JOURNAL OF PRAGMATIC CONSTRUCTIVISM

How to Tell the Story?
On Story and Narrative in the Research Process
– A pragmatic constructive approach

Lars Bo Henriksen

Aalborg University, Department of Development and Planning
Rendsburggade 14, DK-9000 Aalborg, Denmark
E-mail: lbh@plan.aau.dk

Abstract

In this paper I investigate the problems of data collection, data analysis and the final communication of the results of our research, when doing social science that we, ourselves, are part of. Central to this are the concepts life world, language games and stories and narratives. How do we collect stories and narratives in the field, how do we construct scientific narratives that are both reliable and valid? And finally, how do we, as researchers present our newly constructed narrative to a – hopefully – interested audience? That is, how do you, as a consumer of scientific narratives, read what I have been writing? Finally, I will discuss the problem of handing over research results to the people that we are doing research with. This is all done within a framework of a pragmatic constructivist paradigm.

1 Introduction – How to tell the story?

One of the special features of the pragmatic constructivist approach is its insistence on the direct participation in the research project, in the lifeworld of the actors involved (Nørreklit et al, 1983; Henriksen et al, 2004, pp. 145). The idea is to help develop new concepts and new language games in order to help solve real problems as they are found in the actor's lifeworld (Henriksen et al 2004, p. 149). In this article I will dig deeper into this idea and analyse the role of stories and narratives in the research process. The questions addressed is as follows. How do we collect data and how do we analyse data and communicate the results of our research when doing social science that we, ourselves are part of, as we are according to the pragmatic constructivist paradigm? That is, how to collect data, how to analyse these data and, finally, how to present the results of the research. How do we collect stories and narratives in the field, how do we construct scientific narratives that are both reliable and valid? And finally, how do we, as researchers present our newly constructed narrative to a – hopefully – interested audience? That is, how do you, as a consumer of scientific narratives, read what I have been writing? And, finally, how can we give something back to the actors, who's lifeworld we were invited to investigate?

The pragmatic constructivist approach constitutes a theory of reality and a conceptualising method (L. Nørreklit, 1973, 1978, 2004, 2009 and 2014; H. Nørreklit, et al 2010 and 2016; Henriksen et al, 2004; L. Nørreklit, 2020). The conceptualising method is a method that emphasises the life world of the actors and the processes that create their worlds and their realities. It is about capturing these change processes and developing methods that are actually able to treat these change processes as processes. World is here understood as the physical world and realities understood as worldviews, horizons. The conceptualising method and the theory of reality emphasises the realities logic and values

and it looks for what counts as facts in the actors' realities, and it looks for how the actors communicate their realities. The conceptualising method can point to the important reality of the actor, how he or she is acting and thinking in the change processes he or she is participating in.

The way to these realities is through language, through dialogues with the actors in question, through their language games and through their stories and their narratives. But it is more than that, because in the conceptualising method, and in the dialogues especially, it is the aim to develop new concepts that are actually able to grasp the worlds and the realities of the actors involved. The conceptualising method therefore also emphasises change process and treats these change process as something happening in time.

Language and language games are consequently important in all this (L. Nørreklit, 2020). First of all, there are stories and narratives – the stories and narratives the actors use to navigate their everyday life, the stories they tell each other in this everyday life and the stories they tell us as researchers when we ask them. Then there are the narratives we construct on the basis of the stories and narratives borrowed from the actors. These narratives should, in order to be scientific, be based on valid and reliable principles, methods, and the question here is of course how we can do that. We can do that through the development of good concepts that are actually describing the worlds and realities of the actors, and this consequently leads us to the next question, the question about the concepts we use to describe and understand. I will argue that a pragmatic constructivist paradigm is able to do exactly that. In the following I will analyse the possibilities of stories and narratives as means to get to know, understand and conceptualise. In doing that I will first take a closer look at stories and narratives as they are used to communicate by actors and researchers and also how stories and especially narratives act as medium for communicating research results. This is then an analysis of three different activities; the stories and narratives in the lifeworld of the actors, the stories and narratives as they are handed over to the researcher and finally the narratives as research results read by an audience. This could have some resemblance to Ricoeur's (1983) threefold mimesis, or to put it more bluntly; the stories and narratives the actors tell each other, the stories and narratives they tell me as a researcher and the narratives you read. In the final section I raise the question on how to use this insight in a cooperative relationship between actors and researchers. That is, how can we as researchers give something back to the people who lend us their stories and narratives in the first place?

2   Story and narrative

> '*Let us define plot. We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. 'The king died, and then the queen died' is a story. 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief' is a plot'.*
>   E. M. Forster, from Aspects of the Novel

Stories and narratives are everywhere. We tell stories and we construct narratives whenever we do something. Here we can make a distinction between stories and narratives, even if lines are somewhat blurred. Narratives are, well, yes, narrated. They have a beginning, middle, end structure, they have a plot … Stories are of somewhat different nature, they do not necessarily have a beginning, middle, end structure, they do not necessarily have a plot, they are not narrated.

Because stories and narratives are everywhere, and they are obviously also in the lifeworld of the actors. Stories and narratives are ways of communicating. The actors tell stories and construct narratives in their everyday life and through these stories and narratives they express – externalise – their realities (Nørreklit, 1983; Henriksen et al, 2004). If we could find, listen to and hold on to these stories and narratives, we could also learn about the ways in which the actors understand and know about the realities and life worlds.

Forster continues his distinction between plot (narrative) and story this way:

> '*The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again: 'The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king.' This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development. It suspends the time-sequence, it moves as far away from the story as its limitations will allow. Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say 'and then?' If it is in a plot we ask 'why?' That is the fundamental difference between these two aspects of the novel. A plot cannot be told to a gaping audience of cave-men or to a tyrannical sultan or to their modern descendant the movie-public. They can only be kept awake by 'and then-and then-'. They can only supply curiosity. But a plot demands intelligence and memory also.'*
>   E. M. Forster, from Aspects of the Novel

In the quote above Forster points to several of the themes in Ricoeur's hermeneutic of time and narrative (Ricoeur, 1983, 1991). Ricoeur wanted to investigate the relationship between time and narrative and the relationship between life and narrative. In the following I will be concerned with the latter. The problem addressed here is how we can use stories and narratives to capture, hold on to and understand the lives lived by living people in their lifeworlds and their stories and narratives. The purpose of this is to understand the realities of the actors and conceptualise this reality. Stories and narratives are the ways into these realities and the means to conceptualise.

Ricoeur is, like Forster, concerned with the concept of plot. Plot is described as a synthesis of heterogeneous elements. These elements are first a synthesis between the events and incidents in the world, which are multiple and discordant and the narrative, which is unified and complete – concordant. The plot is making one narrative out of multiple, making them into an intelligible whole. Second, the plot also organises actors, circumstances, discoveries, changes, and encounters, interactions, conflicts, cooperation, means and ends and results into a meaningful whole. This also makes it possible to follow and understand the narrative. Finally, the plots are organising time, first as a series of events and secondly as the narrative beginning, middle, end structure. In this way the plot is making a configuration out of a succession of events.

With this we have the elements plot, story (which has no plot) and narrative (which has a plot) and we can now conclude that the plot is organising a narrative into a series of events, it mediates between the incidents of interest (chaos) and the unified narrative (order), it has a primacy of concordance over discordance and it is also about both succession and configuration. But the plot is much more than that, it is also about causality. This is what Forster pointed at when he said 'if it is in a plot we ask 'Why?''. With the why-question we get to know why the queen died – there is a causal relation between the king's death and later the queen's death. It was because of grief. There is a causal relation, which we did not know about when the emplotted narrative was only a story.

This brings us to the question of the relationship between life and narrative. Ricoeur states the very obvious that life is lived and stories (narratives) are told. Ricoeur describes life as more than a biological phenomenon, more than experience. It is also action - – why we use the word actors. In this way life can be understood through narratives. Through our natural language we can understand actors and actions. We know what is meant by aim, project, means, circumstances, in all the semantics of action and we thereby have a network, which is familiar to us and by which we can make a synthesis of the heterogeneous. Secondly a narrative about life is comprehendible because of the symbolic resources we have at hand. We understand because we know what is meant by 'doing', 'being-able-to', 'knowing', 'how-to-do' and so on. Therefore, we are able to understand and recount actions. Finally, we know how to recount actions if they happen in a known context or we can get to know about the context through actions described in a narrative.

Here we could look to another of Ricoeur's ideas - – that of the fictional element in history and the historical element in fiction. If we tell a story with a plot, a narrative, and we claim that it is describing actual historical events; there will be some fictional elements in this narrative, as we are not able to totally copy the events. Of course not, as this recounting is the whole point of telling the story, the whole point of narrating. This is history. But a fictional narrative will also hold some historical elements to it, without which the narrative would be totally incomprehensible. Even the wildest of science fiction will have to have some elements, like say, love, death, conflict, food, transport, which is known to the reader. We always need some points of reference in, even a fictional narrative. This also has to do with our prejudices or our pre-knowledge (Gadamer, 1960/1992). We know of narrative, we know previous narratives and we know how to understand life through a narrative, because narrative is a way (the only way, see below) of knowing about life and identity (Ricoeur, 1991; Arendt, 1958). If we want to know about life, if we ask about life, we are told a story, most often in the form of a narrative and the same goes for identity (Ricoeur, 1991). If we ask the question 'who are you?' we get a narrative in return. A story with plots, a narrative recounting of lived life, a narrative with causal explanations, telling why this person is like he or she is and why and how he or she became that.

To conclude, the narrative is a reconfiguration of life and through a narrative we can get to know about lived life. Emplotment is unifying and explaining about the causalities in the heterogeneous events that the narrative wants to inform us about and with our previous experiences with narrative, with the semantics and the symbols, we are able to understand lived life through a narrative. Not necessarily the full story with all its twists and turns and also always a story that is emplotted, narrated, in a certain way and with a certain purpose, but hopefully enough to let us know and to let us understand.

3   Story, narrative and social science - how to tell a scientific story

The social sciences are very ill-equipped for describing and understanding processes and according to Ricoeur there is only one possible way, and that is through a narrative, as this is the only way we can come to terms with time:

> *'Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organised after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience'.*
> (Ricoeur, 1983, p. 52).

Ricoeur uses Aristotle to describe narrative and concludes that in narrative concordance, order, wins over discordance – narrative creates order in the chaotic. Ricoeur then uses Augustine to describe time and concludes that when dealing with time discordance wins out over concordance. It shows us the mystery of the human condition.

If we then, through stories, narratives and other means of communication, have learned about realities and life worlds, we are then confronted with another problem: how should we then communicate our new knowledge. That is, how should we be able to represent somebody else's reality? This is the problem of representation – which all research is confronted with – but in this case it is a special case, precisely because we are interested in processes, something happening in time. This brings us to method. The question is, then, first, how we collect stories and narratives from the field, so that we are able to learn from and of the actors. Learn of their lifeworld and their realities and learn how they understand, think and act. Next, we, as researchers, have to choose among the many different (discordant) stories and turn them in to a coherent (concordant) narrative that is able to represent the actors' realities and do that in a valid and reliable way. Finally, the reader of our narratives would have to interpret and understand our narratives, in order to know of actors we were interested in, in the first place. Each of the steps along that way has its own challenges and each step needs special attention and clarification. I will do this in the following way. First, I will analyse the way we as researchers collect stories and narratives. The questions here is how to handle the stories they tell. Second, we, as researchers, have to narrate a coherent narrative, which in turn can be read by someone else and finally, how would an audience receive the research narrative? In a final section I will discuss the problems of giving something back to the actors that lent us their stories in the first place.

4   The stories they tell

What are we then interested in? In the everyday life, in life worlds and the language games of course, but how? The answer to this question is the reality of the actors, their reality (virkelighed, Wirklichkeit in Danish and German), in the sense of a worldview that works for them. The access to this is through language as stories and narratives. First, what to look for in the reality? In our book 'Dimensions of Change' (Henriksen et al., 2004) we argued that realities could be studied as logic, facts, values and communication (Nørreklit, 2004, 2009, 2014; Nørreklit, et al., 2010). The logic is showing us the possibilities we have, if – then, and through the logic we are able to navigate in the world and sometimes, and sometimes not, predict the outcome of our actions. So, logics are concerned with our future. Facts, or what would count as facts, are another important ingredient of our reality. Facts concern what is and we are constantly negotiation what is. Fortunately, it is not everything that is up for negotiation all the time. Most facts we can agree upon, but sometimes we start arguing. This concerns our past. What has happened, what should and what could count as fact. Finally, we have values. Values make it possible for us to choose between futures. Values make it possible to choose between possibilities, because values tell us right from wrong and tells us what we like and what we would like to change. Without values nothing would happen, as we would not know how to choose and consequently not know what to choose and what to change.

With this we have a description, or structure, of our reality. The way we can know about realities is through communication, through the stories and narratives.

Actors in their everyday life, use stories and narratives to navigate, to coordinate and to justify their actions. This is hardly noticed as stories and narratives but is a constitutive part of lived life (see also Arendt, 1958). We, as researchers, observants, do not have direct access to this, but we can get a glimpse of it through e.g. interviews, participant observation or other similar research methods, which in turn, though, holds their own problems. This concerns the relationship between the actor and the observant. What we, as observants, can do is to listen to the actors and have them hand over their stories to us. This is a well-known procedure in social science. We can even record and transcribe the actor's tellings for further analysis. This again requires some skill on the observants side. In order to understand and even comprehend the stories told, the observant must possess some kind of pre-understanding (Gadamer, 1960/1992). Following Ricoeur some basic understanding of actions, language, symbols and time is a prerequisite for understanding the actors' actions and stories and narratives at all (Ricoeur, 1983). The observant necessarily has to be able to understand stories and narratives, but he or she also has to have some kind of insight into the actors' lifeworld and language and into the matter of interest (Sachverstehen, Gadamer, 1960/1992, pp. 323). With this pre-knowledge, prejudice, it should, at least in part, be possible to understand the stories told and be able to distinguish stories from narratives.

In ethnography, anthropology or any other field of social science, there are plenty of methods and techniques for gathering stories and narratives. Interviews, participant observation, etc. Czarniawska (2007) propose shadowing as a

method where researchers, by following the actors in their lifeworld, get to learn about the world and reality of the actors through the stories and narratives that are necessary for that lifeworld to function as intended (Czarniawska, 2007). The crux of all this is to get out of the ivory tower and get in contact with real people in their real-life settings and listen to them, collect their stories and narratives and through this get access to their realities.

In much of social science the truth of the stories told is of great concern. That is the correspondence between the events told about and the narrative presented. As we saw above, it is not possible to make a complete representation, reproduction, of the actions and events in question – that is why we need narratives. The events were chaotic, discordant, and they are made concordant in the unified and possible logical narrative. Therefore, a quest for correspondence is impossible. On the other hand, we do not want to collect and present illusions (Nørreklit, 1978; Henriksen et al, 2004). The actors should not be able to present illusions and fiction to us, unless, of course, lies and illusions are part of our research interest. So, here we are confronted with a dilemma. But if we left the idea of correspondence and instead acknowledged that truth is constructed – not out of the blue, but in close connection with the actors involved and their worlds and realities, then we might be able to collect stories and narratives that are able to show us realities and through them be able to establish an account of what is and what is the case.

> *'Truth about reality must be based on observation. The observational basis must be thorough and extensive or sufficient. Superficially, inadequate and insufficient observation leads to superficial knowledge, which does not express insights. To establish a solid observational basis is therefore a primary task in constructing truth'.*
> (Nørreklit, 2009, p. 281)

But this truth can only be constructed in close connection to realities, in direct contact with the actors involved. But as we shall see in the next section we need more than that – we also need scientific reflection (see below). So, therefore we need to engage directly with the actors in order to get to know their realities, but this, then, brings another important question. How will the researcher influence the process of gathering stories and narratives? Possibly not in a passive fashion, just listening, as the sheer presence of the researcher is a different situation, than the situations of the actors' ordinary everyday life. There is a difference between a life world and a life world where a researcher is present. In addition to that we, as researchers, are asking questions, and these questions are not neutral, but are, in order to be genuine questions, asked with an intention (Gadamer, 1960/1992). So, there is something here that needs to be addressed – the role of the researcher in the process. I will return to this problem in the final section.

To conclude this section, we could return to Ricoeur, when he stated that stories and narratives are ways of understanding actions, events, incidents and we can do that, thanks to our pre-understanding and direct involvement with the actors. Data collection, field research, shadowing etc. are all names for the same: direct research with and for the actors involved, and this could – as we shall see later - even be extended further through the researcher's direct involvement in the process.

5   The narrative I tell

> *'Life-world realities determine how it (the reality) functions in its environment. It is not sufficient to observe a life-world to understand it. One has to understand its realities: the dynamics that move things, in order to distinguish between the apparent and the real in the world we live in. Observations should be combined with critical scientific reflection. To understand reality requires more than observing the world's phenomena with the naked eye. It includes an uncovering of what is going on. There has to be a disclosure of realities as experienced life-world.'*
> (Nørreklit, 2009, pp. 281).

Scientific reflection can take many forms. Interviews can be transcribed and analysed, observation notes can be analysed, and so on. In order to do justice to the stories the actors tell, the stories I tell must include an interpretation and a plot, so that the stories presented to the reader (see below) can convey the message that I as an observant wanted to bring in the first place – and we got to, for both scientific, as well as ethical reasons. Without this narrative we only had to deliver the actors' stories and narratives in a 'raw' form, without the mediation of the observant, without the necessary scientific reflection. But that would not work, as this would only bring an incomprehensible, seemingly discordant story, as it most often contains both stories and narratives and is chaotic. We cannot present field notes and transcripts as research results.

Scientific reflection, interpretation and a scientific narrative are necessary and there has to be openness about the process that produced that scientific narrative. The process of narrating will always take place, no matter what. Let alone the fact that the observant has chosen the actors' story and presents that and edited it - narrated it. 'Storytellers

own the right to narrate' says Boje (2001, p. 7). The observant will always only have some stories; there will always be other stories that the observant did not hear. So, it is a selection of stories and in order to do justice to the actors and their stories and narratives, the process has to be transparent and displayed in full all the way from the encounter with the actors to the final research narrative. This is method.

The analysis of data – field notes, transcripts etc. – can take many forms, be it discourse analysis, narrative analysis etc. E.g. Boje (2001) presents several analyses that can guide the process of making discordant field findings into a concordant narrative. In this we need theories. Not theories in the form of Euclidian/Newtonian theories that are rationalist in the sense that they, as theories hold the truth and the field data are only there to confirm the coherence of the theory. Instead theories take on another role. As one student once said our theories can act as a spotlight and highlight certain aspect of the field data and leave other aspects in the dark. This could e.g. be ideas of systems and lifeworlds, where Habermas' colonisation thesis could be used to analyse stories and narratives from modern bureaucracies (see e.g. Henriksen, 2015). Not to confirm the colonisation thesis, but to inform us about important aspects in the stories and narratives we collect and consequently of realities and lifeworlds. With this, theories can act as catalysts for certain perspectives that we would otherwise have neglected, theories can point to important elements – logics, facts and values – in our field work which we have not seen from our own everyday conceptions of the subjects of interest. This changed attitude towards theory also points to another conception of truth in the narratives we produce. In science the truth lies in the coherence of the theory and in the correspondence between the scientific narrative and the data and the correspondence between the data and the phenomena in question. This is not the case in a pragmatic constructivist perspective. Coherence and correspondence are of course desirable to a certain degree, but this alone cannot secure the validity and reliability of our studies. Instead we have to rely on the relation to the actors and to the openness – transparency – of our narratives. That is, we have to show how we collected our stories, how we reflected and how we created our narratives, so it is possible for the reader to see what we are actually doing.

The writing of narratives that claim to be a record and an analysis of events in time will always face the problem, even the dilemma, that it is caught between history and fiction, as we saw above. Therefore, transparency is the only way to secure the truth of the matter.

6 The narrative you read

How to get meaning out of the narrative we produce based on our findings in the field? Well, that is no different from any other hermeneutic task. It is all about understanding, about fusion of horizons etc. (Gadamer, 1962/1992; Henriksen, 2002). The narrative, which is the result of the observant's fieldwork, analyses and scientific reflection, is a special narrative, complying with the rules of this type of research: honesty, transparency, trustworthiness – reliability and validity. The name of the narrative is less important; we can call it a case study, a research report, a research paper, even a book if it is long enough. The important thing is that the narrative presents a story of interest to the reader, which makes the reader wiser and maybe even happy, surprised or better at his or her job? It could also make the reader angry, even furious and maybe the reader wants to do something in order to change something. Several fictional narratives have been able to do that, like Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. Books like that certainly have had a history of effect (Gadamer, 1962/1992, pp. 300).

As noted above, our narratives should bring order into the chaotic set of events presented by the actor in his or her stories or it should bring chaos into, or question, what seemed obvious. We also saw how both fictional and historical elements are necessary in the account of the actors' actions. So, the idea is to tell an interesting story as a narrative that conveys a scientific message and present a series of concepts able to describe and understand the realities and lifeworlds of the actors.

So, how do we read the kind of narrative we call case stories, cases, research reports, books, or … ? How do I, as a reader, get the knowledge that the author of a case, tries to convey to me? Science is about truth seeking, we want to know 'what is' and 'how it is' and the purpose of the scientific narrative is to inform you, and me as readers, about scientific findings. The question for the social sciences is: how do we achieve this truth from the narratives that are the result of our research? Most would recognise that scientific truth as correspondence and coherence is not a possible path to follow for the social sciences, but what can we do then?

We have all been there – we do field work, transcribe interviews, we write case stories and we argue that this case story conveys a general lesson. Then we are met with the usual scientific sledgehammer: 'How can you prove that?' Despite the rudeness often involved in such questioning, it is obvious that anyone concerned with case study research should be able to answer such question. First, we could reject it simply for its rudeness, for its naivety and lack of knowledge about the ability of case studies to convey new knowledge and simply for its ignorance about science and science theory and method in general. We could also reject it for its implicit correspondence criteria and its use of a scientific truth criterion where it does not belong. But we could also do something else; we could confront the question by showing that cases actually are an important and indispensable method in the social sciences.

Flyvbjerg (2006 & 2007) has intensively worked on case studies and their ability to show us social lifeworlds and realities – especially the misunderstandings circling around the 'how can you prove that?' question. Flyvbjerg is focusing on five specific misunderstandings:

First misunderstanding states that general, theoretical and context-independent knowledge is more valuable than concrete, practical and context-dependent knowledge. That was what produced the sledgehammer argument in the first place. That is, knowledge produced by Euclidian/Newtonian models of science is much more valuable than a case study, because it produces 'eternal' knowledge through context-independent and timeless procedures and methods like e.g. the hypothetical deductive method. But this is exactly the problem with the Euclidian/Newtonian model of knowledge production. Because of its timelessness it is unable to describe the kind of changes we are interested in, in the social sciences. So, all its vices untold and all its truth claims and claims to validity and reliability, it is still unable to show us changes in social settings. This last point is also why we need the case stories. Cases can, through context dependent knowledge, develop a very nuanced view of lifeworlds and realities – can create a concordant narrative out of the chaotic. It can provide concrete experience from actors in the field and knowledge can be achieved via proximity and feedback from these actors.

The second misunderstanding states that one cannot generalize on the basis of an individual case; therefore, the case study cannot contribute to scientific development. Well, that is doubtful. First, it can definitely work as falsification; most theories fall short when they meet cases from the real world. Think of economic theories that have been proven wrong time and time again when they meet the world outside the ivory tower. It only took one black swan to disprove a theory stating that all swans are white. Secondly, there are hardly any generalisations in the social sciences, as there are no 'laws of nature' in the social sciences.

The third misunderstanding states that the case study is most useful for generating hypotheses; that is, in the first stage of a research process, whereas other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building. This is just as doubtful as the two first misunderstandings. Flyvbjerg has in his study of urban planning shown how power can be disguised as rationality and this is not a hypothesis, but is demonstrated through his case study (Flyvbjerg, 1991).

The fourth misunderstanding states that the case study contains a bias toward verification, that is, a tendency to confirm the researcher's preconceived notions, the researcher's prejudices. Well, not necessarily so, as we, in a case study often question our prejudices and preconceptions and are surprised by our findings and we learn from them. The stories and narratives we meet in the actors' lifeworld are often much more interesting and entertaining and we get to learn about life worlds and realities in a way no other method can. If, then, the validity and reliability is in question, transparency should do the job – securing validity and reliability.

Finally, the fifth misunderstanding states that it is often difficult to summarise and develop general propositions and theories on the basis of specific case studies. Yes, maybe, but so what! As we saw above the concept of theory is different. It is not about producing timeless, epistemic theories, but about learning of and from living people in their lifeworlds. Through their stories and narratives we, as researchers, learn about, get insight into worlds and realities in a way we would not have been able to, through any other research strategy. Especially changes and change processes are disclosed through the case study and remembering Ricoeur's (1983, p. 52) statement about narrative as the only means to describe and understand changes in social settings, the case study is an important and indispensible method in the social sciences. This we could take even further and claim that the case study narrative is a result in its own right; the narrative is a result in itself, like a novel, able to convey a certain message about events and changes. This narrative should of course be interesting, even exiting, maybe provocative. Flyvbjerg (2006) concludes that 'It should be unthinkable to the bystander to say 'So, what?'' about the case study narrative.

The case study narrative, which we as researchers produce, should be interesting, exiting and provocative and we do not want the reader to say: 'So what?'. We could say that this would be the ultimate test. But what is it then that the reader learns from the narrative? We know of Jesus' parables – the prodigal son, the good shepherd, the good Samaritan. When we hear stories like that, let's say in the church, we do not ask the 'how can you prove that?' question. Of course not, we are not dealing with science. Instead we listen and we hear the story and we hear the message. But what if we now employed the same strategy to our research narratives? A parable is a story that conveys a moral or religious lesson. Every parable is a narrative. That is, it tells a story, often conducted as beginning, middle, end structure and a plot. The parables are also stories that convey a lesson consisting of the story itself and the lesson, called the parables' trop-ical meaning (Boucher, 1981, pp. 25). The meaning of the parable is not just to entertain. It is to bring about a change of mind in the listener – or as we would say, change the worldview, the reality, of the listener – disturb their reality and their prejudices. Finally, the parables convey a religious or ethical lesson, so we learn something. If we now turn to the scientific narrative, could our cases then, be a parable? And could they convey a scientific lesson? If, instead of the moral or religious lessons it should convey a scientific lesson. Then the scientific narrative would tell a story – hopefully an interesting one and at the same time present a scientific lesson to the reader. Is that at all possible? Yes, if we think of e.g. Flyvbjerg's (1991) own writings on urban planning, he is able to present a story that is interesting in its own right, but at the same time he is able to present the interesting scientific message that what is

presented as rational plans for urban development can be, and very often are, means in a power game. So, the lesson is, in this case, that rationality and power are inseparable.

7 The narratives we construct – together!

So far we have only seen the research process as a series of events – the field work – the stories they tell, the reflection by the researcher – the stories I tell as a researcher and the reading of the scientific narrative that is the result of the stories – the stories you read. This description of the research process is a sequential description and could be criticised for exactly that. Our research narrative is most often just descriptive and published in the ivory tower, and it is very unlikely that the people whose stories and narratives we borrowed will ever encounter that ivory tower. The question is therefore how we can find ways of using our research results for the benefit of the people, who lend us their stories in the first place, so our research will not just be descriptive, but also have some real impact and not just be for the benefit of our academic careers.

This question is closely connected to another problem that we saw above, the question of the researcher's presence in the research process. Some would see the researcher's presence and direct involvement in the research process as a problem; the pragmatic constructivist approach introduced the concept of dialogue in order to handle the problem of the researcher's presence and direct involvement (Henriksen et al., 2004). With the dialogue the researcher becomes an active part in the process and this active participation becomes an ideal, not a problem. Through the dialogues with the actors, the researchers are able to hand over research results directly and even assist in the development of new concepts and new language games. In this way we collapse the entire research process and instead of the sequential process described above – just servicing the ivory tower – we can now also add something to the actors and their lifeworld.

The research process could now look like this (Nørreklit et al., 1983; Henriksen et al., 2004): The researchers, that we now call observants, get into a dialogue with the actor in the field. The result of this dialogue is, in the first place, data about the actors' realities and lifeworlds. This data is a bundle of chaotic, discordant stories and narratives, but, hopefully, it is also a process where observants and actors jointly create new narratives and new concepts. After an encounter it is the job of both observant and actor to reflect upon the encounter. The actor should think of which problems he or she wants to do something about and how to solve them and the observant should use his or her entire scientific arsenal to reflect upon the data he or she got from the first encounter. It is also the job of the observant to create an ordered, concordant narrative out of all the chaotic data collected. In this the scientific arsenal could consist of a set of theories and methods like the ones presented by Boje, Czarniawska and Flyvbjerg above. When the actor and observant have reflected and developed new concepts and narratives they are ready for the next encounter. This is a circular movement of encounters and reflection and a constant development of the language used to confront the problems of interest. The number of encounters varies, depending on the project, but the outcome should in all cases be as follows: A new narrative describing the realities, the lifeworlds and consequently the problems in question. This is a conceptualising method (Nørreklit, 1978; Nørreklit et al., 1983; Henriksen et al., 2004). Through carefully crafted dialogues the observant and the actors jointly create new concepts and language games, new stories and narratives and with that, they are much better prepared for solving the problems at hand. (Henriksen, 2016; Henriksen, 2019). This is reported in a research narrative (be it a book, an article or a research report) of interest for the research community. But, ultimately, as an aid, and even a necessity, for the actors' problem solving, the new stories and narratives would of course be preferable. That is, the actors and the observants have jointly created a new language game and a new narrative that is able to handle and probably guide the actions that can solve the problems that the actors face. Again, this of course requires the utmost openness from the researchers, as this is the only way to secure the validity and reliability of the research. Therefore, this method is also about ethics in the research process. We do not just borrow the stories and narratives from the actors, as we would using other research methods, but we are able to hand something valuable back to the actors. So, with the conceptualising method we open up the possibility for the actors to get something in return for their willingness to participate and we solve the problem of the researcher's influence as we make that into an integrated and necessary part of the research process.

8 Conclusions

Stories and narratives are everywhere and awareness of their role in the research process is a necessity for social research. In this article I have presented four different roles for stories and narratives in social research: The stories and narratives that the actors tell each other, the stories and narratives that are necessary for them to navigate their everyday life in their lifeworld. The stories and narratives we as researchers hear from the actors and the narratives we produce as researchers based on the narratives we collect (data). Finally, there are the stories and narratives we (the observant) develop jointly with the actors – a joint conceptualisation of the problems. Each of the roles are necessary for the research process and for a successful outcome and sometimes it can be hard to distinguish between them, as we are not always able to engage the field in a way where we can contribute to the final problem solving. But less will do, as long

as we are aware of the different roles of stories and narratives. Data collection, in the Czarniawska fashion, analysis in the Boje fashion and a final case study narrative in the Flyvbjerg tradition can be ends in themselves and just as interesting, but ultimately, we ought to give something back to the actors in the field and by the creation of new concepts and narratives help the actors solve their problems. This last role of the stories and narratives, the ones we create together with the actors in the field, solves some, if not many of the problems of this type of social research. The pragmatic constructivist approach gets the research out of the ivory tower. Instead of just writing articles for a scientific audience and for the benefit of our own CVs, we are able to give something back. We solve the problem of the researcher's presence in the research process, by making it into a necessary and valuable contribution to the process and we also make questions of ethics into a central theme in the research process. We are able to follow social processes in the making and thereby contribute to social research where we take both actors and the processes they are involved in seriously on a scientifically and ethically responsible basis.

References

Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human condition*. University of Chicago Press.

Boje, David. 2001. *Narrative methods*. Sage Publications.

Boucher, Madeleine I. 1981. *The Parables*. Veritas Publications. Dublin.

Christensen, Jens, Ed. 2004. *Vidensgrundlag for handling*. (Knowledge base for action). Aalborg University Press. Aalborg.

Czarniawska, Barbara. 2007. *Shadowing and other field methods*. Liber. CBS Press.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1962/1992. *Truth and Method*. New York. Continuum

Henriksen, Lars Bo. 2002. *Kvalitet i kvalitativ samfundsvidenskab – En historie om filosofisk hermeneutik og kvalitative metoder i samfundsvidenskaberne* (Quality in Qualitative Social Science – A Story of Philosophical Hermeneutics and qualitative Methods in the Social Sciences). Aalborg University Press. Aalborg.

Henriksen, Lars Bo et al. 2004. *Dimensions of change*. Copenhagen. CBS Press.

Henriksen, Lars Bo. 2015. Industriel ledelse: Om Ingeniører, systemer og livsverdner. (Industrial management: On engineers, systems and life worlds) In Hertel & Fast Eds. (2015) *Ledelsesfilosofi og Praksis: Dilemmaer og paradokser.* (Management philosophy and praxis: Dilemmas and paradoxes). Aalborg University Press. Pp. 51-72.

Henriksen, Lars Bo. 2016. Change, concepts and the conceptualising method. *Proceedings of Pragmatic Constructivism*, Vol. 6, Nr. 2, 2016, s. 29-33.

Henriksen, Lars Bo. 2019. Language Games, Dialogue and the Other. *Proceedings of Pragmatic Constructivism*, vol 9 nr.1, s. 25-30.

Flyvbjerg, Bent. 1991. *Rationalitet og magt. Det konkretes videnskab*, København: Akademisk Forlag. Also in English as 'Rationality and power – Democracy in action' (1996). Chicago University Press.

Flyvbjerg, Bent. 2006. Five misunderstandings about case study methods. *Qualitative Inquiry*, Volume 12 Number 2. SAGE Publications. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363

Flyvbjerg, Bent. 2006. *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again.* Cambridge University Press.

Forster, E. M. 2005/1927. *Aspects of the novel and related writings*. London. Penguin Classics.

Nørreklit, Lennart. 1973. *Concepts: their nature and significance for metaphysics and epistemology*. Odense University studies in philosophy. vol. 2.

Nørreklit, Lennart. 1978. *Problem orienteret forskningspraksis og den reale virkeligheds konstitution.* (Problem oriented research practice and the constitution of the real reality). Aalborg University Press. Aalborg.

Nørreklit et al. 1983. *Aktørsmetoden* (The Actors Method). Poseidon

Nørreklit, Lennart. 2004. Hvad er virkelighed? (What is reality?) In Christensen, Jens (Ed) *Vidensgrundlag for handling* (Knowledge base for action). Aalborg University Press. Aalborg.

Nørreklit, Lennart. 2009. Konstruktion af sandhed – sandhed som integration og læring (Construction of truth – truth as integration and learning). In Rasmussen & Aarup Jensen: *Læring og forandring – Tværfaglige perspektiver.* (Learning and Change – cross disciplinary perspectives). Aalborg. Aalborg University Press.

Nørreklit, Lennart. 2014. *Reality as a construction*. Working Paper. Aalborg University.

Nørreklit, Lennart. 2020. Pragmatic Constructivist Perspective on Language Games. *Proceedings of Pragmatic Constructivism*. Vol. 10, No. 1, 11 – 28.

Nørreklit, Hanne; Nørreklit, L & Mitchell, F. 2010. Towards a paradigmatic foundations of accounting practice. *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 6. https://doi.org/10.1108/09513571011065844

Nørreklit, H, Nørreklit, L & Mitchell, F. 2016. Understanding practice generalisation: opening the research/practice gap. ***Qualitative Research in Accounting & Management***, vol. 13, No. 3, 278-302. https://doi.org/10.1108/QRAM-09-2015-0088

Ricoeur, Paul. 1983. ***Time and Narrative***. Volume 1. University of Chicago Press. Chicago.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1991. Narrative Identity. ***Philosophy Today***. Vol. 35, No. 1 (Spring) p.73. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday199135136