected to the semantics of micro representational, often paralinguistic patterns, as well as the semantics of words.   Other researchers, like Mishler (1986), omit some speech elements– either non-narrative clauses, as in Mishler's case, or diversions, repetitions and nonverbal elements- in the interests of clarifying narrative progression. This less detailed approach is, unsurprisingly, commoner in experience-centred than in event narrative research, as it generally deals with larger amounts of text, and sometimes assumes that the detail of the language, *how* things are said is much less important than its content, *what* is said. This was not my assumption. However, in my interview work in South Africa, while all words, word fragments and obvious paralinguistic elements such as laughs and coughs were transcribed, pauses were not, since their significance at different could not be assumed to be universal. Nor could emphases be reliably noted or understood, across speech communities, let alone across languages, and across people speaking in their first, second and sometimes third languages. These interviews were conducted in English, but South African English differs markedly from British English; moreover some South African research participants were interviewed in Xhosa or in a mixture of English and Xhosa. In such complex language

circumstances, making and using fine-grained transcriptions may lead one to unwarranted assumptions about their meanings.

Different transcription approaches also produce differences in interpretation. Researcher interventions are not part of Labovian transcription, nor indeed of some biographical interview transcribing (Chamberlayne et al.2002; Wengraf, 2005), where non-intervening 'active listening' is engaged in. However, they are included in the large amount of work that treats narrative as a co-construction. The presentation of field notes and other materials related to interviews also varies, depending on their perceived centrality. Riessman's second 'take' on her South Indian data, for instance, expanded to include more notes about her own situation (2004, 2002). There are of course limits to such processes. I could not include a full description of popular representations of HIV in South Africa without radically shifting analytic focus away from personal narratives, for instance. However, I could and did record and analyse my contributions and those of my research assistants, in two languages where appropriate; the contributions of co-interviewees, since many research participants chose to be interviewed with acquaintances or friends; the particular circumstances of interviews, for instance some research participants being ill, or needing to get home, or the research situation being cramped and time-limited; and the current local and national HIV situation. For example, some interviews occurred just after Nkosi Johnson, the HIV positive child who had spoken at the 2000 Durban AIDS conference, died, and this lent particular impetus to interviewees' accounts of 'speaking out.'

3.3.2 Interpretation: Going round in hermeneutic circles?

Once obtained, how do we interpret the transcripts? For Ricoeur, 'the hermeneutical problem begins where linguistics' -Labovian analysis, for instance – 'leaves off' (1991: 27). Some narrative analysts move from Labovian linguistics towards wider interpretive frames in the same study (Riessman, 1993a; Mishler, 1986). Others start off looking for large-scale 'meanings. This search for a valid interpretive frame is perhaps the research stage that causes most controversy and concern.

The simplest approach is to begin describing the stories in the interviews thematically, and from this, to develop and test theories that give a predictive explanation of the stories, moving back and forth between the interviews themselves and generalisations about them in a classic 'hermeneutic circle,' using a combination of top-down and bottom-up interpretive procedures. This approach may not seem at first to differ greatly from many other qualitative procedures, for instance a thematic content analysis or – in the case of the more bottom-up analyses - grounded theory. However, experience-centred narrative analysis is distinguished by its attention to the sequencing and progression of themes within interviews, their transformation and resolution. Thus, it foregrounds the specifically narrative aspects of texts' meanings.

How the analysis is done depends once more on researchers' idea of what 'narrative' is. Riessman (2002) for instance describes expanding her initial definition of Gita's own 'experiences-of-pregnancy 'narrative,' to include Gita's account of family reactions. This allowed her to analyse Gita's progressive and successful positioning of herself in her narrative as someone who is defined *by others* as having fertility problems. Hollway and Jefferson (2004) use a Kleinian theory of the narrator as an anxious and defended subject, and the biographical narrative as a means of managing psychic difficulties, to understand the contradictory attitudes of an unemployed working-class man, Tommy, towards his family, his fondly remembered 'poor but happy' childhood, his contemporary distance from most of his relations; and his conflicted attitudes towards his father. My own work, assuming connections between individual and cultural narratives, analyses people's deployments of political, religious, psychological, and western and traditional medical narratives within their personal narratives of HIV.

For many researchers, a single story-understanding is not to be expected. Narrative analyses must accept that there can be multiple valid interpretations, multiple narrative 'truths' (Freeman, 2004); the hermeneutic circle will never close. How, though, might we build a persuasive case for a particular interpretation? The usual qualitative procedures of amassing evidence, theory-

building and theory-testing are undertaken. This involves internal testing by the researcher, who continually checks their evolving interpretations against the materials and actively seeks out falsifying cases. External testing by interested others can also be used (Chamberlayne et al., 2002). For some, its value is restricted by the difficulty of others achieving sufficient familiarity with the materials to be able validly to interpret them. Feedback from respondents themselves may also be a check on interpretations (Andrews, 2004). My research used a combination of such procedures. My use of the conversion genre category in relation to the interviews came not simply from observed structural parallels between the genre and the interview narratives, but also from research assistants' independent comments on the faith-oriented nature of interviewees' HIV talk; interviewees' spontaneous mentions of religious faith, and wider analysis of the contemporary place of religious discourse in South Africa.

A problematic area of legitimizing your interpretation, specific to experientially-oriented narrative research, is the presentation of evidence. In the Labovian approach, small sections of text are sufficient- though Labov has also moved towards using longer accounts. Patterson (2008) presents interconnected stretches of 'narrative' and 'non-narrative' materials, showing how the latter are required to understand the former. Riessman extracts from the interview 'story' smaller stories, usually of constellations of events – for instance, Gita's story of her infertility - which she presents in 'stanzas' each associated with a particular 'idea' within the narrative. In a life history or biographical analysis, the 'story' is much longer, and the data are often glossed and exemplified by extracts. This may lead to reader scepticism, since illustrative short text sections can usually be 'read' in ways that contrast with the often large and rich interpretations offered. Detailed accounts of interpretive procedures and corroborating materials go some way towards offsetting such doubts. Corroborating materials are also increasingly made available to other researchers, following appropriate ethical guidelines, through academic or other archives such as, in Britain, the ESRC's Qualidata Archive and the British Library's National Sound Archive

Analysis raises, again, some ethical questions. Ethical approval for experience-focused narrative research should, but rarely does, involve considering the ethics of interpretation, within the frame of researchers' and research participants' different powers over the data. Presentation of data can itself be problematic. Reproducing larger amounts of data than with an event-centred approach, sometimes glossing whole lives, it becomes harder to guarantee anonymity, especially when researching an understudied area with small community of potential respondents, and particularly if this community may – as with much of my HIV research –read the resultant papers. To obviate this problem, researchers can– like those working with clinical and therapeutic materials – omit or change more specific data, guaranteeing confidentiality at the expense of some of the data's richness.

Ethical approaches to discussing research with participants vary widely, though all agree on the need for responsibility. Hollway and Jefferson provide transcripts but do not invite participant input into interpretation. From their psychoanalytic perspective, the participant may not know what s/he is 'saying' in the story (2004). Chamberlayne and colleagues feed back interpretations, particularly of the most semantically open-ended visual materials, and note responses, but do not necessarily change their accounts. Interviewee rights over material can however be conceived in a much stronger way that overlaps with interpretation, allowing participants to comment, rewrite and add their own analyses. Andrews for instance engages in long-term conversations with her participants over interpretations which can generate new materials and themselves become part of the analysis.

3.3.3 The place of the researcher

Since the researcher who hears a 'story' is more inevitably part of the analysis than are researchers who analyse smaller and less obviously co-constructed text segments, narratively-oriented analysis is also usually more consistently concerned with reflexivity than are those procedures. In addition, researchers working in the experience-centred tradition are also more interested in reflexivity than a Labovian researcher, for whom the story inheres in the teller.

For Ricoeur, written and told stories are reconfigured in their readings or hearings: 'the process of composition, of configuration, is not completed in the text but in the reader' (1991: 26). The worlds of readers and texts, speakers and listeners must be brought together, co inhabited, in order for understanding to occur. Such understanding requires, as for Labov, reactualising the act that produced the story, but in Ricoeur's account considerable indeterminacy attends the process. It is, though, possible because for Ricoeur as for Labov, human action and experience, like human symbols, have a narrative structure (Ricoeur, 1991: 28–29). In the Ricoeurian tradition, narrative intermeshes told and understood text worlds, reaching not just into story structures but into their experiencing, bringing researchers' and participants' experiences together. Moreover, the tradition is, as we have seen, concerned with the possibilities of multiple interpretations, among which researchers' reflexive analyses of their own contributions sit easily. Riessman's accounts of her own implication in analytic processes (2004, 2002b), again, provide good examples. Hollway and Jefferson formulate the process differently, as an examination of researcher counter transference, drawing on their psychoanalytic frame (2004). My own work in South Africa could be endlessly reflexive, given the complex and dramatic power relations operating in research on HIV in the developing world and my own problematic positioning within them. My impetus to pursue such analysis was curtailed, however by the narratives' broader social meanings. The powerful significance of HIV in South Africa to some degree overwhelmed the interaction between myself and interviewees, as indicated by interviewees' own clear concerns about wider audiences for their words.

3.3.4 The social world

Narrative is intrinsically social to some extent for all experience-centred researchers, since it uses the social medium of language and is produced by social subjects. At the same time, narrative remains, in this tradition, a production of individualized subjectivities. Ricoeur, having and eating his poststructuralist cake, puts it like this: 'we can become our own narrator' (1991: 32) while at the same time 'in place of an *ego* enamoured of itself arises a *self* instructed by cultural symbols,

the first among which are the narratives handed down in our literary tradition' (1991: 33). This dualism is acted out in analysis, usually by paralleled top-down and bottom-up approaches. Top-down analyses, often comparing across many interviews, tend – except in the case of psychoanalytic accounts - to seem more socially oriented. My analyses for instance draw on research about the ways in which people spend time; the dominance of religious discourse in South Africa and existing discourses about HIV, and relate it to data from the interviews. In Bamberg and Andrews's collection of papers on 'counter narratives,' narratives arising from interview materials are analysed as speaking 'against' dominant cultural narratives of for instance 'mothering' or gender and ageing. Andrews (2004) argues that the explanatory power of this analysis is not vitiated by the frequently inexplicit 'countering' process, the fine grain of the materials, or the possibility of other levels of reading. Wengraf puts the cases more strongly when he advocates reading 'potentially symptomatic and revelatory expressions of historically evolving psychologies in a historically evolving context of micro and macro social relationships' (2004, p117), at the same time advising caution with such rich interpretive moves.

From social analysis to advocacy is a small step. Some experience-centred narrative researchers include within their analysis, a valuing of some stories over others: Crossley for instance sees the narratives of long-term HIV survivors that manage to consider the future as most adaptive. Many researchers seem to suggest that narratives that are not 'closed off' and that contain multiple possibilities within them, are better than others (Wengraf, 2004; Freeman 2004) Even those who do not deliberately judge narratives, often do so by default, discussing the high value of certain kinds of narratives if not the low value of others. It was for instance difficult in listening to our South African interviewees to get away from the sense that in general, fuller narratives that envisaged the future were 'good' stories - especially as such stories were commoner when interviewees had access to material resources such as treatment and support groups. This kind of assumption is, however, indicative of the problems emerging around experience-centred narrative research.

3.4 Criticising experience-centred narrative research

3.4.1 Interpretation as prescription

Experience-centred research makes strong, sometimes prescriptive assumptions about the stories it claims to inhabit. The approach often assumes that hermeneutic immersion warrants you drawing up a narrative typology of a particular text; judging which are 'good' narratives; and assessing, on the presumption that narratives reflect lives, which stories indicate successful life adjustment. Of course, any hermeneutic project asserts some interpretive authority. Moreover, some researchers base their assumptions on well-specified, and therefore challengeable, psychoanalytic or narrative theories. However, others use nebulous criteria such as narrative 'openness' and 'reflexivity;' assert interpretive authority based on materials to which their readers have little access; or rely on assumptions about the nature of 'narrative' like those we considered earlier, whose cracks now start to show.

3.4.2 The problem of 'time'

Time is complexly formulated in the Ricoeurian tradition, but its fundamentality in experience-centred narrative research goes unquestioned. This research takes chronologically or psychically sequenced time as an unproblematic analytic category. It requires temporal progression, and the full presence of past, present and future in narratives A naïve temporal realism characterizes this valuing of well-arranged, well-'timed' stories, and the well-ordered lives and subjects they are thought to mirror. To question such assumptions is to extend Polyani's and Langellier's criticisms of Labovian gendering and ethnocentrism around time (in Patterson, 2008), to the experience-centred approach. In doing so, narrative social science research has some catching up to do with literary and cultural studies and social theory, which have long adopted more nuanced approaches towards temporality in life writing. They recognize, for instance, the co-presence of futurity and past in the present, the reconstruction of the past by new 'presents', and the projection of the present into future imaginings (see for instance De Man, Stanley, 1993; Steedman, 1987).

A focus on 'time' may also close off information about the unconscious and material realities, both of which may order stories outside time - socially, spatially, or in a different kind of causal or emotional 'time' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2004; Frosh, 2002). These orderings may still constitute personal narratives. One of our South African interviewees, a trainee sangoma, or healer, brought several such unconventional modes of narrative ordering together when she explained her HIV acceptance and activism as happening through dreams in which her ancestors spoke to her, and through her own reimagining of an event from Xhosa history. To translate this narrative into an experiential progression through personal time, would be reductive and misleading.

3.4.3 What is narrative 'coherence'?

A related issue is that some experience-centred research criticizes partial, fragmented or contradictory narratives for their incoherent or incomplete representation of experience. For example, we tend to expect life narratives to mention family members, education, work, and other activities, as well as major life-defining events, and to provide some more or less resolved account of all of them. I would argue however that we cannot tell what events 'ought' to be mentioned in life stories, or how they 'should' be talked about ; nor can we tell what has been 'left out' at problematic moments in a narrative just because we think we know how lives and narratives 'go.' For example, one of our South African interviewees, telling the story of how she and her boyfriend came to accept and live with her certain and his probable HIV positive status; said of their relationship, 'all of the children are his and it's been a long time that we've been staying together.' This account does not fit well with conventional western health education narratives of couples' HIV acceptance and risk reduction through open communication, or with almost any canonic social science or clinical account of 'good' heterosexual relationship as involving strong emotionality. That does not make it a 'bad' story. There are many other frames within which it could be read – and within which our interviewee might indeed be expecting myself and the research assistant to understand it, involving for instance the informal, highly mobile. low-

income and high-crime settlement in which she lives, and ways of representing emotions that do not involve talking about them a lot.

Even with difficult-to-understand stories like that told by a man with schizophrenia, considered by Phil Salmon and Riessman (2008), the establishment of a language community can be worked at so the stories can get 'heard.' But we have to accept that we are always powerfully limited in story understanding. My and my South African informants' story worlds are hard to bring into congruence and will retain relative autonomy, and this is true to a degree of all storytellers and hearers. The experience-centred approach's emphasis on story worlds coming into congruence, despite its awareness of mismatches between storytellers and researchers, tends to work against that acceptance

3.4.4 Is there a 'subject' of experience?

The experience-oriented approach suggests that experience is rooted in a subject that can claim some unity and agency: a 'self' which has and describes experiences. This position is sometimes asserted 'against' postmodernism's alleged preoccupations with an entirely fragmented and socially determined subject, which is then presented as elitist and non-political. At other times, the experience-oriented approach claims a kind of partial, continent subjective unity along the lines perhaps of Spivak's (1992) strategic essentialism or Hacking's (1995) assertions about the need for a level of subjective continuity to underpin moral and political personhood. The first version, in particular, can lead experience-focused research into the individualized, prescriptive approaches we have described, and to psychobiographies of interviews, with the attendant problem of assuming an authorial subjectivity 'behind' every aspect of the data. Again, this approach cuts researchers off from all the other literary and cultural studies work on narrative which takes more complicated approach to subjectivity

3.4.5 Analysing experience, forgetting language

A focus on unproblematic experience tends to reduce the significance of language in narrative research, subordinating it to experience itself. Even if language is seen as reconstructing experience and not as a direct translation of it, language's patterns effects are often uninteresting to experience-centred researchers. Links between interpersonal and cultural forms of language, like those I am interested in, are also neglected. Moreover 'performance', a term frequently used in current narrative research, takes on a simply Goffmanian meaning, signifying the presentation of different 'scripts' of narrative identities in different contexts, with a unified subject behind it. The present popularity of the term, however, derives from Judith Butler's (1993) more complicated usage, in which 'performance' is predicated on the non-repeatability of significations and a non-repeatable, non-identical subject. Performance in this sense does not allow any simple assumptions about agency.

3.4.6 Relativism

Lastly, even those who work within the experience-centred tradition, while also being aware of the complexities of language and subjectivities, can end up by prioritizing experience, with a set of equally valid interpretations and no way out of this relativism. It may seem as if there is no place to stop the interpreting, and no way of judge between interpretations, all of which may be 'truthful' in their own contexts

4. Narrative pragmatics: The 'context' of narratives

One way out of some of the problems that arise with experience-centred approaches to narrative, is to look at narrative at other levels, those that address the social and cultural contexts of personal narratives. We have already seen that many experience-centred and even some event-focused narrative researchers pay considerable attention to narrative contexts, though these are not the principal focus of their work. Other narrative researchers are more explicit about addressing narrative as a context-bound phenomenon

4.1 Doing narrative: the microcontexts of 'small' stories

There are many different ways of approaching narrative from this 'contextual' perspective; 'context' may be understood as that of interpersonal language, interpersonal relations, or the broader field of social and cultural relations. A recent articulation has, for instance, taken the form of posing research focused on micro-levels of context, here called *'small'* stories, against the so-called *'big'* stories of more experiential, biographically-oriented research (Bamberg, 2006; Freeman, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006). Those on the side of 'small' narratives argue that we need to pay more attention to the micro-linguistic and social structure of the everyday, small narrative phenomena that occur naturally *between* people. Such 'small stories' cannot be understood simply in Labovian terms, for they may concern unfolding, anticipated, imaginary, habitual and indefinite events and states, as well as past, singular 'events'; they may also, for some, involve repeated content or themes spread out across representations (see Phoenix, 2008); and they are, crucially, co-constructed between speakers and hearers, rather than emerging as a biographical expression that is relatively constant across space and time. They occur in spoken language, but also in writing – text messages, for example – paralanguage, and perhaps even in action. This emphasis on 'small stories' brings together the Labovian commitment to research on 'naturally'-occurring stories, and conversation-analytic and some discourse-analytic commitments to studying 'natural' language, and applies them to a wider and more socially-formulated range of narrative phenomena than has previously been addressed in this way, including interactions of the kind previously investigated mostly by conversation and discourse analysts (Bamberg, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006). The emphasis on 'small stories' tends to prioritise 'event' over experience, and socially-oriented over individually-oriented narrative research; but it formulates 'event' in a broadened way, and pays attention to the 'social' in its most micro social versions, as well as in its wider, cultural variants.

Against such 'small story' arguments, Wengraf (1999), Freeman (2006) and other experience-centred researchers defend the experiential richness, reflectiveness and validity of 'big stories.' However, writers on the 'small story' side of the debate do recognise the separate value of 'big story' research, and 'big story' researchers often pay attention to the 'small' aspects of their data.

For many, the 'big'/'small' division may not be too significant. Moreover, Freeman (2006) points out the parallel tendencies in some 'small story' research to claim it is the 'real thing,' and in some 'big story' research to claim an immanent validating identity behind its narratives. These claims can return proponents on both sides of the argument to the unproblematically expressivist approach to narrative as a mirror of experience, described earlier.

4.2 Performing narrative: The sociocultural contexts of stories

We have already seen that researchers such as Riessman and Mishler pay explicit attention to the interview context and to the wider discourses within which this 'context' is situated, a procedure that tends to place them, too, in the field of 'contextual' as well as 'experience-centred' researchers (see also Malson, 2004). A valuable example of work that starts from this contextual focus, is that of Kenneth Plummer. Plummer's *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995) traces the emergence of intimate disclosure narratives in the 20th century west, within the larger context of the contemporary cultural and political power of autobiography (see also Plummer, 2001). He gives detailed accounts of, for instance, lesbian and gay coming-out narratives: their structure, the historical and social contexts which enabled their development, how they have changed, and their effects. He argues that such stories must have an audience at least partly prepared to hear them if they are to achieve currency, but that stories also themselves 'gather people together' Stories operate within interpretive communities of speakers and hearers that are political as well as cultural actors, to build collective identities that can lead, albeit slowly and discontinuously, to cultural shifts in representation and to political change. Plummer thus situates personal stories, from the start, as, in particular sociocultural contexts, bids for representation and power from the disenfranchised. He (2001) points out that the trend since the nineteenth century has been towards stories told more reflectively, by the less powerful, in a collective mode where one person's story 'stands in' for many others, as with US slave narratives and the testimonies of peoples under occupation; and most recently, in diverse modalities, including not just conventional book form but also newspapers and magazines, films, and more recently, the

internet and reality television. It is important to note that such stories are also told increasingly, though in different forms, in the 'developing' world.

4.3 Analysing story genres

My own interest in HIV narratives, which perhaps looks on the surface like a concern with experience-centred storytelling, started from a concern with genre, and an assumption that cultural and personal narratives are interconnected, and is underpinned by this concern and assumption throughout. My specific interest in how people's stories drew on the genre of conversion narratives developed first from a recognition of how often interviewees in South Africa, when talking about HIV, talked also about religion and how central it was to their lives; and from an interest in the religious-sounding emphases on 'belief,' 'acceptance,' and telling others, or testifying, in many interviewees' accounts. Here is an example, from an interview with a woman who named herself Linda:

Linda: Okay! In the first place I am glad that I know of my HIV positive status because now I know what to do. Then my husband, the one I am married to, I told him. At first, he could not accept it, he gave me too many problems. I then continued talking about it everyday, I used to chat about it so that it would sink into him that I am HIV positive/Mm/ Truly, eventually he accepted it. My baby was not discharged yet, so that he/she could be tested as well./OK/ Then he asked about the baby. I said the baby will be tested at 9 months. I then explained. Truly then I was told that the baby, I was very happy, because I was happy to save my baby. AZT helped me, my baby was tested negative. That made me a very happy person, I didn't think of myself as having HIV because I am still alright. There is no difference I must say. My health is still good. The other thing that made me happy is the group support that we are doing as nursing mothers./ok/ The things that really helped is the support groups. It really really helped us because you feel free when you are there I must say. You become very happy and forget that eish, when you get home it is then that you remember that you have HIV, but when you are there you are

free. We advise each other very well, even the instructor (facilitator), I must say she tells us what to do. So today I am not ready, I am not yet free, I don't feel like I am open, I am not open yet to stand up and say I have HIV. I am still getting there, you understand?/Mm/ But I feel alright, most importantly I thank God. God said these things before, he said there will be these incurable diseases, so I believe in God truly. What he talked about, is happening today. So that is something else that inspired me, because God mentioned this before, he said they will happen, they are happening today, unto people, they would not fall in steep places, so I believe in that.

This is, at one level, the story of Linda's personal coming to terms with her HIV status. It also exemplifies the religious storytelling genre drawn on by many South African interviewees, who described a struggle to confront HIV status, culminating in a conversion moment, often marked in the stories by interviewees saying something like, 'then, I believed,' or - as here - 'truly, eventually he accepted it.' For women who, like Linda, had received antiretroviral treatment during pregnancy, this transformation moment was often revisited in the salvational event of their baby testing negative. However, as in many religious narratives, there were ongoing doubts and reaffirmations of faith. Linda tells of her continuous struggle to improve, ethically as well as informationally, her relation to HIV. Many interviewees told stories of searching out HIV versions of faith communities to strengthen their beliefs - support groups often acted in this way, where family and friendship groups did not. The stories also often moved on to a kind of witnessing, aimed at converting others to an accepting, knowledgeable and hence ethical life with HIV. The speaker's own telling of their status to others was often the first step in this evangelical HIV testimony, as for Linda with her husband. Linda's story becomes explicitly entwined with Christian discourse at the end when she evokes Psalm 37's assertion of god's support for the poor and faithful in times of wickedness – though personal transgression is certainly not equated here with HIV status.[2] ' However, this kind of story was also told in relation to non-Christian traditional spiritual beliefs and, most commonly, with no explicit religious connotations, yet still deploying a structure that moved from conflict to conversion and witnessing.

Why do such resonances with cultural genres matter? Following Plummer, who relates interpretive communities to communities of action, I am assuming that the interconnection between such genres and personal narratives, may potentiate personal narratives' effects. The conversion genre was not simply recognizable to our interviewees, ourselves and to wider South African speech communities. It also worked to turn stories of HIV into morality tales. The stories borrowed ethical force of the conversion genre and gave it to living with HIV, often the object of some quite different religious stories of possession, transgression, or silence. The conversion genre was then a very powerful one, at this specific time and place

Genres are always mixed up and therefore imperfect. As Derrida (1981) says, the law of genre is to break its own laws. My assumption was that many cultural narratives, rather than just one, will inflect personal narratives, so I also looked at stories' inflection by for instance western and traditional health narratives of HIV; psychological narratives of coming to terms with the condition, and political narratives of self-affirmation and action. It is also important to recognize that stories are strongly determined by material circumstances. Interviewees in our study tended to tell longer and more complex stories of their HIV experiences in conditions where they had access to support - support groups, sympathetic family members, medical treatment, employment and training. Interviewees with little support were, unsurprisingly in a national situation of stigma and underprovision, less likely to talk about HIV at length.

A genre's imperfections also mean that aspects of people's lives that are hard to make sense of within 'stories' as they are conventionally understood can still appear within a 'genre'; it continues, imperfectly, around them. This is important in the case of HIV, whose relations with stigma, death, sexuality and uncertainty are hard to put into words. Crises of HIV 'faith,' for instance, could appear in Linda's narrative of immanent, not-yet-achieved belief; she is ready but also not ready to speak of HIV; she is on the interminable road to community and faith that conversion narratives map out.

4.4 Problems of the culturally-oriented approach

The advantages of putting the experience-centred approach in a broader cultural context are that this context may make it less prescriptive, less controlled by temporal progression; less focused on coherence; more aware of language; more likely to understand selves in non-essentialist ways, and more able to break out of hermeneutic reflexivity with its social referents. But how 'solved' are these problems, actually? Trying to adopt a culturally-oriented approach to narrative may just mean operating with two incommensurable theories of the speaking subject: the agentic, storytelling subject of the experience-focused tradition, at odds with the fragmented disunited 'postmodern; subject of more culturally-oriented analyses, produced by the cultural stories around them.

A 'cultural' approach also does not necessarily avoid relativism, guarantee political engagement or provide a clear concept of the relationship between narrative representations and their effects. It is difficult to say anything definitive about narrative genres, given the multiplicity and incompleteness just described Focusing on 'cultural stories' can lead to narrow particularism about specific stories; or to reifying them, for instance by collapsing them into categories such as 'women's stories' from which politics is evacuated (Stanley, 1992). The political shapes of narratives are larger than a 'cultural' analysis can indicate (Parker, 2003); a move towards broader understandings of them is becoming more common in narrative researchers' work, as work like that of Molly Andrews (2007) demonstrates. From an opposed perspective, some critics also accuse culturally-oriented approaches of losing sight of the individual stories on which experience-centred research rests. Is Linda really telling her 'own' story, or is she saying what she thinks she has to, or what is called forth by being in a clinic, with her friend from the group?

Some of these problems can be circumvented. Many stories does not mean infinite stories: Liz Stanley's set of cultural 'stories' about the Yorkshire Ripper are as she points out also an interested collection, told from a set of resistant standpoints that are far from relativist. The contemporary significance of 'experience' as a place-setter for political access is too strong to

allow us to ignore it on the grounds of its conceptual messiness or political dangers (Plummer, 2001; Squire, 2007). Plummer makes detailed and subtle arguments about the catalyzing effects of self-disclosure stories in shifting political circumstances. These effects are particular to time and place, but we can expect some generalization. For instance, while our South African interviewees drew on genres of conversion and witnessing to talk about HIV in a situation where HIV identities had been 'othered' as unclean and immoral (Joffe, 1997), it seems justifiable to propose that such *ethical* self-disclosure genres may be useful narrative resources in other situations of narrative pathologisation. I would also argue that individual stories are not lost, but reframed in this approach. What we hear from Linda is certainly a 'personal' story – just one expressed within a particular national and representational context.

Some problems, however, remain. For instance, what is left out of these brave new self-disclosure stories, or indeed, any culturally-described set of stories? Here, what is *not* said assumes an importance it lacks within Labovian and Ricoeurian perspectives, according to which the 'unsaid' can often be derived, albeit with difficulty, from the syntactic or semantic substructures of a story. The rich interlinkings that a notion of cultural narrative generates, between individuals and across social and historical moments, often seem to leave no space, however, for an unconscious. When you tell a 'coming out' story, for example, you may produce an account that despite its meaningfulness, necessarily omits some difficult and important emotions that fall outside words (Frosh, 2002: 127–8; see also Craib, 2004). When a woman testifies to her acceptance of her HIV positive status and tells of her commitment to living long and healthily and spreading the truth about HIV to her family and friends, what happens to sexual shame, loss and grief in the story? A partial solution to such questions is to borrow from literary and cultural theory a notion of the unconscious that sees it as constitutive of cultural representations, infiltrating even the most conventional of them. Parker (2003), for instance, describes a 'self' spread across stories and storytelling in his consideration of psychoanalytic, and specifically Lacanian stories of subjectivity.

In addition, in looking at the genre structure of for instance conversion narratives, we miss out, inevitably, on smaller, co-occurring structures, the co-construction of narratives between speakers and hearers, and the limits of such co-construction. Such structures are specially difficult to discern across language differences – which of course exist between the 'language communities' of any interviewer and interviewee, but which are much more pronounced and freighted with historical and political meanings in cases like my South African research, where white middle class UK English met South African English and urban Xhosa - itself mixed with English and containing many Xhosalised English terms. Given limited researcher time and language skills, full analysis of these complexities was too speculative for me to attempt. However, within language communities, it is often possible to do valuable work on the social structures and personal identifications that generate linguistic positionings, 'reading back' to these from language use across narrative interviews (see for instance, Phoenix, 2008).

A focus on 'genre' allows us to understand narratives as contextual cultural genres that are always in contest, compromising between redemptive closure and unrepresentable openness (Bersani, 1990). The fluidity of the coming out genre for instance (Sedgwick, 1990) involves this kind of perpetual instability – you are never fully 'out' to everyone, even yourself – as does the conversion genre, in which faith is a process not an end point. Thus, cultural genres do not leave out the unsayability and ambiguity that makes 'telling the whole story' impossible, so much as negotiate across them.

5. Conclusion

The approaches outlined above provide many useful directions for addressing narratives in the group-analytic context. Even when asking the simplest question, about what a story is, we can think of it as a replayed event, an expression of identity, a cultural trace – or a trace of something that's not there. What a story says and does can be taken as cognitive or aesthetic re-enactment, an effort at personal understanding, an effective social inscription, or an emotional defence. A

story can be read as addressed to its present audience or to a much broader audience of past, present and future figures, real and imagined.

Whatever your preferred framework, it is, I think, politically important to retain a sense of the potential diversity of narrative readings. The common *conceptual* ground between the approaches I have sketched is fairly limited. Relating stories to events, personal identities and cultural representations are theoretically different endeavours. Analysing clauses, searching out an intertextual hermeneutics and decoding cultural meanings are epistemologically distinct programmes. Narrative researchers tend to adopt eclectic perspectives that are fairly unconcerned about such theoretical and methodological contradictions. The perspectives are, however, loosely associated by a kind of pragmatic *politics*. For there is, across all the different stakeholders in narrative, a preoccupation with a politics of 'voice' that brings them into loose association (Freeman, 2003). Whether we link narrative analysis to the personal preoccupations of biography, to psychoanalytically-informed tracings of emotions, to structural concerns with language or to cultural patterns of representation and action, it can be argued that 'narrative' operates throughout as a kind of theorisation of unrecognized or undervalued texts, and hence as a kind of politics for post-political times. That does not mean, of course, that we should ignore debates about what narrative research is. Perhaps, though, it provides a context in which to continue them.

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7. Study questions

For Section 2:

1. Think of a story you might tell about a recent important event in your life. How far can Labov's categories be applied to this story, and how useful would such an application be?

2. Think of an important social research question Could an investigation of it be formulated using Labovian categories as a means of mapping differences across social circumstances or time?

For Section 2 and 3:

3.   Labov says that the event narratives that interest him are personal, sequential, and meaningful, and that his approach to them is 'hermeneutic,' since it is not quantitative, like much linguistics. Is there a firm distinction between this 'hermeneutic' work and the hermeneutics of narrative adopted by researchers in the Ricoeurian tradition?

For Section 3:

4.   Riessman, adopting a definition of 'narrative' that allows research on it to range from the particular to the most general, says that narrative research 'illuminates the intersection between biography, history and society' (2002, p.697). Other narrative researchers (for instance Chamberlayne et al., 2002) agree. How much can experience-centred personal narratives tell us about 'history and society'?

5.	How can appropriate levels of transcription detail be decided?

6.	How much of a personal narrative needs to be presented in research papers, and what kinds of changes to obtained narratives are necessary and justifiable?

For Section 4:

7.	Plummer (2001) recognises clearly the historical and social specificity of the 'age of autobiography.' In the light of this, how valid is the focus on personal narratives in experience-centred narrative research?

8.	In Plummer's self-declared humanist approach to life stories, no contradiction is seen between examining personal stories of agency and studying cultural representations. Do contradictions remain in this approach, are they important, and if so, how might they be resolved?

9.	What falls 'outside' stories, as they are currently researched, and how should social researchers address these exclusions?

8. Primary readings

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[1] This paper draws on Squire (2005, 2008) and Squire et al. (2008), though these articles also cover other aspects of and debates within narrative research.

[2] Psalm 91's invocation of pestilences may also be referred to here, and some readers have suggested links with Isaiah's prophecy of the road being made straight through the wilderness – certainly Isaiah is a text frequently used to discuss HIV. The analysis is pursued in more detail in Squire (2007).