

MODES OF THINKING FOR QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

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NARRATIVE THINKING

Narrative demarcates, encloses, establishes limits, orders. And if it may be an impossibly speculative task to say what narrative itself is, it may be useful and valuable to think about the kinds of ordering it uses and creates, about the figures of design it makes. Here, I think, we can find our most useful object of attention in what has for centuries gone by the name of plot.

Peter Brooks, 1984, p. 4

A story . . . must be more than just an enumeration of events in serial order; it must organize them into an intelligible whole, of a sort such that we can always ask what is the “thought” of this story.

Paul Ricoeur, 1984, p. 65

Introduction to Narrative Thinking

As the opening quotes suggest, thinking narratively involves constructing plots, and is another strategy used by humans to make sense of, and create order in, their worlds. Narrative theorists generally agree that without plot there would be no identifiable narrative or story. “Plot is the principle of interconnectedness and intention which we cannot do without in moving through the discrete elements—incidents, episodes, actions—of a narrative” (Brooks, 1984, p. 5). Consider, for example, the meaning behind this set of statements: “the teacher called me,” “you would think,” “a picture of the states,” “it was wrong.” Although we may easily imagine these statements as a narrative, they only became a narrative when we connected them as such. So while there may be different definitions of what constitutes a narrative or story, for the purposes

of this chapter, I am viewing narrative as an outcome of Peter Brooks’s “principle of interconnectedness” in whatever form that may take. As Brian Richardson (2000) explains, regardless of the variety of narrative forms and purposes, “narrative is a representation of a causally related series of events” (p. 170), where “causally” refers to any kind of meaning-producing or explanatory connection made in the constructed tale. Returning to the aforementioned loose statements, these were extracted from a story told by Lisa, a mother of two who began her response to my opening question about her own school experience by telling me she had dropped out of school in tenth grade and now regretted it. Over the next few questions she built an explanation as to why she dropped out by tying together a need for more time to learn, and negative experiences she had experienced with in-class participation. When I asked her if a particular event stood out for her, she told me this story:

Um, well I can remember one time the teacher called me up (laughs) and she had a picture of like the States (Me—hmhm) but they didn’t say the names of them, and she wanted me to find a certain one. And I’m up there going ‘yup ok I can’t do this,’ so I just pointed one out, and (laughs), it was wrong and the whole class just laughed at me. And you would think that the teacher would have said something, you know like ‘that was rude,’ but no, just ‘go back to your seat and study,’ and that was all. It’s like I just wanted to go curl up into a corner and just hide. You know, it’s like, I mean at least the teacher could have said something to the kids like ‘well that’s not right, you shouldn’t laugh,’ you know, ‘we’re all here to learn.’ That’s what I’d say, you go to school to learn not to be laughed at, and if you’re laughed at you’re not going to learn anything.

Freeman, 2001a, p. 181

Lisa told me many stories during three interviews on the topic of parental involvement. These stories went back and forth across time and context. She used stories like this one to explain her actions and decisions as a parent in relation to her children’s schooling or to make sense of her children’s school experiences. Narrative inquirers believe that we tell others about ourselves through stories and that the process of telling stories is a way to make sense of our lived existence. However, as historiographer Hayden White (2001) explains: “We do not *live* stories . . . we give our lives meaning by retrospectively casting them in the form of stories” (p. 228). Furthermore, the capacity to tell and to understand stories is believed to be something all humans are, to a greater or lesser extent, capable of. “This is a form of intelligence that . . . does not require the apprehension of general principles and causes. Rather, it is an ‘implicit understanding’ that originates from experience and remains within the horizon of particular events and situations” (Carli, 2015, p. 106). It is this human capacity as narrators, and consumers, of stories that results in narrative

thinking being so compelling an object of study, *and* in its development as a form of analysis for the social sciences.

Accepting narratives as a legitimate form of thinking, however, has required a continuous and interdisciplinary effort on the part of scholars in the human and social sciences. Literacy scholar David Olson (1990) explains that during the classical era, a clear distinction was created between “unreflective, uncritical” narrative forms of expression which were “taken as the antithesis of thought . . . [and] logical argument and prosaic discourse . . . [which] have continued to dominate our conceptions of thinking to this day” (p. 99). Fortunately, challenges to what has been called, among other names, the “rational-world paradigm” (Fisher, 1987, p. 47) or the “paradigmatic” or “logico-scientific paradigm” (Bruner, 1985, 1986) have significantly altered the ontological and epistemological landscape in the social sciences, and have had a deep influence on narrative having a central place in qualitative research. The belief that narratives play a significant role in the human world and constitute a valid means for making sense of human existence is, now, for the most part, well-established in the humanities and the social sciences (Clandinin, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2007). What is focused on in this chapter, however, is not narrative inquiry *per se*, but emplotment: the mode of thinking that characterizes much, but not all, of the research incorporating some aspect of narrative into the design. “Plot as I conceive it is the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning” (Brooks, 1984, p. xi).

Another way to think about this is that plot is “the ‘element’ that imitates *praxis*” (Carli, 2015, p. 105), where *praxis* is understood in the Aristotelian way as being the practical domain of action. To understand a plot, one needs to be able to understand the way action unfolds in a given account, and the complex ways various events and characters intersect with these actions, whether what constitutes *action* is a series of events or a reflective account. It is important to note here that while humans tell stories, and these stories are often the focus of inquiry, narrative thinking is also an analytic approach that aims to convey the result of inquiry through plot. How one theorizes the purposes and sources for what constitutes a plot varies. Therefore, regardless of who tells the story, researcher or participant, it is important not to assume that all theorists adopt the same foundation for narrative thinking. In other words, it is important not to conflate the intent of the narrator with what gets narrated.

Characteristics of Narrative Thinking

We are surrounded by stories and construct stories as we make sense of the events we live and witness. Our stories are often embedded in other stories, which are themselves embedded or linked to other stories. This unending flow of meaning-making affects, and is affected, by human existence, whether

or not we pay attention to it. Indeed, “the emplotment of events into narrative form is so much a part of our ordinary experience that we are usually not aware of its operation, but only of the experience of reality that it produces” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 160). Thinking of this vast interconnected material through emplotment is what characterizes narrative thinking. Therefore, a stance is required on what is meant by emplotment when narrativizing strategies are used in research. In other words, whether talked about as “resonant threads” (Clandinin, 2013), “identity” (McAdams, 1988), or “existentials” (van Manen, 1990), it is essential for researchers to understand *what* they are plotting, and *how*. This section discusses some of the assumptions that explain the what, while the section on practice considers the how.

Scholars working in a variety of disciplines have conceptualized narrative emplotment in different ways. This is why a psychologist might be interested in what narrative plots convey about identity, a philosopher might worry about narrative and metaphysics, and a scholar of communication might wonder what a particular narrative is communicating, and how that “message” is being received. Overall, however, one reason narratives are considered significant to understanding human existence is because an understanding of narrative requires interpretation, and interpretation is believed to be how humans orient themselves to the world. As such, narratives are manifestations of these interpretive capacities and require interpretation to access their meaning(s). Explaining his interest in plotting, rather than in plots, Brooks (1984) remarks that plotting concerns “the activity of shaping, with the dynamic aspect of narrative—that which makes a plot ‘move forward,’ and makes us read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative a line of intention and a portent of design that holds the promise of progress toward meaning” (p. xiii). Taking this out of the context of literature, a focus on plotting helps us to understand how narrative “operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality” (Bruner, 1991, p. 6), or how “a chronicle or listing of events [is transformed] into a schematic whole by highlighting and recognizing the contribution that certain events make to the development and outcome of the story” (Polkinghorne, 1988, pp. 18–19). Additionally, narrative thinking is based on the belief that narrative structures or plots reflect a basic human tendency, which is to connect events, characters, circumstances, decisions, and so on, in a way that provides meaning to that experience. Therefore, narrative thinking, or what Maxwell and Miller (2008) call contiguity-based analytical processes “involve juxtaposition in time and space, the influence of one thing on another, or relations among parts of a text; their identification involves seeing actual *connections* between things, rather than similarities and differences” (p. 462). Furthermore, this form of thinking is action-oriented and purposeful in that the “unified whole” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 11), which is the outcome of constructing a plot, is believed to be constituted around a human need to know how to act in the social world.

In other words, plots are dynamic in that “narrative texts themselves appear to represent and reflect on their plots” (Brooks, 1984, p. xii), and invite an audience (whether directly or indirectly) to participate in their unfolding. We do this actively, although often unconsciously, ascribing motives to actions, making connections between events, and continuously revising our understanding even while the narrator tells us otherwise. Therefore, there is no single way to think about emplotment. There are, however, some shared characteristics. Since narratives are a representation of the way a series of events have been connected, attention to connective operations used in narratives, for example, the way time is depicted, or a series of actions, or the motives behind the characters’ actions, become important clues as to the narrative’s intent or effect. Furthermore, narratives are told and written in a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes, so these, too, must be accounted for when considering what sense can be made of a particular plot. For example, speaking about the narrative work of historians, White (2001) suggests that historians must take into account “the *types* of configurations of events that can be recognized as stories by the audience for which . . . [they are] writing” (p. 224). Similarly, literary critic Barbara Smith (1980) criticizes the decontextualized approach taken by narratologists who focus solely on the structure of a text and argues that all stories are “manifest, material, and particular retellings—and thus versions—of those narratives, constructed, as *all* versions are, by someone in particular, on some occasion, for some purpose, and in accord with some relevant set of principles” (p. 218).

When we construct a story we gather together a variety of linguistic, physical, historical, geographical, sensual, physiological, cultural, and relational materials. Even when asked to “state the facts” about an event, our interest in conveying a “believable” or “truthful” account means that we not only add rhetorical elements to our telling, but also convey the story from a particular point of view. When we read a novel or an historical account, it is easy for us to overlook the historical and cultural conditions that surrounded its creation. But another equally important context to consider is that our reading of the novel or historical account also plays a role in its shaping. Who we are and where we are located historically, culturally, and geographically shapes the story that is being told as well as the way the story is read and interpreted. It is for this reason that Smith (1980) prompts us to understand narratives “as part of a *social transaction*” (p. 232) so that we pay close attention to the circumstances surrounding the telling of a story, and not just view it purely as an inert text. And White (1992) agrees that “conflict between ‘competing narratives’ has less to do with the facts of the matter in question than with the different story-meanings with which the facts can be endowed by emplotment” (p. 38). The resulting conflicting accounts of supposedly factual affairs continue to pose interpretive challenges to historians and social scientists, prompting some to criticize narratives for their unreliability, while others argue that narrative

thinking provides crucial insights into human interpretation (see Munslow, 2007, for one account of this debate).

Another characteristic of narrative thinking is that when we tell a story, or reflect on a story told, we always do so from a particular perspective, meaning that its uniqueness is always in relation to *something outside of itself*. This “something outside of itself” has been variously conceptualized (for example, tradition, culture, lifeworld, intersubjectivity), but is believed to be the webs of meaning we all participate in—albeit in different ways—that provide the basis for our capacity to understand each other.¹ Nick Crossley explains:

Intersubjectivity is the key to understanding human life in both its personal and its societal forms. It is that in virtue of which our societies are possible and we are who we are. . . . [I]t is something that we cannot step out of. . . . We are inter-subjects.

Crossley, 1996, p. 173

This interaction between the particular and the general provides qualitative researchers with a strong argument for the social scientific value of studying a small number of cases in detail. The focus on narrative detail provides researchers a unit of analysis that allows them to examine human meaning-making in context, while also providing the theoretical basis for considering that the narrative form taken encompasses, or puts into actions, values and meanings that are considered variations of a broader shared human existence.

Another explanation is that a focus on the unique case or story is an essential source of what Gary Thomas (2010) calls “exemplary knowledge” which, he argues, is an “example viewed and heard in the context of another’s experience . . . but used in the context of one’s own” (p. 578). Although not always theorized as such, the crafting of stories is a form of practical reasoning. “Practical reason is the general human capacity for resolving, through reflection, the question of what one is to do” (Wallace, 2009, n.p.). Furthermore, Polkinghorne explains:

the recognition or construction of a plot employs the kind of reasoning that Charles Peirce called “abduction,” the process of suggesting a hypothesis that can serve to explain some puzzling phenomenon. Abduction produces a conjecture that is tested by fitting it over the “facts.” The conjecture may be adjusted to provide a fuller account of the givens.

Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 19

Whether the stories are one’s own or those of others, they provide “a basis for understanding new action episodes by means of analogy” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 11) and are considered a dynamic resource for individual and social



FIGURE 3.1 Dimensions of Plot

change. Since stories are themselves dynamic and are told differently depending on the reason for, or context of, the telling, they also provide potential for re-employment. In other words, narratives can help bring order out of chaos, provide explanations for unexpected events, and also spark reflection, critique, and rearticulation of events.

Finally, while there are recognizable narrative genres (for example, comedy, tragedy, satire, and so on), a plot is not something predetermined and imposed upon disparate events; it is something presented to us in the narrative unfolding itself. So another shared feature across theories is the way in which telling a story is understood as an act and, therefore, requires a theory of action (van Dijk, 1975). Teun van Dijk explains: "Whereas 'doings' are real, extensional objects, actions are *intensional objects*, to be identified by our *interpretations* and *descriptions* of doings" (p. 281). One could say, therefore, that a plot is the manifestation of a particular theory of action. It is the way a sequencing of events (action) unfolds in regards to particular or global circumstances or issues (theme) in a particular time, place, location (context) from one or more point of views and for one or more audiences (point of view). Figure 3.1 depicts these dimensions.

What differentiates narrative thinking from categorical thinking is the way in which plot mediates events and understandings across, time, place, and cultural context and puts into action a unique point of view about an event of significance. Philosopher Brian Fay explains:

[Narratives] show us how various actions and events led forward one to another toward a particular end. The significance of each action is understood in terms of its role in an unfolding drama. In these and countless other cases, particular acts are related to other particular acts

not as instances of a certain general law, but in their particularity as each pushes forward a continuing line of transformation.

Fay, 1996, p. 170

Research on narrative, therefore, has contributed to the development of many interpretivist theories of action for the social sciences. It has done this by arguing:

- that humans have stories worth telling
- that any story, no matter how similar to others, is unique in one way or another
- that regardless of how unique or different a story is from others, it provides an important perspective on human existence in general
- that it is in this mediation between the particular and the general that much can be learned about the interpretive capacities of individuals as well as the historical, social, discursive, linguistic, and cultural materials that give shape to human interpretations
- that plotting, by virtue of never being static, is both evidence of, and potential for, human change.

In other words, whether a plot mediates across time and place, between events, or between speakers within a text or in relation to the narrator, one of its unique contributions is how this mediation provides social science researchers with a way in which to theorize an interdependent relation between the particularities of human existence and the general condition of being human.

Narrative Thinking in Practice

Making story-telling a central feature of research has a well-documented presence in the social sciences and has brought to light several assumptions associated with working in narrative modes. First, stories, whether written or oral, have, as far as we can tell, always existed as part of the social world. Second, a story told does not necessarily correspond to a story lived. Third, stories, however theorized, bring people together across time, place, and culture. Fourth, and related, stories transcend time while also being meaningful in time; their significance manifesting itself over and over in a variety of ways for multiple contexts. The possibilities inherent in narrative plotting are endless so, similarly to the section on categorical thinking, studies have been selected that demonstrate a variety of ways in which narrative thinking could be used in analysis, whether or not they draw explicitly on narrative theory as a framework.

Since narrative thinking is believed to provide coherence to the stories people tell about their lives and decisions, narratives are often elicited and analyzed as a way to understand a particular topic or phenomenon. Sheri Price, Linda Hall, Jan Angus, and Elizabeth Peter's (2013) narrative study of millennial

generation students' nursing career choices provides an example of this kind of study. They believed that knowing more about why millennial students chose nursing would contribute to a better understanding of this generation of young people and assist with recruitment and retention in the profession. They argued that "understanding career choice using narrative theory requires attending to the process of emplotment, how individual events are linked together, with particular attention to context, language and temporality" (p. 307).

Participants included 12 female students who had been accepted onto a Canadian Bachelor of Science in Nursing program. Each participant was interviewed twice and attention was maintained on the narrative structure of their accounts. Using a combination of narrative and categorical thinking, their analysis involved mapping the plots of each story and identifying general themes. Several shared themes were identified and the theme of focus in this article, "Emplotting Career Choice Around the Virtues of Nursing," was presented through a rich description of the subthemes thought to constitute it: "Making a Difference," "Characterizing Self as Nurse," "Imagining Nursing as the Ideal Career," and "Constructing Choice as a Calling" (p. 308). In this way, "career choice was represented as a course of discovery and understanding more than a static moment in time or definitive event" (p. 308). Each subtheme was understood, and presented, as a significant part of the actions and choices made by the nursing students in relation to choosing nursing as a career. Throughout the narrating of each subtheme the authors tied their findings back to narrative theory as a way to support their analysis.

In this study, and in others like it, narrative theory provided the epistemological basis for theorizing narrative emplotting as a way of understanding and knowing (Ricoeur, 1984). As mentioned earlier, narrative thinking helps humans make sense of, or give order to, the "multiple and scattered events" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. x) of their lives. Researchers drawing on narrative theory argue for the centrality of narratives as a way to examine human-centered phenomena such as experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) or different conceptions of identity (Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin, 2007), and use narrative thinking as an analytic approach that provides legitimacy to the analytic decisions made, and to the presentation of the findings.

Narrative thinking as an analytic approach is fairly common in qualitative research studies but is not always labeled as such, or used within an explicit narrative framework. Polkinghorne describes this analytical approach:

[This] kind of investigation is *explanatory*; its aim is to construct a narrative account explaining "why" a situation or event involving human actions has happened. The narrative account that is constructed ties together and orders events so as to make apparent the way they "caused" the happening under investigation.

Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 161

Emir Estrada and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo's (2011) study of Latino immigrant youth street vendors provides an example of narrative analysis. They wanted to understand why Latino youths would "consent to spend all summer and most of the school year pushing a cart with cut-up fruit through blazing city streets" (p. 111). It was hard work and there were many pressures—from peers, the law, and society—that would easily explain why they might not have consented to this work. Less evident was why they would. Using data collected from nine months of field observation and interviews with 20 Latino youths aged ten to 21 (mostly of Mexican heritage and female), Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo reconstructed an account of the youths' reasons for street vending, as well as their responses to the stigma the work carried.

Their findings wove together their observations and the young people's accounts, in the form of a "narrative explanation" (Polkinghorne, 1988) of the economic and moral reasons provided by the youths, and the difficulties and rewards of working as street vendors to contribute to their family income. Understanding why did not yet help the researchers understand how the youths "cope[d] with the responses of others who may tease them or disparage them" (p. 116). So adding to the unfolding narrative for why the Latino youths consented to this kind of work even though it went against the norm, Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo showed how the young people constructed "affirming narratives of intersectional dignities" (p. 117), which served to set themselves apart from the negative, mostly criminalized, images of Latino youth circulating in society, and differentiated themselves from non-working Latino youth who they perceived as "lazy" or "spoiled" or acted "as though they were white" (p. 118).

Like all research accounts, not all the young people interviewed recognized themselves in the above narrative. For some, street vending felt uneasy, was something to be kept secret, and did not reflect the kind of work they desired. Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo contextualized their findings and acknowledged the strengths and weaknesses of their design and analysis.

In examples like this, narrative thinking as a theory of action grounded in the data provides support for research aimed at answering "why" questions, such as, for example, grounded theory studies. Charmaz (2014) explains: "Theories offer accounts for what happens, how it ensues, and may aim to account for why it happened. Theorizing consists of the actions involved in constructing these accounts" (p. 228).

Because of its dynamic and action-oriented nature, narrative thinking has also contributed to the performative turn in the social sciences (Conquergood, 1989). Julie-Ann Scott's (2011) study on the personal stories of physically disabled professionals provides an example of a study looking at narratives as performances. As Scott stated, a performative approach provided "a vehicle to understand how professional narratives are created through performativity, emerging through daily *embodied interactions*, even as cultural discourses of professionalism seek to render bodies irrelevant" (pp. 238–9).

Scott recruited and interviewed “26 self-defined physically disabled professionals from 14 different states . . . for a study seeking to learn: ‘*What it means to be a physically disabled professional situated in cultural discourse*’” (p. 241). As a physically disabled professional herself, she was particularly interested in the way her participants’ bodies were implicated in their professional work stories, whether or not they themselves were conscious of these interactions. Scott explained: “Performance analysis attends to how all narratives are the creation of bodies interacting in time and space, co-constituting performativities, in their reiteration, resistance, and/or dismantlement of the meanings that emerge from them” (p. 240). Her analysis of her participants’ stories needed, therefore, to account for both what her participants told her, and how their stories provided evidence for different enactments of bodily performances within professional situations. Using Super Hero narratives (for example, Super, Warrior, Tragic, and Rogue) helped her provide the narrative logic of each performed identity, and although she illustrated these with her participants’ accounts, participants do not embody any one particular Super Hero identity; these were enacted situationally. “Physically disabled professional heroes are not located within particular bodies but are cultural constitutions that surface in interaction, performances emerging from the perceived absurdity surrounding physically disabled professional identity” (Scott, 2011, p. 255).

Beginning with the assumption that bodies are performative, Scott analyzed the transcripts taking note of how the stories were being told with regard to tone, gestures, or laughter, what was being emphasized, what transitions were used, and so on. Additionally, she focused on “three levels of narrative positioning” (p. 242). These included relations to others in the story, relations to the audience or researcher, and relations to self. This process, Scott explained, helped her identify the different kinds of body performances as they manifested themselves in different situations and in relation to different positionalities. Using short narratives to illustrate the positions described, Scott made visible the way her participants’ bodies played a central role in the telling of the stories.

In general, constructing plots provides a way to retain the unique circumstances of a person’s experience, an organization’s journey of change, or the historical conditions surrounding an event, and can be used with a variety of design options. So whether the researcher traces the unique plot of a speaker or constructs a plot out of disparate data sources, value is placed on the uniqueness of each situation and what can be learned about human nature from an analysis of these unique conditions. Because of the complexity of the interrelation between the research story and the stories told within a study, as well as the emphasis social science and qualitative research places on human action and interaction, narrative thinking is ubiquitous as a mode of thinking, and can be found across disciplines in a variety of forms.

Deciding on Narrative Thinking for Analysis

The turn to narrative is a turn to human agency, a subjective way of knowing which is thought to be more relevant to issues affecting human beings. Like other modes of thinking it has its strengths and limitations. One of its primary strengths for analysis is the familiarity of its form; the way narrative emplotment figures centrally in everyday human talk. Therefore, narrative thinking develops from and uses well-known narrative conventions. Ethnographer Bud Goodall describes these conventions well:

The story’s narrative and rhetorical supporting structure (for example, its form or genre, episodes, passages, conflicts, turning points, poetic moments, themes, and motifs) are constructed out of ordinary and extraordinary everyday life materials that, from a reader’s perspective, allow meaningful patterns to emerge and from which a relationship develops.

Goodall, 2000, p. 83

With its focus on human action, narrative thinking allows researchers to:

- Connect disparate events into coherent accounts
- Witness the unique variations of human experience-making by attending to the way individuals put into action their own interpretive “principles of interconnectedness”
- Highlight human practical domains of action or *praxis*
- Connect individual experiences to universal human themes

Although narrative thinking has gained popularity and legitimacy across disciplines, it is not without its own issues. And, for the most part, these all revolve around its subjective and interpretive nature, whether the narrative accounts are provided by research participants or constructed by researchers themselves. In general, researchers working with narrative strategies will want to consider the issues of correspondence, coherence, and culture.

Correspondence. Narrative theorist, Mark Freeman (2010) explains that drawing on narratives in social science research has always raised questions about the “relationship between life as lived, moment to moment, and life as told, in retrospect, from the vantage point of the present” (p. 3). In a general sense there is agreement among narrative researchers that all narratives are “an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience” (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 162). However, researchers disagree with how much each is needed for narrative research to be considered valid. For example, narrative theorists disagree about how (or whether) to address issues of memory, intended or unintended distortions on the part of participants, or how to account for multiple versions of the same story if some form of correspondence to the actual experience is required for their study. For some researchers, such as historians, these issues are

of critical importance. When researchers are interested in individuals' perspectives on their own lives it might not matter at all whether the accounts happened in the way described, but when those accounts clash with versions told by others, then whose truth should take precedence? Whose account should be considered more valid, reliable, worth telling? And what criteria should be used to determine which history to tell ourselves and our children? Since our understanding of the past depends on what we have lived or what we have been told of it, the past and its telling can become entangled in the politics of science in complex ways (see Friedländer, 1992, for example, for a collection of essays on the complicated issue of representing the Holocaust). Therefore, depending on the context, the narrative decisions we make can have serious consequences. This is one reason that most narrative theorists call for transparency in regards to the interpretive decisions made in the process of constructing a research report (Etherington, 2004). Furthermore, many theorists believe that by ignoring the interpretive and literary procedures used in the research process the abilities of researchers and historians to engage issues of representation collectively has weakened (White, 2001).

Interestingly, even when correspondence is dismissed as irrelevant and narratives are not believed to mirror reality, there is still widespread reluctance towards the writing of fiction as research (Watson, 2011). Watson states that "[t]his reluctance is no doubt the result of a deeply felt need for research to be grounded in an empirical reality of something that *really happened*" (p. 396), even if that happening is understood as one person's version of the truth. Nevertheless, in practice there are researchers who are turning to fiction as a viable means of representing social science research findings (Clough, 2002; Watson, 2011; Whitebrook, 2001). While much of this work employs narrative thinking, the move for others from action and intention as a focus to one of immersion in felt experience, positions their work as primarily driven by poetical thinking, an approach described in Chapter 5.

Coherence and Culture. Coherence, and what counts as coherence, is another issue facing narrative researchers. In general, "narrative is capable of representing fragmentation, disunity, uncertainty and of offering solutions to what would otherwise be disabling disjunctions" (Whitebrook, 2001, p. 87). However, coherence is always "an interpretation of some aspect of the world that is historically and culturally grounded and shaped by human personality" (Fisher, 1987, p. 49). So while a story can draw on a wide variety of rhetorical strategies, what counts as a story is rooted in tradition, and these traditions do not necessarily align with one another. This means that what counts as a coherent account is always tangled up with the politics of culture (Benhabib, 2002).

Narrative scholars must, therefore, attend to this intersection, both in their decisions about what narratives to report and how to craft these, but also in the way in which they articulate a rationale for narrative research. The reason for this is that there are crucial distinctions, and disagreements, among narrative

researchers regarding the role and agency of the narrator, the role and position of the researcher, and whether narratives can analytically stand alone or must be positioned within broader discursive, cultural, or political frameworks. In other words, while narrative researchers tend to agree that narratives are legitimate forms of experiential knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Collins, 2009), they differ regarding the role and emphasis of the dimensions of plot depicted in Figure 3.1. Although a description of the varieties of narrative theories is beyond the scope of this chapter, like categorical thinking, some of the possibilities and constraints offered by narrative thinking are inherent to the mode of thinking itself.

For example, a fundamental part of the process of emplotment is to transform complex events into coherent, organized accounts. Since what counts as coherence is not only determined by linguistic conventions, but is also at the mercy of cultural, social, and disciplinary norms, the stories that get circulated and accepted are more often those that reinforce, rather than resist, the status quo. This issue makes narrative research vulnerable to the same criticisms leveled at categorical thinking. Nevertheless, narrative thinking's emphasis on the principles of interconnectedness and its grounding in everyday practice, provide a strong argument for the validity of first person accounts as a reliable source of knowledge about an event lived and witnessed by the narrator (Collins, 2009). The strength of narrative thinking is in its ability to make visible the interpretive capacities of human agents in relation to their actions, interactions, beliefs, and practices. As such, narrative thinking is not only considered an important way to understand human action and experience, but has become a core component for critical, emancipatory research, a form of research most often guided by dialectical thinking, the topic of the next chapter. This is because, as some have argued, it is not narrative's connection to culture per se that is the issue, but when researchers seek to classify and represent these in ways that silence culture's inherent multiplicity (Benhabib, 2002). Benhabib explains: "The lived universe of cultures always appears in the plural. We need to be attentive to the positioning and repositioning of the other and the self, of 'us' and 'them,' in this complex dialogue" (p. 41). A challenge, then, for researchers making use of narrative thinking is how to contextualize situated or cultural stories in ways that maintain the inherent complexity of an individual's or a group's understandings. Taking a dialectical approach has been one solution to this issue.

Note

- 1 The importance of the influence of these webs of meaning continues in dialectical, poetical, and diagrammatical thinking but is taken up differently. Whereas in dialectical thinking, the tensions produced between the structures of meaning and the material productions of lived life as experiences or discourses become the focus of analysis, in poetical and diagrammatical thinking, the lifeworld, experience, etc. is not an entity that preexists the meaning encounter or event itself, but becomes manifest during the course of that event.

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