

Narrative – State of the Art

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Introductory remarks

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By now it has become hard, if not cumbersome, to trace the exact origins of the often cited *turn* to narrative. Open to debate is whether it started as an adherent or in opposition to the French structuralist theories of the mid- to late 1960s (Herman, Jahn, & Ryan, 2005, p. ix), or whether it started with the 1981 publication of the special issue of *Critical Inquiry* (entitled "On Narrative"), or whether its breakthrough came in publications in the late 1980s by Bruner (1986), Polkinghorne (1988), Sarbin (1986). The question also arises as to whether the "turn" to narrative was foreshadowed a few years earlier in the field of social history with the influential article by Stone (1979). However, although the exact historical origins are not clearly identifiable, it nevertheless is commonly agreed upon that over the course of the last 40 years or so a seemingly unbounded wave of narrative theorizing has emerged. In addition, this wave of narrative theorizing was quickly followed by abundant empirical investigations that sought to analyze all kinds of aspects of individuals' and social lives by use of narrative methods.

Ever since, narrative has become a powerful tool and a method of analysis in a number of rather divergent disciplines such as anthropology, communication, cultural studies, history, law, linguistics, medicine, psychology, and sociology. Different methodological traditions have been called in under the header of narrative as a new root metaphor (e.g., ethnography and ethnomethodology, hermeneutics, literary interpretation, sociolinguistics, cognitive and psycholinguistic experiments, to name a few), resulting in what can be called a narrative boom, or *frenzy*, as one of my colleagues prefers to put it. A series of interdisciplinary books (e.g., *Frontiers of Narrative*, published by the University of Nebraska Press; *Theory and Interpretation of Narrative*, published by Ohio State University; *Narratologia*, published by de Gruyter; *The Narrative Study of Lives*, published by Sage and continued by APA Books; and *Studies in Narrative*, published by John Benjamins) and a number of new journals with 'narrative' in the title started spawning (cf. *Image & Narrative*, *Journal of Narrative & Life History*, *Journal of Narrative Theory*, *Narrative*, *Narrative Inquiry*). In addition, the number of narrative monographs and

edited book volumes has literally skyrocketed – all signifying that the turn to narrative has turned into an integral part of current theorizing and empirical inquiry in the social sciences and humanities. Against this backdrop, it may not come as a surprise that the narrative turn has leaked into the public domain (cf. Akst, 2004; Safire, 2004; Thernstrom, 2004) and opened the doors to potential misinterpretation and confusion (Phelan, 2005). Also, it has become apparent that what may have emerged at some point as a new field of narrative inquiry with the appearance of homogeneity is not necessarily coherent or homogenous at all. Rather, a number of different directions and orientations have emerged, leading some narrative researchers to call for a revival of narrative theorizing – or, in response to what happened with the original turn to narrative, a ‘new’ or ‘second’ narrative turn (e.g., Georgakopoulou, this volume).

It appears as if the turn to narrative was carried by at least two different promises. Apart from the multi-disciplinarity of theories and approaches there seem to be two strands in theorizing and methodologically approaching narrative that emerged when trying to answer the question as to what makes narratives so attractive and what the facilitating factors were in the original turn to narrative. While one strand focuses predominantly on what narratives of personal experience represent about aspects of life, embracing the ideography and uniqueness of subjective accounts, the other strand is predominantly interested in the kinds of social, cultural, or at least communal, templates that seem to be the guiding forces for how sequences of events are arranged and particularized. In other words, it seemed as if there were two forces behind the narrative turn, both orienting inquiry away from more traditional, positivist arrangements of doing research and both different in terms of their ontological presuppositions, though often not much differentiated in ensuing empirical investigations.

The former, which I would like to call the ‘*person*’ or ‘*subjectivity-centered*’ approach to narrative, is interested in the exploration of narratives as personal ways to impose order on an otherwise chaotic scenario of life and experience. By way of eliciting, listening (and analyzing) these narratives, narrative inquiry opened up insight into the particularistic and ideographic means by which individuals describe their experience as ordered and meaningful. Although this may not always be possible, as in the face of particularly traumatic experiences, this at least is the promise that narrative inquiry within this framework seemed to be making. Approaching narrative with this orientation is antithetic to traditional positivist ways of approaching life, meaning, and everyday events from a nomothetic and objective perspective that traditionally aims for theory-driven and generalizable accounts. Studying narratives within this framework builds on the assumption that life and experience are storied, with narrative as an ontological presupposition.

Bringing out peoples' stories, hearing them share their experiences, validating their subjectivity, and thereby participating in relevant aspects of these people's lives was spearheading the turn to narrative. In this, one of the promises of the turn to narrative was to bring back the long-lost 'subject' and move it closer to the center stage of social inquiry.

In contrast, but also with a number of interesting affinities, a second view of narrative started from the assumption that narratives are pre-existing meaningful templates that carry social, cultural, and communal currency for the process of identity formation. This orientation, which I will contrastively call a *social* or *plot orientation*, centers more strongly on the communal ordering principles that seem to be handed down from generation to generation in the form of communally-shared plot lines, making their way into the lives of ordinary people and their stories of personal experience. These communal principles, also called *master narratives* or *dominant stories*, are assumed to guide communities and their participating members in terms of how to think, feel, and act. As such, this approach to narrative was more interested in action and collective identity and opened up innovative ways of rethinking the concept of human agency within the territory of communal practices. Narrative within this strand of theorizing is antithetic to the traditional positivistic ways of intending to explain human action and social identity in terms of social variables such as gender, race, or age. Following this orientation of what narratives are promising for the study of human lives, we are more likely to end up with a better understanding of social/communal sense-making principles that are at work when stories are shared – particularly the way they are negotiated and practiced in communal settings with others.

In sum, it seems as if the turn to narrative was spearheaded by two quite different orientations, one in which the narratives are elicited and analyzed as stories that belong to and are owned by the story-tellers. These narratives are considered special and unique – because they express the tellers' personally owned, very unique, experiences. Within the framework of the second orientation, narratives are *not* owned by the individual teller – at least not in the same way. Rather, the stories told, even if they deal with very personal and unique experiences, always are part of larger, communally shared, practices of sense-making and interpretation, and therefore belong to those who have engaged previously in establishing these frames for sense-making and interpretation. However, both of these orientations seem to have joined forces giving an opportunity to reunite what seemed to have fallen aside in traditional positivistic social science inquiry: the active role of the subject as an agent in the construction of social practices on one hand, and on the other, the role of social practices as constitutive of ways of thinking, feeling, and acting at the level of individual choices.

Looking back, the turn to narrative has impacted in a number of promising ways on rethinking the dynamics between the individual and the social and has become a center piece of qualitative inquiry in the social sciences and humanities. In an effort to look back and take stock of what has been accomplished within these last forty years in the fields of narrative inquiry, I started to approach leading narrative researchers with whom I had the opportunity to meet over the year 2005 at a number of rather diverse conferences and meetings. Starting in February 2005, at the Georgetown Language & Identity Conference, followed by the Huddersfield Narrative & Memory Conference in March, the Jean Piaget Society in June, the International Pragmatics Conference in July, the International Congress for the Study of Child Language in July, the American Psychology Association in August, the International Society for Cultural and Activity Research in September, the Modern Language Association in December, and in a number of colloquia and workshops in the US, Asia, and Europe, we were able to table and begin to discuss three emergent questions: (i) What was it that made the original narrative turn so successful? (ii) What has been accomplished over the last 40 years of narrative inquiry? (iii) What are the future directions for narrative inquiry? What became apparent in these discussions was a broad range of interests in narrative as a tool and as a discipline to do inquiry resulting in the need to bring together the differences and commonalities that – broadly speaking – unite and separate narrative studies. This in turn resulted in the plan to collect a number of short contributions that reflect on the present state of narrative inquiry with the purpose of critically taking stock and proposing new venues for future directions.

The contributions to this edited volume are deliberately kept short so that the reader can browse through them and get a feel where narrative inquiry is these days. I am not sure whether it actually can be stated that this volume is fully representative of all the current strands and trends in narrative studies. In spite of really trying hard to bring together narrative theorists and researchers from a broad range of theories and practical approaches, I realize that the result has to remain ultimately incomplete if not eclectic, constrained by my own subjective and very limited horizon in narrative inquiry and narrative studies. However, the attempt has been made to bring together authors from very different disciplines and with very different concerns and have them express their conceptions of the current state of the art from their perspectives. I hope that this volume will stir up even more discussion among different research traditions and between narrative scholars across the disciplines – more than we have already had over the last 40 years. The future will tell.

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