

John Benjamins Publishing Company



This is a contribution from *Narrative Inquiry* 22:1
© 2012. John Benjamins Publishing Company

This electronic file may not be altered in any way.

The author(s) of this article is/are permitted to use this PDF file to generate printed copies to be used by way of offprints, for their personal use only.

Permission is granted by the publishers to post this file on a closed server which is accessible to members (students and staff) only of the author's/s' institute, it is not permitted to post this PDF on the open internet.

For any other use of this material prior written permission should be obtained from the publishers or through the Copyright Clearance Center (for USA: www.copyright.com).

Please contact rights@benjamins.nl or consult our website: www.benjamins.com

Tables of Contents, abstracts and guidelines are available at www.benjamins.com

Reconstructing narrative

A new paradigm for narrative research and practice

Maura Striano

University of Naples Federico II

On the basis of a thorough comparative analysis of the Forum contributions to the last issue of "Narrative Inquiry" (21:2), it is possible to focus on some patterns which indicate the development of a new paradigm in this field of study and practice. These patterns lead us to understand narrative as co-constructed, dialogical, educational, ethical, multi-perspectival, relational, political, provisional, social and situational and place it in a non exclusive confrontation with other forms of meaning making within the different fields of human experience.

Keywords: narrative, challenges, epistemology

The narrative turn and its challenges after forty years

Almost all the Forum contributors to the last issue of "Narrative Inquiry" refer to the framework opened up by the narrative turn in the early Nineties. This framework made it possible to focus on the meaning making dimensions of individual and social life and to explore them in depth, using the narrative device as the most appropriate tool to achieve a clear and broad understanding of these dimensions.

Nonetheless, there were some implications that have not been properly developed over the years, insofar as the main focus of research and practice has been on individual narratives according to a self centered perspective rather than on a culturally and socially centered perspective. This defines a strong epistemic position for the narrator, who is able to make meaning of her/his experiences and therefore of her/his life and to acknowledge herself/himself as a "self" organizing structure. Narrative is therefore intended as the main device which helps in defining individual and personal identity, and in situating it within different contexts. Within this

Requests for further information should be directed to: Maura Striano, Via Porta di Massa 1, 80133 Napoli, Italy. Email: maura.striano@unina.it

perspective, the product of narrative is a frame of meaning which organizes different experiences composing individual and collective life in a continuum aimed at ordering them according to a defined form. Narratives can therefore be analyzed taking into account the clusters and patterns used to order individual and collective experience in a consistent artifact, which can be the material out of which other artifacts may be created and used.

Moreover, narrative studies and practices have focused mainly on the *products* of narrative rather than on the *process* of narrating, which can be seen in contextual and situated perspectives taking into account the cultural background, the cultural artifacts used to produce narrative, the actors and characters involved in the process of narration, the forms of interaction, and the negotiation implied in this process. All these elements have been characteristic of narrative research and practice since the emergence of the narrative turn, but there are some challenges in today's new cultural, political scenarios.

As González Monteagudo (2011) points out, we are challenged by the necessity to consider narrative as a cultural and social product, focusing on the process of narration rather than on its products and to consider this process as co-constructed by multiple agents situated within a determinate cultural and social context. This leads us also to problematize the criteria and devices that we use for analyzing and interpreting narratives, by taking into account all the complexity of the narrative process which cannot be seen as de-contextualized and un-situated. Insofar as narrative is a complex process, situated within a determinate cultural, political and social context, and imbedded within a specific frame of events and forces, it requires to be explored through an interdisciplinary approach, from multiple perspectives and with multiple tools. We therefore face an epistemological challenge which requires narrative research and practice to reconsider their epistemic position as well as their role and function within the cultural, political and social context within which they have been developed.

Patterns of development of a new narrative paradigm

First of all, as Smorti points out, we need to focus on narration as a process of “continuous construction,” situated within a context of social relations which brings the individual story into a “wider world made of institutions, economy, populations, genres” (Smorti, 2011, p. 309) and this leads us to take into account the cultural, political and social dimension of narrative.

In this perspective, Hammack focuses on the need to consider the narrative process as the product of a “narrative engagement” within a framework of competing storylines of history and identity and acknowledges the function of capturing

“the reality of lives in contexts” and of offering to individuals and communities the possibility of a deep exploration of their implications, therefore enabling “possibilities for social and political transformation” (Hammack, 2011, p. 311). Narrative inquiry is thus challenged to change its focus from an “interpretation” of individual and collective stories to a “transformation” of the contextual conditions that have framed and determined these stories, a change which poses a strong educational and political challenge (Hammack, 2011, p. 315). Indeed, the construction of individual and collective identity is not a predetermined process but comes out of a series of generative experiences, according to, as Gregg defines it, a “generative theory of identity” model (Gregg, 2011, p. 319). Moreover, identity does not follow a unique pattern, but we have to acknowledge a “multiplicity of self” integrated into the identity construction process, which is culturally and socially situated. This process occurs within a narrative framework of “big stories” referring to the whole life stories and world views, that ground individual and collective identities within a determinate cultural framework and “small stories,” that make meaning of single situations where individuals perform different roles and take different positions (Gregg, 2011, p. 320). Identity comes out of the constant and dialectic interplay between “big” and “small stories” where multiple identities combine and generate new possible selves, and where self narratives reflect this complex dynamics. As a consequence, narrative research cannot prescind from the interplay of “big” and “small stories” in order to catch the emergence and development of identity.

From a similar perspective Daiute points out that “developmental activities engage relational complexity and tension” and narrating, conceived as a “tool for individual and societal sense making” deeply reflects these dimensions (Daiute, 2011, p. 329). We can see it in the inner structure of narrative, which is tensional and is always generated by a trouble condensing and reflecting the multiplicity of troubles that we encounter in the world. (Daiute, 2011, p. 330) In this perspective, narrative reflects the complexity of our experience and plays a “meditational function” with regard to what we experiment and live as problematic and tensional, situating ourselves in a dynamic dialectics with the multiple narratives occurring in the social systems where we live (Daiute, 2011, p. 334). The challenge is therefore to make use of narrative developmentally, working out troubles and transforming canons in order to identify new and different possibilities of existence.

Through narratives, it is possible to construct and reconstruct not only personal life or professional and cultural experiences, but also learning experiences, considering that narrations are the main carriers of knowledge in contemporary societies. This is the point made by Czarniawska, who argues that it is possible to study the cognitive life not only of individuals but also of organizations as organizations “imitate many traits of actual persons including the construction of identity via narrative.” (Czarniawska, 2011, p. 341).

The process of sense making cannot be understood, as Bahtia notes, if we do not consider the cultural background which sustains this process. We need, therefore, also to examine “how those narrative meanings emerge from conflicting and contested cultural sources and practices.” This is particularly relevant if we focus on the characteristics of cultural and social scenarios, strongly shaped by the process of globalization, which raises “crucial questions about belongingness, identity, and citizenship.” (Bahtia, 2011, p. 347).

But contemporary scenarios are not only characterized by a global framework. The advancement of new technologies determines the construction and development of multiple virtual realities and virtual worlds, which generate new forms of narrative. We construct our identity stories which are the stories of who we are “in the face of what we have been given and what we have made of it” and this is our limit and our richness (Gee, 2011, p. 354). But virtual life is something different because it offers us the possibility of trying different directions and of having “second, third, fourth and multiple lives.” (Gee, 2011, p. 355). Moreover, it offers us the possibility of putting ourselves in the lives of other people and (virtually) playing with the cards that life has given to them. This opens up new and very complex scenarios for narrative research and practice focusing on the possibility of constructing and de-constructing individual and collective life stories on a virtual basis, which may help us to identify un-expressed potentialities and resources, that individuals can test and use in another possible world.

Narrative research must, moreover, face an ethical and moral challenge, as there is the risk, indicated by Holquist, of not being faithful to the complexity of human existence and experience. Some narratives may distort and reconstruct individual and collective experience in a false way, for example not taking into account one or more perspectives or omitting some facts and events. Furthermore, some narratives may be constructed using a pre-definite cultural format which eliminates other concurring frames of reference. Focusing on this issue, Holquist compares MacIntyre’s construct of “narrative self” with Bakhtin’s concept of “novelness” which “stresses the importance of openness, shared authorship” for individual and collective stories according to the acknowledgment of the “dialogic nature of human existence.” (Holquist, 2011, p. 358). Novelness is not a literary genre but a way of making meaning of human experience, taking into account the possibility of using multiple languages, multiple perspectives, multiple tools. This has strong ethical implications as it calls for the development of a new understanding of individual and collective experience, according to a dialogic perspective, which helps us to acknowledge “the potential for new understanding” through diversity (Holquist, 2011, p. 374).

Along similar lines, Ritivoi highlights the need to reconceptualize the MacIntyrean/‘narrative identity’ framework and to focus on the tensions existing

between the individual self and the traditions which offer to her/him the tools to construct her/his own narrative in a critical and creative way, actively participating in the reconstruction of those traditions. As Ritivoi notes, “traditions embody conflicts” and the possibility to use those conflicts for a reflective and participatory construction of the individual self must be taken into account in order to use the concept of “narrative selfhood” in a meaningful perspective, therefore contributing to the “foundation” of a new political theory (Ritivoi, 2011, p. 367).

Gergen and Gergen point out that experience is not something that “we have as a private possession but something that we do in relational participation.” (Gergen & Gergen, 2011, p. 380). Consequently it cannot be reconstructed through a single narrative perspective, but requires to be understood taking into account all the relational threads which compose it. Indeed, in the field of narrative research and practice there are some (often interrelated) tensions and oppositions which need to be overcome in order to make more effective use of narrative patterns:

1. *psychological vs social*, according to which narrative is either conceived of as a self centered and introspective process or as a culturally and socially centered process that impacts and shapes individual life;
2. *structure vs process*, that has determined an alternative focus on either the products of narrative or the process of narration;
3. *experience vs text*, with the risk either of bracketing the very experience of narration itself or of disarticulating the narrative text intended as a form of discourse;
4. *singularity vs multiplicity*, which has determined the emergence of different perspectives of social development: The focus on the single identity story grounds an understanding of the human agency as anchored in consistency and coherence of individual actions, while the focus on multiplicity grounds an understanding of human agency as an adaptive device, flexible, suitable but not consistent.

A possible way to construct a new pattern for narrative research is the reference to what the authors indicate as a “relational constructionist perspective” insofar as it could provide a useful means of integration but also open up a new perspective of development for narrative studies (Gergen & Gergen, 2011, p. 378). Within this framework, there is space for the acknowledgment of the “interactive moment” in narrative research and practice according to what Lannamann and Mc Namee highlight. This moment stems from a shift of perspective, which puts a focus on narrative as a communicative process, a perspective which “requires attention to the moment-to-moment construction of relational meaning” and makes it possible to have a joint integrated approach to narrative (Lannamann and Mc Namee, 2011, p. 384). This also implies that narrative cannot be analyzed apart from the

context and situations in which it is constructed and apart from the ongoing process of narrative construction itself. Moreover, the “focus on the communication action of storytelling brings out and works with both the constraints and potentials of multiple voices and multiple constructions” and this is a strong cultural, ethical and practical implication, as it opens up “new ways of being in relation with others and new ways to move forward together.” (Lannamann and Mc Namee, 2011, p. 389).

From another viewpoint, Westlund doubts “the necessity of narrative to selfhood or unified agency” (Westlund, 2011, p. 391) which organizes individual and collective experiences according to a continuous pathway and focuses on the possibility offered by narrative intended as a device to make meaning of human experience in a provisional way. Indeed, Westlund points out, “the narrative to be told about life is not finished until the life is over”, which means that every life is open to multiple possible narratives and that there may be some moments and times in our life which escape narrative. For this reason we must be able to “achieve some distance from the narratives we construct and take responsibility for working and reworking them as our lives continue to unfold.” (Westlund, 2011, p. 397). Narrative introduces one possible interpretation of human experiences, but there may be many other interpretations. Moreover, not all experiences make sense in a continuity or fit a narrative format (think, for example, of the most private dimensions of our lives).

As Woods reminds us, a strong focus on narrative intended as a general framework for human development and growth could be limiting both for research on human experience as well as for human agency within different life contexts. We have to recognize that there are some experiences which cannot be organized into narrative formats in order to obtain a meaning, according to a continuity and an integrity of the individual. Also, we have to admit that narrative is not the only way to organize our experience and make sense of it. There are other ways to do this, and narrative research and practice must account for them, considering narrative within the context of all the cultural and social devices that individuals and communities use to make meaning of their lives in a reflective way.

Where are we going with narrative?

On the basis of all these challenges, narrative research and practice are forced to construct a new frame of reference on the basis of some general guidelines, which can be summarized in the following four points:

- i. an acknowledgment of the relevance of the cultural and social dimension of narrative;
- ii. a recognition of the contextual and situated condition of narrative practice;
- iii. an identification of narrative as one of the possible epistemic positions that individuals and communities use with regard to reality, which needs to be confronted dialogically with other positions, in order to be faithful to the nature and structure of human experience;
- iv. a focus on the emancipative and transformative outcomes of narrative practice and of the consequent ethical, moral and political implications for narrative researchers and practitioners.

Narrative, therefore, is intended as a form of negotiation and active participation in social discourse and as a way of constructing new social discourses, which develops through a process of on-going and interactive construction (versus fixed and organized narrative formats). This approach requires reference to a plural epistemology and a strong openness to different interpretations of the role of narrative in multiple study fields (anthropology, psychology, pedagogy, sociology, medical sciences...) on the basis of an interdisciplinary dialogue, which seems to be very promising for narrative studies. Narrative research and practices are therefore required to construct a new narration of their cultural and intellectual enterprise, according to a new paradigm. This narration needs to be co-constructed through different disciplinary frameworks, using multiple artifacts and languages and acknowledging the educational, ethical and political potential of narrative in transforming the condition of individual and collective life within different social contexts.

References

- Bhatia, S. (2011). Narrative inquiry as cultural psychology: Meaning-making in a contested global world. *Narrative Inquiry, 21* (2), 345–352.
- Czarniawska, B. (2011). Narrating organization studies. *Narrative Inquiry, 21* (2), 337–344.
- Daiute, C. (2011). Trouble — In, around, and between narratives. *Narrative Inquiry, 21* (2), 329–336.
- Gee, J. P. (2011). Stories, probes, and games. *Narrative Inquiry, 21* (2), 353–357.
- Gergen, k. J., & Gergen, M. M. (2011). Narrative tensions: Perilous and productive. *Narrative Inquiry, 21* (2), pp.374–381.
- Gregg, G. S. (2011). Identity in life narratives. *Narrative Inquiry, 21* (2), 319–328.
- González Montegudo, J. (2011). Jerome Bruner and the challenges of the narrative turn: Then and now. *Narrative Inquiry, 21* (2), 295–302.
- Hammack, P. L. (2011). Narrative and the politics of meaning. *Narrative Inquiry, 21* (2), 311–318.

- Holquist, M. (2011). Narrative reflections — After After Virtue. *Narrative Inquiry*, 21 (2), 358–366.
- Lannamann, J. W., & McNamee, S. (2011). Narratives of the interactive moment. *Narrative Inquiry*, 21 (2), 382–390.
- Ritvoi, A. D. (2011). Virtuous selves in vicious times: Alasdair MacIntyre on narrative identity. *Narrative Inquiry*, 21 (2), 367–373.
- Smorti, A. (2011). Autobiographical memory and autobiographical narrative: What is the relationship?. *Narrative Inquiry*, 21 (2), 303–310.
- Westlund, A. C. (2011). Narrative necessity and the fixity of meaning in a life. *Narrative Inquiry*, 21 (2), 391–398.
- Woods, A. (2011). Post-narrative — An appeal. *Narrative Inquiry*, 21 (2), 399–406.