

Chapter 2

**From experience-centred to socioculturally-oriented approaches to narrative**

*Corinne Squire*

**Introduction**

This chapter examines how we can study narratives as stories of experience, rather than events; considers the problems associated with experience-centred narrative research; looks at ways to tackle such problems, particularly, adopting a more socially and culturally-directed research framework;<sup>1</sup> and returns to some research described in the previous chapter, while also referring to additional studies, and drawing on my research about people's stories of living with HIV in South Africa.

As noted in the previous chapter, when we consider personal narratives as event-centred, in Labov's terms, we tend to neglect three important narrative elements:

- (a) Talk that is not about events but that is nevertheless significant for the narrator's story of 'who they are'.
- (b) Representation itself. The uncertain, changeable nature of written, spoken and visual symbol systems means that stories are distanced from the happenings they described, have many meanings, and are never the same when told twice.
- (c) Interactions between storyteller and listener, researcher and research participant, in the co-construction of stories.

Towards the end of her chapter, Wendy Patterson looked at research that addresses these omissions by focusing not on the syntax (Mishler, 1986) of storied 'events', but on the semantics of narrated personal 'experience'. This chapter starts off by looking at other examples of such research, before moving on to consider work in which the social and cultural frames of narrative are primary concerns.

**Narratives of experience**

I am going to describe narrative research that focuses on first-person storytelling, regardless of its structure, as, following Patterson, experience-centred narrative research. This work often rests on a phenomenological assumption that experience can, through stories, become part of consciousness. It also takes a hermeneutic approach to analysing stories, aiming at understanding rather than, as in William Labov's case, structural analysis (though Labov does indeed describe his own work as hermeneutic). This work does not provide useful methodological guidelines, like Labov's. Instead, it offers a conceptual technology that is, to many, equally appealing. It is the dominant conceptual framework within which current social science narrative research operates. It is perhaps most often related to the work of Paul Ricoeur (1984, 1991), which provides a helpful reference point for the first part of this chapter.

The experience-centred approach assumes that narratives:

- are sequential and meaningful
- are definitively human
- re-present experience, reconstituting it, as well as expressing it
- display transformation or change.

### *Personal narratives as sequential and meaningful*

Experience-centred narrative research defines personal narratives as different from other sets of symbols because they involve movement, succession, progress or sequence – usually, temporal sequences - and the articulation or development of meaning. Unlike event-centred research, this kind of narrative research assumes personal narrative includes *all* meaningful stories of personal experience that people produce. Such stories may be event narratives, but they may also be more flexible about time and personal experience, and they may be defined by theme rather than structure. An experience-centred narrative might address a life turning point (Denzin, 1989), such as a realization about sexuality, or having children. It might address a more general experience, such as living through a trauma and its consequences, as Patterson's research described in Chapter 1. It may go beyond the past tense recountings that interested Labov, to include present and future stories, and for some researchers, these recountings may be about others as well as oneself. Such narratives may address generalized states or, as Patterson emphasizes, imaginary events, as well as particular events that actually happened. They may appear in different places across an interview or interviews, and in contradictory ways.

A personal narrative could also, within the experience-centred tradition, be a life history or biography, produced in several interviews, perhaps over months or years, as in Molly Andrews's (1991) life history research with lifetime political activists. A personal narrative could be the thematic biography produced when someone tells the story of a long-term aspect of their life such as chronic illness (Bury, 1982) or career (Freeman, 2004). In these instances, sequence and meaningfulness are guaranteed by the research participant's following a life or theme; but some 'non-story' material – for instance, description and theorizing – will probably be included.

A personal narrative may also, from the experience-centred perspective, be the entire 'narrative' told to and with a researcher – a position Cathy Riessman (2000, 2002) arrives at, when looking for ways to understand her interviews with south Indian women about infertility. Here, the narrative succession of signs includes dialogue, not just what one person says, and meaningfulness is located in interviewer–interviewee interaction as well as the interviewees' words. Ricoeur (1991) describes this intersection of the life-worlds of speaker and hearer, or writer and reader, as an inevitable, constitutive characteristic of narrative.

For some experience-centred narrative researchers, 'personal narrative' can involve interviewing several people about the same phenomena, as with Elliot Mishler's interpretation of a man's story in the light of an interview with his wife, described in the previous chapter. Like Labov, some experience-centred researchers privilege speech as closest to personal experience, but experience-centred research also increasingly addresses written materials – published and unpublished, documentary and fiction – as with the diaries, letters, autobiographies and biographies and artworks that form Maria Tamboukou's data in her (2010) study of women

artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There is, too, growing interest in gathering and analysing visual materials and conducting interviews around them, as with Alan Radley's and Diane Taylor's (2003a, b) study of photo diaries produced by people during hospital stays, followed by interviews with them on their return home, or Wendy Luttrell's (2003) research, involving ethnographic observation and visual materials alongside interviews – or Susan Bell's work, described in this volume.

To understand 'meaning', experience-centred narrative researchers often expand the contexts, as well as the materials, that they study. They may include participants' and their own reflective written or oral comments on interviews, sometimes just afterwards, sometimes as a 'second take' years later, as in Andrews's (2003, 2004) research, which sustains longstanding interviewee relationships. Researchers may look at hard-to-transcribe fragments, contradictions and gaps within narratives, as well as the words themselves; or at the paralanguage of for instance tone, pauses and laughter that accompanies words. They may draw in related materials, such as the larger cultural and national narratives about femininity, reproduction, and political activism that Riessman referred to in her study of south Indian women's infertility stories.

Thus, the previous chapter's definition of experience-centred narratives, as 'texts which bring stories of personal experience into being by means of the first person oral narration of past, present, future or imaginary experience' (p.37) and which may be fragmented and contradictory, is expanded by some in the experience-centred tradition to include non-oral media, and some non-first person and non-experiential material. All such material is contained within the tradition's broader understandings of narrative sequence and meaningfulness.

### *Narratives as means of human sense-making*

Experience-centred narrative researchers think we can understand personal experience stories because of what they see as narratives' second defining feature: that narratives are essential means of human sense-making. Within this tradition, humans are imbricated in narrative. Labov too thinks there is a special relationship between people and stories. For him, event narratives express, in fairly invariant form, humans' most vivid experiences, those of sex, death and moral injury. But the experience-centred approach assumes that sequential temporal orderings of human experience into narrative are not just characteristic of humans, but *make* us human. 'Time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode', Ricoeur (1984: 52) puts it. Adapting Socrates, he declares that the 'examination' of a life, without which life is not worth living, consists in the recounting of it (1991).

For the psychologist Jerome Bruner, too, humans are, as a species, *homo narrans*, with an inborn tendency to tell and understand stories (1990). This perspective draws on the Aristotelian account of human morality as developed and transmitted through the meaning-making activity of storytelling. All stories are thus, to some extent, morality tales (MacIntyre, 1984). Stories are also, because human, deeply social; not just because they always involve hearers as well as speakers, as Labov might argue, but because storytelling constitutes and maintains sociality (Denzin, 1989). Even if you tell your story to yourself, or to someone who does not understand it, you are still speaking as a social being, to an imagined social 'other' who understands your tale.

At the same time, some experience-centred narrative researchers, particularly those influenced by psychoanalysis, think that important aspects of human experience escape narrative and cannot

be storied into sense. Some such researchers, such as Stephen Frosh (2002), understand narrative as nevertheless an important route of human meaning-making. Others, such as Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson (2000) claim more strongly that there is an 'emotional' sequencing to stories that offers a route into the logic of the unconscious.

### *Narrative as representation and reconstruction*

A third assumption of the experience-centred perspective on narrative is that narrative involves some reconstruction of stories across times and places – an expression of experience that is not, as Labov's work tends to suggest, a direct translation of it. In this account, narratives cannot be repeated exactly, since words never 'mean' the same thing twice (see Andrews, this volume),<sup>2</sup> and stories are performed differently in different social contexts. For Ricoeur and Bruner, narratives convey experience through reconstituting it, resulting in multiple and changeable storylines – like those pointed out in Mishler's and Langellier's work, examined in Chapter 1. These uncertainties of language can, again, be understood as offering some means of expression to the unconscious within narratives, if the unconscious is itself defined, following Lacan, as like a 'language', and as existing in and through the uncertainties of representation (Culler, 1981; Frosh, 2002).

Ricoeur describes narratives as jointly 'told' between writer and reader, speaker and hearer. In telling and understanding stories, we are thus working on the relation between 'life as a story in its nascent state' (Ricoeur, 1991: 29) and its symbolic translation into recounted narrative. Here we move towards what Mishler describes as the third focus of narrative research, its *context* – beginning with the research situation's interpersonal context, but taking in broader social and cultural contexts also. In my South African research on experiences and requirements of support for living with HIV, for example, many levels of context were in play. The interviewees were all black, mostly women, almost all working class, and largely under the age of 30. Speaking to a white middle class female university researcher from the overdeveloped world, in most cases older than them, certainly affected the stories they told. But interviewees were also speaking to the other potential hearers of their words, who would listen to archived tapes, or read papers or reports, or hear talks about the research. They were speaking, too, in the broader context of contemporary national contests over HIV issues, and the continuing global history and politics of the pandemic, over which they had little power but strong interests. At a time when they perceived scant interest in hearing them outside local HIV communities, they were highly concerned about what would happen to the research. They wanted the tapes archived. Sometimes, they even spoke directly into the tape recorder, addressing future audiences (Squire, 2007). From a Ricoeurian perspective, all these contextual factors impact the way 'nascent' stories become spoken narratives.

The interest in reconstruction and co-construction in experience-centred narrative research leads some researchers to view any personal story as just one of many narratable 'truths'. Ricoeur, however, distinguishes narrative from reason. Stories are for him, as for Labov, an imperfect, 'practical wisdom'. They convey and construct moralities, but they are time-dependent, caught in 'tradition', which for Ricoeur involves a varying balance between sedimentation and innovation. They are important sources of the 'truths' of a tradition, but they do not have the generality of a grand theoretical 'truth'.

However, some experience-centred researchers view narratives as representing, more

transparently, both experience and the realities from which it derives. Such researchers may also assume that stories can represent the psychic realities of the narrator – including sometimes their unconscious elements – without much social mediation. Researchers using the biographic–narrative interpretive method such as for instance Prue Chamberlayne, Michael Rustin and Tom Wengraf (2002), expect to find in their interview transcripts both the story of an objective ‘lived life’ that can be corroborated by, for example birth and death registers and newspapers, and a ‘told story’, containing meanings specific to the narrator and their context, as well as some unconscious meanings, relatively independent of the social contexts of storytelling. In stories about living with HIV, the ‘lived life’ might include date of diagnosis, medical history and support services used. The ‘told story’ might cover the speaker’s highly contextualized personal progress through getting ill, getting tested, coming to terms with HIV, telling others about their status, and finding effective treatments and ways of living, and in addition, an unconscious narrative of underlying, difficult emotions. The relative objectivity of the ‘lived life’, and the unconscious elements in the ‘told story’ are often questioned. However, for some researchers, the distinction offers a starting point for identifying and defining narratives.

### *Narrative as transformation*

Fourth, experience-centred research assumes that narratives represent personal changes that go beyond the formal ‘resolutions’ of Labovian event narratives. It addresses themes, rather than clauses. For Bruner (1990), for instance, stories involve the violation of normality and an attempt, through human agency, at its restoration. Michele Crossley (2000) applies this criterion to gay men’s stories of living with HIV over a long period of time, and differentiates three separate kinds of story. One addresses HIV directly and comes to terms with it, even deploying a discourse of ‘growth’; one normalizes HIV’s impact throughout; the third is propelled into mourning by the losses involved with HIV and never makes its way out of it.

This interest in narrative change often impels experience-centred researchers to look for improvement in stories, as well as trying to understand them. Ricoeur suggests that by hearing a ‘story not yet told’, the psychoanalyst offers the analysis and the possibility of producing a better story, ‘more bearable and more intelligible’ (1991: 30). From an experience-centred perspective, all hearers and speakers of stories might be involved in such projects, including researchers and research participants. Experience-centred researchers are, therefore, often interested in what constitutes a ‘good’ human story. Crossley, for instance, assesses the melancholic stories she found in her narratives of long-term HIV survivors as the least adaptive. This emphasis on transformation leads to some experience-centred narrative research being associated, sometimes controversially, with social, psychological and sometimes quasi-clinical value judgements about stories. Increasingly, though, narrative researchers are cautious about rating experience narratives according to socially or culturally conventional criteria.

### **Obtaining narratives of experience**

When we start looking at how we might obtain narratives, more differences within the experience-centred approach emerge, depending on what definition of ‘narrative’ the researchers adopt.

### *Narrative materials*

The range of materials that can be incorporated into experience-centred narrative research is wide, but there is one area of broad agreement. While some narrative researchers, predominantly working in clinical or observational settings, reconstruct material by writing notes concurrently or afterwards, most view the succession and particularity of the verbal and other symbols that make up such stories, as requiring a concurrent record, wherever feasible. This means that almost all experience-centred narrative researchers try to obtain a full written, aural and/or visual record of research participants' stories.

Researchers who take a broad view of 'narrative' and are interested in narratives' context may use a number of such records – oral, written and visual texts, field notes, participants' and their own commentaries, alongside related cultural representations and records of important realities in their own and their interviewees' lives. Riessman, for instance, (2000) situates her work on south Indian women's narratives of reproductive problems in relation to dominant cultural narratives of women's fertility, and south Indian political narratives. The value of this becomes clear when she analyses an interview with Gita, a woman who positions herself not as an infertile woman, but as a political actor, surrounded by stigmatizing discourses of femininity and reproduction (Riessman, 2002). Revisiting her materials several years on, Riessman (2005) includes more material about the context of the research, specifically about her own relation to discourses of feminism and postcolonialism, that leads her to understand Gita's story as potentially less heroic than in her earlier reading of a narrower range of narrative contexts.

Researchers who view narratives as relatively unmediated expressions of personal experience, such as Chamberlayne and her colleagues (Chamberlayne et al., 2002), may see context as important, but they may treat it separately from the personal story. Researchers who are more interested in context may also concentrate on personal stories, simply because these seem the most practical and effective means of researching particular contextual issues. Spoken personal testimony is indeed a strong cultural currency, with powerful effects, constituting, in the west and beyond, what Kenneth Plummer (2001) calls an 'autobiographical age'. This is why my own research on HIV has focused on personal narratives, rather than other materials. In South Africa in 2001, when I did the interview study about HIV support, HIV was a major issue with which treatment, care, education and social attitudes were not keeping pace. People living openly with HIV were often stigmatized. In politics, popular media and everyday social interactions HIV was frequently minimized or referred to other countries or other people, rarely owned publically. In this context, many research participants saw the interviews as a way of 'speaking out' for themselves and others. Their words practised and prefigured a new acceptance and openness about HIV in South Africa.

Ethical issues also affect what narrative materials are collected. In South Africa, I audio-recorded interviews in community organizations' offices, treated research participants as expert informants about HIV support and asked no questions about modes of infection, 'risk behaviours' or HIV as a medical condition. These constraints on content and context offered research participants an anonymity that visual or audio-recordings in domestic settings or clinics could not. They provided a framework for referrals, should people want to access more support; and they clearly distinguished the research from studies of people's medical HIV knowledge or their efficacy as condom users or patients taking medications. Similar issues of anonymity, confidentiality, referrals and implicit pathologization might arise when gathering Labovian event narratives. However, research that collects longer 'experience' narratives is more likely to

encounter such issues because it usually involves longer, sometimes repeated, and often more interactive collection of materials, as well as attention to extensive contextual elements.

Finally, experience-centred researchers who are interested in what is *not* clearly represented in narratives, try to include such elements within their materials. Hollway and Jefferson (2000), for example studying fear of crime in northern England in long, open-ended interviews, were concerned not just with what people said, but with contradictions, silences, hesitations and emotionally marked aspects of the interviews. As we shall see in the next section, such elements are harder to define, record and transcribe than symbolic language or images; they also present large problems for narrative analysis.

### ***The processes of experience-centred narrative research***

How is experience-centred narrative research carried out? As with Labovian event narrative research, general guidelines for qualitative research apply (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Seale et al., 2004). However, different definitional emphases again lead to divergent approaches. I shall concentrate on oral interview research, the most common form. Research on experiential images and writing, and written and internet interviewing, shows similar variability, but requires more specific considerations than I can offer here.<sup>3</sup>

Event-centred narrative researchers gather corpuses of stories. Experience-centred narrative researchers are more likely to aim for a certain number of interviews or interviewees. Researchers who study life narratives, or who aim for fully biographical accounts of at least parts of interviewees' lives, tend to use small numbers of interviewees, sampled theoretically, often on an opportunistic and network basis, with little randomization within this sampling frame. Interviews may involve several meetings and last many hours, but involve relatively small numbers of participants – 15 for instance in Andrews's (1991) life history study of older political activists. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) generated two interviews per participant and (like Mishler) interviewed family and other networks.<sup>2</sup> Notes on the interviews and their contexts will usually be made roughly concurrently. Broader contextual material, if collected, may be gathered beforehand – as in approaches influenced by oral history – or in parallel, as with Riessman's south Indian work.

Researchers who are interested less in biography, more in narrative themes' commonalities and differences across groups of individuals, tend to use larger interviewee numbers, and quota sampling and a degree of randomization, within a still theoretical sampling frame. Interviews here are typically one or two hours in length. In my South African research, for instance, I wanted to examine how people talked about HIV in differently resourced situations, and how gender might affect such talk. Interviews with 37 people in different neighbourhoods were a way both to look across local variabilities in resources and to obtain a reasonable number of male interviewees (eight), since men were, as in many interview studies, less likely to volunteer.

Pragmatic and ethical considerations are important, again, for sampling. It may be difficult for some participant groups to find time or personal resources for long interviews – for instance, in HIV research, if interviews are conducted far from home, or if participants have health problems. With sensitive research topics, it can be hard to recruit a sample for qualitative interviewing. The resultant small number of participants may, out of the researcher's concern to learn as much as possible from this group, be asked to participate in more intensive research, perhaps using a life history or biographical approach.

Most experience-centred narrative interviewing is semi-structured. Within this format, researcher involvement shows a continuum, depending on where the researcher thinks ‘narratives’ live. If you place the story within the person, you may simply ask for ‘their story’, intervening as little as possible. Hollway and Jefferson’s (2000) ‘free association narrative interviewing’ for instance, concerned with narrators’ emotional sequencing of their stories, is highly participant-centred in the interviewing phase. Somewhat like an analytic session, it allows silences and other awkwardnesses that may be difficult in a research – or indeed a conversation – context, and that may also present problems in terms of researcher’s and participant’s power within the research process. Researchers may partly constrain such open processes by asking for instance for a family or career ‘story’, and allowing ‘active listening’ that is, non-verbal responses by the researcher at conventionally appropriate points (Chamberlayne et al., 2002).

If you assume that reality is to some degree separate from personal story, you may triangulate, asking interviewees about real events, or looking for evidence of them elsewhere, for instance in newspaper reports (Chamberlayne et al., 2002). If you want to gather and analyse full biographical accounts, you may ask questions about ‘conventional’ aspects of lives – family, work, friends – if they are not spontaneously covered, and about events marked by the speaker as important but not expanded on (Wengraf, 2004).

If you are convinced of the importance of narratives’ co-construction, you will engage throughout in active narrative interviewing, an interaction that stretches to something like conversation, or co-research. If context is assumed to be a large aspect of research, you may, like Riessman in her south Indian work, be particularly alert to social and political factors as they affect the ongoing interview. In my South African research, interviewees sometimes explicitly referred to the country’s post-apartheid, developing world context of political change and activism, alongside continuing structural disadvantage and poverty, high HIV prevalence and low treatment access. However, these factors were highly salient even when implicit.

If you want to collect and study stories about particular experiences, you may elicit them, with formulations like, ‘can you give me an example?’ or ‘tell me more about when ...’. If, however, you see ‘narrative’ as the whole interview, or as a wider formation of which the interview is a part, or as involving sequences of symbols across the interview, not necessarily all gathered together in a single place within it, then you may not be concerned with gathering obvious ‘stories’. You might even see such procedures as skewing the research. In asking South African interviewees about HIV support, I simply asked people to describe the support they had and the support they wanted, so as not to require the the disclosures, individualization and particularization that often go with personal stories, \*

Research need not stop with the first interview. You may return for chronological follow-up, a longer story, or to check facts, examine interpretations, or explore highly emotional issues. Hollway and Jefferson use second interviews to return to points in the first interview that their theoretical frame pointed to as significant: contradictions, silences, hesitations, strong or unusual patterns of emotion. Re-interviews and other post-interview interactions can also be viewed as ways to give interviewees more power over the materials; to enable them to ‘look back’ historically, or to continue the conversation. For Andrews and other life history and oral history researchers, such interactions can extend over decades (see, for instance, Portelli, 2010).

Much qualitative research, modifying ethical considerations developed initially for quantitative, often medical research with ‘human subjects,’ gives guarantees about the time-limited

availability of materials. This may not be appropriate for narrative materials with which interviewees are heavily invested. Many of our South African research participants would not have agreed to participate without being convinced of the long-term survival of their interviews. However, the quantitatively derived ethics codes of many universities, in combination with the codes of professional bodies such as, in Britain, the British Psychological Society, British Sociological Association and the Economic and Social Research Council, do provide extensive participant rights over research processes and access to materials such as tapes and transcripts. These rights are often more significant for experience-centred narrative research than for the more restricted research processes of event narrative research.

### **How do we analyse narratives of experience?**

In Labovian narrative analysis, defining, categorizing and assessing the ‘evaluations’ that give meaning to event narratives is difficult. Analysing the human meanings of experience-centred narratives is an even more controversial project.

### ***Going round in hermeneutic circles***

For Ricoeur, ‘the hermeneutical problem begins where linguistics – Labovian analysis, for instance – leaves off’ (1991: 27). Some narrative analysts move from Labovian linguistics towards wider interpretive frames (Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 1993); others start off looking for large-scale ‘meanings’. The search for a valid interpretive frame is perhaps the research stage that causes most argument and concern.

The simplest approach is to begin describing the interviews thematically, and from this, to develop and test theories that give a predictive explanation of the stories, moving back and forth between the interviews themselves and generalizations about them in a classic hermeneutic circle, using a combination of top-down and bottom-up interpretive procedures. This approach may not seem at first to differ greatly from many other qualitative procedures, for instance a thematic content analysis. However, experience-centred narrative analysis – and, indeed, other narrative analysis that is broadly focused on the content or semantics of stories – is distinguished by its attention to the sequencing and progression of themes within interviews, their transformation and resolution. Thus, it foregrounds the specifically narrative aspects of texts’ themes.

Many researchers do not expect a single interpretation to emerge. They argue that there are multiple valid interpretations, multiple narrative ‘truths’ (Freeman, 2003); for them, the hermeneutic circle never closes. How, though, might we build a persuasive case for a particular interpretation? As described above, researchers themselves continually check their evolving interpretations against the materials and actively seek out contrary cases. They may also submit their analyses to external assessment by interested others (Chamberlayne et al., 2002). For some, the value of such external testing is restricted by the difficulty of others achieving sufficient familiarity with the materials to be able validly to interpret them. Feedback from respondents may also be a check on analyses (Andrews, 2003). My research used a combination of such procedures. My use of the religious conversion genre to analyse some interviewee stories came not simply from observed structural parallels between the genre and the interview narratives, but also from research assistants’ independent comments on the faith-oriented nature of

interviewees' HIV talk; interviewees' frequent mentions of religious faith; and the prominence of religious discourse in South Africa.

Analysis raises, again, some ethical questions. Ethical approval for experience-focused narrative research should, but rarely does, involve considering the ethics of interpretation, within the frame of researchers' and research participants' different powers over the data. Presentation of data can be problematic. Reproducing larger amounts of data than with an event-centred approach, sometimes glossing whole lives, it becomes harder to guarantee anonymity, especially when researching an understudied topic with a small community of potential respondents. To obviate this problem, researchers can – as those working with therapeutic materials often do – omit or change more specific data, guaranteeing confidentiality at the expense of some of the data's richness. Sometimes – as with a few interviewees in South Africa – research participants want to their own names used in the research, for personal or political reasons. In such cases, the conflict between participants' and researcher's understandings of the material could become particularly problematic. Another issue to consider in such cases, though, is that people's views about anonymity may change over time, especially around a stigmatized issue such as HIV, while a name, once published, cannot be revised.

The ethics of discussing analyses with participants is widely debated, though all agree on the need for interpretive responsibility. Hollway and Jefferson provide transcripts but do not invite participant input into interpretation. From their psychoanalytic perspective, the participant may not know everything that she/he is 'saying' in the story (2004). Chamberlayne and colleagues feed back interpretations, particularly of semantically open-ended visual materials, and note responses, but do not necessarily change their accounts. Interviewee rights over material can, however, be conceived in a much stronger way that overlaps with interpretation, allowing participants to comment, rewrite and add their own analyses. Andrews for instance engages in long-term conversations with her participants over interpretations, exchanges which generate new materials and themselves become part of the analysis. Research participants vary a great deal in how involved they get with research; as in my South African research, confidentiality issues and or constrained participant resources may not make it appropriate to press for such involvement. Even receiving a transcript may be problematic – if it announces private things about yourself, where is it to be kept? At the same time, having a transcript has a variety of meanings for research participants which can go way beyond that of a simple record of a research interview. A transcript can be a valued part of someone's own framing of their life, particularly when it addresses hitherto silenced or untold aspects of that life.

### ***The place of the researcher***

For Ricoeur, written and told stories are reconfigured in their readings or hearings: 'the process of composition, of configuration, is not completed in the text but in the reader' (1991: 26). Understanding requires, as for Labov, re-actualizing the act that produced the story, but in Ricoeur's account considerable indeterminacy attends the process. It is, though, possible, because for Ricoeur, as for Labov, human action and experience, like human language, always has a narrative structure (Ricoeur, 1991: 28–9). Yet narratives are not autonomous for Ricoeur, as they are in Labov's work. The worlds of readers and texts, speakers and listeners must be brought together, co-inhabited, in order for understanding to occur. Moreover, the experience-centred tradition of narrative research is, as we have seen, concerned with the possibilities of multiple interpretations, among which researchers' reflexive analyses of their own contributions

sit easily. Riessman's accounts of her own implication in analytic processes (2002, 2005) provide good examples. Hollway and Jefferson formulate the process differently, as an examination of researcher countertransference, drawing on their psychoanalytic frame (2004). Andrews explores the issue of researcher stance and its historical specificity later in this volume.

### ***The social world***

Narrative is intrinsically social to some extent for all experience-centred researchers, since it uses the social medium of language and is produced by social subjects. At the same time, narrative remains, in this tradition, a production of individualized subjectivities. Ricoeur, having and eating his poststructuralist cake, puts it like this: 'we can become our own narrator' (1991: 32) while at the same time 'in place of an *ego* enamoured of itself arises a *self* instructed by cultural symbols, the first among which are the narratives handed down in our literary tradition' (1991: 33). This dualism is acted out in analysis, usually by paralleled top-down and bottom-up approaches. Top-down analyses tend – except in the case of psychoanalytic accounts – to be more socially oriented. My analyses for instance draw on existing research about religious and HIV narratives in South Africa, and relate it to the interview data. In Bamberg and Andrews's (2004) collection of papers on counternarratives, stories in interview materials are analysed as told 'against' dominant cultural narratives of, for instance, 'mothering' or ageing. Andrews (2004) argues that the explanatory power of this analysis is not vitiated by the frequently inexplicit countering process, the fine grain of the materials, or the possibility of other levels of reading. Wengraf puts the cases more strongly when he advocates reading 'potentially symptomatic and revelatory expressions of historically evolving psychologies', within the personal biographies that emerge in his research – 'in a historically evolving context of micro and macro social relationships' (2004: 117) involving, for instance, employment and social welfare histories within particular communities. At the same time, he advises caution with such rich interpretive moves.

From social analysis to advocacy is a small step. Some experience-centred researchers include within their analysis a privileging of some stories over others: Crossley for instance sees the narratives of long-term HIV survivors that manage to consider the future as the most useful. Many researchers suggest that narratives that are not 'closed off', and that contain multiple possibilities within them, are better than more apparently dogmatic stories (Freeman, 2004; Wengraf, 2004; see also Squire, 2012). Even those who do not deliberately judge narratives often do so by default. It was indeed difficult in listening to our South African interviewees to get away from the sense that in general, narratives that managed to represent a future were 'good' stories – especially as such stories seemed commoner when interviewees had access to resources such as treatment and support groups. This kind of assumption is, however, indicative of the problems of experience-centred narrative research.

## **Criticizing experience-centred narrative research**

### ***Interpretation as prescription***

Experience-centred narrative research can make strong, sometimes prescriptive assumptions about the stories it claims to inhabit. The approach often assumes that hermeneutic immersion warrants the drawing up of a narrative typology of a particular text; judging which are 'good narratives'; and, on the presumption that narratives reflect lives, associating these 'good' stories

with successful life adjustment. Of course, any hermeneutic project asserts some interpretive authority. Moreover, some researchers base their assumptions on well-specified, and therefore challengeable, psychoanalytic or narrative theories. However, others use nebulous criteria such as narrative 'openness' and 'reflexivity'; assert interpretive authority based on materials to which their readers have little access; or rely on assumptions about the nature of 'narrative' like those we considered earlier, whose cracks now start to show.

### ***What is narrative 'coherence'?***

A related issue is that some experience-centred research criticizes partial, fragmented or contradictory narratives for their incoherent representations of experience. For example, we tend to expect life narratives to mention family members, education, work, leisure and major life-defining events, and to provide more or less resolved accounts of them. I would argue however that we cannot tell what events ought to be mentioned in life stories or how they should be talked about. For example, one of our South African interviewees, telling how she and her boyfriend accepted and lived with her positive status and his refusal to test, said of their relationship, 'all of the children are his and it's been a long time that we've been staying together'. This account does not fit well with conventional western health education narratives of couples' HIV acceptance and risk reduction through talking and testing, or with almost any canonic social science or clinical account of 'good' heterosexual relationship as involving strong emotionality and communication. That does not make it a bad story. There are many other frames within which it could be read and within which our interviewee might indeed be expecting myself and the research assistant to understand it, involving for instance the highly mobile, resource-deprived, informal settlement in which she lives, and ways of representing emotions that do not involve talking about them a lot. Recent research has, indeed, moved towards seeing incoherence as an integral part of the narrative materials with which it deals (Hyvarinen et al., 2010).

Even with difficult to understand stories like that told by a man with schizophrenia, considered by Phil Salmon and Riessman in Chapter 4, the establishment of a language community can be worked at so the stories can get 'heard'. But increasingly, researchers are accepting that we are always powerfully limited in story understanding. My and my South African informants' story worlds are hard to bring into congruence and will retain relative autonomy, and this is true to a degree of all storytellers and hearers. The experience-centred approach's emphasis on story worlds coming into congruence, despite its awareness of mismatches between storytellers and researchers, tends to downplay such incongruence. When we say that narratives are forms of everyday meaning-making and that they are distinguished from theories by their human particularities, we also have to acknowledge that such meaning-making is socially, culturally and historically specific, so that story meanings are never accessible across all social, cultural and historical contexts. It is useful, in this respect, to think about Joan Scott's (1991) important reframing of 'experience' as discursive, and as a process of engagement and social practice, rather than as a naturalized, individualized and coherent guarantee of truth.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Is there a 'subject' of experience?***

The experience-oriented approach initially suggests that experience is rooted in a 'subject' of those experiences, which has some unity and agency. This position is now sometimes asserted

‘against’ postmodernism’s alleged preoccupations with an entirely fragmented and socially determined subject, which is then presented as elitist, relativist and non-political. At other times, the experience-oriented approach claims a kind of partial, contingent subjective unity along the lines perhaps of Spivak’s (1993) ‘strategic essentialism and interest in collective action, or Ian Hacking’s (1998) assertions about the need for a level of subjective continuity to underpin moral and political personhood (see also Freeman, 2003). Its default first approach, however, can lead experience-focused research into the individualized, prescriptive approaches we have described, and to psychobiographies of data, which assume an authorial subjectivity ‘behind’ the material. This approach cuts researchers off from a great deal of literary and cultural studies work on narrative which takes more complicated approaches to subjectivity and – as in Scott’s (1991) case - experience, which she argues needs to be understood as how people become who they are, not as the expression or reflection of their essence. The word ‘experience’ itself comes from a Latin root that refers to test, trial and experiment. It refers to practice, rather than to being. At the same time, the experience-centred approach hardly addresses at all one other important subject of experience: the subject who experiences the world sensorily (see Lars-Christer Hyden’s chapter, this volume, for a detailed account). Despite the approach’s frequent references to phenomenology, the body only appears within it at two removes: lodged in the reflective consciousness of the authorial subject, and translated into a verbal language that itself receives little attention,

### ***Analysing experience, forgetting language***

A focus on experience tends to reduce the significance of language in narrative research. Even if language is seen as reconstructing experience and not as a direct translation of it, language’s patterns and effects tend to be uninteresting to experience-centred researchers. Links between interpersonal and cultural forms of language, such as those in which I am interested, are neglected. Moreover, ‘performance’, a term frequently used in current narrative research, takes on a Goffmanian meaning, signifying the presentation of different narrative identities in different contexts, with a unified subject behind them. The present popularity of the term derives from Judith Butler’s (1993) usage. But her complicated account of ‘performance’ as predicated on the non-repeatability of significations and a non-repeatable, non-identical subject, is often jettisoned in narrative research. Performance in Butler’s sense does not suggest any simple assumptions about agency or language’s expression of it.

### ***Relativism***

Lastly, even those who work within the experience-centred tradition while also being aware of the complexities of language and subjectivities can end up, by prioritizing experience, with a relativist set of equally valid interpretations. It may seem as if there is no place to stop the interpreting, and no way to judge between interpretations, all of which may be ‘truthful’ in their own contexts.

### **Socio-culturally-oriented approaches to personal narratives**

One way to address these problems is to maintain, in general, many of the procedures and analytic approaches of the experience-centred approach, but to orient your research much more according to the social and cultural character of personal narratives. A valuable example is Kenneth Plummer’s *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995), which traces the emergence of intimate

disclosure narratives in the twentieth century west within the larger context of the contemporary social, cultural and political power of autobiography and its place within social change movements (see also Plummer, 2001). Plummer gives detailed accounts of, for instance, lesbian and gay coming-out narratives: their structure; the historical and social contexts which enabled their development; how they have changed; and their effects. He argues that such stories must have an audience at least partly prepared to hear them if they are to achieve currency, but that stories also themselves 'gather people together'. Stories operate within 'interpretive communities' of speakers and hearers that are political as well as cultural actors. They build collective identities that can lead, albeit slowly and discontinuously, to cultural shifts and political change. Personal stories thus often operate as bids for representation and power from the disenfranchised. Plummer (2001) points out that the trend since the nineteenth century has been towards stories told by the less powerful, in a collective mode where one person's story 'stands in' for many others, as with US slave narratives and the testimonies of peoples under occupation.

Within the intimate disclosure genre, there are many variations. My own concern with HIV positive people's ways of talking about the epidemic in South Africa started from the assumption that cultural and personal narratives are interconnected. My specific interest in how people's stories drew on the conversion narrative genre developed first from a recognition of how often interviewees, when talking about being HIV positive, talked also about religion; and from an awareness of the religious sounding phrases and structures in many interviewees' stories. Here is an example, from an interview with a woman who named herself Linda:

**Linda:** Okay! In the first place I am glad that I know of my HIV positive status because now I know what to do. Then my husband, the one I am married to, I told him. At first, he could not accept it, he gave me too many problems. I then continued talking about it everyday, I used to chat about it so that it would sink into him that I am HIV positive/Mhm/ Truly, eventually he accepted it. My baby was not discharged yet, so that he/she could be tested as well./Ok/ Then he asked about the baby. I said the baby will be tested at 9 months. I then explained. Truly then I was told that the baby, I was very happy, because I was happy to save my baby. AZT helped me, my baby was tested negative. That made me a very happy person, I didn't think of myself as having HIV because I am still alright. There is no difference I must say. My health is still good. The other thing that made me happy is the group support that we are doing as nursing mothers. The thing that really helped was the support groups. It really really helped us because you feel free when you are there I must say. You become very happy and forget that eish, when you get home it is then that you remember that you have HIV, but when you are there you are free. We advise each other very well, even the instructor (facilitator), I must say she tells us what to do. So today I am not ready, I am not yet free, I don't feel like I am open, I am not open yet to stand up and say I have HIV. I am still getting there, you understand?/Mhm/ But I feel alright, most importantly I thank God. God said these things before, he said there will be these incurable diseases, so I believe in God truly. What he talked about, is happening today. So that is something else that inspired me, because God mentioned this before, he said they will happen, they are happening today, unto people, they would not fall in steep places, so I believe in that.

This is, at one level, the story of Linda's personal coming to terms with her HIV status. It also exemplifies the religious 'conversion' genre drawn on by interviewees, who described a struggle to confront HIV status, culminating in a conversion moment, often marked by interviewees saying something like, 'then, I believed,' or – as here – 'truly, eventually he accepted it'. For women who, like Linda, had received antiretroviral treatment during pregnancy, this moment of transformation was often revisited later through the salvational event of their baby testing negative. As in many religious narratives, there were ongoing doubts and reaffirmations of faith. Linda tells of her continuous struggle to improve, ethically as well as informationally, her relation to HIV. Many interviewees told stories of searching out HIV versions of faith communities to strengthen their beliefs – as for Linda, support groups could act in this way when family and friendship groups did not. The stories also often moved on to a kind of HIV witnessing, aimed at converting others to an accepting, knowledgeable and hence ethical life with HIV. The speaker's own telling of their status to others was frequently the first step in this testimony, as for Linda with her husband. Linda's story becomes explicitly entwined with Christian discourse at the end when she seems to be evoking Isaiah's promises of protection of the faithful and the punishment of the wicked. But personal transgression is shifted here from people who are HIV positive, often seen as sinning at this time, to people who fail to understand and come to terms with HIV, while grace accrues to those who accept and witness about their status. However, this kind of story was also often told with no explicit religious content, still deploying a 'conversion' structure that moved from ignorance and conflict to acceptance and witnessing.

Why do such cultural resonances matter? I am assuming that the interconnection between cultural genres and personal narratives may potentiate personal narratives' effects – and work on the impact of popular-cultural representations of HIV in the South African context tends to support that view (). The conversion genre was not simply recognizable to our interviewees, ourselves and to wider South African speech communities; it also worked to turn stories of HIV into morality tales. The stories borrowed ethical force of the conversion genre and gave it to living with HIV, often the object of some quite different religious stories of possession, transgression or silence. The conversion genre was then a powerful one at this specific time and place.

Genres are always mixed up and imperfect. As Derrida (1981) says, the law of genre is to break its own laws. My assumption was that many cultural narratives, rather than just one, would inflect personal narratives, so I also looked at stories' inflection by western and traditional health narratives of HIV; psychological narratives of coming to terms with the condition, and political narratives of self-affirmation and action. It is, too, important to recognize that stories are strongly determined by material circumstances. Interviewees tended to tell longer and more complex stories in conditions where they had access to support – support groups, sympathetic family members, medical treatment, employment and training. Interviewees with little support were, unsurprisingly, less likely to talk about HIV at length.

A genre's imperfections also mean that aspects of people's lives that are hard to make sense of can still appear within a 'genre'; it continues, imperfectly, around them. This is important in the case of HIV, whose relations with stigma, death, sexuality and uncertainty are hard to put into words. Crises of HIV 'faith', for instance, can appear in Linda's narrative of immanent, not-yet-achieved belief; she is ready but also not ready to speak of HIV; she is on the long road to community and faith that conversion narratives set out.

Moving away from the experience-centred approach to a broader socio-cultural approach to narrative research can make it less prescriptive, less controlled by temporal progression; less focused on coherence; more aware of language; more likely to understand selves in non-essentialist ways and more able to break out of hermeneutic reflexivity with its social referents. But how 'solved' are these problems, actually? Expanding the remit of experience-centred narrative research may just force it to operate with two incommensurable theories of the speaking subject: the agentic, storytelling subject of the experience-focused tradition, at odds with the fragmented, culturally produced, 'postmodern' subject of more culturally-oriented analyses.

Neither does a 'socio-cultural' approach necessarily avoid over-interpretation or relativism, guarantee political engagement or provide a clear concept of the relationship between narratives and the material world, including bodies – or narratives and their effects. It is also difficult to say anything definitive about narrative genres, given the multiplicity and incompleteness just described. Moreover, focusing on 'cultural stories' can lead to narrow particularism about specific stories; or to reifying culture, for instance, by addressing stories through categories such as 'women's stories' from which politics is evacuated (Scott, 1991; see also Tamboukou, this volume). The political shapes of narratives are larger than a sociocultural analysis can indicate; a move towards broader understandings of them is becoming more common in narrative researchers' work, as Chapter 3 and the final section of this book will demonstrate. From an opposed perspective, some critics accuse culturally-oriented approaches of losing sight of the individual stories. In analysing Linda's story as a conversion narrative, am I erasing the particularity of her language and experience?

Some of these problems can be circumvented. Many stories, does not mean infinite stories. Liz Stanley's (1992) set of cultural 'stories' about the Yorkshire Ripper are, as she points, out also an interested collection, told from a set of resistant standpoints that are far from relativist. The contemporary significance of 'experience' as a place-setter for political claims is too strong to allow us to ignore it on the grounds of its conceptual messiness or political dangers (Scott, 1991). Plummer makes detailed and subtle arguments about the catalyzing effects of self-disclosure stories in shifting political circumstances. These effects are particular to time and place, but we can expect some generalization. For instance, since our South African interviewees drew on genres of conversion and witnessing to talk about HIV in a situation where HIV identities had been 'othered' as unclean and immoral (Joffe, 1997), it may be that such ethical self-disclosure genres may be useful resources in other situations of narrative pathologization. I would also argue that individual stories are not lost, but reframed in this approach. What we hear from Linda is certainly a 'personal' story – just one expressed within a particular national and sociocultural context.

Some problems remain. Can genres really continue across the unsayable and so register unsymbolisable things, as I have suggested? Critics who point to the seductive and even self-deluding sense that you have solved unsolvable unconscious issues by 'telling your story' would not be convinced. Was there any way for the loss of a child or the shame of sexual transgression really to find a place within the narratives of the South African interviewees? Psychoanalytic approaches to narrative might argue that unconscious significations in and around the research materials are being neglected in this analysis.

In addition, in looking at the genre structure of, for instance conversion narratives, we miss out, on smaller, co-occurring language structures, the co-construction of narratives between speakers

and hearers, and the limits of such co-construction. Such structures are specially difficult to discern across language differences – which of course exist between the ‘language communities’ of any interviewer and interviewee, but which are much more pronounced and freighted with historical and political meanings in cases like my South African research, where at times, white middle class UK English met South African English and urban Xhosa, itself mixed with English and containing many Xhosalised English terms.<sup>4</sup> Chapter 3 examines how research on the fine grain of context can help us understand the construction of narratives and identities. This is an issue that is also taken up in the conversation between Salmon and Riessman in Chapter 4, and in Andrews’s Chapter 5.

## Conclusion

Experience-centred and socioculturally-oriented approaches to narrative research have many positive features. For example, they focus on the constructive powers of narrative, which can be useful for social research and practice, and they can extend the notion of ‘story’ into communicative realms other than speech and writing, such as the visual and action. In the first case, the approach’s biographical interests are salient for the many for whom ‘life story’ undoubtedly is expressively or analytically meaningful; In the second, In the second, socioculturally oriented case, interests in the intersections of texts and audience worlds allows attention to the co-construction of narratives; diversities, uncertainties and intertextualities in and between narratives; subjectivities that are always in process; stories with truths rather than a single truth (Freeman, 2003); stories that have social effects; and stories that may serve helpful functions for people. These approaches can also serve the important contemporary function of allowing personal narratives of identifications to come into congruence with broader narratives of trauma and conflict, through the *storying* of memory and history (Andrews, 2007; Freeman, 2009; Venn, 2005).

As we have seen, the approaches also run into a number of problems which are general to both of them, particularly, perhaps, over-interpretation. Ways to guard against this problem might include multiple, careful readings of material, from different perspectives (see for instance Loots and colleagues, this volume). We will probably want to be able to explain and justify our interpretations to research participants, except if our interpretive framework clearly suggests this is not useful – as in Hollway and Jefferson’s (2004) case, where interpretation depends on analysis of unconscious processes that are not expected to be available to the interviewee. We will be aware that we cannot be fully reflexive, that there will always be material that lies beyond the realm of our interpretations and that we may get things very wrong for our interviewees, or for other audiences. If approaching materials psychoanalytically, we might also want to keep in mind the ‘story’ of psychoanalysis itself (Parker, 2003). We will be trying to situate our work culturally and politically; we will also want to pay attention to the *micro*contexts of research through which these broader issues are lived and clarified.

Experience-centred and socioculturally-oriented forms of narrative research are, as this chapter demonstrates, extremely diverse, with limited common ground. Relating stories to personal identities, unconscious meanings, social and cultural representations are theoretically and often methodologically distinct endeavours. The perspectives tend, however, to be loosely associated, by a kind of pragmatic politics. Many of them share a similar preoccupation with a politics of representation and expression (Freeman, 2003), rooted in a long history of class, gender, anticolonial and sexuality politics driven by personal narratives (Stanley, 1992; Plummer, 1995). Whether they associate narrative research with personal biographies, with cultural patterns of

representation, or with the interpersonally produced ‘story’ of the interview process, such narrative approaches often operate as means of delineating and even theorizing under- or unrepresented lives; and as preliminary, complementary or even new forms of politics for unpolitical – or differently political-times. It may be that this commonality supercedes theoretical and methodological divergences. It may also, however, be that such commonality is itself limited, in the long run, by the unaddressed contradictions within these narrative approaches.

## Notes

- 1 Portions of this chapter are adapted from Squire (2005; 2007).
- 2 Their total of 37 participants included around a third in family groupings.
- 3 Scott’s work provides a useful frame for understanding experience-centred work within narrative, in general, although her focus of attention is social theory, particularly feminist theory.
- 4 Given limited researcher time and language skills, full analysis of these complexities was too speculative for me to attempt.

## Suggestions for further reading

- Foundational readings come from Ricoeur (1984; 1991). Recent examples using the perspectives in this chapter are Freeman (for instance, 2004; 2009) and Riessman (for instance, 2008). Bakhtin (1986) provides a good account of dialogic aspects of the approaches, taken up in Venn’s (2005) work.
- On approach comparisons, see Emerson and Frosh (2004), Freeman (2003), Parker (2003), Riessman (2008) and Rustin (2000).
- For more detailed accounts of life history and biographical research, full accounts – from varying theoretical perspectives – can be found in Andrews (1991), Chamberlayne et al. (2002), Hollway and Jefferson (2000) and Mishler (1986).
- Useful addresses to context at levels from the interpersonal to metanarrative appear in Abell et al. (2004), De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2011), Hyvarinen et al. (2010), Malson (2004), Mishler (1986) and Riessman (2008).
- Narrative genre is also considered in Edley (2002), Jacobs (2004), Plummer (1995; 2001) and Squire (2003, 1999). For the linguistic foundation of this work, see Todorov (1990).
- For broader accounts of the power relations involved with stories of ‘experience’, see Burman (2003) and Tamboukou (2010). For counter-narratives, see Bamberg and Andrews (2004) and Fine and Harris (2001).
- To consider the specialist area of narratives of illness experiences, good texts to start with are Bury (1982), Frank (1997), Kleinman (1988) and – more recently - Hyden and Brockmeier (2011).
- For perspectives on visual and other non-linguistic narratives; see Bell (2009), Harrison (2004), Luttrell (2003), Radley (2009), Ryan (2004) and Seale (2004).

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