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Article Title: Reading narratives

Year of publication: 2005

Citation: Squire, C. (2005) 'Reading narratives', *Group Analysis*, 38 (1) 91-107

Link to published version:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0533316405049373>

DOI: 10.1177/0533316405049373

Publisher statement:

<http://www.uk.sagepub.com/authors/journal/permissions.sp>

Reading Narratives

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This is the final draft version of:

Squire, C. (2005) 'Reading narratives.' *Group Analysis*, March 2005, 38: 1, 91-107.
ISSN: 0533-3164
DOI: 10.1177/0533316405049373

This paper also appears, translated into French, in *La Société Biographique*, N. Duvoux, ed., Paris: L'Harmetton, 2006.

Narratives are an increasingly popular focus of social research. Perhaps this is because 'stories'¹ seem to promise human universality and accessibility, while analysis of them requires a rewardingly comprehensive attention to individual, social and cultural dimensions of language and meaning. In this paper, I examine some persuasive modes of understanding the social world as narrative, and the significance of such approaches for modes of social research and practice, including some operating within group analysis.

Key words: story, narrative, language, identity, culture

Introduction

The study of narrative ~~also~~ seems to promise change, 'forc(ing) the social sciences to develop new theories and new methods and new ways of talking about self and society' (Denzin, 2004: xiii). First, though, I want to look at some connections between the 'turn to narrative,' and other recent 'turns' within the social sciences.

The narrative turn can be associated with many other social-scientific moves in the late 20th and early 21st centuries: turns to qualitative methods, to language, to the biographical, to the unconscious, to participant-centred research, to ecological research, to the social (in psychology), to the visual (in sociology and anthropology), to power, to

culture, to reflexivity . . . the list is long and various. But to look at the 'narrative turn' is to view a snapshot of what these turns have yielded, their limitations – and a little more.

First, interdisciplinarity, and interchanges between theory and practice. All the social-scientific 'turns' endorse the creative and problem-solving possibilities of interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary approaches and also, often, of work that feeds into practice as well as theory. However, narrative work has a specially strong interactive flavour. It draws on literary and cultural theory, as well as on story-research traditions within sociology, anthropology and psychology and on more recent addresses to narrative within for instance history, medicine, therapy and new media (Andrews et al., 2000; Bruner, 1986; Bury, 1982; Freeman, 1993; Greenhalgh and Hurwitz, 1998; Kleinman, 1988; Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 1993; Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992; Ryan, 2003; Sarbin, 1986; White and Epton, 1990). Interdisciplinarity, and the melding of theory and practice, are projects with important historical, theoretical and methodological limitations, and narrative itself is a slippery notion, hard to pin down. Nevertheless, narrative seems to offer particularly broad access to different disciplinary traditions, and to have a high level of salience for fields outside as well as inside academia.

Second, work on narrative seems to let us combine 'modern' interests in describing, interpreting and improving individual human experience which underpinned much qualitative social science in the early and mid-twentieth century, with 'postmodern' concerns about representation and agency that drove the later 'turns', such as the 'turn to language;' and with a set of questions, broadly derived from psychoanalysis, about subjectivity, the unconscious, and desire, that accord at times with modern and at times with postmodern frames of thought. Whether such combinations are legitimate or useful is a question I shall address. Initially, it is important to recognize that much work on narrative suggests such syntheses are possible.

Third, an address to narrative enables us to extend our analyses to multiple levels of research. Such inclusiveness is sought by many other social-scientific 'turns'. To focus on narrative, however, is to bring *structures* of language into focus, with a plethora of attendant possibilities for linguistic, visual and even behavioural analysis.² At the same time, narrative analysis takes seriously the *content* of texts, at levels ranging from individual phrases or images to discrete stories to larger 'stories' encompassing long and multiple stretches of talk, image or action. Narrative analysis also pays attention to the *context* of storytelling: to the real and assumed audiences of narratives, their microcontextual co-construction between tellers and hearers (Mishler, 1986), and to narratives' broader ecological and fantasy contexts. Other qualitative research is of course often reflexive about contextual processes, but such considerations are embedded in narrative work: the notion of 'story' always entails 'audience' as well as 'storyteller'.

Fourth, stories often seem to function in narrative research as forms of politics, broadcasting 'voices' that are excluded from or neglected within dominant political structures and processes – as indeed stories have often done in recent western history, for instance in the writing and reading of 19th century accounts of working-class life, slavery, and women's experiences. Much recent work on narrative foregrounds this function (Fine, 2001; Andrews, 2002). The concerns with social, cultural and political discourses that characterize the social-scientific turns of the last few decades thus seem intimately connected with narrative, rather than having to be grafted on. Whether an association between social research and politics can fruitfully be pursued via this apparently transparent resolution within 'stories' is debatable; but 'story' does often seem to operate in social research and practice as a kind of Trojan Horse, an initial sortie carrying politics into the walled city of the personal.

As my qualifications of narrative research's contributions may indicate, it is full of difficulty as well as diversity. 'Story' is a problematic category in itself, defined in ways that veer from temporal or causal ordering (Todorov, 1990) to the making of human sense (Bruner, 1986) and applied to speech, texts, visual materials, objects, performances, even ways of living. Are they all the same, and would such inclusiveness reduce the concept of 'narrative' to triviality? Other debates within the narrative field are equally intransigent. Researchers argue the balance between the personal and cultural components of narrative; whether or not narrative has a redemptive human function; whether life events, or even life progress, can be 'read off' from the structure and contents of stories and what, in general, is the possible and allowable extent of interpretation; whether it makes sense to talk about stories' 'truth' and where such truth might lie; whether there is always something 'outside' the story, defined in terms of emotions, or the unconscious, or political or material reality, or an unsymbolisable 'real' and to what extent storytelling can be an effective means of personal or political change.

These debates will be my concern in the sketches of narrative research that follow.

Narrative, structure and theory

I shall begin with an outline of the highly influential account of narrative produced by the US sociolinguist William Labov (1972, 1997, 2001, 2002; Labov and Fanshel, 1977; Labov and Waletzky, 1967). Labov's description of what a narrative is derived initially from stories told to him and his colleagues by African American informants in South Harlem in the 1960s and 1970s and applies primarily to spoken event narratives, told in natural situations. Such stories have, Labov says (Labov and Waletzky, 1967), a general structure that includes abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution,

and coda. For instance, a story told by someone coming late to an appointment might look like this –

I had a terrible time getting here. (abstract)

I started out an hour ago, and I only live a couple of miles away. (orientation)

I was standing at the bus stop for ages, and then when the first bus came it was full, and I had to wait another 20 minutes for the next one. (complicating action)

I was getting so worried; I really thought you'd be gone by the time I arrived.

(evaluation)

Still, I got here in the end. (resolution)

I'll know to start earlier if we meet here again, though. (coda)

The abstract, of which there is sometimes more than one, describes what the story is about. The orientation sets the scene. Complicating action tells us 'what happens next', and is, for Labov, the element that defines talk as 'narrative'. A 'minimal' narrative must contain at least two clauses that are temporally ordered so that they cannot be reversed without losing sense. Evaluative clauses describe the human consequences of the event; the resolution gives an ending; the coda is a linking section that returns the story to the present. For a story to be more than a 'minimal' narrative, Labov wants elements other than the complicating action to be present. Evaluation is particularly important, as it tells you what the story 'means.' Labov (1972) suggests that this element can, like orientation, spread all through the story, and allows it many manifestations. For instance, pauses or sighs during the complicating action in the story above, might act evaluatively.³

Labov deployed examples from his African American informants to demonstrate the sophistication and subtlety of African American English, at a time when that language was an object of fierce educational and political debate. His analyses of specific stories are rich and highly nuanced. He is also able to make some generalisations about story

skills – about the more extensive evaluations produced by older speakers, and by black versus white preadolescents for instance. Many who deploy his categories are interested in such general manifestations. Bell (1988) for example charts the increasing sophistication of women's stories about the serious reproductive effects on them of an anti-miscarriage drug taken by their mothers, as the interviews progressed through their lives. More recently, Jordens et al. (2001), using a modified version of Labov's categories, find more complexity in narratives of Cancer which described high levels of life disruption, than in those which described low levels of disruption.

While Labov's (1972), Bell's (1988) and Jordens et al.'s (2001) conclusions are carefully circumscribed, there is often questionable warrant for using Labovian categories to make judgements about communication or adjustment, particularly at the individual level. Labov himself remarks with surprise on the apparent requirement, in the therapeutic literature around bereavement for example, for narratives to be emotionally expressive – in his terms, to include explicit statements about emotions among their evaluative clauses – if individuals are to be judged psychologically healthy (1997). His research suggests that the most powerful stories, for listeners, are 'objective' accounts of events, almost like verbal movies (2002), which simply *assume* that common emotional evaluations of the stories will be made within the language communities where they are produced (1997). Working-class speakers tell these objective stories most frequently. We could, perhaps, argue that what constitutes a generalisable 'objective' narrative is more variable than Labov suggests, and can include emotion 'events'. Narrative sophistication is, though, as Labov suggests, hard to quantify within representations, is extremely variable in nature, and does not necessarily correlate with social power or individual wellbeing. And sometimes, being a good storyteller is simply its own reward.⁴

Labov's categorisation seems to restrict the 'story' category, not just through his definition of narrative clauses and his emphasis on the copresence of all narrative elements, but also through his insistence on event narratives told monologically in natural situations. Stories that get told in reverse, in fragments, or collaboratively; stories about general events, thoughts, emotions or things that happened to other people, and stories told as part of conversations – including those with interviewers – are seen as other kinds of speech events. Written stories and narratives produced in other media are separate communicative events entirely. For Labov, however, the personal event narrative claims a privileged place all forms of communication, because it replays, cognitively, an event that has become part of the speaker's biography (Labov, 1997), in ways that other forms of speech do not.⁵ It is this 'replay' assumption that makes the social context – and content – of storytelling somewhat irrelevant.⁶ Labov is interested in the conversational contexts enabling narratives, but much more in the special place he thinks narratives have within conversational contexts – therapy and research included – as 'privileged forms of description' (1997: xx).

Labov has also argued that narrative is not only description but explanation, a theory of causality (1997, 2001, 2002). A narrative is a way of accounting for events that balances the reportability that makes a story worth telling, with believability. After the orientation, the complicating action and evaluations of a narrative lead, he says, to its most reportable event, and so constitute a theory of that event (Labov, 1997). This account interestingly links Labovian narrative analysis with research on the social effects of storytelling. Labov's examples of story-'theories' are micro-level morality tales that reassign blame away from its most obvious objects: away from a daughter whose father died in her absence (2002), and away from a white man testifying to South Africa's Truth

and Reconciliation Commission who, as a member of the security forces, committed murder (2001), for instance.⁷

Labov's work continues to be important in narrative research, for several reasons. Despite its assumption of fairly direct relationships between experience, cognition and representation, it turns our attention to language itself, not just what language 'means' – and social science work on narrative has a common tendency to move too quickly and easily from language to 'meaning'. Labovian categories are also a useful starting points for defining what 'stories' are, a contentious but essential procedure. Moreover, personal event narratives do operate powerfully in people's talk as revisitings of certain key moments (Denzin, 1989), in which cognitive and emotional reliving is communicatively performed.⁸ In my own interviews with people in South Africa describing living with HIV, for example, the moment when they received a positive diagnosis was often embedded in a Labovian kind of story, but that was rarely true for HIV positive people we interviewed in the UK, who were often longer-diagnosed and who had much greater access to medical treatment and social support. There is, too, some value in using Labovian categories as a guide to the narrative resources available to people in particular circumstances, and the possible material significance of those story resources. Among South African interviewees, for instance, elaboration of HIV acceptance and disclosure stories seemed to be related to having at least some treatment and support available. Telling such stories was also seen by professionals, and the tellers themselves, as related to social, psychological and physiological health.⁹

Finally, Labov's more recent work introduces a conception of narrative as theory that seems to leave behind late-modern understandings of narrative as personal sense-making, in favour of it operating as a kind of contemporary politics. Looking at the South African narratives from this perspective, for instance, allows me to identify acceptance of HIV

status as the 'most reportable event' for many storytellers, and the stories as theories of how such acceptance can occur. Such story-theories have considerable cultural and moral impact in a context where HIV has only recently become speakable, let alone explicable. More generally, it could be helpful to view other personal narratives as strategies for explaining events that are partially represented, or outside representation, and that stories drag into representation and some form of theoretical coherence.

Narrative, identities and understanding

I ~~want to~~ turn now to another highly influential strand in narrative work, the hermeneutic or interpretive tradition, which has a variety of philosophical antecedents (Rustin, 2001) but which is often now related to the work of Paul Ricoeur. Such work provides a distinct conceptual technology, as opposed to Labov's methodological guidelines.¹⁰ It examines stories that are larger than event narratives, stretching to full biographies or to generalized 'narratives' appearing across stories and sources, and aims to understand stories' meanings within lives. It bases itself on the assumption that lives have a particular, time-based relationship with narrative. '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 consists in its recounting (1991). A similar assumption obtains in much narrative psychology. For Bruner, for instance, humans are, as a species, *homo narrans*. Their ' "innate" and primitive predisposition to narrative organisation' (1990) gives stories some universal characteristics: the violation of canonicity and its restoration, sequentiality, agentivity and perspective (see also Crossley, 2000; Sarbin, 1986).

Ricoeur's account also describes the complexities of interpretation. For him, 'the hermeneutical problem begins where linguistics (Labovian accounts, for instance) 'leaves off' (1991: 27).¹¹ 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). And so the worlds of readers and texts, speakers and listeners must be brought together, coinhabited, in order for understanding to occur. Such understanding requires, as for Labov, reactualising the act that produced the story, but in Ricoeur's account considerable indeterminacy attends the process. It is made possible because for Ricoeur as for Labov, human action and experience, like human symbols, have a narrative structure (Ricoeur, 1991: 28–29). In telling and understanding stories, we are working on the relation between 'life as a story in its nascent state' (Ricoeur, 1991: 29) and its symbolic translation into recounted narrative. We are also, in the process, producing a narrative identity that mediates between subjective incoherence and immutability. Through stories, we can narrate, though not author, our lives. 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).

Understanding narrative identities is a project of improvement as well as understanding. 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). Yet stories are for Ricoeur as for Labov only a form of imperfect, 'practical wisdom'. They convey and construct moralities,¹² but they are distinct from reason and formal 'theory', because they are time-dependent, caught in 'tradition', which for Ricoeur involves a varying balance between sedimentation and innovation.

Couze Venn (Venn, in press) has used Ricoeur's account to develop the idea of a critical hermeneutics that can allow people 'to inhabit the other's story in imagination'. His specific examples are 'dialogues during staged encounters and exchanges' between

Jewish and Arab Israeli school students, and more generally, a cosmopolitanism based in a universalized understanding of being, a recognition of the suffering of the other and a 'nonforgetful forgiveness'. Other versions of narrative analysis inflected by Ricoeur, however, unlike Venn's, make strong and prescriptive assumptions about the stories they claim to 'inhabit'. These approaches assume that an often vaguely-defined hermeneutic immersion will bring story-worlds and their own close enough together to warrant them drawing up a narrative typology *de novo* of a particular text¹³ and judging which are 'good' narratives and which indicate successful life adjustment. Some researchers base their interpretations on categories exported from psychoanalytic theories – those of the anxious and defended subject in the work of Hollway and Jefferson (2000), and Chamberlayne and colleagues (Chamberlayne et al., 2000), or of transitional space (Yates and Sclater, 2000) for instance. However, others use nebulous criteria such as narrative 'openness' and 'reflexivity,' and assert an interpretive authority they present as self-evidently justified by their material.¹⁴ Perhaps it is an apparently unproblematic concept of time that underpins this certainty. The concept is complexly formulated in the Ricoeurian tradition, but its fundamentality goes unquestioned. Personal narratives that sound spatialized, or that are purely theoretical, causal accounts, or that seem 'outside' biographical time and conventional history – in my South African interviews, a trainee sangoma's account of her life in terms of ancestor myths and dreams, for instance – gets interpretively translated into lived temporality. These translations impose time itself as an interpretive category and, more narrowly, standards of progression and ending, and may close off spaces of both the unconscious and the real. A kind of displaced realism gets played out in this valuing of well-arranged, well-'timed' stories for their own sake – and sometimes, too, for sake of the well-ordered lives and subjects they are thought to mirror.

Despite these problematic applications, the Ricoeurian approach offers a great deal to narrative readings. Though occasionally allied to assumptions about the transparency of language, in general it focuses on the constructive powers of language in a way which, as with the Labovian approach, is useful for social research and practice. Its biographical interests lend it salience for the many for whom 'life story' undoubtedly is expressively or analytically meaningful. It is capable of extending the notion of 'story' into communicative realms other than speech and writing, such as the visual and action (see Bell, 2002; Seale, 2000). Its interest in the intersections of text and audience worlds allows attention to a number of linked problematics of interaction and change: the co-construction of narratives; intertextualities in narratives and in different intra- and interdisciplinary understandings of them; subjectivities that are always in process; stories with truths rather than a single truth (Freeman, 2003); stories whose meanings and cultural effects change, and that never really reach an 'end'. And as Venn (in press) points out, Ricoeur's narratology serves 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.

Cultural narratives

We may want, also, to look at narrative at a conceptually intermediate level, between concrete Labovian 'event' and abstract Ricoeurian 'identity:' a level that takes in the individual, social and cultural character of particular narrative formations. Such a mid-level analysis places more emphasis on context than either the Labovian approach, preoccupied with narrative syntax, or the Ricoeurian approach, centred on narrative semantics (Mishler, 1986). A project that exemplifies this approach is Kenneth Plummer's *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995), which traces the emergence of intimate

disclosure narratives in the West during the 20th century, within the larger context of the contemporary cultural and political power of autobiography (see also Plummer, 2001). Plummer (1995) 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. Cultural story change happens by slow cultural shifts, by a series of small breaks or slides. Stories also operate within interpretive communities of speakers and hearers that are political as well as cultural actors. This is particularly clear with the intimate disclosure genre, within which stories very often operate as bids for representation and power from the disenfranchised.¹⁵

The particularity of cultural theories of narrative can be problematic. Such theories run the risk of either of claiming unsustainable generality for their accounts, or of making no explanatory or predictive claims at all, confining their accounts to description. However, the approach's particularity has the merit of encouraging researchers to be very careful about general claims. Plummer's work is carefully historically and socially limited, for instance, suggesting that self-disclosure genres are contemporarily important for underrecognized and stigmatized identities. For me, looking at South Africans' use of religious genres of conversion and witnessing to talk about HIV, it seemed justifiable to propose that such *ethical* self-disclosure genres are useful narrative resources in situations of direct narrative pathologisation – as in this case, where HIV identities had been 'othered' as unclean and immoral (Joffe, 1997).

A second problem that cultural analyses of narrative encounter is that of the link between representations and their effects. This perspective poses the question more acutely than the Labovian and Ricoeurian approaches, both of which assume parallels

between individual lives and narratives. Once we address narrative at the cultural level, such parallels start to fall apart. Again, Plummer makes detailed and subtle arguments about the potentiating effects of self-disclosure stories in shifting political circumstances, and those circumstances' enabling effects on the stories themselves. Taking these arguments as a guide, it would seem naïve to expect, for example, that increasing amounts of HIV self-disclosure talk in South Africa would translate directly into increased condom use and HIV testing. Such changes in narrative repertoire might, however, have effects on other representational activities such as peer discussion and education, and appropriate disclosure – as was indicated in our research by gatekeepers and by many interviewees themselves. What seemed to be produced out of the increasing numbers of personal stories being told about HIV were, indeed, many levels of 'interpretive community', from the support group and the family, to local communities and the virtual community of popular media, each with their own, often quite limited, realms of action. At the same time, it is important to recognize that self-disclosure narratives cannot always have productive relations with individual and social change. Plummer (2001) notes one subgenre, around paedophilia, for which interpretive communities cannot be found. In South Africa, HIV self-disclosure narratives hardly occurred at all in situations where there were few treatment and support resources.

A third question about cultural analyses of narratives asks what is left out of the brave new self-disclosure stories Plummer identifies, or indeed any culturally defined set of stories. Here, what is *not* said assumes an importance it lacks within Labovian and Ricoeurian perspectives, according to which the 'unsaid' can be derived, albeit with difficulty, from the syntactic or semantic substructures of a story.¹⁶ The rich interlinkings that a notion of cultural narrative generates, between individuals and across social and historical moments, often seem to leave no space, however, for an unconscious. When

you tell a 'coming out' story, for example, you may produce an account that despite its meaningfulness, necessarily omits some difficult and important emotions that fall outside words (Frosh, 2002: 127–8; see also Craib, 2000). When a woman testifies to her acceptance of her HIV positive status and tells of her commitment to living long and healthily and spreading the truth about HIV to her family and friends, what happens to sexual shame, loss and grief in the story? A partial solution to such questions is to borrow from literary and cultural theory a notion of the unconscious that sees it as constitutive of cultural representations, infiltrating even the most conventional of them.¹⁷ This concept allows us to understand narratives as contextual cultural genres that are always in contest, compromising between redemptive closure and unrepresentable openness (Bersani, 1990). The fluidity of the coming out genre for instance (Sedgwick, 1990) involves this kind of perpetual instability – you are never fully 'out' to everyone, even yourself – as does the conversion genre, in which faith is a process not an end point. Thus, cultural genres do not leave out the unsayability and ambiguity that makes 'telling the whole story' impossible, so much as negotiate across them.

Conclusion

The approaches outlined above provide many useful directions for addressing narratives in the group-analytic context. Even when asking the simplest question, about what a story is, we can think of it as a replayed event, an expression of identity, a cultural trace – or a trace of something that's not there. What a story says and does can be taken as cognitive or aesthetic re-enactment, an effort at personal understanding or social inscription, or emotional defense. A story can be read as addressed to its present audience or to a much broader audience of past, present and future figures, real and imagined.

Whatever your preferred framework, it is, I think, politically important to retain a sense of the potential diversity of narrative readings. The common *conceptual* ground between the approaches I have sketched is fairly limited. Relating stories to events, personal identities and cultural representations are theoretically different endeavours. Analysing clauses, searching out an intertextual hermeneutics and decoding cultural meanings are epistemologically distinct programmes. Narrative researchers tend to adopt eclectic perspectives that are fairly unconcerned about such theoretical and methodological contradictions. The perspectives are, however, loosely associated by a kind of pragmatic *politics*. For there is, across all the different stakeholders in narrative, a preoccupation with a politics of 'voice' that brings them into loose association (Freeman, 2003). Whether we link narrative analysis to the personal preoccupations of biography, to psychoanalytically-informed tracings of emotions, to structural concerns with language or to cultural patterns of representation and action, it can be argued that 'narrative' operates throughout as a kind of theorisation of unrecognized or undervalued texts, and hence as a kind of politics for post-political times. That does not mean, of course, that we should ignore debates about what narrative research is. Perhaps, though, it provides a context in which to continue them.

End notes

¹ Many theorists make debatable distinctions between narrative and story (see Patterson, 2002); they are not relevant to this paper, so I shall use the words interchangeably.

² For instance, Seale (2000) describes many sequences of everyday actions as life-maintaining 'narratives,' even when they do not have a culturally recognised status.

³ Labov's earlier work was criticised for its concentration on evaluation, hardly exclusive to narrative, at the expense of complicating action, which once identified could be set aside. However his 1997 paper expands the definition of clauses that qualify as narrative.

⁴ Labov consistently distinguishes 'tall tales' storytelling from the ordinary everyday narratives which are his concern (e.g. 1997, 2002), but there is some slippage between the two. Many of his informants are telling the truth, but also telling it exceedingly well.

⁵ It is 'a method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred' (Labov, 1972, 359-60). Recently, Labov has analysed stories by parsing their underlying event structures (2001).

⁶ African-American-English's sophistication, for instance, is evidenced in story structure, rather than what the stories are about. Narratives are assumed to have cognitive universality, which means the storyteller is always talking to a generalised attentive and comprehending other.

⁷ Other examples are story theorisations that shift blame towards a rich, drunk city-dwelling car-owner and away from the actual driver who had the fatal accident, his chauffeur (Labov, 2001) and away from a male interviewee who once barged the boyfriend of a girl he had talked to in a bar, and ended up with his throat cut (Labov, 1997) – though this story is also a theorisation of the limits of rationality. Discourse-analytic accounts of stories often produce similar descriptions of constructions of praise and blame; see Abell et al., 2000. In his analyses of underlying event structures, Labov sometimes turns detective to uncover the 'evidence' of narrative manipulation in the events that are left out or misrepresented in the story – a procedure that may have less general applicability for narrative analytic work (Labov, 2001).

⁸ Stories of dying (Seale, 2000) are clear examples; Labov himself describes the most salient circumstances of such narratives as 'death, sex and moral indignation' (1997: xx).

⁹ A few years earlier, Helene Joffe's (1997) account of South African social representations of HIV found a pervasive 'othering,' within which a personal narrative of living with HIV could hardly be articulated.

¹⁰ Labov (1997) calls his work hermeneutic, to distinguish it from his quantitative linguistics, and certain elements of it certainly resonate with Ricoeur's description – its interest in meaning-making through evaluation, and in time sequence - but it is not in general concerned with larger story structures and their relation to biography.

¹¹ Many narrative analysts do effect an association between these approaches, starting from Labovian linguistics and later drawing on wider hermeneutic frames (Riessman, 1993; Mishler, 1986).

¹² This perspective converges with that of some moral philosophers, who suggest that moral judgement is taught to us through stories (MacIntyre, 1984).

¹³ Such a procedure may not differ greatly from some grounded theory approaches in its implementation, although it is (a) more consistently and comprehensively concerned with reflexivity, and b) imposes a particular, narrative structure on the emergent meanings of texts.

¹⁴ Of course any interpretive work asserts some such authority. The critical address to such authority is, however, conspicuously absent in the cases I discuss.

¹⁵ Plummer (2001) also notes their potential to act as depoliticising banalisations of problems. Similarly, Burman's interest is in what might be called a pragmatics of narrative – what personal stories are elicited in particular contexts, why such choices are made in storytelling and story reception, and what their personal and political effects may be (Burman, 2003). More generally, Jacobs (2000) examines the place of canonic narrative forms in situations of social conflict and change.

¹⁶ Wetherell (2002) makes a similar and persuasive argument about the 'unsaid' in discourse generally.

¹⁷ Parker (2003), for instance, describes a 'self' spread across stories and storytelling in his consideration of psychoanalytic, and specifically Lacanian stories of subjectivity.

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