Narrative – State of the Art

Edited by

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Stories: Big or small

Why do we care?

Michael Bamberg

This article is a pledge that we actually should care about the differences between what has recently been coined 'small' versus 'big' stories because they represent very different approaches to narrative inquiry. In the attempt to pull other contributions of this special issue into the debate between small and big, I argue that the small story approach is able to theoretically and methodologically enrich traditional narrative inquiry — not in a peaceful, complementary fashion, but by more radically re-positioning big story approaches as grounded in dialogical/ discursive approaches such as *small story research*. (*Small Stories, Identity Analysis, Narrative Identity, Sense of Self, Positioning*)

There are already two contributions in this volume debating 'small' versus 'big' with regard to narrative approaches; it seems that the pro and con arguments have been laid out and readers can draw their own conclusions. So one might ask, why another opinion on this topic? My answer is that the controversy is not only and not really about small versus big, nor is it about the role of reflection and distance in narrating and narrative analyses — and it is definitely not about whether narratives "cannot help but falsify the past," as Mark Freeman (this volume, p. 155) suggests. Neither do I think that life story or biographic research is under siege. Quite the opposite: It is alive and doing well — possibly a little too well, in my opinion — since it seems to be resting, resting on assumptions that are not moving narrative inquiry forward but rather holding it back.

However, Freeman is correct in his observation that there is an increasing emphasis in narrative inquiry — as the collection of chapters in this volume attests — on narrative practices: The contexts in which narratives take place, what they consist of, their performances, and 'small story research' all seem to be part of this game plan. Thus, the distinction between big and small is not an artificial distinction, and behind the debate may be hidden very different agenda — agenda we need to detail and sharpen before we can see whether we can get small and big together and decide how to engage in future narrative inquiry, particularly

empirical inquiry, across the lines. My aim with this contribution is to sort out some of the differences.

Let me start with a brief excerpt from a recent interview with the author Francine du Plessix Gray, conducted by Kate Bolik and published in a recent issue of the Sunday Globe (Bolik, 2006). Du Plessix Gray is the winner of the first award of the National Book Critics Circle, which finally had come around to recognize autobiography as a separate award category. In Bolik's interview, du Plessix Gray calls the autobiography/memoir "an American form." In the attempt to explain its recent popularity, she characterizes the difference between the novel and the autobiography in the following way:

> Novels keep us at distance. I get the sufferings and tribulations of childhood much more immediately from McCarthy's autobiography than I do from a novel about the problems of growing up. A memoir is less mediated, and more like a patient/doctor relationship: The writer is on the couch talking: you, the doctor, are reading with passion and interest, and listening, as good doctors must listen, and at the same time putting it through the mill — as any good doctor would — of your own consciousness, memory, and experience. (Bolik, 2006, p. B3)

What is of interest in du Plessix Gray's explanation is the aspect of immediacy that makes written autobiographies, and probably even more so oral accounts of so-called personal experience, thus seizing and taking possession of the reader/audience. Her comparison of the author-reader relationship in terms of a patient-doctor (client-therapist) constellation may come as a surprise, since it replaces the traditional teacher-pupil or expert-novice metaphor and turns the tables: The emphasis is on empathy (rather than on the desire to become enlightened) as guiding the reading/listening process. Empathy as the basic motivator to reading and listening requires different prerequisites than seeking enlightenment, and it also entails different attention to the author/speaker and their performance or delivery of what their talk or writing is *about*. The past experiences that are shared in a memoir or life story have to be *revealed* or *disclosed* — in a particular way and in a particular empathetic style — in order to be successful.

James Phelan (this volume), contrasts narratology (as backward-oriented) with futurology (as forward-oriented). Naturally, as a narratologist, he sides with the backward oriented — but the question remains whether narrative has to be necessarily backward oriented. I would argue that yes, it has to, if we take the perspective that the main focus of narrative is on the content, that is, what speakers/writers make their talk *about*. This seems to be the point of departure for Freeman and a number of traditional narrative researchers. However, if we take narrating as an activity that takes place between people (and Phelan heads exactly that way by foregrounding the rhetorical design of narratives), we are more strongly focusing

on the present of 'the telling moment.' This is the moment of narrating as a reaction to the immediate preceding past of the interaction, and at the same time forwardly oriented because it anticipates a response from the audience. Thus, it is the audience-design of the narrative that makes it seize and take possession; it intends to affect the audience because the worst that can happen to a narrative is that it remains 'responseless.'[1]

This aspect of narrative is central to Amy Shuman's contribution to this volume: She suggests that we study narratives as interactions and warns that "the biggest challenge to the study of personal experience narrative continues to be to avoid the conflation of experience and the personal with the authentic and the real and at the same time to understand why this conflation is so compelling" (this volume, p. 181; see also Shuman, 2005). Along very similar lines, Jan Blommaert defines narrative "as a form of action, of performance, and the meaning it generates are effects of performance." He continues: "Content .. is an effect of the formal organization of a narrative" (this volume, p. 216). Similarly, Mary and Ken Gergen draw a clear line between two approaches to narrative: "narratives as cognitive structure or schema through which we understand the world" and "narratives as discursive actions" (this volume, p. 140). Liz Stokoe and Derek Edwards (this volume) take this point of departure to suggest studying what "people are *doing* when they tell stories, and therefore, what stories are *designed* to do [their emphasis]." They demonstrate in their contribution with a few short examples "*how* stories are told — how they get embedded and are managed, turn-by-turn, in interaction — and *what* conversational actions are accomplished in their telling (e.g., complaining, justifying, flirting, testifying, etc.)" (this volume, p. 70 — their emphasis).

Other authors in this volume make strikingly similar points by orienting toward and emphasizing more strongly the situated and contextual nature of narrating as activities, activities that are functionally embedded in sociocultural practices. It is within these practices that they become interpretable and analyzable for what they are accomplishing; one part of these activities is that they also index who is speaking/writing, from which position, and for what purpose. In short, narratives cannot be taken simply and interpreted solely for what has been said and told. Rather, they have to be *analyzed*, and the analysis of narratives has to work with what we have,

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1. The '*responselessness*' of narratives, when looked at in terms of its content and formal organization, usually is called 'pointless'. Though note that both may just present two sides of what ultimately is produced in interaction — for the purpose of the relational work that is taking place in interaction. It is with regard to this orientation that I am hesitant in following Jerry Bruner when he contrasts "studying narrative ... as a mode of thinking and organizing experience temporally/causally" versus "a mode of organizing conversation or the like" (Bruner, personal communication).

the actual wording and the delivery/style of the wording. The analysis has to work through this in order to perceive how a 'sense of self' — or an 'identity' — has been conveyed and is indexed; let me try to unpack this a little.

Textualization

In order to specify what Alexandra Georgakopoulou (in my opinion very appropriately) has coined "the second wave of narrative analysis" (this volume, p. 146) and what currently seems to emerge as "a 'new' narrative turn" (p. 152), we explicitly targeted the history and predominance of big stories in the field of narrative analysis as a potential hindrance to alternative approaches (Bamberg, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006; this volume; Georgakopoulou & Bamberg, 2005). Mark Freeman's response (2006) — and his defense for big stories as representing *'life on holiday'* — gives the opportunity to sharpen the differences between traditional approaches and what we mean when we talk about a *'new'* turn in narrative analysis.

Freeman's coining of the two orientations as expressivists versus productivists[2] (Freeman, 2003; see also Georgakopoulou, this volume, p. 148) is very telling. According to Freeman, expressivists study people by asking them: "Tell me your story." Their stories, in terms of what they are about, will tell. In contrast, productivists are characterized as interested in people's language: They analyze people's *talk* — though, as Alexandra Georgakopoulou and I would like to add, what people *do* with their talk — and more specifically, how they accomplish a sense of self when they engage in story-telling talk. Even more specifically, productivists analyze when people use narratives in their talk to index who they are. This is important, although it seems to be very difficult to realize and integrate into traditional approaches.

It is my suspicion that the hermeneutic framework that is embraced by most traditional narrative researchers makes this insight particularly difficult. Let me be upfront: The merits of hermeneutic orientations are, and we very much are in agreement here, that experience, lives, and persons are viewed — or better, *have to be* viewed — as interpretable and that such interpretations require perspective. However, at the same time, to view experience, action, lives, and persons *as texts* (see Freeman, 1993, p. 7) that can be read in the very same way as we read narrative texts, may constitute a serious reduction: What about people as responsible agents? What about people as social, *interactive* agents? And last but not least, what about the interactive and social nature of *accounting* that traditional narrative interviewing attempts to reduce to a minimum so that the text is not

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2. As Alexandra Georgakopoulou already pointed out in her contribution to this volume, the term is very unfortunate.

"contaminated" by interactive, situated strategizing (see Bamberg, 2006, for a more detailed critique of these assumptions)?

It is not that Freeman (and others) have not attempted to give these issues any thought. However, the trend (within a hermeneutic frame) toward an increasing textualization of action, interaction, experience, person, and lives is paralleled in recent cognitive approaches to narrative in the way that they are sweeping through literary narrative theorizing these days (see Bamberg, 2004, for a critical summary). Space limitations do not allow me to expand on this topic, but the characterization of experience and life as internally organized texts, presentable in narrative form and content, is exactly what other contributors to this volume (cf. Gergen & Gergen, this volume, Kraus, this volume; McLeod, this volume) characterize critically in terms of "story as 'cognitive' or 'psychological' structure" (see also, though from very different perspectives, Hogan, this volume, and Sartwell, this volume, in their contributions to this issue).

Reflection

I certainly agree with Mark Freeman that having the ability to step back from the immediacy of a situation and reflect is a good thing. I also agree that reflection is a part of life, just as actions and activities that are less reflective or that appear to be nonreflective. I agree, too, that activities that seem to be based on reflections are usually more valued than others, most often because they come across as more rational and mature. Recounts of lives or experiences that are making use of (or even better: are *displaying*) this potential, however, do not necessarily form better narratives, nor are they necessarily closer to life or the actual experience. I also would hold that *any* recount, including small stories, *is* reflective. The amount of reflection or the quality of it should not have any impact on the quality of the narrative; neither should they play a role in the narrative's veracity or verisimilitude.[3] What seems to be at issue when it comes to the value of reflection for narrating and for our ability to inflect and rework our identities, thus, is not so much reflection versus nonreflection but rather the role we assign to reflection.

To pose the question more succinctly: How do new interpretations come about? Are they based on reflections or are they emerging in and through talk? In addition, we may ask: What is the role of talk and conversation for reflection — and in

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3. Atkinson and Delamont (this volume) argue that the truth of a narrative "is not a property to be treated as an issue in the quality-control of information. On the contrary, veracity and verisimilitude are to be inspected as embedded in the rhetorical properties and discursive structures of narrative accounts themselves" (p. 201).

particular, for *becoming* (more) reflective? Again, I assume that Mark Freeman and I place very different emphasis on talk and interaction as the origins for our internal (cognitive) psychological apparatus, including reflection. But I can't help seeing close analogies between the view of the person as text and the reflective person as self-organizing and able to reorganize — if given the opportunity (e.g., in a biographic interview) to dig deep enough into his or her deepest interior with monadic reflection as the tool. And I also can't help but speculate that behind accrediting monadic, independent, self-reflection (in contrast to dyadic, interdependent, discourse) with the power to change our lives is the deep-seated wish to integrate and harmonize with the drive for coherence and authenticity as the organizing forces.

Again, I do not want to be misunderstood as in favor of the argument that there is no such thing as 'internal monologue' (or internal "dialogue" — in which the I and the me are communicating with one another), or as denying the existence of 'cognition'. However, to start with the assumption that narrative and the interpretation of selves (and others) are *based* on internal (psychological) constructs would seriously underestimate the dialogical/discursive origins of our interiors.

With regard to narrative *analysis*, we have to ask, what is it that the analyst is empirically approaching — and how? If we want to maintain that it is narrative self-reflection that forms the subject of our inquiry, we have to lay out how self-reflection becomes empirically identifiable and researchable.[4] If the emphasis in narrative analysis is on what people accomplish — particularly with regard to bringing off identity claims in their narrating activities, we can turn to discourse-analytic frameworks, the way they have been put forth over the last 15 years, with narrative analysis playing a central role in these developments.

Positioning

In my previous work, I have stressed that narrative analysis is less interested in a narrator who is self-reflecting or searching who s/he (really) is. Rather, we are interested in narrators who are engaging in the activity of narrating, that is, the activity of giving an account; for instance, when we engage in making past actions accountable from a particular (moral) perspective for particular situated purposes:[5]

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4. I gather that it may be possible to view Ramírez-Esparza and Pennebaker's (this volume) contribution to this volume as a (challenging) empiricization of exactly this question. However, I assume that thus far only a few biographers may be willing to take this route.

5. Again, it is irrelevant whether the action or happening that is accounted for lies back in time or is something of a more immediate nature.

> In the (interactional) circumstances in which we report our own or others' con-
> duct, 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 descrip-
> tions are unavoidably incomplete and selective, they are designed for specific and
> local interactional purposes. Hence they may, always and irretrievably, be under-
> stood as doing moral work — as providing a basis for evaluating the "rightness" or
> "wrongness" of whatever is being reported. (Drew, 1998, p. 295)

It is precisely this kind of activity, with all its situational stake and interest (Potter, 1996), that is of relevance to identity researchers — as Wolfgang Kraus argues, simply because "people do not … choose affiliations, they have to negotiate them with others and are positioned within them by others" (this volume, p. 130). To put the issue more succinctly: When we study narratives, we are neither access- ing speakers' past experiences nor their reflections on their past experiences (and through them how they reflect their selves). Rather, we study talk; talk that does not reveal immediately or directly (and potentially not even indirectly) the speak- er's internal organization of his/her self (if there actually is such a thing). However, in and through talk, speakers establish (i) what the talk is about (aboutness/con- tent), and simultaneously (ii) the particular social interaction in the form of par- ticular social relationships. And in the business of relating the world that is created by use of verbal means to the here and now of the interactive situation, speakers position themselves vis-à-vis the world out there and the social world here and now. It is in this attempt of relating aboutness/content to the social interactants, or making the aboutness/content of their talk relevant to the interaction here and now, through which a position, from where these two 'worlds' are drawn together, becomes visible. And this position is taken by the interlocutors (as well as — over time and with practice — by the speaker him-/herself) as a sense of 'who s/he is' or as a 'sense of self'.

More concretely, in terms of what this implies for the analytic procedures, we begin our narrative analysis by paying close attention to the ways in which the constructed/represented world of characters and event sequences is drawn up. Here we attempt to spot descriptions and evaluations of the story characters and analyze the time and space coordinates in the way that these relate to social catego- ries and their action potential. From here we move into a closer analysis of the way these referential and representational aspects of story construction are assembled in their sequential arrangement among the participants in the interaction. The assumption that governs this step is that particular descriptions and evaluations are chosen for the interactive purpose of fending off and mitigating the interpreta- tions of (present) others. The descriptions and evaluations rhetorically function to convey how speakers signal to their audience how they want to be understood.

In working from these two levels of positioning (one with respect to the content of what the story was designed to be about, the other with respect to the coordination of the interaction between speaker and audience), we are better situated to make assumptions about the ideological positions (or master narratives) within which narrators are positioning a sense of self, i.e., as signaling complicity or opposition in order to mark off segments that can be countered. The analysis of the first two positioning levels is intended to progressively lead to a differentiation of how narrators work up a position as complicit with or countering dominant discourses.[6] It is at this juncture that we come full circle by showing how narrators position themselves in relation to discourses by which they are positioned. In other words, analyzing narratives in interaction along these lines enables us to circumvent the aporia of two opposing subject theories, one in which the subject is determined by preexisting discourses and master narratives, the other in which the subject is the only ground from which narratives (and selves) are constructed.

Concluding remarks

Whether small and big stories can manage to co-exist peacefully and complement one another is a good question. And a year ago, at last year's conference of *the Huddersfield Narrative and Memory Research Group* (Bamberg, 2006), I was in basic agreement with the way Mark Freeman's (this volume) answered this question in his contribution to this volume. Today, a year later, I am more skeptical. I surely can not see any hope incorporating big story methodology productively into small story research. Vice versa — maybe; however, biographers' recent suggestions (cf. Wengraf, this volume, and Fischer & Goblirsch, this volume) to incorporate micro-analytic interpretive procedures into big-story research — at least at this point — do not seem to be a satisfying answer. They come across as an add-on, and they are advertised as a way to deal with particularly interesting parts of the interview data. What makes particular parts more interesting is not theoretically motivated, especially not within a dialogical or discursive framework. The person is viewed as 'independent', as constructing him-/herself by way of orienting their memory backward, engaging in the cognitive activity of 'reflecting'; the audience/interviewer, as is demonstrated in the way the interview is theorized in big-story work, is no more than the sounding board, and the interviewee as 'talking to themselves'.

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6. In our recent work we have been stressing the point that complicit and counter discourses are not always clearly separable — as one or the other. Rather, they often fluctuate; something that we believe is extremely interesting and relevant for identity analysis research.

A new narrative turn will have to place emphasis on how selves and identities are '*done*' in interactions — interactions in which narratives are made use of, and as Alexandra Georgakopoulou (this volume) has pointed out, not the traditionally privileged kinds of narratives. In addition, the narrative tradition of privileging biographic narratives as the means par excellence to turn backward and engage in self-reflection — to sort out past, self, identity, and life — i.e., as the privileged means to do identity work, will have to give up its hegemonic position. Identity research that orients toward what is *done* in interaction, i.e., how identities are emerging and are managed by use of narratives-in-interaction, will become a more productive starting-point in the future field of identity research. It is my hope and conviction that small story research will enter biographic research methods and help us rethink narrative research en passant. It is good to have Sundays and holidays, but we need to get work done; and that's what the rest of the week is for.

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