

6 Biographic-Narrative Research, *Quo Vadis?* A Critical Review of ‘Big Stories’ from the Perspective of ‘Small Stories’

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Introduction

I will have to pass up the opportunity of giving a full explanation and exemplification of what *small stories* are. We, Alexandra Georgakopoulou, Luke Moissinac, and I, have done this at several occasions elsewhere (Bamberg, 2004a, b, c, d; Georgakopoulou, 2004, 2005a, 2006; Moissinac and Bamberg, 2005). Instead, I'd like to take this opportunity to critically take stock of biographic-narrative research the way it has emerged in the wake of what has commonly been coined “the narrative turn”, and show how it resulted in an (often uncritical) celebration of ‘Big Stories’.¹ My point in doing this is to explicate that all this happened in contrast and at the expense of the investigation of everyday small stories. However, the overall aim of this contribution to this volume is not to dismiss or do away with ‘Big Stories’, but rather open up a route to a deeper reflection of what ‘Big Stories’ are, how they operate, and how they can be used in narrative inquiry more empirically and productively. Before I start, however, let me briefly describe the position that we (Alexandra Georgakopoulou and I) have characterized in the past in broad terms as “small stories”: First off, “small stories” are usually very short; and that is why we call them “small” (since the term ‘short-stories’ had already been coined for a particular literary genre). But more importantly, the term “small stories” is meant to refer to stories told in interaction; stories that do not necessarily thematize the speaker, definitely not a whole life, but possibly not even events that the speaker has lived through – and now, retrospectively, reflects upon and recounts (often termed “personal stories” or “narratives of personal experience”). Rather, “small stories” are more the kinds of stories we tell in everyday settings (not just research or therapeutic interviews). And these stories are most often about very mundane things and everyday occurrences, often even not particularly interesting or tellable; stories that seem to pop up, not necessarily even recognized as stories, and quickly forgotten; nothing permanent or of particular importance – so it seems. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that these kinds of stories and story-telling activities have been

largely neglected in narrative research. However, with this contribution to the Huddersfield conference proceedings, we will try to re-establish these “small stories” as the bread and butter of narrative studies before narrative researchers should turn to the kind of ‘Big Stories’ that have become the privileged topic with the turn to narrative over the last 20/30 years.

In the following, I will try to account how it was possible that “small stories” never really made it to the forefront of narrative research. To foreshadow my main argument, I will lay out how it was possible that within the turn to narrative ‘Big Stories’, ie. life stories or autobiographies, or at least stories of life determining (or threatening) episodes have come to take the center stage in narrative studies in the human sciences. ‘Big Stories’ are typically stories that are elicited in interview situations, either for the purpose to create research data or to do therapy – stories in which speakers are asked to retrospect on particular life-determining episodes or on their lives as a whole, and tie together events into episodes and episodes into a life story, so that something like ‘a life’ can come “to existence”. Situations, I will argue, in which ‘Big Stories’ are constructed then are particular kinds of occasions in which speakers have been provided with a particular opportunity for reflection and a particular type of accounting practice (also often called ‘disclosure’), occasions to which the participants have agreed, but occasions that are also quite different from situations in which “small stories” are created and shared.

To avoid a misunderstanding: I am not out to do away with ‘Big Stories’ or the turn to narrative as a whole. Quite the contrary, I regard the move of narrative researchers to concern themselves with lives (and narratives as reflections of lives) as an important antipositivist move that has enabled investigations deeply concerned with how people experience and make sense of their experiences and feed these into what they seem to regard as relevant to their ‘lives’. Thus, narrative inquiry, in comparison to traditional, positivist methods of inquiry, has enabled researchers to take better account of the point in time “back then” when the experience happened, and the here and now, when the experience is told, where the guiding assumption is that the same event “back then” can be made sense of differently at different points in time and in different communicative situations. In short, narrative inquiry that uses ‘Big Stories’ in order to explore lives has moved considerably closer to the subjective point of view of the person who actually has lived his/her experience. Thus, traditional narrative approaches are more optimally equipped to account for people’s actual experiences and people’s interpretations of their experiences than traditional positivist approaches.

In a similar antipositivist vein, narrative methodology has resulted in critical debates and challenges of the status and role of the researcher within the data gathering process and the interpretive project as a whole. While some narrative approaches work with narrative data from a more detached perspective (more about this below), others see the data-gathering process as a

co-production of narratives between participant and researcher, and the analysis and interpretive procedures as heavily grounded in communally shared practices and interpretive repertoires and judgments. Some, particularly researchers within the autoethnographic tradition, even go so far as to admit and analyze their own biographies and blur the boundaries between biographic material that is meant to be “true to life” and ‘autobiographical fiction’. Overall, narrative research that has intended to describe and explore people’s lives by use of eliciting and analyzing ‘Big Stories’ has contributed considerably over the last 30 years to open up the study of identities in a broader and methodologically enriched way.

So, one may ask, what then is the problem with ‘Big Stories’ and their predominance in the field of narrative inquiry? And while it is clear that there is nothing wrong with the study of ‘Big Stories’ in research or therapeutic interview settings in a principled way, there nevertheless arise a number of issues that, as I will lay out in more detail, block the field of narrative studies from taking advantage of the full opportunities that narrative inquiry permits. Thus, while it may appear that “small stories” could simply be viewed as the everyday practice field for common folks’ capacity to step out of the exchanges of small stories and “pull it all together” in the form of a full-blown life story (when the occasion is offered), it will be noted that there are very different assumptions behind inquiry into “small stories” versus ‘Big Stories’. Let me attempt to unpack this in the following.

‘Big Stories’ and Narrative Studies as an Antipositivist Stance

The turn to narrative in the human sciences is unthinkable without Jerome Bruner’s suggestion to connect self and narrative in innovative ways; at least, I would argue, narrative studies nowadays would look rather different if it hadn’t been for his repeated efforts to spread ‘narrative’ – first into psychology and from there into a larger, cross-disciplinary project. Bruner clearly states that “we constantly construct and reconstruct a self to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears of the future” (Bruner, 2003, p.210), resulting in the stories we tell about ourselves, our autobiographies (as well as in the stories that are told about us). In order to be able to “furnish” autobiographies we rely on a culturally shared symbolic system as well as our personal memories² – memories of the then & there of events that happened in the past, as well as the memories of what happened since. In other words, biographies are not playbacks of life events but require a point of view from where past events are tied together and are made relevant for a here & now – with an eye on the biographer’s future orientations. At the same time, Bruner also attributes relevance to the situational circumstances of the telling: “our self-making

stories need to fit new circumstances, new friends, new enterprises” (p.210). He even goes so far to say that “our very memories become victims of our self-making stories” (ibid).

Taking up on these very basic assumptions about the relationship between self and narrative, we now have three levels from where value orientations can enter life-stories: (i) a general level of culturally shared value assumptions that are deeply engrained in the cultural symbolic system that is employed when engaging in biographic work; (ii) my visions, hopes and aspirations about what I expect my future to be like (which also are culturally constrained, but nevertheless very personal and individual); and (iii) the kinds of situative, and local interactive forces within which the biographer finds him-/herself – in which we have to tailor our biographies toward our audiences. Bruner cogently acknowledges that our actual telling of our story always “depends on what we think they think we ought to be like”, that this constant caveat does not “end when we come to telling ourselves about ourselves” (p.211). Thus, he clearly states that there is no single all-purpose story that can speak to all audiences simultaneously ‘in one voice’ (p.222). We will return to this point later.

Elsewhere, Bruner (2001) addresses the curious ambiguity that we are facing when engaging our ‘selves’ and our ‘lives’ simultaneously by way of biography. This ambiguity is possibly best characterized as referring to ‘our lives’ as what past, present and future orientation “live up to”, so to speak, so that a sense of ‘self’ can come to existence. Simultaneously, we are taking an already established sense of self for granted in order to be able to collect and recollect out of the abundance of potential events those that we consider relevant for a past life that in turn enables (and hopefully: makes worthwhile) a life now. What looks as a contradiction, namely that the construction of ‘life’ requires a self and that the construction of ‘self’ requires a (lived) life, can only be bridged, according to Bruner, by a “theory of growth or at least of transformation” (Bruner, 2001, pp.27f.) – a transformation by which the character can develop from there & then into a new character here & now. And simultaneously, the character of the there & then transforms into the speaker (in the here & now), who retrospectively, and self-reflectively singles out events, sequences them and ties them together into episodes and some form of a ‘transformation plot’ that brings out his/her very own perspective on the ‘lived life’ and ‘present self’. In this sense, there is something that is always “built-in” when autobiography takes place, and Bruner calls this “a form of ‘taking a stand’”, which “is perforce rhetorical” (p.35); and he continues: “when one combines the rhetoric of self-justification with the requirement of a genre-linked narrative, one begins to come very close to what Goodman describes as “worldmaking” in which the constructed Self and its agentive powers become, as it were, the gravitational center of the world” (ibid).

In sum then, Bruner’s way of opening up the field of narrative studies for the study of selves and identities was of utmost relevance for the emerging

field of identity research across the human sciences. It helped to explore lives, selves, and identities from the perspective of the meaning making subject, through the lens of experience – or, at least reported experiences. And although the individual is viewed as the agentive subject of his/her lived experience in the form of constructing and telling their very own autobiography, this very own and very personal autobiography is simultaneously through and through social and communal: Not only are our “commitments” to a particular way of life always communally shared and aligned with the “commitments” of those we live with, they also follow plot constructions that have been formed into communal plots which have been told before. This balancing act between the two, between making a self that is unique and thus very different from the other, and simultaneously ‘just like you’, is what Bruner seems to establish as the background against which self “is a product of our telling and not some essence to be delved for in the recess of subjectivity” (Bruner, 2003, p.222). Of course, this balancing act can result in telling different stories about self at different occasions, not only at different times in the course of one’s life, but also maybe at the same point in life when confronted with different audiences.

This view of self as put together by way of combining an agentive narrator with communal (social) forces keeps Bruner clear from the tension that exists between two different camps of theorizing narrative – one in which the different stories we tell draw on the same core story (Chatman, 1978) versus a position that privileges the social context of storytelling (with much less emphasis on the story content) (Herrnstein-Smith, 1980). He acknowledges many factors to play a role in how the core story will play itself out in actual version making, but he states clearly: “My position is that the story is prior to, but not independent of, the discourse. We abstract the story from discourse, but once abstracted the story serves as a model for future discourse” (Bruner, 1986, p.143). So, what we end up with is a certain way of privileging story over discourse, that is, moving narrative meaning-making, and thereby narrative meaning making as the foundation for self- and worldmaking, into a quasi ontological status. One may want to argue that this move was unavoidable, particular at the time in the face of positivist advances to meaning, mind, and everyday life. At the same time, it is precisely this move that led to a surge of inquiries employing ‘Big Stories’ as the paradigmatic cases within a larger research project that attempted to get closer to the ‘core story’, the center of sense and meaning from where we seem to engage in our everyday, actual sense-productions. In sum then, while Bruner’s move to take the essential and overpowering agentive self off its throne is clearly recognizable, and although it turned out to be overall strategically successful, we nevertheless end up with residues of it in the form of an embracement of ‘Big Stories’ as the privileged site where selves and identities are already ‘in existence’ before executed in actual autobiographies.

A similar orientation as displayed in Bruner's influence on what became the "narrative turn" can be found in Ted Sarbin's "storied nature of human conduct" (Sarbin, 1986), in the writings of Donald Polkinghorne (1987), who equally influenced our current theorizing in narrative studies, and in Mark Freeman's work, who has discussed the controversy between 'Big Stories' and small stories elsewhere (Freeman, in press; see also Bamberg, in press).

'Big Stories' and Narrative Inquiry

In this section I will try to give a brief account of the different approaches that have used 'Big Stories' to empirically investigate life stories, autobiographies, selves and lives. Again, I will not be able to do justice to all approaches that currently are on the market, and I will also not be able to present these approaches in their entirety. Rather, my aim is to extrapolate a better understanding of what 'Big Stories' are, why they seem to be so elucidating, and most relevantly, try to expose a number of undercurrents that ultimately will lead to our call for investigating small stories as at the very least an equally important component within the field of narrative studies.

The empirical study of lives by use of the stories people tell (particularly in stories about themselves), has a long history in a wide range of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Goodson (2001, p.129) reports the origins of life history methods in the form of autobiographies dating back to the beginning of the century. Thereafter, life history methods have spread from the study of attitudes in social psychology (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918-1920) to community studies in sociology, particularly within the Chicago school, and forty years later back into psychology. Retrospectively, it may be argued that the early studies of the members of the Chicago school, particularly what became well known under the heading of 'oral history' as in the works of Studs Terkel, lacked the analytic component of modern day narrative inquiry. However, without these origins within the discipline of sociology, Bertaux's (1981) collection *Biography and Society*, and Plummer's (1983) *Documents of Life*, and the subsequent foundation of the RC38 in 1984, the *Research Committee on Biography and Society*, within the *International Sociological Association*, would have simply been unthinkable. Let me outline some of the methodological principles the way they led early empirical work by Fritz Schütze in Germany, and how they were picked up and refined in current narrative interview approaches by Wolfram Fischer and Gabriele Rosenthal in Germany, and Prue Chamberlayne and Tom Wengraf in the UK. It may be of interest to realize that the biographic interview, that is where interviewees are asked to tell their life stories, developed originally from more thematically oriented interviews. Although these earlier, more thematically oriented interviews attempted to focus on the particular question or problem the

researcher was interested in within the scheme of what had happened before in the life of the interviewee, an explicit interview question that asked for the interviewee's life came as a second step in the development of modern-day biographic research.

According to Schütze (1984; but see also Kallmeyer and Schütze, 1977), a narrator is obliged to follow three basic principles when narrating: (i) "Kondensierungszwang", ie. an obligation to increase the density of a story as for instance by not telling 'everything' that can be remembered but choosing relevant experiences for what is to be narrated; (ii) "Detaillierungszwang", ie. an obligation to give detailed background information about emotional constellations, motives and connected events so that a foreground can come to existence; and (iii) "Gestaltschliessungszwang", ie. an obligation to fit parts into a larger whole that gives some form of closure to the story as a whole. These three narrative principles are a mixture of what a story *is* (or is supposed to be) and what it means to tell a story, ie. they follow from the structural features of stories and how to make a story plausible and intelligible to one's audience. The argument is that a speaker needs to follow these principles, since otherwise he/she will not be narrating a story, but rather giving a 'description' or engaging in 'argumentation'. In addition, the elicitation procedure of these stories is argued to follow four guidelines (see for details Schütze, 1977). First, the narrative interview requires a sufficient trust relationship between the interviewer and interviewee – again, so that participants actually narrate and not engage in accounting or other face-saving strategies. Second, the interviewer starts with a generative question to guarantee a spontaneous telling, without any previous thinking or strategizing by the interviewee (to engage in "extempore narrating", as Schütze called it). Third, the "main narrative" (usually the life story) unfolds without interruptions from the interviewer, who basically engages in supporting the narrative flow; the aim here is to get "the story" from the perspective of the participant and to remove the situation as much as this is possible from the interview situation with its research agenda. Fourth, after the main narrative has been completed, interviewer and interviewee engage in an extended phase of questions and answers, first to flash out more aspects of the main story and from there moving into reflections and potential evaluations, eg. what the events may reveal about the speaker's sense of self.

As I had mentioned above, the analysis of recorded and transcribed biographic interview data has been considerably advanced in the works of Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal (Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal, 1997; Rosenthal, 1995; this volume) and Wengraf and Chamberlayne (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 2000; Wengraf, 2006). Here I will briefly present the main components of how the biographic method is put to work with empirical data – again not attempting to give an overall account, but rather to ultimately be able to show how small stories can actually reorient

biographic methods to how they contribute to the larger picture of identity research by way of doing narrative analysis.

To summarize, the interpretive work with transcribed biographic interview data proceeds in a number of steps. It starts with the analysis of the “*gelebte Lebensgeschichte*” – which is actually a lot closer to Freeman’s categorical distinction of ‘life as it was lived’ (Freeman, in press) – as it is deducible from the transcript, and as it is supposed to have been formed in the participant’s socialization (Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal, 1997, p.149). The analysis of this kind of more factual stuff is followed by a thematic and structural analysis of the text in order to get closer to how the interviewee actually has experienced this ‘lived life’ from his/her subjective point of view, which feeds into the third analytic step, consisting of a reconstruction of the particular case (“*Rekonstruktion der Fallgeschichte*”). Before the lived life and the storied life can be compared and contrasted, Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal (1997, p.155) suggest to analyze particularly rich segments in more detail (“*Feinanalyse*”) so that a rich corpus of hypotheses can be built up to interpret which aspects of the interviewee’s life were actually told and which not, and how he or she tried to present him-/herself. Last but not least, in case a number of interviews with different interviewees on the same topic/problem area were conducted, the biography researcher can begin to compare the different analyzed biographies and generate a typology that is meant to illuminate the original research question for which an autobiographical interview had been chosen.

Wengraf (2006), in an interesting way, broadened and at the same time specified the purpose of eliciting and analyzing ‘Big Stories’: He expanded previous approaches into what he calls the “biographic-narrative interpretive method” (BNIM) to serve the function of dealing with life-histories, with lived situations, and with experience. In other words, what usually is differentiated into ‘life history interviews’ (as for instance in explorations of “becoming a psychologist” or “leaving home”), and ‘episodic interviews’ (as in Murray’s research on the experience of chronic pain, cf. Murray, 2003) can be tackled by the same interview elicitation technique and subsequent interpretive procedures. At the same time, Wengraf specifies that interview and the resulting transcripts are supposed to serve the main function to gain access to “two decision-making flows” (Wengraf, 2006, pp.34ff.), (i) the flow of decisions that were made to accomplish the “lived life”, and (ii) the flow of decisions that led to what surfaced in “the told story”. The analysis proceeds similarly to the analysis suggested by Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal (1997) by first reconstructing the lived life and thereafter moving into the reconstruction of the told story.

So What's Wrong with 'Big Stories'?

'Big Stories' are hardly everyday phenomena. They most often require elaborate elicitation techniques, precisely for the reason that they are not likely to be shared spontaneously. As I mentioned earlier, it requires particular kinds of institutional settings to bring them off, and, as we have seen more clearly, the use of highly specific rhetoric techniques. Thus, they are very rare; and one may also want to argue, somewhat artificial, phenomena.³ However, this per se does not make them less useful for the analysis of people and their identities than phenomena that are more ubiquitous, mundane and everyday. Nevertheless, it should already be noted that the search for 'Big Stories' as activities that only take place in quasi-experimental conditions makes them look suspiciously similar to traditional procedures that required to subject participants in research to very special conditions in order to look "behind" or "below" the surface into something that can not be seen in everyday, mundane circumstances; something "deeper" that then can be held responsible for – or may even "cause" – the "surface phenomena" of everyday actions and interactions.

Furthermore, the fact that we need to employ interview procedures, and in addition, interview techniques that require considerable training, brings up a second complication: There are at least three different traditions of research interviewing by use of which identities are currently theorized and investigated: (i) traditional ethnographic research, where interviews are supplements of partaking in the activities and sharing the life-world of the 'natives'; (ii) research in the broad terrain of clinical psychology, where interviews are considered to be "disclosures" of the inner world of the interviewee, granting entrance for the trained clinician into mind, soul or emotional interiors of the interviewee; and (iii) discursive approaches that treat interviews as practical sites where interviewees are managing accountability, linked to the actions and interactions between interviewer and interviewee, and all this as taking place within broader institutional and societal contexts. In spite of the fact that, as I have tried to show, a good deal of modern-day biographic research originated within the sociological traditions of the Chicago School and the framework established by Fritz Schütze (and developed further by Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal and Gabriele Rosenthal and Tom Wengraf), the affinity to psychological clinical approaches is striking. Though again, this affinity should not be interpreted a priori as a problem. However, it opens up a larger set of assumptions that seem to guide the biographic approach and its fascination with 'Big Stories'.

In a principled way, interpreters of 'Big Stories' are interested in what stories are 'about'. Their main concern rests on what is revealed in these stories about the inner world of the interviewees, the way they lived their lives, what they went through and how they make sense of all this; and the language used

(in the form of stories) is the lead for the interpreter into this terrain. Now, again, in principle there is nothing wrong being interested in people and their experiences, if it wasn't that language in the interpretive business of biography research was reduced to its referential (or at best 'representative') function. There are two questions that can be raised with regard to this issue: (i) Are there any other ways than construing the relationship between lives and "their stories" as lives that are "lived" and stories as *about* these lives? And (ii), what does it mean to give an account of one's life in an interview situation? – Let me start with the latter.

Accounting for 'Life'?

Stories are embedded in interaction. They are parts of interactional activities and locally accomplished projects, at least originally. This is the place where they are shared and come alive. They are occasioned by what is happening before and they are taken up on, at least often, in what is happening after they have been completed. Or, as Georgakopoulou puts it, "the sorts of identities that storytellers construct are intimately linked with the roles of the participants in the storytelling situation and their relationship with them. These premises force attention to the local interactional environment of the story, in the sense of prior and upcoming talk" (Georgakopoulou, 2005b, p.542). Usually, speakers bid for the floor to tell a story in order to 'make a point' (Labov and Waletzky, 1967/1997) and to 'account' for one's own (and/or others') social conduct as a matter of stake and interest (Potter, 1996), ie. making past actions accountable from a particular (moral) perspective for particular situated purposes.

In the (interactional) circumstances in which we report our own or others' conduct, our descriptions are themselves accountable phenomena through which we recognizably display an action's (im)propriety, (in)correctness, (un)suitability, (in)appropriateness, (in)justices, (dis)honesty, and so forth. Insofar as descriptions are unavoidably incomplete and selective, they are designed for specific and local interactional purposes. Hence they may, always and irretrievably, be understood as doing moral work – as providing a basis for evaluating the "rightness" or "wrongness" of whatever is being reported. (Drew, 1998, p.295)

Thus, the question may be asked: What is it that causes an ordinary person to account for his or her 'life' – and I don't mean to give an account of a special situation in one's life that may be constructed as particularly transforming and tellable, but one's life as a 'Big Story'? Again, I don't want to be heard as dismissing 'life stories' or autobiographies as an impossible or completely artificial genre. However, in order for an ordinary person to give the account of one's whole life, something must have happened that challenged the everyday

run of the mill, the ordinary course of one's 'life', so that we turn away from what we usually do and arrest the moment in order to reflect on life and its meaning in a much more general way. Still, even in such extraordinary life-challenging situations, we usually don't go immediately and tell someone our whole life – unless this someone challenges us and explicitly asks for an account that lays out our complete lives.

So what I am trying to allude to is that interactional occasions that lead to longer stories and even potentially 'Big Stories' require someone to *elicit* them. More concretely, some of my past or present actions have led someone to ask me to give an account, ie. to lay out, explicate, clarify, and justify – and not just those situations or actions under debate; but instead my whole life – in as much completion as possible. And since this is most likely a very lengthy account, we can further speculate, that the person who elicited the account and now becomes the recipient, must really be *interested* in receiving this account. It must mean something: Not only is s/he willing to listen, but s/he also has to care about it. This kind of 'contract' must also hold the other way around: In order to be challenged into explicating how I have lived my life thus far, I need to *want to* comply, ie. I must have an interest in this person and trust that my account may be able to accomplish something more than small stories do. I only lay my life out, if something is at stake, as for instance if I have to fully explicate in order to save the relationship between the person who "asks for my life" and myself. However, we usually don't role out our complete lives. Rather, we give an account of a few though important events that leads up to what needs to be accounted for. To dig into my whole life in order to explicate and make intelligible what happened seems to be quite a bit of interactive work, and the quantity of the interactive work is usually an indicator of the seriousness of the interactive challenge. In other words, if I had to start with my explication from birth on (or from my first childhood memory), I may be heard as evading the actual account and rather talk about 'other', less relevant, things. – I believe it is exactly *this* complex set of communicative assumptions that leads biography researchers to stress that trust is one of the most important aspects in eliciting good biographic data, and that a good deal of interviewing technique is oriented to establish a supportive atmosphere for the interviewee to ease this conversational burden.

The establishment of a trustworthy relationship between interviewer and interviewee and the continuous effort to elicit memories of concrete incidents (also called "particular incident narratives", Wengraf, 2006) seem to be relevant for another, possibly more important, reason. Following Riemann (2003), the interviewer needs to be cautious not to invite accounts "which primarily aim at saving one's face as self-justifications, excuses or 'sad tales' as Goffman (1968, p.141) referred to them" (Riemann, 2003, p.24), but narratives. Although it is possible to differentiate between 'argumentation' and 'narration' on structural grounds, the goal to elicit narratives free of any

accounting for what was right and what was wrong with their life must strike the reader as odd. If it wasn't for the opportunity of giving an account of one's life along the lines outlined by Drew (above), why would anyone want to engage in telling their life story? However, behind the imperatives of establishing trust, not to interrupt the interviewee in their unfolding story, and only aim for "pure stories" are techniques that all seem to follow the assumption that people "have" a life and a life story that only comes out if the everyday conversational maxims are set aside and put out of action. This stirs up associations with clinical interviewing practices, where clients are encouraged to engage in self-disclosure, ie. uncover unconscious motives and allow to be seen what routinely has been kept secret. Viewed from this angle, the activity of telling 'Big Stories' appears to be tailored toward an ideal, where the interviewer disappears and interviewees talk to themselves, as if in a continuous monologue, disclosing one's own life to oneself (see for a similar argument Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p.142).

Lived Lives and Told Stories?

All proponents of 'Big Stories' vehemently claim that stories are NOT simple recalls and recounts of what once was or happened. And almost all of them also employ the construction metaphor when it comes to the relationship between telling stories and living lives. They argue that it is not just the narrative form that is constructed, but that the content of what is reported is also subject to the speaker's construction; and that the symbolic means of language and socially circulating plots are the building blocks in this construction process. However, the 'Big Story' approaches to identity and lives seriously undertheorize and reduce language to its referential and ideational functions. They attempt to reconstruct the history of what had happened as the backdrop against which a story is formed and simultaneously want to establish 'story' as the root metaphor for the person, our selves and identity. And while the attempt is made to maintain that it is the storied part that brings meaningfulness into histories of lived lives, 'Big Story' approaches have to constantly worry about the correctness of what is (re)counted and the distortions – deliberate or not.

One way to move out of this dilemma is to foreground the action orientation or discursive function that is inherent to all language use, and make this orientation the starting point for narrative analysis. I already have tried to allude to the potential problems that reside in the neglect of the accounting function that stories have in interaction. If the elicitation techniques used to tease out 'Big Stories' are meant to set off the procedures of everyday accounting, these approaches, and with them any elicited 'Big Story', not only run danger to appear artificial but also distrustful in terms of getting anything

'real'. If proponents of 'Big Stories' believe that they can uncover anything more authentic or more "deep seated" than what is negotiated in everyday small stories, I think we need to watch out and seriously ask what this 'more' or 'deeper' could be.

This is not the time and place to discuss the role of the interview in social science research (see the recent debate between Potter and Hepburn and Smith, Hollway, and Mishler in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2005). However, as long as interviews are used as the method par excellence to collect and analyze "how people represent their experiences and understandings of events and aspects of their worlds" (Mishler, 2005, p.318), without analyzing how these "representations" are actually put to use in particular contexts in order to accomplish interactive business, "peoples' lives" are running danger to get prematurely 'fixed' and potentially reified or essentialized. In our own studies of small stories (Bamberg, 2004a, b, c; Georgakopoulou, 2004, 2005a, 2006; Moissinac and Bamberg, 2005) we could demonstrate that there is a strong tendency to strategically avoid fixity, or at least to entertain different, often contradictory, positions that are held simultaneously. This tendency to embrace and simultaneously resist identities has become a pervasive feature staring the researcher right in the eye when analyzing small stories. Now, this is not to say that this pervasive tendency is washed out in interview situations that are supposed to elicit 'Big Stories' or in interviews in general. However, the treatment of 'Big Stories' as an underlying competence that is grounded in human existence with the 'execution' of small stories as colored by performance issues gives grounds to become skeptical vis-à-vis the biographic-narrative method. In contrast, to start from the analysis of small stories in interactions, including interview interactions, it is very well possible to see how the practices become refined in ways that can be released and brought off in special kinds of interview settings by use of special kinds of interview techniques.

To sum up, although it was not my aim to dismiss or do away with 'Big Stories' and their analyses in identity research, I nevertheless have tried to critically review their currency in contemporary narrative research. In my opinion, narrative analysis that is interested in the nexus between the stories we tell and who we are has to do more than listen to what is said (De Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg, 2006). A reorientation of narrative studies toward a discursive approach has the potential to "provide an overarching theoretical coherence to a systematic turn to narratives-in-interaction at the same time as affording opportunities for much needed inter-disciplinarity for the future of narrative analysis" (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p.284). In the long run, this only will strengthen the investigation into 'Big Stories', rather than weakening.

Endnotes

1. The term 'Big Stories' was chosen over 'Grand Stories' in order to avoid the possibly confusing allusion to 'Grand Narratives' as coined by Lyotard. While 'Grand Narrative' or 'Grand Récit' refers to more global explanatory meta or master narratives (cf. Bamberg, 2004b, 2005), the term 'Grand Story' would have nicely captured the 'grandiosing tendency' of self presentations as something that is more paradigmatic to life stories, life writing, and autobiographies. However, people tend to do this in small stories, too. So, 'big' versus 'small' is probably the most neutral opposition.
2. This is how Bruner sees 'the social and the personal' (while others refer to it as 'the general and the specific' or 'the objective and the subjective') as always related and coupled and ultimately inseparable from each other (see also Fish, 1980).
3. Even topics such as 'chronic illness', 'emigration' or 'divorce', although often narrated in the form of giving the phenomena under discussion a temporal contour, ie. a history or genealogy, are very rarely told as part of the larger life history of the speaker.

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