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## Chapter 1

### What is narrative research? Starting out

#### Introducing narrative research

Narrative research has become a very popular field in contemporary social sciences. It promises new fields of inquiry, creative solutions to persistent problems, a way to establish links with other disciplines such as cultural and literary studies, enhanced possibilities of applying research to policy and practice, and a fresh take on the politics of social research (see for instance Andrews et al., 2013 [2008]; Andrews et al., 2004 [2000]; Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2004; Elliott, 2005; Emerson and Frosh, 2004; Freeman, 2009a; Herman, 2009; Hyvarinen et al., 2010; Lieblich et al., 2004; Patterson, 2002; Riessman, 2008; Trahar, 2009; Wells, 2011). This book aims to introduce you, step by step and with contemporary examples, to narrative research in the social sciences. It will give you an overview of a range of narrative methods, and it will situate narrative research in relation to other social science methods. It will show you what narrative research offers, as well as its difficulties. It will do this by drawing on work from a variety of disciplines, in theoretical and applied fields, across diverse topics, from health and the internet, to politics and sexualities, and in a number of different national contexts.

*What is narrative research?* assumes no existing expertise. We want readers to be able to build up their understandings from simple to broader, more complex issues, across the course of the book. Throughout, we are going to base our arguments on narratives themselves – on stories that will provide you with clear demonstrations of the points we are making. In the early chapters, we also list new terms as we introduce them, to give you a good sense of some of the vocabulary

around narrative research.

The group of researchers who wrote this book are members and associates of the Centre for Narrative Research, at the University of East London. We all have strong interests in doing narrative research, and considerable experience in conducting it. But none of us started off knowing how to do it. Often, it was difficult to find out what to do, how to choose between the many options available, and how to justify our choices. Narrative research was exciting and fruitful, producing many new insights; but it also threw up intractable problems at every step. This is the book we would have liked to have had at our side as we started doing narrative research ourselves.

The first chapter gives you an overview of what narrative research is, and the definitions of narrative; how narrative researchers go about doing narrative research; where we find narratives; and where narrative research itself comes from.

Chapter 2 introduces you to some important contemporary terms, concepts and debates which you will often hear in relation to narrative research, to give you an idea of cutting across the field. These debates about narratives versus stories; coherence and incoherence within narratives; the co-construction and performance of narratives; narratives and reflexivity; and counter-narratives.

In the third and fourth chapters, we provide some case studies of contemporary narrative research, to which we return later in the book. Chapter 3 provides three short summaries of how

narrative research is conducted on across different media: by paying attention to the body, as well as speech; within visual media; and within new, online media. Chapter 4 presents case studies of narrative research on three different themes: violence and abuse, sexualities and power, and politics.

Chapter 5 discusses the uses of narrative research. What possibilities does it offer to us as researchers, and what are its limitations? The chapter focuses on how narrative research addresses little known phenomena, and whether and how it allows a 'voice' for those phenomena; what it tells us about people's lives; what it can tell us about people's thinking; and narrative research's relations to social and political worlds. It then briefly provides exemplars of narrative research's usefulness in two areas where it is very frequently turned to: health research, and research on difficult or 'sensitive' topics.

Our final chapter, Chapter 6, spends more time exploring the challenges of narrative research. It starts with some summary guidelines about how to do narrative research, and then proceeds to some questions about ethics, truth and the impact of research, that go further than the 'what is' and 'how to' questions that we have been addressing earlier.

We start the book, however, by exploring some more fundamental questions about what narrative research is, and how we can start to answer those questions, by looking at a particular story.

**A. What is narrative research?** Key new terms: Narrative, narrative research, analysis of

narratives versus narrative analysis, narrative inquiry, narratology, narrative structure, narrative content, and narrative context.

We are going to start off by defining some key terms in the narrative research field. The best way to do this, in a book about narrative research, is to start with a story.

In March 2008, during his first election campaign, President Barack Obama gave a powerful, effective speech which is now commonly called the ‘race speech,’ or the ‘more perfect union’ speech. Obama made the speech in Philadelphia, where the US Constitution was written. He began and ended with the idea of a ‘more perfect union’ within the nation, that appears in the Preamble to the Constitution. He made this speech at a time when many Republicans, and some Democrats, were calling for him to reject the angry, ‘God damn America’ approach to issues of race and racism of his former pastor, Rev Jeremiah Wright (Obama, 2008). At the end of the speech, Obama told this story: (You can see the speech here on Youtube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrp-v2tHaDo> )

Text box 0

There is one story in particular that I’d like to leave you with – a story I told when I had the great honor of speaking on Dr. King’s birthday at his home church, Ebenezer Baptist, in Atlanta.

There was a young, twenty-three year old woman, a white woman, named Ashley Baia who organized for our campaign in Florence, South Carolina. She had been working to organize a mostly African-American community since the beginning of this campaign, and one day she was

at a roundtable discussion where everyone went around telling their story and why they were there.

And Ashley said that when she was nine years old, her mother got cancer. And because she had to miss days of work, she was let go and lost her health care. They had to file for bankruptcy, and that's when Ashley decided that she had to do something to help her mom.

She knew that food was one of their most expensive costs, and so Ashley convinced her mother that what she really liked and really wanted to eat more than anything else was mustard and relish sandwiches. Because that was the cheapest way to eat. It's the mind of a nine year old. She did this for a year until her mom got better. So Ashley told everyone at the roundtable that the reason she joined our campaign was so that she could help the millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents too.

Now Ashley might have made a different choice. Perhaps somebody told her along the way that the source of her mother's problems were blacks who were on welfare and too lazy to work, or Hispanics who were coming into the country illegally. But she didn't. She sought out allies in her fight against injustice.

Anyway, Ashley finishes her story and then goes around the room and asks everyone else why they're supporting the campaign. They all have different stories and different reasons. Many bring up a specific issue. And finally they come to this elderly black man who's been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he's there. And he doesn't bring up a specific

issue. He does not say health care or the economy. He does not say education or the war. He does not say that he was there because of Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, ‘I am here because of Ashley.’ (applause)

‘I’m here because of Ashley.’ By itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough. It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children.

But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. And as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the two hundred and twenty-one years since a band of patriots signed that document right here in Philadelphia, that is where the perfection begins. Thank you very much, (applause) thank you, thank you, thank you.

(Our transcription)

End text box 0

We can use the Ashley story to understand a number of key concepts in narrative research.

First, what is a **narrative**? A broad, inclusive definition is that a narrative is a set of signs, which may be written symbols, verbal or other sounds, visual, acted, built or made signs. Narrative also has some particular, rather than only general, meanings that, through their sequencing or movement, construct more meaning. Because a narrative progresses, it does not only describe.

Because it is particular, it is not a theory; it is narrower and more tied to specific conditions. And because it constitutes human meaning, there are going to be social and historical limitations on where and when it can be understood, and by whom (Squire, 2012a).

There are many definitions of narrative, as you will see within this book. They may focus on stories as temporal progression, or developing or expressing personal identity, or telling about the past, or making sense of mental states or emotions, or having particular social effects, or demonstrating formal linguistic properties. Often, the definitions contain more than one component; many definitions overlap; it is not easy to put them into neat categories. Our definition here is very broad. You may want to think about qualifications of it as you read further in the book.

The narrative excerpted from Obama's speech, above, has both oral and written forms. Obama delivered the story as a speech, but it was also written, in two ways. The speech was written out beforehand, almost as delivered (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2008/03/18/text-of-obamas-speech-a-more-perfect-union/>), and we have transcribed the story exactly as delivered, above. In both spoken and written narratives, you can hear, or read, the meaning of the story building. It is not just a description. It starts from Ashley's love for her mother and her early difficulties and struggles. It moves to her growing sense of wanting to fight injustice broadly and collectively, and then to the effects that Ashley's own story has in bringing others together. It ends by understanding these connections as the starting point for a 'more perfect union' in the United States (Squire, 2012b). The story is particular; it is not a general theory of political action and social change across racialised boundaries. Its meanings are also specific to a certain historical and social context. It is hard to understand without some knowledge of Obama, or of US history. US readers brought up with the US Constitution and civil rights struggles, probably read it differently, and perhaps better, than non-US readers.



Obama explicitly declared that his account of Ashley was a narrative. In his speech, he called it 'the 'story... that I'd like to leave you with today.' (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2008/03/18/text-of-obamas-speech-a-more-perfect-union/>). And so it seems like good material for narrative research. **Narrative research**, sometimes also called **narrative inquiry** involves working with narrative materials of various kinds. Sometimes, they already exist, for instance, if you are studying a video game, a novel, a film, or a speech of the kind you have just read. Sometimes, the narrative materials come into existence as part of the research. In this second case, the researcher might ask their research participants to *produce* stories. These could be spoken life stories, or photographic self-portraits, or day-by-day journals of events. Alternatively, the researcher may collect material that will likely *include* narratives without explicitly asking for them, for instance by asking research participants to write about their personal experiences, or asking them to draw a family tree, or simply encouraging them to talk at length about their opinions about something that matters strongly to them.

However you find or produce the narrative material, the second aspect of narrative research or narrative inquiry involves analyzing that material, trying to categorise or interpret it. This is **analysis of narratives**. However, you can analyse narratives without actually taking their narrative character into account. For example, you could do a quantitative content analysis of words related to 'race' and to other themes in the Ashley story and in other stories in Obama's speeches, and look at the relations between these themes by comparing their indicative word frequencies. Or, if you wanted to examine these relations more deeply, you could do a qualitative content analysis of 'race' and related themes in this and other stories told by Obama. **Narrative**

**analysis**, however, involves analysing narrative aspects of stories, not just analysing stories in any way you choose. Most narrative researchers are keen to examine stories *as* stories, so we will be concentrating on narrative analysis, rather than just the analysis of narratives, in this book (Squire, 2012a).

### **C. What do narrative researchers do?**

Key new terms: Narrative theme, narrative resource. Naturalism and constructionism. Narrative truth and truths. Narrative structure, content and context. Programmatic and pragmatic narrative research.

There is a great diversity of approaches to narrative research. Some researchers are interested in what stories say about people and the world. In that case, they may be concerned about the **truth** of stories, that is, their representation of physical realities. However, researchers may also be interested in story meanings that include psychic and social realities. They may then be dealing with a number of different narrative '**truths**' (Andrews, 2007; Freeman, 2003; Riessman, 2008). In all these cases they are concerned with stories as **resources** for research. In addition, though, they will often take stories themselves as the **themes** of research (Plummer 2001), addressing how narratives work, and how they affect people's understandings and actions in the world. In these cases, narrative researchers will be less concerned with the truth or truths of stories, whether or not they think such truths exist. Jane Elliott has described this dichotomy in narrative research as an epistemological division between **naturalist**, that is, narrative as resource, and **constructionist**, that is, narrative as theme, approaches. 'While the naturalist view is that the social world is in some sense 'out there', an external reality available to be observed and

described by the researcher' (Elliott, 2005: 18), the constructionist approach aims to explore how meaning is constructed in narratives in relation to available cultural, social and interpersonal resources (see also Esin et al., 2012).

In the case of the Ashley narrative, for instance, we might not be too concerned about the truth of what Ashley said, or about what really went on at the meeting. That is, we might not really be much interested in the story as a resource, as a naturalistic account of what happened to Obama or to Ashley. We might instead be concerned with **narrative structure**, the grammar or syntax of this story, how it fits into Obama's speech's broader narrative of the United States as a country pursuing 'a more perfect union,' and how it works at the end of the speech to bring together the arguments and stories that come before it. For the old man's 'I am here because of Ashley', Obama says, is the point 'where our union grows stronger.' This concern with the structure or grammar of stories, their linguistic or thematic organization, is particularly strong in relation to written stories and is sometimes called **narratology**. Secondly, we might be interested in a more concentrated way in the **narrative content**, themes, or meanings, such as the personal, family and national histories, struggles and resistances that the Ashley narrative conveys. An important aspect of such work is to distinguish it clearly from thematic or content analysis in general. Narrative thematic analysis focuses on themes that develop across stories, rather than just on themes that can be picked out from stories (Ndlovu, 2012; Riessman, 2008). Thirdly, we might analyse the **narrative context**, how the Ashley narrative works, both in relation to the audiences hearing and reading the speech and within the broader narrative of the first Obama election campaign and US politics at that time, to counter the narrative of Obama as a 'black' candidate, and to constitute Obama as a candidate of all the people. Taking this contextual

approach, we can understand the Ashley story as a moment or event from which we can trace many historical and present lines of narrative around nation, racialisation, family and politics (Mishler; 1995; Riessman; 2008; Squire; 2005). And again, when looking at narrative context, researchers are analysing how context works narratively, that is, across stories, as they develop, rather than just at how context works for a story as a whole, or at a particular point within a story.

Of course, these structural, content and context-focused approaches are not mutually exclusive. Most narrative researchers who are interested in narrative content, for instance, address narrative context, as well. As we indicated earlier, it is not really possible to understand the content of the Ashley story, for example, without some sense of its wider context.

In addition, there are many approaches within each category, or cutting across two or three of these categories. Some researchers want to call their own approach by a particular name, and they will articulate in what ways they consider this to be the 'right' approach, usually stressing some particular ontological or epistemological framework. They will also endeavour to retain what they take to be the core aspects of the methods to be used in the research process. We could call this way of working, **programmatic** narrative research. However, many researchers are interested in using more than one approach. They take what might be called a **pragmatic** direction, choosing theories, methodologies, data and modes of analysis that are not unique to any one approach, although also often trying to make sure at the same time that they are aware of the theoretical and methodological commonalities and differences between the approaches. We are going to return to the different ways of approaching narrative research often, and in more

detail, throughout this book. For now, we want to suggest that you try to keep the distinctiveness of different approaches in mind, and to be conscious of possible contradictions. What we are hoping is that once you have familiarised yourself with what narrative research is, you will be able to include it, or particular elements of it, in research projects you undertake, with a clear sense of why you are doing so, and why you have chosen those specific elements.

#### **D. Where do we find narratives?**

Key new terms: Spoken and interview narratives, recording, transcripts, written narratives, moving and still image narratives, new media narratives, activity narratives, object narratives, emotional narratives, bodily narratives, paralinguistic narratives, sound narratives. Small and big stories. Top-down and bottom-up narrative analysis.

From the approaches to narrative analysis and the definitions of narratives that we have considered so far, you can see that narrative materials can be found in a number of very different media. Perhaps the most obvious forms of stories, for social researchers, are **spoken narratives**, very often obtained as **interview narratives**, alongside their **recordings** and **transcripts**, and **written narratives**. There is a lot of diversity even within these fairly straightforward categories. For instance, some stories are more fragmentary than others, particularly in their spoken versions, and might not ‘count’ for some researchers, although more and more, fragmented stories are, as we shall see later, becoming part of the main materials of narrative research. Recordings may involve sound or audio-visual technologies. Decisions about level of detail in transcription are difficult to make, and can give rise to some quite different narrative material. Written narratives come in many forms, and are strongly affected by sociohistorically

inflected technologies and genres.

Beyond the words themselves, there are also a great many symbols around narratives to which narrative researchers are increasingly trying to pay attention. Researchers interested in linguistics and conversation analysis often include silence, voice pitch and timbre, and other paralinguistic elements such as laughs and sighs that accompany oral narratives. Increasingly, they use video so that they can also analyse eye, head, hand and body movements in their analyses. This material often has great power and is especially good at conveying a kind of **emotional narrative** (L-C Hyden, 2013), as we shall see later when we consider the role of the body in narratives (Chapter, 4 Section A). For some researchers, this kind of material, whose symbolic meanings are often quite mobile, is also the place to look for the **unconscious narratives** which appear within a spoken or written story as the things not explicitly represented – and which therefore invite particular debate about how, if they are there at all, they can be interpreted (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000).

Many narrative researchers are interested in the place that visual, auditory and physical materials more generally can have within stories. However, there is considerable debate over whether a still image, or an object, or a sequence of music, can be said to be a narrative in itself. A piece of music may, of course, have a narrative title, or describe, sonically, successive elements in different aspects of a story. A photo or keepsake on a mantelpiece may be part of someone's family story, or may become, within a research context, part of a broader story (Harrison, 2002; Radley and Taylor 2003). The case is even clearer with moving or sequenced-image materials like comics, theatre and dance, film and television, and internet texts. These materials have

pictorial narrative progressions built into them, and often (though less so with dance) support the image or object narratives with words. There is a great deal of extremely useful research within cultural and media studies on visual and object narratives, on which social researchers are only just starting to draw (Krauss, 1993; Mulvey, 2006; Turkle, 2007). We will consider these debates further when discussing visual and new media narratives later on (Chapter 3, Sections B and C). Some researchers have also argued that patterns of activity that are symbolically structured – for instance, getting, making and eating food; playing games; taking care of people – also have a narrative structure (Seale, 2004). Even walking around your everyday environment could be said to have the attributes of a daily story. Some buildings such as shops, museums, temples, mosques and cathedrals are also set up and used in ways that entrain people into a narrative experience of progression through them (Ryan, 2004). Interest in what we could call activity narratives (Squire et al., 2013) has led to increasing inclusion of ethnographic or observational elements within narrative research. For example, Wendy Luttrell's (2003) work with young pregnant women, in a high school class in a low-income US urban area, involved the young women making images of their lives in a classroom setting, and the researcher doing interviews, but also, the researcher recording her ethnographic observations of the classroom, including the processes of image-making, recording how the images were later collated and displayed, and reflecting on her own involvement with the project. All this material, together, formed the research narratives (see, similarly, Esin and Squire, 2013).

Narratives can also be said to inhere in the phenomena that surround and support their more obvious manifestations. Context is in an important sense part of narrative, since it is what enables narrative to be understood. Thus, personal narratives can be taken to include the current

and past historical, social and cultural narratives within which they are situated, and which at least partly produce even the most intimate personal narrative account. We can see this contextual contribution to narrative with Obama's story, which draws so directly on the Preamble to the Constitution. More broadly, when reading the story of Ashley, a young white woman, and an older African American man, both working within the Obama campaign, we ourselves, as readers, necessarily draw on context: on historical narratives of racialised segregation in the US, the civil rights movement, slavery and abolitionism.

In a logical extension of this understanding of the multiple locations of narratives, many narrative researchers have started to examine explicitly intertextual, hypertextual or transmedial narratives, that include a number of different, linked narratives, in varieties of media, and that stretch, sometimes, across historical time and social situations. David Herman (2004, 2013), for instance, has described the 'storyworlds' that accrete around phenomena such as alien invasion, specifically, the successive twentieth century iterations of HG Wells's *War of the Worlds* story in book, radio, film and comic form. Obama's 'more perfect union' speech, and the Ashley story within it, can easily be seen to belong to the US political 'storyworld' of the Constitution and its consequences, and to the enormous, overlapping but importantly distinct, 'storyworld' of 'race' in the US.

We have spent a little time considering where we might look for narratives. But *where* we think narratives are, depends to a large degree on *what* we think narratives are, and how we think they should be studied. Researchers who are interested in 'small stories' told during everyday interactions, for instance (Bamberg, 2006), are not going to be so interested in extensive



interview narratives, which appear in a very specific, non-everyday context. But they may be extremely interested in the new media where such everyday narratives now occur, such as mobile phone texts and blog posts. Researchers interested in ‘big stories’, like full biographical narratives told by individual narrators, often over a long period of time, may not be too concerned about stories commonly told in popular media and cultural forms, even if these seem quite similar to the material they are studying, because they are interested in personal meanings more than sociocultural genres.

On the other hand, research materials themselves also importantly shape what we think is narrative. Most narrative researchers would say that they aim to start from and to be respectful of their data, rather than approaching the data with a set idea of what counts as narrative. Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson, (2000), for instance, were so struck by the gaps and contradictions, as well as paralinguistic expressions of emotions expressed during participants’ spoken narratives in their fear of crime study, that they felt they had to make them a central part of their analysis. Alexandra Georgakopoulou found so many apparently ‘fragmentary’ story starts within her social media materials that she had to analyse them, even though her previous narrative analyses had focused on fuller, though still naturally-occurring and often apparently incoherent, stories.

A correlate of all this, is that there is an interaction between **top-down**, deductive approaches to narrative research, drawing on definitions of narratives which tell us where to find them and what they consist of, and **bottom-up**, inductive research approaches, responsive to data of different kinds, which are useful in extending our sense of where narratives occur, and what they

are. These extensions of our understandings of narrative materials mean that we often cannot be too definitive about what narrative research *is*. The interconnections and overlaps between narrative and other materials, narrative research and other research, are multiplying, rather than decreasing, in narrative research.

This diversity may be the future of narrative research. But what are the origins of that research?

### **E. Where does narrative research come from?**

Key new terms: event narrative, structural linguistics, poststructuralism, postmodernism, positioning, polysemy, subjectivities, the unconscious, intertextuality, transmediality, rhizomes, narrative forces, antipositivism, humanist psychology, cognitive psychology, philosophy of mind, narratives' effects

The origins of narrative research are many and complicated. This section reviews the historical origins of contemporary work, clustering them in some broad-brush categories that should help us think about the shape of the contemporary field.

Narrative research is often said to originate with 1920s Russian formalist linguistic approaches to stories, for instance Vladimir Propp's categorization of the functions served by narrative units within fairy tales. Propp counted 31, following 'Once upon a time...', and also claimed they occurred in an invariant order. This tradition is quite hard to tie to contemporary narrative work in a social research context, because it was not concerned, except at the broadest level, with the social functioning of stories. However it influenced later psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic

attempts to analyse the functional ‘grammar’ of spoken stories. In particular, it contributed to the work of William Labov, which describes what it claims is the universal form of **event narratives**, that is, spoken first-person stories about past events that happened to the narrator. Such stories, Labov says, are distinguished by a) clauses that follow each other in time and b) ‘evaluative’ material that makes sense of these happenings, telling you why the story matters (Labov 1997; 1972; Labov and Waletzky, 1967; Patterson, 2008). Obama’s Ashley story belongs in this category. There are key narrative clauses where progression happens in time, for example when Obama says, ‘Anyway, Ashley finishes her story *and then* goes around the room and asks everyone else why they’re supporting the campaign’ (our emphasis). And Obama explicitly evaluates what the story means at the end: ‘that single moment of recognition... is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger.’ Other kinds of speech, and narratives in other media, do not belong to this fundamental category of human story, for Labov.

But as many researchers have pointed out, people tend to work with much larger definitions of narratives. ‘Event narratives,’ for instance, are not everyone’s preferred way of telling stories; these may be gender-and culture-specific. And stories about events that happened many times, stories about what could happen in the future, and stories about happened to other people, are part of our common stock of narratives, even though they do not fall within Labov’s definition. Obama could have told his very effective story even if he had not been at the meeting with Ashley, for example. In addition, ‘event narratives’ are very hard to separate out from the material around them. Though we have treated ‘the Ashley story’ as a separate part of the speech, you can see that the ‘coda’ of the story, linking it to the US Constitution, is quite long, perhaps not really part of the story, in Labov’s terms. It also relates crucially to material that

came before the 'event' story (Patterson, 2008). Despite these issues, the Labovian framework is still used, often in an adapted way, to analyse some kinds of narratives, and also as a starting point for people developing other ways of defining and investigating narratives (Bell, 2009; Mishler, 1995, Patterson, 2008; Riessman, 2008).

Somewhat later than the Russian formalists, structuralist linguistics, as developed by Saussure particularly and also by Barthes, Levi-Strauss, Todorov and Genette, studied narratives as mobile sets of relationships between symbols, rather than simply as symbols with straightforwardly-available one-to-one meanings. Many narrative researchers within the social sciences still draw on this work, and use it to maintain a focus on the language of stories, as well as their meaning and how they work within social groups (see for instance Barthes, 1977; Todorov, 1990).

Example?

The later **poststructuralist** and **postmodernist** intellectual movements took these arguments about the relationality of signs further, to suggest that symbol systems do not exist in a formal, independent way. Their characteristics of interconnection and undecideable meanings also appear within the subjectivities that make and are made by them, and across all of the social and cultural formations within which these subjects live. While these ideas were most influential first within humanities disciplines, where they quickly affected theorizations of narrative in for instance film, literature and history, they also strongly affected social sciences (eg Henriques et al., 1984; Gergen, 1991). This happened both at the level of 'small story' analysis, where narrative social research is now often related to conversation and discourse analysis, (eg Abell et al., 2004; Squire, 1994) and within larger-scale work on life stories, which frequently draw on

contemporary literary, cultural and social theory (Freeman, 2006; Riessman, 1993). Pin down with an example maybe?

Today, work in narrative research that is most allied with this perspective, is probably that which looks at the large-scale or small-scale '**positionings**' of narrators, narratives and audiences, as they are constituted by discourses of power and knowledge. Such work often also operates with a constructionist view of how narratives work to make and relate subjects (Esin et al., 2012). It will be interested in how the Ashley story, for instance, is positioned within a whole set of stories, and how it both calls on and constitutes certain kinds of political subjects as its audiences. There is 'you', an audience hearing a story told by an African American presidential candidate, which was first told in honour of Martin Luther King; but also 'we', who are all both Ashley and the elderly man, a 'we' who all need education, jobs and health, and who can all come together in the heritage of the Constitution.

A number of other ideas connected with poststructuralism and postmodernism affect contemporary narrative work. Researchers understand narrative language as having multiple meanings or being **polysemous**. They look for multiple **subjectivities** in play in stories (Riessman, 2008; Squire, 2005). They think of past, present and future as co-present in stories (Andrews, 2006; Freeman, 2009a). They may be interested in the inexpressible or incomprehensible **unconscious** elements of narratives and their psychoanalytic meanings (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Frosh, 2002; Wengraf, 2001). They explore the **intertextualities** and **transmodality** of different forms of narratives (Abell et al., 2004; Davis, 2011; M Hyden, 2008; Phoenix, 2008), spoken, imaged, acted out in our lives, lived in bodily experiences,

broadcast in popular media, performed by institutions (L-C Hyden, 2013; Harrison, 2002; Herman, 2013; Jacobs, 2000; Ryan, 2004). All these concepts are powerful within contemporary narrative research, and derive from the eclectic traditions of postmodernism and poststructuralism.

Some researchers, again following work in the humanities, draw on Deleuze and Guattari to suggest that personal, social, cultural and political narratives can be understood analogously with the 'narrative' lines traced by some organic matter's **rhizomatic** patterns of life, and inorganic matter's reactive processes and movements towards entropy, and the disjunctive events that occur when fields of **narrative force** are broken. (Tamboukou, 2010c; Sermijn et al., 2008; Cavarero, 2000).

Many of these conceptual moves have been very fruitful in freeing up ways of thinking about narrative, narrators, and audiences, within social research. However the question of whether narrative can be understood politically within this tradition, something that is often important to narrative researchers, is difficult. Can its analyses of the possibilities of power and resistance in narrative be justified, and do they really lead anywhere? Do the qualifications of subjectivity, agency and action lead to an infinite array of interpretations that paralyse action?

A rather different history within social sciences themselves has contributed to narrative research's present state (Rustin, 2000; Andrews et al., 2004/2000; Squire et al., 2008). Many authors point out that post war **anti-positivism** in the social sciences, in Wright Mills's *Sociological Imagination* (1959), for instance, as well as earlier work concerned with

understanding the fine grain of people's lives rather than large structures, such as Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918-20), became part of a groundswell of humanist-oriented social sciences from the 1950s onward, partly at least in response to a political situation in which broad-brush empirical and theoretical understandings of society did not seem to be leading to expected or productive outcomes (Stanley, 2010). This sentence too lengthy perhaps?

At the same time, **humanist psychology** became more significant, both clinically and academically, acting against the reduction of psyche to dependent variables, measurable in experiments, or to unconscious factors knowable only by an inducted elite. This kind of psychology included an important narrative strand (Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986). The humanist narrative psychology school viewed lives as actively storied in ways that help us understand people socially and emotionally, and linked stories to agency. The two major figures within this tradition used by narrative researchers today are probably the philosopher Ricoeur's (1984) work on narratives as making human sense of time, and the psychologist Bruner's (1990) work on narratives as 'stories we live by.' Concurrently, though, social theorists were questioning the culturally and politically specific, and often discriminatory, assumptions attending concepts of the 'human' (Foucault 1994) and 'experience' (Scott, 1992) and thus undermining some of the key assumptions of the humanist-psychological approach to narrative research (Henriques et al., 1998/1984)

Humanist-psychological narrative research also exhibited a tendency to draw on 1950s critic Northrop Frye's Aristotelian account of narrative genres of comedy, tragedy, romance, irony as

human universals, at precisely the time when literary theory was questioning the validity of all literary categorisation, and of the Eurocentrism shaping these particular categories. Work within this tradition is more theoretically sophisticated now. For instance, Kenneth Plummer's (2001) 'critical humanist' narrative research is informed by Foucault's ideas about the constructed nature of human experience, and the power relations that operate both ways in any situation, as well as by a commitment to exploring stories' emancipatory actions. However, the impetus to make narrative research a somewhat uncritical, people-based social science, within which stories have intrinsic value as knowledge, representation of experience, and the foundation of progressive personal and social change, remains.

**Cognitive psychology**, which tends to treat language as a conduit to thought and sometimes, brain function, and functionalist understandings of language within analytic **philosophy of mind**, has produced some very different approaches to narratives within psychology and philosophy respectively. These approaches are now often borrowed back into narrative research by more literarily-inclined narrative scholars (Herman, 2004; Fludernik, 2010; Ryan, 2004). This cognitively-inflected approach focuses on 'what stories do' socially, but also in terms of our thinking, an approach that brings some promised insights from the 'sciences of mind.' At the same time, it returns literary approaches to narrative to a relatively straightforward account of the activities of narrators, readers and hearers. The approach often draws on a fairly traditional narratology that looked at narrative forms but also at how readers experience these forms. It applies these ideas outside of the literary texts where they originated. It also ties what is in texts, and readers' responses to them, to patterns derived from cognitive psychology thought to underlie narratives, and to cognitions of a making-sense variety which are themselves thought to



be built by narratives. In some ways, it relates to prior linguistic work on narrative, for instance that of Labov and Gee (1991), which grounded narrative forms in underlying cognitive structures. This current work deals in some quite different ideas about who and what narrators, audiences and narratives are, but it tends to come together with the earlier linguistic approaches around views of language as relatively transparent, subjects as held together cognitively and experientially, and narrative as a universal sense-making device tied into other cognitive and social abilities (see also Hutto, 2012, for a critical take on this work).

In the above case, the urge to understand narrative moves narrative research inward, towards synthesizing an understanding of narratives and what they do, rather than outward, towards understanding **narrative effects** in relation to broader social and political worlds. These outward concerns are however very common within narrative research. Contemporary researchers are frequently very interested in what narratives do politically, either the political power of the individual, or the political power of narratives as structures, discourses, technologies, or assemblages. Narratives are frequently seen as means of cultural transmission and ethical education for human subjects generally, but also in for instance the specific literature on contemporary witness narratives around trauma, refugee narratives and the *testimonio* stories of people in South America subject to state violence (Azarian-Ceccato, 2010; Beverley, 2004; MacIntyre, 1984 van de Merve and Gobodo-Madikizela, 2007). Plummer (2001) suggests that the rise of the 'autobiographical age' is evidenced in the importance of personal speech and writing in anti-slavery campaigns, working class struggles at the turn of the twentieth century, feminist, lesbian and gay rights campaigns civil rights (Polletta, 2006) and anti-colonial independence struggles throughout the twentieth century (Andrews, 2007; Selbin, 2010). Many

narrative researchers, drawing on Judith Butler's (2005) work, now suggest that narratives always involve ethical self-positionings, although these efforts are inevitably flawed and incomplete. Narrative research, telling stories about stories, is surely similarly imbricated in ethical endeavours. Throughout this book, we will see the close relation of much narrative research itself to emancipatory social practice, a relation driven by both the stories themselves, and by narrative researchers' engagements with them.

In a sense, though, we could say that the role of narratives is always a palliative one. Narratives never make change by themselves, they frequently have a short-term impact that goes nowhere. The most empathetic of stories may also be objectivizing, and they often exist in a kind of unspoken alliance with a 'policing' address to social problems, as in the twin commitment to telling the stories of the nineteenth century poor in UK cities and quantifying them, sympathizing with them and stigmatising them (Himmelfarb, 1984). Narrative research does not 'give voice' to oppressed, let alone excluded people. It is more that people give their voices *to* the research (Portelli, 2010), not always with the consequences they want, and that narrative researchers then tell their own stories about the research, and sometimes about themselves. Should we still consider narratives, and narrative research too, as ethically sound projects, even when they are so compromised?

Here, we once again encounter one of the more difficult contemporary debates within narrative research, and one which is inevitable, perhaps, given this field's intimate involvement with the stuff of people's lives, and the ambiguous relationships between 'research' and 'practice'. Later on, we return to the issue of what narrative research may offer in terms of what the research itself

does, and in relation to the participants who give their stories to the research (Chapter 5, Sections A, B and D; Chapter 6, Sections D-I).

In the next chapter, we provide a sample of contemporary arguments within the narrative field by describing five current narrative research debates, of quite different kinds, which you will often encounter when reading and doing narrative research.