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Looking Back, Looking Forward

One day, I was visiting my granddaughter Sage's classroom in Washington, DC, and saw the teacher's plan for the day on the blackboard, including the following directions:

Writing a Personal Narrative

- make sure the events are in the right order

- use the pronouns "I" and "me" to tell the story

- check to see that

 - the beginning is interesting

 - the narrative sticks to the topic

 - there are details that tell what, who, why, when, where

 - the last part tells how you felt

- check for

 - neatness

 - spelling

 - grammar

At first I thought it was a joke; the teacher knew I was coming and had selected a lesson to fit with my book project. Dismissing this self-centered thought, I settled into my role as volunteer for the morning in the public school. The diverse class included many children whose first language wasn't English, as well as African American, Asian American, and white children.

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Alas, the teacher never got to the lesson on writing personal narrative, and I never saw the children's productions.

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Why begin the book with a story about a moment in a second grade classroom? Including this example underscores how early in schooling narrative emerges (it arises even earlier in human development¹) and how highly regulated the practice is. Although the storytelling impulse may be natural and universal across the globe,² the teacher's instructions highlight normative criteria in one kind of classroom for one kind of story—the first person (“personal”) narrative. Sage and her diverse classmates were being schooled in dominant Western narrative conventions for writing about personal experience: use the pronoun “I” (not “we,” privileging the individual over family and community); place events “in the right order” (an ambiguous instruction, asking for “truth,” perhaps, or the temporal ordering of events); the beginning must be “interesting” (to whom, I wondered—the writer, teacher, other children, family members?); the narrator must “stick to the topic” (privileging topically centered over episodically or spatially organized narrative); and there must be specificity—what, when, where events happened (disallowing personal narratives that report habitual or general states). A final instruction is the most revealing: the last part of the narrative must tell how the child felt (demanding the display of emotions to secure the “point” or meaning of the story in the emotional life of the child).

These instructions ring of contemporary North American individualism. To be fair, the second graders of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds were being taught writing skills and a way to construct stories to help them succeed in U.S. public schools. Perhaps they were also being taught a way to construct a “self” in a particular historical and cultural context and prepare for the “interview society”³ of late modernity. Even so, I couldn't help but imagine how the instructions would confuse South Indian children, Aboriginal children in Australia, and those in other contexts where I have lived—regions of the world where a singular feeling self is not necessarily the primary axis of signification. I also wondered about definitions of a “good story” that children in the classroom might have brought with them to school. Would the lesson honor the varied storytelling practices of children from the many ethnic communities in Washington, D.C.? I feared narratives could be evaluated as deficient when children developed them differently than the teacher outlined—an outcome others have found in urban settings in the United States that has disadvantaged African American children (research reviewed in Chapter 3). Was I witnessing the reproduction of inequality in schooling in this brief instance?

By using the incident, I do not mean to fault Sage's teacher or her wonderful school. The teacher was positioned in her world of experience and training, as I am positioned in mine. She built her lesson on dominant standards in education, and she used excellent pedagogical strategies (listing on the board the tasks for the day, and providing simple descriptions for concepts). I introduce the story to anticipate key issues I take up in the book: the central place of narrative when personal lives and social institutions intersect in the "ruling regimes"⁴ of schools, social welfare departments, workplaces, hospitals, and governments. The classroom exercise illustrates how transforming a lived experience⁵ into language and constructing a story about it is not straightforward, but invariably mediated and regulated by controlling vocabularies. Narratives are composed for particular audiences at moments in history, and they draw on taken-for-granted discourses and values circulating in a particular culture. Consequently, narratives don't speak for themselves, offering a window into an "essential self." When used for research purposes, they require close interpretation—narrative analysis—which can be accomplished in a number of ways depending on the objectives of the investigation.

Four broad approaches to analyzing narrative texts are presented in core chapters to follow. But first some orientation is given about what narrative is, and what it does in human communication. I introduce readers to the broad field of narrative inquiry, asking when the "narrative turn" began in the human sciences⁶ and suggest some reasons why so many scholars in such diverse disciplines are now drawn to working narratively with data. The chapter closes with the organizing plan for the book.

What Is Narrative?

The term "narrative" carries many meanings and is used in a variety of ways by different disciplines, often synonymously with "story."⁷ I caution readers not to expect a simple, clear definition of narrative here that can cover all applications, but I will review some definitions in use and outline what I think are the essential ingredients. Briefly, in everyday oral storytelling, a speaker connects events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away from the story. Events perceived by the speaker as important are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience.⁸ Later chapters will expand and complicate the simple definition with research based on spoken, written, and visual materials.

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Viewed historically, articulating what the narrative form is, and what it does, began with Aristotle's examination of the Greek tragedy. Action is imitated (*mimesis*): the dramatist creates a representation of events, experiences, and emotions. The tragic narrative is "complete and whole and of a certain amplitude" (size). There is a classic structure with "a beginning, middle, and an end" (sequence rather than haphazard organization). There is plot, "the ordering of the incidents," which constitutes the life blood of a narrative, and plot is enacted by characters, who take a second place. It is the plot that awakens emotions, such as fear and dread, when "things happen unexpectedly." Something goes awry: there is a breach in the expected state of things (*peripeteia*) that awakens response in the audience.⁹ Aristotle understood that narratives are often moral tales, depicting a rupture from the expected—interpretive because they mirror the world, rather than copying it exactly. Later, narrative theory shifted with French structuralism, Russian formalism, poststructuralism, cultural analysis, and postmodernism.¹⁰ Contemporary narrative researchers carry different traditions forward, as later chapters illustrate.

Although narrative theory developed initially from examining literary works, the Bakhtin epigraph to the book suggests that many kinds of texts can be viewed narratively, including spoken, written, and visual materials. Compositions made after lengthy periods of observation (ethnography) can be narratively organized ("texts about texts"). Just as interview participants tell stories, investigators construct stories from their data. Barthes notes the universality of the form and lists many sites where it can be found:

Narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting . . . , stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind (sic) and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative . . . it is simply there, like life itself.¹¹

To add to the diverse sources Barthes lists, I would include memoir, biography, autobiography, diaries, archival documents, social service and health records, other organizational documents, scientific theories, folk ballads, photographs, and other art work. As later chapters reveal, most investigators tend to work with one kind of text (but there are exceptions¹²). In a word, narrative is everywhere, but not everything is narrative.

While everywhere, in my view, there still must be some boundaries around the concept. In contemporary usage, narrative has come to mean anything beyond a few bullet points; when someone speaks or writes more than a few lines, the outcome is now called narrative by news anchors and even some

qualitative researchers. Reduced to little more than metaphor, everyone has a “story” that, in turn, feeds media culture, whether it entails telling one’s story on television, or at a self-help group meeting in our interview society.¹³ Here, a person’s “story” seems to speak for itself, not requiring interpretation, a kind of “narrative seduction” that all storytellers strive for, and great ones achieve: “their telling preempts momentarily the possibility of any but a single interpretation.”¹⁴ Politicians even speak of the need for “new narratives” to steer them through election periods.

The concept of narrative has achieved a degree of popularity that few would have predicted when some of us, several decades ago, began working with stories that developed in research interviews and medical consultations. More than ten years ago, I began to be uneasy about what I called the tyranny of narrative,¹⁵ and the concern has only increased. It is not appropriate to police language, but specificity has been lost with popularization. All talk and text is not narrative. Developing a sequenced storyline, specific characters, and the particulars of a setting are not needed in many verbal and written exchanges, nor are they present in many visual images. Storytelling is only one form of oral communication; other discourse forms include chronicles, reports, arguments, and question and answer exchanges.¹⁶

Among serious scholars working in the social sciences with personal (first person) accounts for research purposes, there is a range of definitions of narrative, often linked to discipline. Readers will find major differences, but all work with contingent sequences. Phil Salmon put it wisely: “A fundamental criterion of narrative is surely contingency. Whatever the content, stories demand the consequential linking of events or ideas. Narrative shaping entails imposing a meaningful pattern on what would otherwise be random and disconnected.”¹⁷ Beyond this commonality, the narrative concept is operationalized differently.

On one end of the continuum of applications lies the very restrictive definition of social linguistics. Here narrative refers to a discrete unit of discourse, an extended answer by a research participant to a single question, topically centered and temporally organized. The instructions that Sage’s teacher wrote on the board were designed to elicit this kind of narrative in written form. William Labov provides classic examples in oral discourse: he analyzed tape-recorded answers to a question about a violent incident (presented in Chapter 4).¹⁸

On the other end of the continuum, there are applications in social history and anthropology, where narrative can refer to an entire life story, woven from threads of interviews, observations, and documents. A creative example is Barbara Myerhoff’s ethnography of Aliyah Senior Citizens’ Center in Venice, California. From taped conversations of Living History classes,

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combined with observations of the life of the center and poems and stories written by members (refracted through her biography), she composed compelling narratives of elderly Jews living out their days, crafted from the stories they had performed for her.

Resting in the middle of this continuum of working definitions is research in psychology and sociology. Here, personal narrative encompasses long sections of talk—extended accounts of lives in context that develop over the course of single or multiple research interviews or therapeutic conversations. The discrete story that is the unit of analysis in Labov's definition gives way to an evolving series of stories that are framed in and through interaction. An example here is Elliot Mishler's study of the trajectories of identity development among a group of artists/craft persons constructed through extended interviews with them.¹⁹

The diversity of working definitions in these brief examples from research anticipates complexities to come in later chapters and underscores the absence of a single meaning. The term narrative in the human sciences can refer to texts at several levels that overlap: stories told by research participants (which are themselves interpretive), interpretive accounts developed by an investigator based on interviews and fieldwork observation (a story about stories), and even the narrative a reader constructs after engaging with the participant's and investigator's narratives. Analytic work with visual materials pushes boundaries of narrative definition further, as Chapter 6 shows.

Distinctions are important for three nested uses of the term I employ throughout the book: the practice of storytelling (the narrative impulse—a universal way of knowing and communicating that Barthes articulated above); narrative data (the empirical materials, or objects for scrutiny); and narrative analysis (the systematic study of narrative data). Oral narratives can emerge in naturally occurring conversation—stories told around a dinner table, for example—which are usually treated differently than elicited stories, such as those told in research interviews or professional settings. Finally, there is the distinction between story and narrative. In my earlier book on narrative analysis, I made a great deal of the difference: a story is one kind of narrative, while there are other kinds (e.g., habitual and hypothetical narrative) that have distinctive styles and structures.²⁰ Sociolinguists reserve the term narrative for a general class, and story for a specific prototypic form:

Stories can be described not only as narratives that have a sequential and temporal ordering, but also as texts that include some kind of rupture or disturbance in the normal course of events, some kind of unexpected action that provokes a reaction and/or adjustment.²¹

Although this definition of story (reminiscent of Aristotle) remains relevant for projects located in social linguistics (see Chapter 4), I have come over time to adopt contemporary conventions, often using the terms “story” and “narrative” interchangeably in writing.

It is also important to note that while personal stories are certainly prevalent in contemporary life, reflecting and producing the cult of “the self” as a project in modernity,²² narrative has a robust life beyond the individual. As persons construct stories of experience, so too do identity groups, communities, nations, governments, and organizations construct preferred narratives about themselves (although this book concentrates on individual and group narrative). Perhaps the push toward narrative comes from contemporary preoccupations with identity. No longer viewed as given and “natural,” individuals must now construct who they are and how they want to be known, just as groups, organizations, and governments do. In postmodern times, identities can be assembled and disassembled, accepted and contested,²³ and indeed performed for audiences.²⁴

Oral storytelling is an everyday practice, yet it can disrupt research protocols when brief answers to discrete questions are expected, as I illustrate in Chapter 2. Speakers take long turns to create plots from disordered experience, giving reality “a unity that neither nature nor the past possesses so clearly.”²⁵ Scholars debate whether there is such a thing as prenarrative experience or whether, on the other hand, experience is organized from the beginning.²⁶ Is “raw” experience formless, without plot, a series of isolated actions, images, and sensations that are then “cooked?” That is, is raw experience placed in memory in meaningful temporal sequences? While differing in important ways, both philosophical positions agree on the time ordering function of narrative. Typically, narrators structure their tales temporally and spatially, “they look back on and recount lives that are located in particular times and places.”²⁷ Temporal ordering of a plot is most familiar (and responds to a Western listener’s preoccupation with forward marching time—“and then what happened?”), but narratives can also be organized episodically, as Chapter 4 shows. (The teacher’s instructions for writing a personal narrative did not allow for this form of organization.) In conversation, storytelling typically involves a longer turn at talk than is customary.

What Does Narrative Do?

When research participants engage in the practice of storytelling, they do so because narrating has effects in social interaction that other modes of

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communication do not; what the narrative accomplishes can become a become point of entry for the narrative analyst. Most obviously, individuals and groups construct identities through storytelling. Yuval-Davis develops the point: "Identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who are (and who they are not)." But the identity is fluid, "always producing itself through the combined processes of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong. This duality is often reflected in narratives of identity."²⁸ Personal narratives can also encourage others to act; speaking out invites political mobilization and change as evidenced by the ways stories invariably circulate in sites where social movements are forming. Stories of abortion experiences, for example, promote "empathy across social locations," essential to organizing and activism.²⁹ In a word, narratives are strategic, functional, and purposeful. Storytelling is selected over non-narrative forms of communication to accomplish certain ends. Mark Freeman qualifies this observation:

This is not to claim that the intentionality of narratives is always conscious and deliberate; the ends that are being achieved may be utterly obscure to those whose narratives they are. Rather, the claim is simply that narratives, as sense-making tools, inevitably do things—for people, for social institutions, for culture, and more.³⁰

Narratives often serve different purposes for individuals than they do for groups, although there is some overlap. Individuals use the narrative form to remember, argue, justify, persuade, engage, entertain, and even mislead an audience.³¹ Groups use stories to mobilize others, and to foster a sense of belonging. Narratives do political work. The social role of stories—how they are connected to the flow of power in the wider world—is an important facet of narrative theory.³²

Turning briefly to each function, remembering the past is the most familiar. In therapeutic settings and in life writing, individuals turn to narrative to excavate and reassess memories that may have been fragmented, chaotic, unbearable, and/or scarcely visible before narrating them.³³ There is, of course, a complicated relationship between narrative, time, and memory for we revise and edit the remembered past to square with our identities in the present.³⁴ In a dynamic way then, narrative constitutes past experience at the same time as it provides ways for individuals to make sense of the past. And stories must always be considered in context, for storytelling occurs at a historical moment with its circulating discourses and power relations. At a local level, a story is designed for particular recipients—an audience who receives the story, and may interpret it differently.

Second, narrators argue with stories. This function is well illustrated in courtroom dramas, where lawyers organize facts to make claims to provide an advantage for their clients.³⁵ Third and related, all storytelling—whether in courtroom settings, halls of parliament, local bars, or therapy offices— involves persuading an audience that may be skeptical. Rhetorical skills are summoned by the storyteller—this is how it “really” happened. Positioning can, in turn, become a topic for inquiry, in therapeutic conversations (“it’s interesting how you cast yourself as powerless in these family arguments . . .”) or in critical studies of media (“note how the story of the war does not include reference to the origin of the weapons . . .”). Narratives work to convince audiences of veracity, but the “truth claims,” in turn, can be questioned.

Fourth, storytelling engages an audience in the experience of the narrator. Narratives invite us as listeners, readers, and viewers to enter the perspective of the narrator. Interrogating how a skilled storyteller pulls the reader/ listener into the story world—and moves us emotionally through imaginative identification—is what narrative analysis can do. Narratives also engage audiences through modes of artistic expression, well illustrated in writing, painting, and the performing arts.

Fifth, the entertaining function of narrative deserves brief mention. We can all think of times around the dinner table when a speaker held forth and had everyone laughing uncontrollably by the end as bizarre events unfolded in a story. Professional entertainers do this for a living, using storytelling with great skill.

Sixth (and an often neglected function), stories can function to mislead an audience. A “con job” is accomplished by a storyteller to dissuade listeners from thinking that the speaker is responsible for misdeeds. Precisely because of their persuasive power, narratives are constructed by politicians to purposefully mislead the populace. Witness justification for the invasion of Iraq in 2003, for instance: as many have now observed, the Bush and Blair governments cobbled together a storyline from problematic “facts” that persuaded a fearful population—for a time.

Finally, on a positive note, stories can mobilize others into action for progressive social change. Major resistance movements of the twentieth century (including civil rights, feminist, and gay and lesbian movements) were born as individuals sat together and told stories about small moments of discrimination. Commonalities in the stories created group belonging and set the stage for collective action. For instance, oral *testimonios* got facts out in Latin American contexts regarding state-sponsored violence, helping to form revolutionary movements. These stories documented realities erased by governments in “official” documents. More recently, in the United States, the

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personal story continues to be a tool for organizing and mobilizing identity groups, with one example being the use of personal stories by gay and lesbian activists, fueling a movement to challenge discrimination in sexual citizenship (e.g., marriage and cohabitation policies).³⁶

The functions of narrative are obviously overlapping: a teller must engage an audience in order to argue, persuade, mobilize others to action, and the like. Some individuals and groups narrate their experiences in ways that engage, convince, and move an audience, while other tellings can leave listeners or readers skeptical. In professional settings (a case conference, for example, or a courtroom), one speaker can persuade others of a particular formulation, while another fails to convince—a process that can be studied by close analysis of the rhetorical devices each employs to “story” the case.³⁷ Lawyers construct narratives in courtrooms to persuade judges and juries,³⁸ social workers use documents and interviews to construct stories about clients in written reports to persuade colleagues and governmental bodies,³⁹ and some programs in medicine ask students to think narratively about their cases, and their lives as physicians-in-training.⁴⁰ These brief examples illustrate what narrative can accomplish and potential points for analytic investigation.

Many investigators are now turning to narrative because the stories reveal truths about human experience. Those who work with oral narratives of trauma survivors can see Isak Dinesen’s wisdom at work: “All sorrows can be borne if you can put them in a story . . . tell a story about them.”⁴¹ Joan Didion extends the point: “We tell ourselves stories in order to live.”⁴² Telling stories about difficult times in our lives creates order and contains emotions, allowing a search for meaning and enabling connection with others. My own research, which has examined lives interrupted by chronic illness, divorce, and infertility, is built around the meaning-making function of narrative. When biographical disruptions occur that rupture expectations for continuity, individuals make sense of events through storytelling. Interrogating the stories uncovers how we “imbue life events with a temporal and logical order to demystify them and establish coherence across past, present, and as yet unrealized experience.”⁴³ Jerome Bruner goes further: narratives actually structure perceptual experience, organize memory, and “segment and purpose-build the very events of a life.”⁴⁴ Individuals, he argues, *become* the autobiographical narratives by which they tell about their lives. To be understood, these private constructions of identity must mesh with a community of life stories, or “deep structures” about the nature of life itself in a particular culture. Connecting biography and society becomes possible through the close analysis of stories.

What Is Narrative Analysis?

Narrative analysis refers to a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form. As in all families, there is conflict and disagreement among those holding different perspectives. Analysis of data is only one component of the broader field of narrative inquiry, which is a way of conducting case-centered research.⁴⁵ Analytic methods are appropriate for interpreting many kinds of texts—oral, written, and visual. The “cases” that form the basis for analysis can be individuals, identity groups, communities, organizations, or even nations (in political narrative), although the focus of this book is primarily on analysis of individual and group narrative. Particular histories of individuals are preserved, resulting in an accumulation of detail that is assembled into a “fuller” picture of the individual or group.

Attention to sequences of action distinguishes narrative analysis—the investigator focuses on “particular actors, in particular social places, at particular social times.”⁴⁶ As a general field, narrative inquiry “is grounded in the study of the particular”;⁴⁷ the analyst is interested in how a speaker or writer assembles and sequences events and uses language and/or visual images to communicate meaning, that is, make particular points to an audience.⁴⁸ Narrative analysts interrogate intention and language—*how* and *why* incidents are storied, not simply the content to which language refers. For whom was *this* story constructed, and for what purpose? Why is the succession of events configured that way? What cultural resources does the story draw on, or take for granted? What storehouse of plots does it call up? What does the story accomplish? Are there gaps and inconsistencies that might suggest preferred, alternative, or counter-narratives?

There are many ways to narrate experience; how a speaker, writer, or visual artist chooses to do it is significant, suggesting lines of inquiry that would be missed without focused attention. Rita Charon, writing from her dual position as physician/literary scholar, emphasizes the need for “close reading”:

the kind of reading taught in graduate programs in literature in which the reader . . . pays attention not only to the words and the plot but to all aspects of the literary apparatus of a text . . . [including] ambiguity, irony, paradox, and “tone” contained within the words themselves. . . . [Recent literary criticism interrogates] those texts historically, politically, semiotically, economically, in terms of gender or sexuality or colonial status . . . [grounding] their critique in their own close readings of texts. What texts “do,” we all ultimately realize, they do in the resonance achieved between the words themselves and the worlds that surround them, elicit them, and are reflected and transformed by them.⁴⁹

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Narrative texts that social scientists collect require a similar level of close reading. But as later chapters display, some investigators attend to language, form, social context, and audience more than others do.

Elliot Mishler contrasts variable-centered approaches in social research, which strip individuals of agency and consciousness, with case-based approaches that can restore agency in research and theory. He argues that case-based methods are no less scientific a form of inquiry than population-based, variable-centered approaches. These case-based methods grant individuals “unity and coherence through time, respecting them as subjects with both histories and intentions.”⁵⁰ Such approaches to generating knowledge are part of a long tradition, supported in moral philosophy by casuistry⁵¹ and used throughout history to form theoretical propositions. Mishler wisely notes that in psychology, theories of great significance were developed through the study of individual cases: Freud, Piaget, Lewin, Erikson, and Skinner. In the physical sciences, too, major challenges to beliefs about the natural world came from detailed study and comparison of particular instances (e.g., theories of Galileo and Darwin, among others), generating knowledge that is unquestioned in science today.⁵² When the investigator’s objective is to understand and compare experiences of individuals in historical contexts, narrative analysis has aspects in common with other case-centered approaches such as auto/biographical study, life story/history, and oral history.⁵³ In most of these, however, particular sequences of action, choice of language and narrative style, and audience/reader response are not of analytic interest, although scholars of auto/biography do draw attention to the discursive limitations of time and place, and shifts in audience response through time.

Narrative study relies on (and sometimes has to excavate) extended accounts that are preserved and treated analytically as units, rather than fragmented into thematic categories as is customary in other forms of qualitative analysis, such as grounded theory. This difference (discussed further in Chapter 3) is perhaps the most fundamental distinction: in many category-centered methods of analysis, long accounts are distilled into coding units by taking bits and pieces—snippets of an account often edited out of context. While useful for making general statements across many subjects, category-centered approaches eliminate the sequential and structural features that are hallmarks of narrative. Honoring individual agency and intention is difficult when cases are pooled to make general statements. I believe, however, that category-centered models of research (such as inductive thematic coding, grounded theory, ethnography, and other qualitative strategies) can be combined with close analysis of individual cases.⁵⁴ Each approach provides a different way of knowing a phenomenon, and each leads to unique insights. In narrative study, however, attention shifts to the details—how and why a particular event is storied, perhaps, or what a narrator accomplishes by

developing the story *that* way, and effects on the reader or listener. Who elicits the story, for what purpose, how does the audience affect what is told, and what cannot be spoken? In narrative study, particularities and context come to the fore. Human agency and the imagination of storytellers (and listeners and readers) can be interrogated, allowing research to include many voices and subjectivities.

Other forms of textual analysis (e.g., hermeneutics, semiotics, discourse, and conversation analysis) have contributed important ideas to narrative inquiry, although the particular theoretical perspective that guides each of these approaches may not be shared by the narrative scholar. Ricoeur's phenomenology, for example, is embraced by some doing narrative work, but for others the very idea of lived experience or a world behind the narrator (that is knowable) is rejected. Narrative scholars are a diverse bunch; we draw insights from many traditions and have disagreements. Research exemplars in later chapters illustrate the diversity.

Although narrative analysis is case-centered, it can generate "categories" or, to put it differently, general concepts, as other case-based methods do. The history of medicine, for example, is filled with stories of instances—cases where pathologies were noted and studied closely, leading to new disease categories. Similarly, in social research, knowledge about general aspects of social organization have sprung from close study of behavior in a particular instance.

A good narrative analysis prompts the reader to think beyond the surface of a text, and there is a move toward a broader commentary. Just because narrative approaches interrogate cases (rather than population-based samples) does not mean results cannot be generalized. But inference is of a different kind. Generalizing from a sample to the entire population is the statistical approach; case study involves "generalisation to *theoretical propositions*,"⁵⁵ which are, to some degree, transferable. Making conceptual inferences about a social process (the construction of an identity group, for example, from close observation of one community) is an equally "valid" kind of inquiry with a long history in anthropology and sociology. As noted above, major theories in the medical, natural, and psychological sciences were developed from close analysis of instances. Case-centered models of research can generate knowledge that, over time, becomes the basis for others' work—the ultimate test. (In Chapter 7, I take up issues of validation.)

In sum, the field of narrative studies is cross-disciplinary, a many layered expression of human thought and imagination. Narrative inquiry in the human sciences is a twentieth century development; the field has realist, postmodern, and constructionist strands, and scholars and practitioners disagree on origins and ways to conduct analysis. The general approach has a great deal to offer disciplines and professions that want to see how

knowledge is constructed in the everyday world through an ordinary communicative act—storytelling.

The “Narrative Turn”

At what point did the practice of treating a narrative as an object for careful study (centuries old in literature) migrate into the human sciences? Just as there are different ways of defining narrative, and contrasting approaches to interpretation, so too are there several histories that I now sketch. Scholars begin the process in different times, places, theoretical shifts, and political movements. In my reading of the debate about beginnings, differences also turn on epistemological position. Narrative study buds early, but flowers in the mid-1980s with challenges to realism and positivism. Today, the field is a veritable garden of cross-disciplinary hybrids.

Susan Chase locates beginnings in Chicago School sociology: in the early twentieth century, investigators collected life histories and documents to examine experiences of a variety of groups—Polish peasants, urban boys and men, and the situations of tenant farm women. Anthropologists began about the same time to adapt life history methods to study communities during cultural change, a tradition that persisted into the 1960s.⁵⁶ The historical sociology of Daniel Bertaux in France continues this realist tradition.⁵⁷ The language a particular informant may select, the narrative style, and audience (who elicits the story, for what purpose, and how meanings shift with different audiences) warrant attention only rarely. In the realist tradition, narrative accounts represent a means—one source of data—for the investigator’s analytic description of cultures and lives.

Stories continue to be used for historical documentation, with little attention to particulars of the narratives themselves. Slave narratives collected after emancipation in the United States have provided a rich resource for documenting history that was invisible previously. Some contemporary scholars go beyond merely documenting and analyze the political work slave narratives did at contrasting moments in U.S. history.⁵⁸ Important social movements of the twentieth century were built from practices of storytelling, and the stories themselves can become objects for close reading and analysis.

Kristin Langellier locates the beginning of the “narrative turn” in the 1960s and the gradual shift away from realism. Four movements shaped the turn: (1) critiques in social science of positivist modes of inquiry, and their realist epistemology; (2) the “memoir boom” in literature and popular culture; (3) the new “identity movements”—emancipation efforts of people of color, women, gays and lesbians, and other marginalized groups; and (4) the burgeoning therapeutic culture—exploration of personal life in therapies of

various kinds.⁵⁹ In the last several decades, institutions in North America and Western Europe began to provide numerous “autobiographical occasions” (Robert Zussman’s felicitous phrase), which are “special occasions when we are called on to reflect in systematic and extended ways on who we are and what we are.”⁶⁰ Although such occasions certainly existed before, in the autobiographical age of contemporary Western preoccupation,⁶¹ there are opportunities galore: job and school applications, reunions, self-help groups, and, of course, therapy sessions. Given such opportunities, scholars began to examine how “selves” were constructed in these contexts. Corinne Squire, going further, locates the narrative turn in larger currents of late twentieth century Western thought: interest in language, the biographical, the unconscious, the visual, power in the research relationship, reflexivity, intersubjectivity, and the trend in scholarly work toward interdisciplinarity.⁶² Clearly, the narrative turn is part of larger moves in the social sciences away from discipline-specific and investigator-controlled practices.

Going beyond epistemological, theoretical, and political shifts of the 1960s, were there other developments that fed an interest in narrative inquiry and close reading of texts? Although rarely mentioned, developments in technology were important in making narrative research a subfield in qualitative inquiry. Miniature recording technologies made detailed studies of everyday speech possible. Recording technologies offered alternatives to previous ways of gathering data that Chicago School and other “realist” ethnographies had relied on. New forms of analysis of first person accounts became possible with verbatim transcripts, opening up questions about language use, and the relationship between participants’ utterances and investigators’ interpretations of them. Classic work on narrative structure developed by Labov and Waletzky in 1967 (a touchstone for narrative analysis featured in Chapter 4) would not have been possible without miniature recording technologies, nor would the many other studies of naturally occurring conversation.⁶³

Inexpensive cameras, television, and, more recently, video cameras made visual texts available, setting technological conditions in place for study of visual narrative (see Chapter 6). Cinematic images now play in living rooms around the world and expose large numbers of people to sequences of events they would not know otherwise, including images of survivors of state-sponsored violence. Analyzing stories recorded on camera provides new ways of interpreting historical events, cultural processes, and resistance movements.

Although the 1960s saw the budding of a field, the 1980s saw it flowering with landmark work, some guided by the feminist dictum: the personal is political. A fertile space developed in women’s studies—interdisciplinary, with major participation from scholars in literary and auto/biographical inquiry. Attention shifted over time to the diversity of women’s experiences,

eventually clearing space for writings of women of color.⁶⁴ The classic volume *Interpreting Women's Lives* appeared in 1989, including work of anthropologists, historians, literary scholars, and others; the editors chose to be identified by their collective name, the Personal Narratives Group, indicating the solidarity of a cross-disciplinary intellectual movement.⁶⁵ Narrative inquiry turned a significant corner with these scholarly and political shifts, decentering realist representations of the (female) subject told from a distant standpoint and focusing, instead, on narrator-interpreter relations, context, and narrative form—topics others also explored. Women arguably led the narrative turn in anthropology along with the foundational work of Clifford, Geertz, and others.⁶⁶

The narrative path widened when Labov and Waletzky's article was "rediscovered" by scholars in the 1980s. The classic paper and work in conversational analysis provided the basis for Elliot Mishler's radical revisioning of the research interview as a narrative event (discussed in Chapter 2). His book was published in the watershed year of 1986, the same year as Ted Sarbin and Jerome Bruner's classic contributions to narrative theory in psychology, with Donald Polkinghorne contributing a few years later.⁶⁷ These works assume fluid boundaries between the humanities, arts, and social sciences—a stance that differs sharply from earlier "realist" traditions. Bruner⁶⁸ dates the "paradigm shift" to the appearance in 1981 of a collection of essays of a cross-disciplinary group from literary theory, historiography, anthropology, and psychoanalysis that were asking comparable questions about textuality.

A final influence I would add to my brief sketch of the "narrative turn" in the human sciences is the general turn away from Marxian class analysis in the post-Soviet era—a trend Stephen Seidman includes in the broader shift toward postmodernism.⁶⁹ Social theories that privilege human agency and consciousness gained importance (particularly in the United States), in contrast to macro structural views of social relations. Theoretical shifts worked hand in hand with developments in methods designed to preserve agency and subjectivity. Detailed case analysis of narrative texts could occur under new conditions. As Norman Denzin says, theoretical and methodological shifts happen reciprocally, as narrative "forces the social sciences to develop new theories, new methods and new ways of talking about self and society."⁷⁰ As one of my students recently put it, "Narrative is the proverbial ferry between the abstract and the concrete, between cognition and behavior, and between the symbolic and the material."⁷¹

My preliminary listing of facilitating conditions—far from complete—suggests how diverse shifts in Western thought, epistemology, technology, and social practices that began in the 1960s fed the narrative turn. Langellier summarizes key elements:

Diverse sources converge on stories of experience, indicated by the term narrative, and the performance of identity, as indicated by the term personal. Embedded in the lives of the ordinary, the marginalized, and the muted, personal narrative responds to the disintegration of master narratives as people make sense of experience, claim identities, and “get a life” by telling and writing their stories.⁷²

Analyzing those stories, rather than merely presenting them, was the logical next move.

In sum, the precise beginnings of narrative study in the human sciences are contested; there are taproots in a variety of fields that converged and informed narrative inquiry. Susan Chase argues that it remains “a field in the making.”⁷³ In any event, the realist tales⁷⁴ of early twentieth century sociology and anthropology are now making room for ethnographies that include subjectivities of investigator and participant alike, an extension of a larger “interpretive turn” in the social sciences away from the realist assumptions of positivism. The mechanical metaphor adopted from the natural sciences—investigators provide an objective description of the world and position themselves outside the field of study to do so—has given way to narrative studies that position the investigator as part of the field, simultaneously mediating and interpreting the “other” in dialogue with the “self.” Readers can expect narrative analysis to take diverse forms precisely because investigators rely on diverse theories and epistemologies.

Whatever its beginnings, analytic study of narrative can now be found in virtually every field and social science discipline. The movement is international and cross-disciplinary, not fitting within the boundaries of any single scholarly field or nation. The narrative turn has entered history, anthropology and folklore, psychology, sociolinguistics, communications, and sociology. The idea of narrative has energized the study of an array of topics—social movements, organizations, politics and other macro-level processes. The professions, too, have embraced the idea of narrative, along with investigators who study particular professions—law, medicine, nursing, education, occupational therapy, and social work. It is impossible to keep up with the wealth of work going on, as any list of citations quickly becomes obsolete.⁷⁵ Methods of narrative analysis are ripe for a detailed methodological inquiry.

Organization of the Book

The book is organized into seven chapters, purposefully crafted for beginning investigators. The four middle chapters take up particular methods of narrative analysis in a typology I originally developed for teaching graduate

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students. Others have developed different typologies, and I do not claim final authority with mine.⁷⁶ It is descriptive and provisional—a heuristic that I have evolved over years of teaching research methods to map a family of methodological approaches suited to the analysis of narratives of individuals and groups. The typology is not intended to be hierarchical or evaluative, although I do interrogate how investigators (whose work serves as the exemplars of each approach) deal with issues I think important: definition of narrative, the task of transforming talk into text, attention to language and narrative form, focus of an inquiry and associated unit of analysis; and attention to context (local and societal).

The four approaches to narrative inquiry are not mutually exclusive; in practice, they can be adapted and combined. As with all typologies, boundaries are fuzzy. In these postmodern times of boundary crossing, I encourage students to innovate and transgress the borders created by my separate chapters. Please, do not see the methods as a set of disciplining practices. Interrogate your projects in light of the exemplars presented in each chapter, rather than “applying” a particular analytic approach.

As I wrestled with how to construct a book about narrative methods, I decided to organize it around candidate exemplars of various analytic approaches, rather than a set of instruction points. This strategy is how many of us actually teach qualitative methods—detailed study of paradigmatic cases, rather than a listing of principles. The form seemed uniquely appropriate to presenting the case-based methods of narrative analysis. Thomas Kuhn argued that in the history of the social sciences, skills and practices are organized into exemplars: they serve as reference points, “practical prototypes of good scientific work” against which other scholarly activities can be acknowledged or rejected as “good science.”⁷⁷ I chose selected exemplars for each of the four analytic approaches in the typology precisely because they are strong, and can function as focal points for different schools of thought in narrative inquiry. Conflict and controversy are as much a part of our “family” as they are in “normal science.”⁷⁸ Because narrative analysis is grounded in close study of the particular, it seemed best to present exemplars where investigators detail their particular ways of working with narrative data.

The analytic approaches I outline are useful for studying certain research questions and not others. The methods are not appropriate for studying large numbers of nameless, faceless subjects. Analysis is slow and painstaking, requiring attention to subtlety: nuances of language, audience, organization of a text, local contexts of production, and the circulating discourses that influence what can be narrated, and how.

Before presenting the typology of analytic methods and candidate exemplars, I turn in Chapter 2 to an issue many narrative investigators confront

even before they even begin formal analysis—how to construct their data for inquiry. I focus primarily on interviews and less on documents and visual data. The chapter explores the complexities of narrative interviewing, transcription, translation, and interpretation. Designed as an aid to investigators who are new to narrative research, I work through problematics by using instances from an interview study I conducted on infertility in South India. Detailed transcripts of interview conversations constitute the heart of the chapter, and I hope they will help students in research classes to think critically about their data.

Subsequent chapters present the typology—four broad approaches to narrative analysis. Candidate exemplars from published research (mostly the work of others) illustrate and explore key methodological questions that students should consider in relation to their own work. Chapter 3 examines thematic narrative analysis, the most widely used analytic strategy, which interrogates “what” is spoken (or written), rather than “how.” Chapter 4 provides an introduction to structural forms of narrative analysis, with the focus on “how” a story is told. The next two chapters incorporate aspects of the previous ones (I see thematic and structural approaches as the basic building blocks) and add unique elements. Chapter 5 examines a broad tradition of research I call dialogic/performative analysis, which examines how talk among speakers is interactively produced and performed as narrative. Here the investigator becomes an active and visible presence in data gathering, analysis, and in the written report. Chapter 6 describes an emerging area of interpretive narrative inquiry, visual analysis. Here images are the data to be interpreted alongside the words of the image-makers. Chapter 7 concludes with some practical guidelines: ways of thinking about facets of validity relevant for narrative inquiry.

This is a large vision for a small book. I cannot discuss in any depth many issues in the complex field of narrative studies, which now crosses the borders of many academic fields. To further understanding of ideas I can only touch on here, I hope students will seek out the many sources provided in endnotes.

