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Fundamental Assumptions in Narrative Analysis: Mapping the Field

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Abstract

The richness of narrative analysis resides in its unruly openness, but points of reference are needed to tame the variety in the field. This article suggests that researchers should grapple with two fundamental questions when conducting narrative analysis. The first pertains to the status attributed to narrative: it is defined as the very fabric of human existence or as one representational device among others? Emphasizing one answer over the other means mobilizing different theories of representation and therefore, suggesting different articulations between "narrative" and "reality." The second question refers to the perspective developed on narrative: Is it defined mostly as the characteristic of an approach, an object of investigation or both? Different methodological implications are associated with that choice. The article claims that dominant trends in narrative analysis originate in the way researchers answer those two questions.

Keywords

Qualitative Methods, Narrative Analysis, Narrative Research, Approaches

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The richness of narrative analysis resides in its unruly openness, but points of reference are needed to tame the variety in the field. This article suggests that researchers should grapple with two fundamental questions when conducting narrative analysis. The first pertains to the status attributed to narrative: it is defined as the very fabric of human existence or as one representational device among others? Emphasizing one answer over the other means mobilizing different theories of representation and therefore, suggesting different articulations between "narrative" and "reality." The second question refers to the perspective developed on narrative: Is it defined mostly as the characteristic of an approach, an object of investigation or both? Different methodological implications are associated with that choice. The article claims that dominant trends in narrative analysis originate in the way researchers answer those two questions. Keywords: Qualitative Methods, Narrative Analysis, Narrative Research, Approaches

Qualitative researchers have been experimenting with a multitude of methodological strategies to handle the complexity of their empirical material and hence the lives of their research participants. One of these is narrative analysis. The understanding that stories are woven through our personal and social lives and that human beings have a natural impulse to narrate (White, 1980) is being acknowledged by a growing number of scholars. As a result, scholarship has come to recognize that examining the ways in which we "story the world" contributes to understanding how we create meaning (Mishler, 1995, p. 117).

The growing interest and the numbers of contributions in narrative analysis in recent years have added to the field's dynamism (Wiles, Crow, & Pain, 2011). These contributions also add to the multiplication of definitions and assumptions underlying narrative analysis. It is therefore not surprising that a coherent portrayal of the state of narrative analysis is difficult, as has been acknowledged by many specialists in social sciences, literature and humanities (Bamberg, 2006; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Czarniawska, 2004; Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004; Frost, 2009; D. Herman, Jahn, & Ryan, 2007; Kohler Riessman, 1993; Mishler, 1995; Stanley & Temple, 2008). Narrative analysis "remains a relatively open intellectual space characterized by diversity but also fragmentation" (Stanley & Temple, 2008, p. 276).

For these reasons, feeling disoriented when approaching this field, especially as a novice, is to be expected. In fact, at first, we found ourselves struggling with very basic questions such as: Do these narrative studies have anything in common aside from the use of the word "narrative"? If so, what? On what grounds do they claim to be narrative studies? What are the different understandings of the term "narrative"? How do we recognize one? At what level can we situate the differences between those contributions? Do narrative studies share a common analytical process? As researchers and teachers, we needed points of reference for such basic questions, if we wanted to understand and introduce our students to the diversity in

narrative analysis in a way that wouldn't be prescriptive or partial to one tradition. Therefore, we decided to undertake a scan of many narrative studies and suggest a map of the field (We owe these metaphors to Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). This article is the product of our attempt.

Specialists have offered useful typologies of narrative analysis (e.g., Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Elliot, 2005; Kohler Riessman, 2008; Mishler, 1995; Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010) or comparative explanations and applications of different views on narrative analysis (e.g., Andrews, Day Sclater, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2004; Holstein & Gubrium, 2012; Kohler Riessman, 1993, 2008). Some methodological contributions have suggested specific methods or canons for narrative analysts (e.g., Coulter & Smith, 2009; Czarniawska, 2004). While we acknowledge our debt to those important contributions, we were still looking for a map that would be more encompassing of the large variation governing the use of the terms "narrative" and "narrative analysis." Indeed, in an era of interdisciplinary and theoretically eclectic studies, we need a categorization of narrative studies that transcends the disciplinary boundaries and embraces the humanities, literary and social sciences traditions as well. We also need a categorization that encompasses many schools or trends in narrative analysis rather than pinpointing differences among one school. Finally, we need a typology that covers the more marginal but still present understanding of "narrative" and "narrative analysis" (e.g., narrative analysis as an ontological position). For those reasons, we produced a typology based on what we call the fundamental assumptions underlying narrative analysis, those key elements that are present in all studies and are part of their very theoretical or epistemological foundations. We also want to direct attention to the methodological consequences of those assumptions.

Concretely, this article asserts that the sense of perplexity that typically arises when trying to define narrative analysis can be addressed, at least partly, by identifying the answers to two key questions that each narrative study offers either implicitly or explicitly. The first question pertains to the status attributed to narrative. Is narrative the very fabric of human existence or a representational device amongst others? Tackling this question forces readers and creators of narrative research to reflect on the theory of representation mobilized and therefore on the epistemological ramifications of specific narrative studies. The second question concerns the perspective on narrative analysis. Is narrative mostly the quality of an approach, an object of investigation or both? This question helps readers and creators of narrative analysis papers to identify the methodological implications of specific studies. Although we rarely find clear-cut answers to these questions of status and perspective, we believe that identifying their emphasis in specific narrative analysis studies will help highlight the basic distinctions between them, therefore making it easier to navigate the field of narrative analysis.

We think that analyzing studies through the prism offered by our two questions will help us underline the conceptual and pragmatic implications of the positions taken by narrative analysts. But mainly we insist that being conscious of and searching for the assumptions underlying empirical narrative studies may help newcomers to grasp the variety of positions and thus clarify what we believe to be major sources of confusion that one might experience as a neophyte reader and creator of narrative analysis.

Questions of Method

The Empirical Bases of the Study

Since "no one will ever read everything that has been written about stories and storytelling" (Frank, 2010, p. 17) we have conducted a partial bibliographic search, we aimed at identifying a non-probabilistic contrastive group of empirical studies in the broadest array of disciplines possible: sociology, political science, gerontology, education, communication,

narratology, philosophy, psychology, criminology, literature, health sciences, organization and management studies as well as methodological contributions to narrative analysis. We only reviewed studies self-identified as using or relating to narrative analysis, narrative approach, or narrative research, or else explicitly use the term narrative or its declensions in their title, abstract or among their key words. Our exploration revealed no strong and stable distinctions in the use of the terms narrative analysis, narrative approach or narrative research. On these bases, several dozen studies were selected initially over time and through snowballing technique, we gathered some more studies that added diversity to our selection. The fact that one of us is trained in social sciences and the other is also in humanities and literature has helped us to cover a large territory. However, this selection presents at least two limitations. The first is the relatively small size of the pool of research covered. Indeed, there have been many other empirical narrative studies published. We had to keep the number of studies manageable for the kind of analysis we had planned. Moreover, because we are not familiar with the totality of published empirical narrative studies, we cannot claim that a specific study is representative of a large number of studies in its discipline or school. The selected studies were chosen to illustrate the variety of possible answers to our questions of status and perspective in narrative analysis. Therefore this article does not claim to cover all the influential works in the field or delve into much depth or nuance for each work mentioned.

Constructing Typologies

Methodologists identify at least two ways of building typologies. One of them follows the path of comprehensive (Weberian) sociology along which a set of abstract and ideal types are deduced from a theory and specific units (studies in our case) are compared to them. A more inductive approach, trial and error, is also possible where the analysts, on the basis of concrete units (studies), will identify key units, or nodes, that exemplify a larger number of units (Grémy & Le Moan, 1976).

As acknowledged by a Schnapper (2003), building a typology, like many interpretative practices, is often a messy process that borrows from the idealized deductive and inductive approaches presented above. In our case, it certainly was so. Analyzing a few studies; summarizing them; identifying differences among them; trying to distill those differences into a name that would become a "type"; defining the type on the basis of identified differences that would become our criteria; operationalizing the criteria; applying them with partial success to other studies; revising the definitions, operationalizing the criteria and the types; splitting a type into two different ones; fusing types together; and getting rid of some altogether. These are operations that we did, multiple times, throughout this discovery process. However, the methodological studies that we read before and during the process, the typologies already published on narrative analysis and our own academic backgrounds were also solicited as we crafted these typologies. For example, the distinction identified between narrative analysis that focuses on the story and on the telling of the story (Mishler, 1995; Phoenix et al., 2010) was prominent in our minds when we shaped our own distinctions (see the perspectives typology). The typologies we suggest below stems from our understanding of previous methodological contributions and the struggles we had with our sample of empirical narrative studies.

We went from seven typologies, to four, to two. One of us would suggest a typology with its type definitions and operationalization criteria. The other would check them for consistency, absence of duplication and logic as well as test them against a set of narrative studies best known to him or her. Another version of the typology, more complete yet tighter, would emerge. For instance, we came to fuse together the initial typologies based on "level of analysis" and "depth" on the one hand and the ones based on "form" and "definition" on the other. Because they were overlapping, those fine distinctions were abandoned. The newer

typology would then be tested and tweaked by the co-researcher and the process would resume until we were satisfied that we had the most generic, yet useful, typology and that studies in our sample could properly find their place within one type or another in each typology.

The fact that we have different academic backgrounds made the process longer, for each had not only to be convinced of the potential of his or her version of a typology, but each had to defend it to someone who did not share the other's academic "common sense," all those facts and procedures we take for granted when doing qualitative research. Being such a team helped us construct a typology that attained the desired level of generality, able to cross disciplinary borders while still being heuristic for newcomers to narrative analysis.

This procedure led us to identify two underlying assumptions in the selected studies that are at the basis of two typologies. The next section of the article presents the results and discusses our findings regarding the status assumption. The following section presents the results and discusses our findings pertaining to the perspective assumption.

Results. Two Key Questions in Narrative Analysis

The Status of Narrative

One of the main reasons that narrative analysis can be so appealing resides in the belief that narratives or stories hold special powers as windows into the individual and social world. It should be noted that some critics have opposed the view that narrative is essential to human experience and have even scorned the intense interest narratives have gathered (Sartwell, 2000; 2006). Sartwell claims that we are in an era obsessed with language and that we should acknowledge that most of our daily experience is not articulated in words. We see, hear, smell, feel much more than what we say, write or otherwise express. In the same vein, it has been suggested that attributing special status to narrative is ethnocentric and that other expressive acts should be taken into account and analyzed alongside it (Schiff, 2006). But what is the nature of this power and where does it come from? These questions probe at one's fundamental beliefs about the status of narrative. We usually find that the answer to this question in specific studies varies, in degree, on the one hand, from focusing on narratives as the very fabric of human existence and, on the other, seeing narrative as but one important tool humans use to communicate information, identity, and ideas.

Figure 1. Status of Narrative in Self-Identified Narrative Studies
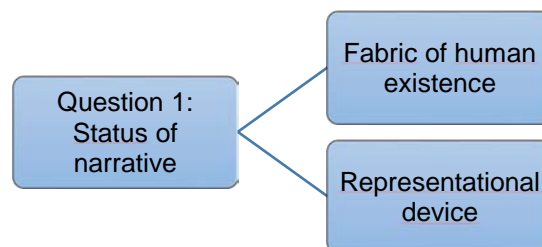
Those two positions are not mutually exclusive. In some cases they can overlap, though not always in an explicit and overt manner, but pre-eminence is often given to one position or the other.

Narrative as a part of human existence itself.

Narratives sometimes interest researchers because they are thought to be connected to deep structures of human existence. Hardy's observation reflects this core idea: "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative" (1987, p. 1). In this view, narratives play a fundamental role in structuring the human mind and rationality (L. Herman & Vervaeck, 2005b; Sarbin, 1986). On this basis, MacIntyre (1981) asserted that narrative are so deeply ingrained in us that, we, humans are essentially "story-telling animals." In the same vein, Fisher (1984) popularized the term "Homo narrans" to designate the human species. When understood in this way:

> …narrative and narrativity [are] concepts of social epistemology and social ontology. These concepts posit that it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities, […] social life is itself storied and narrative is an ontological condition of social life. (Somers, 1994, pp. 606, 614)

This view can have far-reaching consequences stemming from the claim that narratives actually create the social world (Bruner, 1990; Keats, 2009, p. 181; Polkinghorne, 1988).

Narrative as a representational device.

In other studies, the focus is not so much on the connection between mind and narrative but on examining the use and effects of narrative on a more practical level, closer to rhetoric. They focus on narrative as a way to represent experience in an organized fashion in order to produce persuasive messages, meanings, and also to motivate or legitimate actions. In such research, narrative is approached mainly as a communication or representational tool. This approach often assumes a distinction between the representation and that which is represented.

We can find studies suggesting, if not a playful, at least an instrumental rapport to narratives: "Narrative allows us to try on future behavior much as we can try on different suits of clothes before buying one of them" (Brody, 2002, p. 202). Narratives, as a way to represent experience, are hence tailored, consciously or not, and have an effect on the narrator and the audience. This idea is fundamental to the view that changing a narrative can bring transformation either at an organizational (Dunford & Jones, 2000), group (Powell, 2011) or individual level, both psychologically and physically (Ramirez-Esparza & Pennebaker, 2006).

Discussion: Articulating the Status of Narrative

The status of narrative in specific studies is often a matter of degree. Authors might justify the importance of studying narratives by making an essentialist claim about them (they are the very fabric of human life) and then go on to study them empirically purely as a means of communication. Nevertheless, identifying where the status emphasis is placed in specific narrative studies is useful, for it has significant ramifications, mainly regarding the representation theory relied upon. Indeed, studying narrative requires adopting, explicitly or not, a theory of representation. Identifying the underlying theory behind specific narrative studies can help us appreciate distinctions between narrative studies and also guide us toward certain criteria by which to evaluate them.

In this regard, we have to note that the rapport between narrative and reality can take a variety of forms (Shenhav, 2006). Some narrative studies rally around descriptive realism and the correspondence theory of truth. They postulate that narratives and reality are two separate things and that the former can help us access the latter. In this perspective, narratives are bridges to the reality "out there" that the researcher wants to study. For example, narratives about childhood can be a path to understand the lived experience of childhood. The congruence between narrative and reality then becomes a central preoccupation. It is, thus, possible to assume that narrative portrays or represents real life experiences in a transparent fashion. This stance is ingrained in the definition of narrative that Labov uses: "a particular way of reporting past events, in which the order of a sequence of independent clauses is interpreted as the order of the events referred to" (2006, p. 37). Other studies, emphasizing the representational elements of narrative, claim that narrative is a deforming mirror of the lived experience. For example, Presser (2009) says that criminologists are often skeptical of offenders' narratives because they might distort the facts in order to manipulate their interlocutor. This skepticism is also at the heart of the narrative approaches of Griffin (1993) who developed procedures to sort out the true from the false in narratives.

Other studies distance themselves from descriptive realism. While they conceive of narratives as different from the lived reality, they do not feel the need to assess the rapport or distance between the two. Indeed, for them, it is impossible to compare words to non-words (Rorty, 1980). Studies adopting this position are not likely to compare narratives to a reality "out there" (e.g., compare childhood narratives to the experience of childhood). Rather those studies are interested in the "reality" and "truth" of the childhood narratives and not the reality and truth of childhood experience once it is sifted from the narrative. The reality and truth of the narrative are different and run parallel to the reality of experience: "These truths don't reveal the past "as it actually was," aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experience… Unlike the Truth of scientific ideal, the truths of personal narratives are neither open [sic] to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation…" (Personal Narrative Group, 1989: 261, as cited in Kohler Riessman, 1993: 22). Thus, the studies distinguishing between narratives and reality tend to focus on the representative qualities of the narratives. While the studies that see narratives as truths or realities in themselves cannot define and analyze them merely in terms of representation or as rhetorical devices.

Seeing narratives as life itself or as "co-existing realities" in their own right or else conceiving of narratives as transparent or deforming mirrors representing an "objective reality" has an impact on the criteria used to assess the data and the conclusions of specific narrative studies.

If, on the one hand, narrative is seen either as life itself or as an aspect of life that is incommensurable to "non-words," its reliability is irrelevant. A researcher will not be so preoccupied with sifting through the narrative in order to unveil reality. Indeed, if narratives constitute human life or a part of it, then we don't need a bridge to "access" reality as the descriptive realists do since narratives are life itself.

On the other hand, if narrative is defined as a representational device, one could be interested in showing the deception that a certain narrative or narrator performs whether the narratives are produced in a marketing or political campaign, a personal diary, or an interview about one's experience of life. Such a position can be compatible, at the epistemological and theoretical level, with critical theories that postulate the existence of a real world obscured or distorted by words. The researcher then can analyze the narrative to remove the veil on reality and can actually comment upon the reality behind the narrative. At the methodological level, significant energy will likely be spent on verifying and triangulating the data.

The Perspective on Narrative

The second key question to categorize the wealth of narrative analysis pertains to whether narrative is seen, in specific studies, mostly as the characteristic of an approach or mostly as an object. Answers to that question generate significant variety among narrative studies. On the one hand, for some, narrative analysis requires applying a narrative analytical approach to examine empirical data. Here, the narrative aspect is not so much a property of the material under scrutiny but mostly a characteristic of the analyst's viewpoint. For others, narrative analysis is the research field designed to analyzing narratives, understood, for example, as artifacts exhibiting stories (Foss, 2004, p. 335). This distinction between approach and object is important since one of the first questions that come to mind when getting to know any field of research is the nature of its boundaries, whether they are designed, primarily, by methods or content. The ways that researchers view their analytical procedures and their empirical material is, therefore, a main concern in coming to terms with the variety in narrative studies and, even more importantly, to appreciate the associated methodological consequences.

Figure 2. Perspectives on Narrative in Self-Identified Narrative Studies
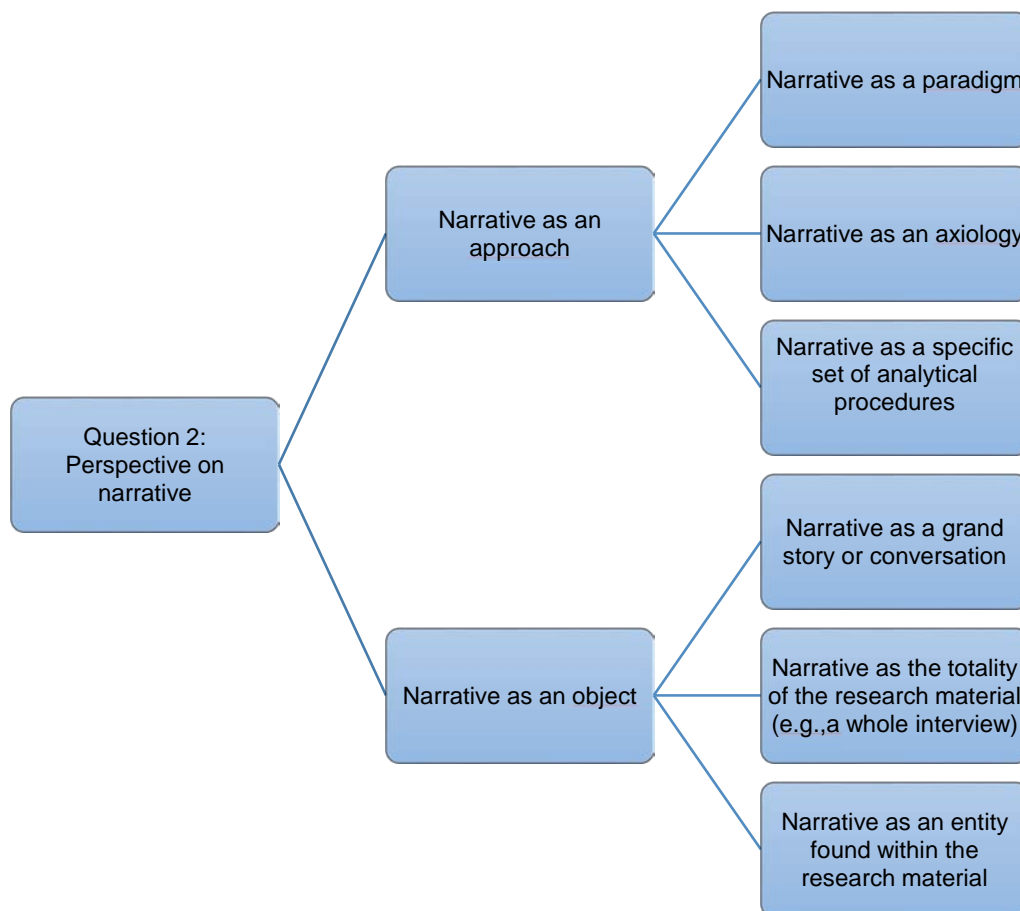
Studies are positioned somewhere in between and conceptualize narrative as both the characteristic of an approach and an object. The answer to question two is, here again, often a matter of degree.

Narrative as an approach.

Narrative studies can be labelled as such based on the characteristics of the analytical approach used to process empirical material. Three different understandings of narrative as an approach stem from the literature. First, in some studies, narrative analysis refers to a paradigm in itself; second, in others, narrative analysis means a specific axiological option; and finally, for the majority, narrative analysis refers to a set of analytical strategies.

Narrative approach can be seen as synonymous with a specific paradigm, namely the interpretive stance in qualitative research. This type of research distinguishes itself from the modernist assumptions in social sciences: "Narrative researchers eschew the objectification of the people that we study and we understand and espouse the constructedness of our knowledge […] Narrative work articulates on a different set of principles from hypothesis-testing quantified studies" (Josselson, 2006, pp. 3, 5). In this text, the use of the term "narrative work" refers to a paradigm that competes with what is often seen as the conventional paradigm in social sciences. Likewise, Clandinin and Rosiek situate narrative analysis on the philosophical level. For them, narrative is a paradigm having its distinctive ontological roots in John Dewey's theory of experience. They distinguish it from three "other philosophical traditions: post-positivism, Marxism, and post-structuralism" (2007, p. 43). Some medical sociologists validate such a definition of narrative approach by situating the rise of interest in narrative analysis on the same level, and against the positivism and reductionism of medicine and the imperialism of the scientific bio-medical model (Charon, 2006). Following this conception, using a narrative approach refers to adopting a set of specific ontological and epistemological assumptions, such as subjectivism, and an attention to processes of co-construction of reality. This understanding of narrative analysis speaks to the philosophical grounding of the research more than the methodological procedures undertaken to tackle research material. For social scientists familiar with a different way of classifying paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 2004), this use of the term narrative can generate some confusion and lead to a quest to identify the differences between narrative analysis and what is known as the interpretative or constructivist paradigm. If this difference is not explicitly articulated, some people could contend that narrative approach, thus defined, has little specificity, and therefore loses its heuristic power.

In other studies, the narrative quality of the analytical approach refers to an axiological choice. Accordingly, a narrative approach is characterized by its desire to provide a stage for the research participants to be heard, to let them tell "their story." This conception of narrative analysis is rooted in a critique of traditional studies that deprive participants of their own lives and voices. Within this understanding, conducting narrative analysis refers mainly to making the choice of redressing the power imbalance between the "experts" and the "people" in favour of the latter. Indeed, some have noted, even deplored, that the narrative turn in social science (that is to say the popularity of narrative analysis) has brought about a valorization of the "authentic" experience and a celebration of raw accounts. Atkinson & Delamont pleaded for narrative researchers to do more than communicate the voices of their research participants:

> All too often, we believe, narratives are collected and celebrated in an uncritical and unanalyzed fashion. It is a common failing, for instance, to imply that informants' voices "speak for themselves," or that personal, biographical materials provide privileged means of access to informants' personal experiences, or their sources of self-identity. (2006, p. 166)

In this case, adopting a narrative approach means seeing research as a channel for communicating the participants' experience, "their story." Of course, if one maintains that all experience is lived and shared through narrative then every interview, journal entry, document

becomes a narrative. This position rests on a very loose definition of narrative. Moreover, the researcher is not so much an analyst as an intermediary between the participants and the readers. This definition of the narrative approach can foster confusion between some form of politically engaged project and narrative analysis. While these can go hand in hand, they don't have to and it is useful to distinguish them.

Finally, the most common understanding of narrative approach refers to a set of specific analytical strategies. Those are often based on "linguistics properties of texts… as drawn from a literary and linguistic tradition that has worked long and hard at teasing out those properties" (Franzosi, 2010, p. 3). Thus, for example, Rimmon-Kenan's synthesis work on poetics of narrative fiction is organized by the "differentia specifica of narrative fiction" (2002, p. 5). According to this approach, elements such as events, characters, setting, point of view, and interpretations of personal stories (Foss, 2004) take a preeminent role in the analysis. Those elements act as an analytic grid used to condense and analyze the empirical material qualified as narratives.

In brief, the narrative aspect of an approach refers to three possibilities. If some studies present it as a paradigm on its own, others assimilate it as an axiological position or, lastly, to a combination of analytic procedures borrowed from linguistics and literature. This latter definition is probably the most widespread and influential understanding of narrative approach. As we will discuss below, the common reference to linguistics and literature, which can be broadly defined under the umbrella of narratology, should not obscure the wide variety of analytical procedures used in specific studies. Moreover, it is important to reiterate that, in many instances, under this umbrella narrative is considered both the quality of the approach used and the object under study.

Narrative as an object.

Studies that conceive of narrative mostly as an object vary widely in the way they understand the very concept of narrative. But they have in common the view that narrative is primary a "unit" and that narrative analysis is defined by the study of such units. For them, there is such a thing as a narrative or the narrative of something or someone. It is usually the story people or institutions tell. This qualification of narrative makes it an object that knows no medium limit, as long as it tells a story, be it a letter, a book, a day-to-day conversation, a myth, a speech, a poem, a movie, a dance, or any genre of human expression (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Feldman, 1991). Moreover, on the theoretical and methodological level, this way of seeing narrative analysis does not disqualify any conceptual system that could be helpful to study narratives. Likewise, it does not exclude, a priori, quantitative (Elliot, 2005; Franzosi, 2010) or qualitative methods, and, among the latter analytical strategies or approaches like grounded theory (Chasteen Miller, 2009) or pattern and metaphors analysis (Silva & Pugh, 2010). Under the conception of narrative as an object, we find studies that define narrative as major topic or grand story; narratives as a general term for the data under scrutiny; and those that define narrative as an entity within the data showing structural characteristics.

Narrative as a major topic or grand story is a common understanding of the term. It is not unusual to come across such expressions as the "narrative of peace" (Erasmus, 2007); a shared narrative of "national security" (Kerbs, in progress); or the "diaspora narrative" as applied to Indians, Jews, or Palestinians around the world (Said, 2000). These expressions assume a shared, if approximate, understanding of some expressions, observations, and positions repeatedly heard in the public sphere. In these expressions, the term narrative is somewhat equivalent to what Gee (2005) refers to as the social conversations (themes, debates, motifs familiar to a group) or to Grand Narratives, namely "stories about stories" (Auerbach, 2009, p. 295). At the methodological level, such a definition of narrative benefits from a clear

identification of its vital features. For example, what elements are essential to a diaspora narrative? Under what conditions can one include or exclude a narrative from the diaspora category? Under what conditions can one include or exclude empirical material about the diaspora under the category of narrative? Answers to these questions are helpful to guide and evaluate the internal validity of narrative analysis results.

Narrative as an object is used in other studies as a synonym for a certain kind of data. Usually the materials gathered or produced by researchers who define narrative in this way are made of words. Hence, the term narrative can refer to the sum of words collected or produced by the research activity (individual interviews, focus groups transcripts, journal entries of participants, etc.). In this sense, an interview with Anna about her life will become Anna's narrative, regardless of the specific features found within the interview. Although most narratologists will disagree with this definition of narrative, the term is quite often used as synonymous with any experience communicated by participants or documents in the research context. Bordt (2004) shares this view when she speaks of the accounts of people's lives as "personal" or "autobiographical" narratives. In interview-based research, this conception of narrative is coupled with a recommendation to conduct "narrative interviews," which may also be called semi- or non-directive interviews. In this tradition, the interviewer acts as a discreet facilitator whose role is to provide the conditions for the participant to speak of her experience in an uninterrupted manner (Chase, 1995). If narrative becomes synonymous with research material and narrative interview with semi- or non-directive interview, one could argue that the term narrative loses its specificity and, therefore, its raison d'être. It is nevertheless important to point out this definition of the term for it contributes the most, in our view, to puzzling newcomers to the field of narrative studies.

Finally, the most widespread understanding of narrative as an object refers to specific characteristics of an entity found within the empirical data, mainly the existence of a sequence or succession of events (Prince, 1982; Tamboukou, 2008). Hence, according to this definition, an interview, speech, or journal entry could contain multiple narratives. In order to grasp this definition of narrative fully, it is necessary to introduce two important traditions that grapple with what is and what should be the unifying nature of narrative: the classical narratology school and the postclassical school. While we use Sommer's (2004) and Herman & Vaervaeck's (2005a) typology, we are well aware that the denomination of these trends is not without challenges. First, the labels are not uniform amongst those who address the debate. Georgakopoulou (2006) refers to the classical school as the canonical approach. Tamboukou (2008) calls it the sequential canon. Second, using the term schools conceals the variety within those trends. The debate between those schools is relevant to the conception of narrative as an object and those who conceive narrative approach as a set of specific analytical strategies, and thus shall be discussed in more detail in the following section. The side one is leaning on in this debate has serious impacts on the methodological options that a researcher can take.

Discussion: Articulating the Perspective on Narrative

What makes a narrative study? In order to find our way in the web of self-identified narrative studies, it is useful to distinguish between those who see narrative mainly as a way of analyzing material or mainly as an object to observe. Each option raises different questions and leads down a different research path, although some can be combined, as we will see.

If narrative refers mostly to the approach used to analyze the empirical material, the main question becomes this: What are the distinguishing features of this approach? This is a difficult question to answer in some cases, namely for those who equate a narrative approach to a paradigm or an axiology. The specificity of narrative analysis for those who associate it with tools and concepts borrowed from literary studies (e.g., stories, plots, events, character,

points of view) is easier to assert. Indeed, in this sense, narrative analysis really adds a new option beyond the widespread analytical traditions in the social sciences, such as thematic analysis or grounded theory.

On the other hand, if narrative is conceived of mostly as an object, its scope has to be defined: Under what criteria does a piece of material qualify as a narrative? We saw that, in some cases, narrative is understood more as a topic or position (e.g. the government's narrative, the narrative of a conflict), sometimes, narrative is a term synonymous with the empirical material studied or else characteristics of an entity within it. What doesn't qualify as a narrative? What are the conditions of inclusion/exclusion of a position or empirical material to be called a narrative? We suggest that if a narrative is mostly defined as an object, its properties and boundaries have to be stated. This precision is a condition of clear communication but also, and mostly, a condition of the validity of the conclusions of the research. If the object under scrutiny is loosely defined, it becomes difficult to evaluate its variations in time, in place, and between authors/speakers. When defining the uniqueness or the specific features of narrative as an approach or as an object, the split between the classical narratology school and the postclassical trend cannot be ignored.

For the first, narratives "stress the idea of sequence or succession of events" (Franzosi, 2010, p. 12). Such a definition excludes items such as lists, tables, invoices, recipes, and the like (Czarniawska, 2004). Some studies require additional conditions to qualify an entity as a narrative, such as non-randomness (events must be connected in a logical fashion), causality (events must be linked causally), structure of unity (narrative must have a beginning, middle, and end), problem solving aspect (narrative must solve a conflict between protagonists), and intentionality (narrative must be seen as such by the addressee; Shenhav, 2005). The classical narratology school encompasses different models. The Russian formalists and their successors, such as Labov (1967), adopt a syntagmatic structural perspective focused on finding the sequence of events in a narrative. Their analysis is inspired by the study of sentences. The researcher aims to uncover the "syntax" of the narrative, the way its parts (abstract, orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, and coda) are put together. Other structuralists adopt a paradigmatic point of view, inspired by Lévi-Strauss and Greimas. This approach suggests that the syntagmatic properties of a narrative (the sequences) are superficial structures that manifest the deeper structures (Wang & Roberts, 2005). To discover those deeper structures, Greimas proposes the actantial model. He posits that the fundamental structure of signification in a narrative is the semiotic square, whereby an element in a narrative "is meaningful only in relation to its contradiction, contrariety, and complement" (Wang & Roberts, 2005, p. 55). With the actantial analysis, the structure put forward is a semiotic one (a structure of meaning) rather than a syntagmatic one (a chronological structure).

For the postclassical school of narrative analysis, the focus is more on the content and the context of the narrative than on its structure. In other words, it shifts the analysis from the story itself to the storytelling as a performance (Peterson & Langellier, 2006). Therefore, a narrative is not a closed system but an open and dynamic process (L. Herman & Vervaeck, 2005a). This position, which favours the textual features as well as the context of their production, has led, since the 1990s, to a "narratological renaissance" (Sommer, 2004, p. 6). Since the interest is focused on the production rather than the product, the role of the reader or the interlocutor (including the researcher) is examined as a factor that participates in the co-construction of the narrative: "A particular self is constituted through […] narratives, occasioned by the presence of a listener, her questions and comments" (Kohler Riessman, 1990, p. 1195). In her analysis of interactions in support groups, Bülow (2004) explicitly analyzes the way narratives are produced through the facilitator that orchestrates a chain of stories and through the co-narrated collectivization of stories. In addition, the postclassical approach insists on the fact that the attributes of a presupposed audience are likely to interact

with the writing of the text. This interactional view opens up whole areas of research for narrative analysts: "such as telling roles and telling rights, audience reactions, etc." (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 381). In these interactions, notions of identity, power, gender, seniority, and culture are at play.

In the postclassical school, the narrative's meaningfulness is to be found in the interlocutor or reader's appreciation and not in some formal properties of the narrative itself (L. Herman & Vervaeck, 2005b, p. 13). The linearity and predetermined structure implied in the classical narratology school are replaced by fluidity. Therefore, chaotic and uncertain narrative forms are to be expected. Indeed, as cognitive and communicative instruments, most narratives are unfinished for they are produced as a way to "grapple with unresolved life experience" (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 57). This view led some scholars to focus on the unstructured form of narrative: small and fragmented pieces of told experience (Boje, 2001). Indeed, the postclassical school claims that with its focus on the structured story, narrative analysis has traditionally neglected a whole range of ""small stories": such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell" (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 130). In her study of trauma survivors, Andrews (2010) pleads for a research that goes beyond narrative coherence:

> Testimony of those who have survived can be marked by what is not there: coherence, structure, meaning, comprehensibility. The actual employment of trauma testimony into conventional narrative configuration contained in time transforms them into something which they are not: experiences which are endowed with a particular wholeness, which occurred in the past, and which have now ended. (p. 147)

The researchers from the new school want to remedy this situation.

Postclassical school objects to the "overly geometric schematization", essentialist and universalizing aspirations of the classical approach (Sommer, 2004). However, this school is far from a unified perspective. It is comprised of many analytical strategies which are often used in combination with those of classical narratology. For the latter, those features and formal properties seem to take precedence over the inspirations generated by the application of the model. As a reaction, the new school of narrative analysis embraces the co-constructed, sinuous and unfinished aspects of narratives and the contexts that see them emerge (ideologies, power relations, etc.).

While some researchers point to fundamental and irreconcilable differences between classical narratology and the postclassical school (Stanley & Temple, 2008), the two overlap concretely in some studies. For example, Frost (2009) used layered narrative approaches combining Labov's strong structuralist approach, Gee's poetics approach, self-reflexivity, and analysis of interactions between interviewer and interviewee as well as metaphor analysis. According to the author, this juxtaposition of approaches shows different features of the interview under scrutiny, adding depth to her insight.

Narrative studies have often been associated with the classical narratology school and its definition of narrative as a structure. This school has had a strong and long lasting influence on narrative researchers. Important epistemological and conceptual consequences of such an option should be highlighted. Because it adopts an objectivist stance, the classical school has been said to strive towards a positivist view of science (Pettersson, 2009, p. 12). It conceives of narrative and analyzes them outside of interactions, namely the influence of the assumed audience, the context, the interlocutor and the researcher (Sommer, 2004). Usually, the classical narratology school is focused on the text, aims at identifying its objective properties

and sees narrative as a closed system.

On the pragmatic level, this distinction between schools has important implications. One is the question of positionality: Should the voice of the researcher be overtly heard in the analysis? Researchers, if leaning towards a classical narratology approach, would be more prone to erect barriers between themselves-the professional producers of knowledge who use tools for objective analysis-and the object of investigation. Such researchers will usually avoid factoring themselves into the analysis. This can be seen in the ways they produce their material. For example, in interview-based research, one will try to conduct interviews that are as non-directive as possible in order to limit the researcher's influence upon the data and preserve the "naturally occurring" structure of the narrative. A researcher influenced by the postclassical school, on the other hand, would be more likely to view an interview as a conversation or dialogue between the participant and the researcher. Accordingly, the quality of the data is ascertained differently in the two schools. In the first case, interventions of the researcher might introduce potential biases, whereas for the postclassical school, biaises, in this context, would be irrelevant.

The classical and postclassical schools are not committed to defining narrative exclusively as an approach or an object. This overlap is highly demanding for it requires clarifications on both the narrative specificities of the approach and the narrative characteristics of the object.

Conclusion: Finding a Narrative Position

A growing number of researchers are taking the narrative analysis journey, either as readers or artisans. Within this journey, one can get lost in the maze of roads and paths. The two fundamental questions offered in this paper can provide helpful reference points by which one can locate fundamental assumptions underlying narrative analysis. We can thus imagine a status-perspective grid as a compass to navigate the field. The status question pertains to whether narrative is the very fabric of human existence or a representational device amongst others. It refers to the rapport between narrative and reality, the essence of narrative. The perspective question pertains to whether narrative is mostly the quality of an approach or an object of investigation. It refers to the formal properties of narrative or narrative analysis.

Applying the status and perspectives questions not only allows for meaningful categorization of individual narrative studies, but is also useful for creators of narrative research. Answers to these questions are not arbitrary and have significant methodological implications. While we can add layers of different types of narrative analysis (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) and try to find a balance between the "what's" and "how's" of narrative analysis (Holstein & Gubrium, 2012; Phoenix et al., 2010): not everything goes. The status attributed to narrative is linked to a theory of representation that is in turn linked to the nature of the research object: the narrative itself or the "reality" the narrative is assumed to portray. The perspective question calls for clearly defining the narrative characteristics of the approach used or the object under study. Defining such narrative characteristics inevitably requires a familiarity with the debate between the classical and postclassical schools. For producers of narrative research, leaning toward one school or the other will have consequences at the epistemological level but also at the very practical level (e.g., the way interviews are conducted and texts analyzed). Narrative analysis is never just a tool. "Methodology is enacted philosophy" (Jackson, 2006, p. 278). Thus, it always carries with it deep assumptions that we aware of when using and crafting narrative research. Although the richness of narrative analysis resides in its unruly openness, articulating the answers to the questions of status and perspective are helpful to navigate the variety in the field, while not being overwhelmed by it.

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