The state of the art in narrative inquiry
Some reflections

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The recent special issue of Narrative Inquiry, ‘Narrative — the state of the art’, is an extraordinary rich resource of ideas for scholars interested in the storied nature of human life. In what follows, I would like to offer some reflections on it. These, however, are by no means definitive, finalized, or complete. It should also be emphasized that due to space limitations I cannot provide explicit reflections on all the articles within the special issue, or cite each one. Despite this, my hope is that this commentary sharpens and extends the dialogue around narrative. Of special concern are the following seven points or provocations.

First, I do not emerge from the present contributions with a set of definitive conclusions on matters related to narrative. At the same time, I do find in the articles a range of recurring broad views. To begin with, narratives can be effective in social and individual transformation (e.g., Gergen & Gergen, 2006; Ramírez-Esparza & Pennebaker, 2006). Further, narratives are important in the process of constructing selves and identities (e.g., Freeman, 2006). People understand themselves as selves through the stories they tell and the stories they feel part of. Another common held view is that whilst narratives are personal, they are also social. They are thoroughly shaped, but not determined, by socio-cultural conventions about language. The context, setting, audience, the particular situated purpose of a story, tellability, and the narrative resources available to tellers frame what might be said and how it can be narrated (e.g., McAdams, 2006; Stokoe & Edwards, 2006; Taylor, 2006). Equally, narratives are done in social interactions (e.g., Bamberg, 2006). Narrative is also a form of social action (e.g., Atkinson & Delamont, 2006). People do things with narratives and they have important social functions, such as having moral force and accomplishing social status. Thus, stories do things in relation others. Yet, people
cannot truly predict what another person does with them. Stories compete for attention and are always out of control since they allow multiple perspectives.

Second, whilst there is a range of recurring views, it would be erroneous to think that all researchers agree with each other. Indeed, collectively the articles remind us that narrative inquiry is a field characterized by tensions and connections, differences and similarities, and contrasts and disparity (Smith & Sparkes, 2006, in press a). For example, not all researchers believe a person is essentially a storytelling animal and that life is naturally storied. Many argue instead that people construct stories out of life and/or within relationships. Additionally, some researchers favor big stories (e.g., Freeman, 2006), whilst others prefer small stories (e.g., Bamberg, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006). Further, several scholars underline different theoretical orientations to narrative. To illustrate, Gergen and Gergen (2006), like McLeod (2006) and Kraus (2006), highlight one orientation that conceptualizes narrative as a cognitive structure and another that views narratives as discursive actions (see also Smith & Sparkes, in press a; Sparkes & Smith, in press). Nomothetic and/or ideographic research may also be done. Moreover, although realist and scientific flavored tales dominate the special issue, narrative researchers have available to them a range of ways in which we might represent our ‘findings’ (see Sparkes, 2002). These include poetic representations, ethnodrama, and autoethnography. However, saying that we may write in different ways does not legitimate that we all can, or should produce, for instance, an autoethnography. Simply choosing this type of tale because it is chic or fashionable, as Atkinson and Delamont (2006) correctly caution, will not do. Our choices instead need to be made in a reflective, informed, principled, strategic, and responsible manner.

Seen in light of the above points, it appears that narrative inquiry can mean different things to different people. Like stories themselves, it supports and calls for multiple perspectives. Narrative inquiry might, therefore, be best considered an umbrella term for a mosaic of research efforts, with diverse theoretical musings, methods, empirical groundings, and/or significance all revolving around an interest in narrative. To deepen and further convey the scope and variability of narrative inquiry, let me add another point.

Third, on my reading of the articles, it appears there is a trend toward thinking about and working with narrative in either what might be termed a formulaic or playful manner. For heuristic reasons, these different ways can be imagined and organized as ends of a continuum. At one end are formulaic narrative researchers, such as Labov (2006) and Johnstone (2006), who are often rooted in sociolinguistics or structuralism. They use highly standardized transcription procedures and conduct an analysis of narrative through mechanical, formal, abstract, logical, and prescribed methods. On occasions, mathematical formulas are also utilized. The findings of this process are, in turn, represented using conventions that resemble a
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scientific tale (Sparkes, 2002). All this, for me, gives the impression of researchers trying to unlock or crack some narrative code of human life. In doing so, they give the sense that formulaic ways of doing narrative research can uncover the ‘real’ world and tell us its secrets.

In contrast, however, are those researchers that are more playful in how they work with narrative. They use transcribed data with limited detail and represent extended accounts of their participant’s narrative. Systematic analytical methods may or may not be used since where or how interpretive insights are derived from sometimes seemingly matters little. Thus, plausible interpretations of narrative are generated in a highly flexible way and without mathematical or strict formulas. These are moreover represented in a fashion similar to a realist tale or species of creative analytic practice (Sparkes, 2002). All this, for me, gives the impression not of a researcher seemingly aspiring to unlock or crack some narrative code, but rather of him or her playing with ideas and narratives in an artful manner. The work of Josselson (2006), McLeod (2006), and Taylor (2006) might be viewed as examples that are close to playful narrative inquiry. Nevertheless, this is not to say that such scholars cannot move closer toward or actually do formulistic research. Nor do I wish to suggest that researchers cannot shift from formulaic research to a more playful kind. That is, the two orientations should not been seen as a dichotomy that obscures any intermittent positions. That said, I wonder if researchers have an elective affinity to a specific orientation. Are we interpellated, or ‘hailed’ by a certain one? Do we then enter into a cycle of investment whereby I, as researcher, bond my sense of identity to one orientation and appeal to a specific kind of implied audience who, it is assumed, will understand and appreciate the conventions being called into? If this might be the case, then where does this leave us in terms of our desire to engage with a different orientation in dialogue?

Fourth, many articles in the special issue suggest that meaning is basic to being human, and being human entails actively construing meaning (e.g., McAdams, 2006; McLeod, 2006). Further, narratives are involved in the process of making meaning. As such, the focus on meaning and narrative is of great importance. It is a focus, a number of articles suggest, which distinguishes narrative inquiry from more traditional social scientific (notably psychological) perspectives. I am provoked to ask however, how alike is narrative inquiry to certain forms of interactionism given their emphasis on meaning, communication, and language? Are some narrative researchers essentially interactionists? Are we displaying sociological or psychological amnesia (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006)? Perhaps one entry into this invitation to dialogue, and as a way to help galvanize researchers and direct scholarship, is to take up the conceptual challenge offered by Schiff (2006). That is, to define more precisely what narrative inquiry can mean without being prescriptive or finalizing. Another might be to explore in more detail the
contrasting perspectives that suggest narrative is woven into the fabric of life and makes explicit meaning that is there in the experience, draws out the meaning that inheres in the events, imposes the meaning that we imagine we see in mere happenings (Nelson, 1998), or generates meaning by virtue of its place within the realm of social interaction and relationships (Gergen, 1994).

Fifth, most articles state that a ‘narrative turn’ has occurred. This can be linked with a ‘performance turn’ (e.g., Atkinson & Delamont, 2006; Krauss, 2006; Peterson & Langellier, 2006). Additionally, it has been proposed that we are in a ‘second wave of narrative analysis’, and/or emerging is “a ‘new’ narrative turn” (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 128). At the same time however, several scholars suggest that narrative occupies a marginal position in certain mainstream disciplines. Some are also “concerned about the demise of narrative before it has had the time to fully actualize” (Schiff, 2006, p. 19). Such issues together, for me, raise various empirical questions. For example, has there really been a ‘narrative turn’ in the social sciences? And if such a ‘turn’ has occurred, what form has it taken? Is it unidirectional or multi-directional? Could it be a form of fragmentation or zesty disarray? Further, does work published on, and debates about narrative, occur almost exclusively inside narrative circles and specialty journals? If so, what might be the consequences of this? Finally, not forgetting our past and that narrative has, in some quarters a long history, might the turn to narrative best be described as a narrative (re)turn? In short, is the narrative turn, fact, fashion, or fiction? Empirical work is thus required to explore this, and to help inform our futures.

Sixth, what counts in a number of the articles is a concern with what might be termed the *storied* and *storytelling body*. For instance, Charon (2006) explores the experiences of the self-telling body, and the health benefits and risks on the body when it tells or writes stories are highlighted by Ramírez-Esparza and Pennebaker (2006). Further, for Peterson and Langelleir (2006), narrative is a communicative practice, a conduct of the lived body. Thus, in combination many of the articles remind us that the body is always connected through narrative and that narratives are embodied. We are, however, at an early stage in our understandings of this connection. For example, narrative inquiry might benefit enormously from a fuller engagement with theories of embodiment. Here, the convergence thesis of Shilling (2005) springs to mind. In this, the body is viewed as a *source* of, a *location* for and a *means* by which individuals are emotionally and physically positioned within and positioned towards society. How, then, might narrative be involved in this process, and what could all this mean for actual bodies?

Another theoretical possibility could be to link narrative explicitly with Bourdieu’s (1992) concept of habitus. Taylor (2006), similar to others (e.g., Freeman, 2006; McAdams, 2006), suggests that a life narrative can be considered a construction that is resourced by past constructions that may aggregate over time. This
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process leads to some continuity in the stories we tell. That is, people can carry over resources between occasions of talk, rehearse their stories, and thus produce a sense of consistency in their life stories and identity. Seen in this light, there is perhaps a durable and transposable quality to some narratives. These, I might add, are incorporated within and regenerated through the body across time and in space. As such, a person comes to have what might be seen as an embodied narrative habitus. This proposition then leads me to wonder, does one’s habitus give rise to certain types of story at certain moments in time and space? If so, how and why might this be? What type of story does an individual’s habitual disposition call forth? In raising such questions, however, I do not mean that a person’s narrative cannot be transformed nor display some inconsistency or flux. As Bourdieu emphasized, people can and do change. They are predisposed to act in predictable ways, but predispositions are constantly being modified. Accordingly, the concept of embodied narrative habitus may offer insights into how and why an individual’s self narrative changes as well as resists this process.

Yet, narrative researchers should not simply be content with theories and conceptual musing on and about the body. We also might turn our attention to generating stories from and with actual lived and living human bodies (Smith & Sparkes, in press b). Bodies are partly connected and ‘known’ through narrative — the stories they tell. Indeed, we tell stories about, in, out of, and through our bodies. Likewise, as a resource, stories from outside our bodies endow us with a sense of interior, subjective reality and are integral to efforts to communicate our feelings to others. Further, bodies perform, do, create, and are created by narratives. For instance, they may do what a story has shown them how to do and given them cause to do. Yet, bodies are not determined by narrative. Likewise, they cannot be reduced to narrative or theory. Bodies are lived and biological; they think, feel, bleed, betray us, destabilize us, are emotionally expressive, and socially shaped and shaping (Smith & Sparkes, in press b). This is a call, in effect, for an embodied rather than a disembodied narrative inquiry. It is a concern with working across disciplinary boundaries to connect theories of embodiment with the empirical, lived, fleshy body in material, social, historical, and political contexts (Crossley, 2006). As part of this, like some suggest (e.g., Charon, 2006), we might explore the ways narratives shape and are shaped by real bodies, along with the consequences they may have on them. Narrative scholars can however take an alternative tact; one that has been neglected. This move is concerned with the thesis that certain bodies might have a desire or give rise to the need to tell a particular narrative. They have an attraction to specific narratives and are constructed in them. As Frank (1995) proposed, different bodies have an elective affinity to different narratives. These “elective affinities are not deterministic. Bodies are realized — not just represented but created — in the stories they tell” (p. 52).
Seventh, together the articles collected in the special issue illuminate some of the mix of non-narrative and narrative methods available to researchers. For example, some use experiments, self-report scales, and/or statistical techniques, whilst others utilize content analyses, a structural analysis, and/or a conversational analysis. As such, in combination the articles may speak to, and add fuel for, those researchers who champion the cause of mixed methods — an issue gaining renewed interest as testified in the new *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*. However, when read through the lens of what Smith (1989) describes as the logic of justification, the mixing and matching of methods is of no great concern. Researchers who accept the logic of justification make a *distinction* between narrative philosophy and principles (i.e. methodology) on the one hand, and narrative methods (i.e. the procedures, strategies, and techniques for the collection and analysis of data) on the other.

Therefore, like Schiff (2006) asks, can non-narrative researchers borrow narrative methods? Can narrative researchers use non-narrative methods? Can they supplement their techniques of description in natural settings with procedures for the quantification and hypothesis-testing of events? Or can researchers supplement controlled procedures and strategies with participant observation in ongoing, natural settings? As Smith (1989) says, the answer to these types of question is an uninteresting ‘yes’. The more important issues revolve around the underlying assumptions of different narrative perspectives that focus attention on the basic ontological and epistemological questions: What is the nature of social reality? What is the relationship between knower and known? How is truth to be defined or characterized? In the general absence of clearly highlighting and discussing such issues in depth, a return to some basic underlying premises, principles, and questions may, therefore, be useful at this juncture to act as a springboard to future dialogue, help in the process of assimilating narrative understandings (Josselson, 2006), and assist in exploring challenges like, ‘what is narrative inquiry’ and ‘is narrative a science’ (Schiff, 2006). All this is particularly important when one considers that in the proliferation of narrative inquiry some basics, the strong deep roots, may be overstated or forgotten. Further, there is the increasing risk that issues surrounding judgment criteria or validity are discussed in uninformed and disingenuous ways. It is also noteworthy given that some of our starting assumptions might not now hold up to scrutiny. For example, recently Bruner (2002) said that he was “mistaken” (p. 101) in suggesting there are two mutually translatable worlds of mind — the narrative and paradigmatic. Such issues, then, merit further contemplation.

Research, I believe, is a theoretical, practical and moral matter. Whilst not easy, it is fundamentally a dialogic process (Josselson, 2006). The articles gathered within ‘Narrative — the state of the art’ invite us to take up the challenge of
dialogue and engage in dialogical processes. That is, the communication between simultaneous differences or horizons of understanding (Smith & Sparkes, in press a). They call for us to appreciate and think with the theoretical complexities, tensions, and similarities that layer the field of narrative rather than have the last word on them. They also provoke us to not simply talk about narrative, but too get on and actually do the research — whatever the narrative research one might responsibly choose to do really is. As such, I am appreciative, and am positively excited, that the articles in this special issue of Narrative Inquiry are also published in a book format (Bamberg, 2007). Like concentric circles of witness, the dialogue, I hope, will thus be expanded, rippling into corners where one might both imagine, and least expect. Possibilities, then, are vast; the future is exciting.

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References


