Narrative research

Time for a paradigm

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As a result of the popularization of the narrative idea and the considerable diversity existing among narrative studies, a rather “all included” conception has arisen, in which the framework of narrative inquiry has been significantly blurred. For narrative inquiry to persist as a unique mode of investigation into human nature, a complementary dialogue is required that aims at outlining its core, alongside the emphasis given in the literature on diversity as its hallmark. As a possible reference point for this debate, recognizing the narrative paradigm that has crystallized since the “narrative turn” is suggested. The narrative paradigm is discussed in light of six major dimensions — ontology, epistemology, methodology, inquiry aim, inquirer posture and participant/narrator posture — indicating that it coincides with other interpretive paradigms in certain aspects yet proffers a unique philosophical infrastructure that gives rise to particular methodological principles and methods. Considering the narrative paradigm as the essence of narrative inquiry asserts that the latter is not confined to a methodology, as often implied. Rather it constitutes a full-fledged research Weltanschauung that intimately connects the “hows” of investigation to the “whats”, namely premises about the nature of reality and our relationships with it.

Keywords: qualitative research, narrative research, narrative paradigm, ontology, epistemology, methodology

Over the last three decades a “narrative turn” has been taking place in the human sciences. The narrative has been expropriated from the humanities, especially from literary scholarship where it was well established, penetrating almost every social discipline: psychology, anthropology, sociology, folklore, history, sociolinguistics,

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communication, cultural studies, gender studies, gerontology and others. As Mishler (2006, p.iv) notes, “With surprising speed, the loosely defined field of narrative studies has moved from its early marginal status in the human sciences to a robust legitimacy.” Narrative thinking has not stopped at the doors of academe and has become practice in major professions including psychotherapy, social work, education, counseling, mediation, organizational transformation, law, medicine, occupational therapy and conflict resolution (Gergen & Gergen, 2006; Riessman & Speedy, 2007). Importantly, it has penetrated into popular discourse. The term narrative has become tremendously widespread and the idea that every individual, family, organization and group “has their narrative” is common knowledge.

Similarly to Rimmon-Kenan’s sense (2006) regarding the openness of current uses of the term narrative, the expansion of narrative thinking is both exciting and bewildering. Whilst it constitutes an affirmative development, giving much satisfaction to its adherents, something might be lost, as in any process of popularization. Just as the term narrative “has come to mean anything and everything” (Riessman & Speedy, 2007, p.428), it often seems that this is the case for narrative research also.

Reading through the narrative literature, diversity appears to be the name of the game. Not only due to the actual variety in narrative studies, but also because it is discussed as the main feature of the field. That narrative inquiry comprises multiple origins, methods and disciplines is stressed in every book, handbook chapter and article introducing it, suggesting that its “hallmark is diversity — in theory, method, and subject-matter” (Mishler 2006, p.iv). Diversity is definitely a good thing, corresponding both with the pluralistic nature of narrative epistemology and current trends towards interdisciplinarity. But is it the most prominent mark of narrative inquiry? Moreover, might it be the case that by our constant emphasis on multiplicity, we are in some way encouraging an “all included” conception, implying that the major characteristic of narrative research is its being uncharacterizable? The diversity of narrative inquiry may actually put in question its mere existence as an identifiable field. As Michael Bamberg points out, the increasing diversification into different narrative methods and approaches has led to the question whether there still is a common core to the “narrative approach” (personal communication, May 14, 2009).

Trusting that a narrative approach (still) exists as a distinct kind of inquiry into human nature, I suggest that alongside the continuous celebration of its diversity, another dialogue should be re-opened, one that, following Bamberg, aims at looking for its core. Three decades after the “narrative turn” it seems necessary to return to the basics, asking what narrative research — presently — is? What makes it a distinct form of inquiry, different from other types of qualitative inquiry? Such an examination, possibly leading to further disagreements and diversity,
is required for the “narrative approach” mean something and not anything; for securing it from being dissolved in popularization. In this paper I attempt to touch upon the core of narrative inquiry by outlining the narrative paradigm. I will try to demonstrate that the plentiful writing on narrative throughout the last decades in its aspects of theory, research and practice points to basic beliefs, specifically to the three fundamental elements that form a paradigm: ontology, epistemology and methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, 2005).

Although a narrative paradigm has been established, the paradigmatic lens is generally underused when considering it. Both in the general field of qualitative research and in the more specific narrative literature, narrative research is commonly referred to as a method of collecting and analyzing empirical materials (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b), a methodology (Clandinin, 2007a), or at best a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2007) or a subtype of qualitative inquiry (Chase, 2005). From a perspective that considers the form alongside the content, it is hard to dismiss this tendency as “just words”. By maintaining that a narrative paradigm has been formed and urging the use of paradigmatic vocabulary, I assert my position that the core of narrative inquiry combines both a philosophical stance towards the nature of social reality and our relationship with it, and the mode in which it should be studied. Indeed, this intertwining of what and how, of Weltanschauung and a research strategy, accounted for the narrative turn.

The proposed outline of the narrative paradigm rests upon three premises. First, while narrative research has deep roots, extending to the late 19th century, the narrative paradigm has been articulated mainly during the last three decades, relying on constructivist, postmodern and performance notions. Secondly, by identifying the narrative paradigm I do not intend to detach or isolate it from qualitative research, its natural home. Rather, I suggest considering it as a distinctive qualitative paradigm which contains both commonalities and differences with other interpretative paradigms. Finally, my invitation to recognize the narrative paradigm in no way overlooks the considerable diversity existing within it. Like every research paradigm, the narrative paradigm constitutes a broad — yet distinct — framework within which various approaches, theoretical orientations and analysis practices coexist.

After a brief account of the historical and philosophical background of narrative research, I will delineate the major dimensions of the narrative paradigm — ontology, epistemology, methodology, inquiry aim, inquirer posture and participant/narrator posture — touching both on the multiplicity within the paradigm and its relations with other interpretive paradigms; where they coincide and where they differ. I will conclude with some thoughts about the importance of recognizing the narrative paradigm, suggesting it as a reference point for further dialogue on contemporary narrative inquiry.
Historical and philosophical background

At the beginning of the previous century narratives were employed to study human reality in major disciplines. History has traditionally told stories; anthropology used biographical methods already in the 19th century and expanded them at the beginning of the 20th century; the first preferred genre in clinical psychology was the case study, in which individuals’ stories are scrutinized. Even sociology, the only social sciences’ discipline born positivist, employed narrative methods. Thomas and Znaniecki’s (1918–1920) study of immigration, based on a single peasant’s biography, was a significant landmark that inspired the biographical research of the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

With the professionalization of the disciplines the positivist paradigm became dominant. Biographical methods were seen as amateurish and after WWII became marginalized (Denzin, 1989). Renewed interest in these methods began toward the 1970s, as a result of a disappointment with the inability of quantitative methods to appreciate human experience. Criticisms of positivist research introduced the “interpretive turn” that challenged the possibility of representing the world “as it is” (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979). The quest for alternative methods of inquiry brought the rediscovery of the narrative, also encouraged by the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, that conceived of personal narratives as a principal channel for listening to silenced voices and a major source of feminist research, and the call of sociolinguistics, led by Labov and Waletzky (1967), to examine ordinary people’s oral narratives of everyday experience (Chase, 2005). In the course of the 1980s groundbreaking studies were published, that depicted narrative as a major cognitive scheme (Bruner, 1986), a root metaphor for psychology (Sarbin, 1986), a central channel by which we impart meaning to ourselves and to the world (Polkinghorne, 1988) and shape our identity (McAdams, 1985), and a base for social interaction (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). These works and others published in their wake brought about the “narrative turn”, in which narrative thinking penetrated most social science disciplines, professions and the media. Since then numerous books and articles have been published and special journals focusing on narrative were established, resulting in a narrative “boom” or “frenzy” (Bamberg, 2007).

The “narrative turn” provided a renewed legitimization for narrative methods but also altered their premises. As Alasuutari (1997) indicates, the approaches common at the beginning of the 20th century — sociostructural and sociolinguistic in Bertaux and Kohli’s terms (1984) — were “factist”: the first conceived of the life story as a picture of a life and the second perceived it as a picture of a personality. In both approaches the narrative was believed to reflect an objectified essence, located either within the narrator or outside him. In contrast, a third approach — termed discursive, constructivist or postmodern — focuses on the fluid nature of
the narrative, suggesting that “any account of one’s personal past... makes a point and serves a function” and is rooted in its local setting (Alasuutari, 1997, p.6).

The main difference between the third approach and its predecessors touches on the relationship between the narrative and the phenomenon that it is (apparently) reflecting. While the traditional approaches depicted narrative as a way of getting to a pre-existing entity, according to current perceptions narratives do not mirror that seeming entity but construct it. Instead of a real, essential and objective reality reflected in narratives, it proposes a subjective and relativist reality, largely invented by narratives. By telling stories we impart meaning to ourselves and the world (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988) and form our personal identities (McAdams, 1993). Through the stories common to the groups we belong to we create our familial, organizational, community and national identities. Our culture’s “grand stories” teach us what “worthy” life is, what we should aspire to and what we should avoid, what is good and what is evil, what is forbidden and what is permitted.

This conceptualization confers upon narratives enormous power to shape reality. If we narrate ourselves as active agents, we will conduct ourselves in the “real world” very differently than if we base our life stories on victimhood. An example at a societal level might be the negative meanings of old age in Western key-plots, which actually limit the possibilities open to the elderly and cast a shadow over their self-images (Spector-Mersel, 2006). The current view, then, complicates the relations between life history — the factual events that comprises the chronicle of our lives, and life story — the way we represent our past in a narrative (Rosenthal, 2004). These relations are no longer seen to be direct but rather as complex, dynamic and mutually influential. In Spence’s terms (1982), “narrative truth” and “historical truth” are not identical; the first expresses the second partially, but also recreates it again and again.

Thus, albeit “factist” approaches are still found in narrative scholarship, a major theoretical move has occurred. As a result of broader theoretical developments in the social sciences and due to technological innovations that enable recording of the language, performance and context of narratives (Bamberg, 2008), “narratives could begin to morph slowly from their treatment as texts that re-present the meanings as encoded, preserved, and transmitted in these texts to processes within which these meanings were locally, situationally, and contextually ‘under construction’ ” (p.183–4).

The narrative paradigm as an interpretive-qualitative paradigm

In light of the above I wish to argue that the narrative approach, as crystallized during the last decades, is far beyond “a subtype of qualitative inquiry” (Chase, 2005,
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p. 651). Nor can it be limited to a methodology, as implied by Denzin and Lincoln's decision (2005b) to place the chapter “Narrative Inquiry” in the section “Methods of Collecting and Analyzing Empirical Materials” in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, or by the subtitle of the first *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry* (Clandinin, 2007a): *Mapping a Methodology*. The narrative approach entails a distinct type of research, but over and above that it comprises a clear vision of the social world and the way we think, feel and conduct ourselves in it. At the present stage of its development, the narrative approach forms nothing less than a paradigm.

A paradigm, according to Guba and Lincoln, “…may be viewed as a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the ‘world,’ the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts…” (1994, p. 107, emphasis in the original). Specifically, paradigms “… combine beliefs about ontology (What kind of being is the human being? What is the nature of reality?), epistemology (What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?), and methodology (How do we know the world or gain knowledge of it?)” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a, p. 22; see also Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I suggest that the extensive writings on narrative theory, methodology and practice clearly conform to this definition.

Before indicating the pillars of the narrative paradigm, it is important to recognize it as one of the nonpositivist paradigms of qualitative research. In the recent edition of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Denzin and Lincoln (2005a), offer a generic definition of qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world… qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). In its broader definition qualitative research embraces positivist and postpositivist paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 2005); yet most qualitative researchers rely on nonpositivist paradigms, i.e., postmodern and interpretive ones. In contrast to the positivist and postpositivist paradigms which posit a single, objective and uniform reality, interpretive paradigms suggest a multifaceted reality, exchanging the positivist desire to create a “true”, neutral and unbiased picture of the “actual” reality for an emphasis on the subjective component inherent in the study of social reality. This difference informs the aims of the research: positivist and postpositivist studies attempt to formulate rules beyond time and place in order to control and predict, whilst interpretive researches focus on the particular, seeking to expand the understanding of a phenomenon through the individual case. The difference between interpretive and positivist/postpositivist paradigms, then, lies not in methodology — for the first may employ quantitative techniques and the latter may use qualitative tools — but rather in philosophy. The interpretive paradigms challenge the positivist ontology and
epistemology, proposing a different conception of the research aim, the positions of the researcher and the participants and the nature of the findings.

In no way, however, do interpretive studies comprise a monolithic group. While in the eighties the main discourse confronted the two opposing paradigms — positivist/postpositivist (termed also quantitative, empiricist, realist) versus interpretive (qualitative, naturalistic, relativistic) (e.g., Smith, 1989), the nineties instigated a more differentiated debate. Current discourse depicts interpretive studies as a broad category that embraces various paradigms and approaches (which are not as clearly formulated as paradigms), different in methodology and conceptions of reality, human nature and research aim. Interestingly, the list of the interpretive paradigms in the Handbook of Qualitative Research changes from edition to edition, even from chapter to chapter in the same edition. In the introduction of the first edition Denzin and Lincoln (1994) identify five nonpositivist paradigms: constructivist, feminist, ethnic, Marxist, and cultural studies, and in introducing the most recent edition (2005a) they add queer theory. However, in the preface to the second section of the latest edition they note only two nonpositivist paradigms — constructivist and participatory — and mention the approaches of feminism, critical race theory, queer theory and cultural studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b, p. 183). In the first edition of the handbook Guba and Lincoln (1994) identified two nonpositivist paradigms — critical theory and constructivism — whereas in the latest edition (2005) they add the participatory paradigm. Despite the differences between these central mappings, they all overlook narrative research, mentioning it neither as a paradigm nor even as an approach.

In my call to place the narrative paradigm side by side with other interpretive paradigms of qualitative research, I do not claim that it is opposed to them or even separate from them. As Guba and Lincoln (2005, p. 192) note, as “the various paradigms are beginning to ‘interbreed’… to argue that it is paradigms that are in contention is probably less useful than to probe where and how paradigms exhibit confluence and where and how they exhibit differences, controversies, and contradictions”. Indeed, in mapping the field of narrative inquiry Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) use both the terms borders and borderland spaces, aiming at elucidating what narrative inquiry and its three “philosophical neighbors” — postpositivism, Marxism and critical theory, poststructuralism — have in common and how they differ. In the same spirit, when presenting the narrative paradigm I will specify what I consider to be its uniqueness but also relate to points of contact between it and other interpretive paradigms.
The narrative paradigm: Six dimensions

When characterizing paradigms different dimensions are added to the three central ones: ontology, epistemology and methodology. As what follows is proffered as a base for subsequent debate, I chose to elaborate, in addition to those three, three dimensions that seem to me essential: inquiry aim, inquirer posture and participant/narrator posture. By relating to these six dimensions I wish to mark out the essence of the narrative paradigm but in no way to exhaust its discussion. A complete account requires attention to additional paradigmatic dimensions (see Guba & Lincoln, 2005), an impossible task within the limits of this article.

Ontology

The narrative paradigm draws on the constructivist paradigm, with its phenomenological and hermeneutic foundations, and the poststructuralist paradigm which conceives of social reality as constructed, fluid and multifaceted. But the narrative paradigm is more specific, in its focus on the storied nature of human conduct (Sarbin, 1986), maintaining that social reality is primarily a narrative reality. This does not mean that we invent stories ex nihilo, but as described earlier, that a mutual relationship exists between life and narrative. As Widdershoven (1993) elegantly puts it, “…life is both more and less than a story. It is more in that it is the basis of a variety of stories, and it is less in that it is unfinished and unclear as long as there are no stories told about it” (p. 19).

The narrative understanding emphasizes the central place of stories in our existence. Through narratives we gain a sense of continuity and identity (Alasuutari, 1997; McAdams, 1993), connect with others (Gergen & Gergen, 1988), learn our culture (Kenyon & Randall, 1997) and adjust our behaviors. Social reality is narrativistic at a collective level too: families live according to stories passed on from generation to generation, nations and religions shape their common identity through narratives, the media convey the world to us by means of stories. As Smith and Sparkes (2009, p. 3) summarize,

We live in, through, and out of narratives. They serve as an essential source of psycho-socio-cultural learning and shape who we are and might become. Thus, narratives are a portal through which a person enters the world; play a formative role in the development of the person; help guide action; and are a psycho-socio-cultural shared resource that constitutes and constructs human realities.

These various functions of the narrative are possible due to its holistic nature, that brings together different dimensions: cognition, emotion and motivation (Birren, 1996); uniqueness, culture and universality (Ruth & Kenyon, 1996); a dual
landscape of action and consciousness (Bruner, 1987); past, present and future (Freeman, 1993).

Epistemology

With regard to epistemology, too, the narrative paradigm shares underlying assumptions with the constructivist paradigm, maintaining that we understand ourselves and our world by way of interpretative processes that are subjective and culturally rooted. Thus, in the narrative paradigm, like the constructivist one, “the borders between ontology and epistemology become blurred: reality is shaped largely by the way in which we perceive it, know it, interpret it and respond to it” (Shlasky & Alpert, 2007, p. 43, translation mine). But how exactly do we shape reality? How do we interpret it? The narrative paradigm suggests a definite answer: through stories. Narrative is depicted as an “organizing principle” (Sarbin, 1986) of human experience and “narrative knowing” (Polkinghorne, 1988) is offered as one of the two primary modes of thought, alongside paradigmatic thought, relevant to social reality (Bruner, 1986). “Narrative intelligence” — the capacity both to formulate and to follow stories — is proposed as a primary intelligence that enables major processes integral to human existence (Randall, 1999).

Narrative epistemology has a clear conception of the circumstances in which our stories are produced. First, narratives are rooted in the narrator’s current situation. Stories of the past or the future are always told from the vantage point of the present. Second, long and detailed though it may be, no story can contain everything. Thus, every narrative is the result of conscious and unconscious selection from among a range of alternatives lying within our life history (Rosenthal, 2004). Third, narratives are rooted within three spheres of contexts: the immediate intersubjective relationships in which they are produced, the collective social field in which they evolved and the cultural meta-narratives that give meaning to any particular story (Zilber, Tuval-Mashiach, & Lieblich, 2008).

In light of this range of influences, it is evident that our stories are not our exclusive creations and we are only their “co-authors” (Ruth & Kenyon, 1996). We have a large degree of freedom in “writing” our stories, but this freedom is limited by the contexts in which we tell them, by the “honorable” stories prevailing in our society at a given time and by components of social structure such as age, gender, ethnicity, class, health, marital status and economic situation. Such a dual conception is expressed by Chase (2005), who states that narrative inquiry demonstrate[s] two things: (a) the creativity, complexity, and variability of individuals’ (or groups’) self and reality constructions and (b) the power of historical, social, cultural, organizational, discursive, interactional, and/or psychological
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...circumstances in shaping the range of possibilities for self and reality construction in any particular time and place (p. 671).

Methodology

Qualitative researchers employ an impressive range of (1) materials that serve as data; (2) methods of collecting or producing these materials; and (3) methods of analysis and interpretation. Narrative methodology differs from other qualitative methodologies mainly in the first and third aspects, although it has special characteristics in the second aspect too. As for the research data, conforming with narrative ontology and epistemology, narrative methodology focuses on stories. If social reality is a narrative reality, then narratives are the natural channel for studying it, on its many levels: personal (self-narratives), collective (narratives of groups, organizations, nations), cultural (“honorable” key-plots) and universal (e.g., cognitive processes). The data of any narrative research are, therefore, stories — written and oral, personal and collective, autobiographical “big” stories and “small stories”, as recently termed by Bamberg (2008) and Georgakopoulou (2006).

Some of the stories that we wish to examine have already been told, such as published autobiographies or historical texts, hence we need to locate the relevant stories according to the criteria set out. Nevertheless, many of the stories that interest us will be told only during research. Here we may distinguish between stories collected through observation and those produced during interview. In the first case the stories are told in the “natural” framework of the narrators’ lives and their direct audience is not the researcher, as exampled by Georgakopoulou’s (2007) study of three Greek women, based on audio-taped data that two of the participants recorded wearing audio-microphones. In contrast, in interviews — the most prevalent tool in narrative studies — the stories are created for the researcher; they are told to him or her and are influenced by the way the teller has understood the purpose of the study, by his or her aims in telling the story to the researcher and by their interpersonal interaction. When narratives are “collected”, the researcher influences them by her or his presence and by their “documentation” which involves selective aspects. But in interviews the researchers’ influence is much more prominent, for the data — the narratives — are embedded in the interaction.

The techniques through which narrative investigators collect or initiate the production of narrative data are taken from the familiar toolbox of qualitative research (observation, interview, focus group, archival examination etc.), yet in employing them they focus on stories. An ethnographer observes the totality of phenomena in the field — rituals, behavior, discourse and more — while a narrative researcher centers on the stories being told. An in-depth interview arising from the critical paradigm attempts to extract information on the dialectic
of power relations shaping the interviewee’s consciousness, while a narrative interviewer invites stories. For this reason narrative interviews often begin with an open, non-directing question (Tell me the story of your life; I’d like to hear how your career developed), encouraging the flow of a story and inviting a temporal account.

The manner in which the stories are interpreted is a crucial part of narrative methodology. Despite the differences among the various methods of analyzing narrative texts (see Riessman, 2008), two basic principles are widely accepted as characterizing narrative methodology: (a) Treating the story as an object for examination, not as a neutral pipeline for conducting knowledge that is “out there”, a concept that guided factist versions of narrative research. On the assumption that stories are the data, not a channel to the data, they cannot be treated like a transparent container and must be examined in themselves. Even studies interested in phenomena “beyond” the stories — culture, social structure etc. — need to take seriously the ways in which these are represented in the stories; (b) Following the narrative ontology that emphasizes the story’s holistic nature, narrative analysis is based on a holistic strategy in four major senses: (1) Adopting a multidimensional and interdisciplinary lens. Although researchers are generally interested in a specific dimension latent in the story — emotion, cognition, culture, gender, class — they need also relate to other dimensions and their mutual relationships; (2) Treating the story as a whole unit. In Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber’s terms (1998) this means a holistic analysis, as opposed to categorical analysis that isolates segments in the story, thus disassembling it. As Reissman (2008, p. 12) notes, treating narrative accounts as units rather than fragmenting them into categories, is probably the most fundamental distinction between narrative analysis and other forms of qualitative analysis. The holistic analysis is stressed by others too, such as Chase (2005, p. 663) who suggests identifying each story’s “narrative strategy”; (3) Regard for form and content. Although some methods of interpretation focus exclusively on either dimension, it is largely accepted that their combination yields a deeper understanding of the story and thus is recommended by central researchers (Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman & Quinney, 2005); (4) Attention to contexts. Narrative epistemology stresses that “stories don’t fall from the sky… they are composed and received in contexts” (Riessman, 2008, p. 105). Thus, considering how these various contexts have influenced the narrative is an essential component of narrative analysis.

These methodological principles make narrative methodology unique, corresponding to Atkinson and Delmont’s request (2006) to “rescue” narratives from many applications in qualitative research, stressing the need to adopt an analytic, rather than celebratory, stance.
Inquiry aim

The aims of narrative inquiries range from psychological questions focusing on internal, emotional or cognitive processes on the one hand, to sociological, anthropological and historical questions on the other. In between are questions focusing on linguistic and interpersonal processes, which examine narrative as a means of communication. Many researchers wish to learn about the ways individuals and groups shape their identities through stories. Some aim to expand understanding of individuals’ identities: they scrutinize self-narratives, particularly life stories, under the assumption that these express the narrators’ selves, fully or in part (e.g. Alasuutari, 1997; McAdams, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1991). Researchers often focus on the narrative identities of people who have experienced special circumstances, such as immigration (Sabar-Ben Yehoshua, 2000), illness (Kleinman, 1988) and life in a nursing home (Gubrium, 1993). Others wish to understand identity at the macro level, thus they examine collective narratives displayed in documents, books, media, etc. This is demonstrated by Morris’ work (2008) on the “Zionist narrative” and Czarniawska’s study of organizations (2004). Often these researchers rely on self-narratives too, in the belief that “understanding general social processes requires a focus on their embodiment in actual practices, that is, in actual narratives” (Chase, 1995, p. 20, emphasis in the original) of individuals.

In light of the holistic narrative ontology that emphasizes reciprocal relationships between individual, society and culture, many narrative studies coalesce the personal prism with the sociological-anthropological prism which examines the socio-cultural environments that shape narrative identities. In studying the life stories of senior army officers of the Israeli founding generation, I investigated the narrative strategies which allowed them to preserve respectable and continuous identities in their advanced years, but also aimed at understanding the cultural meanings of Israeli old age (Spector-Mersel, 2008). In analyzing the stories of Israeli backpackers, Noy (2007) wished to learn about backpackers’ identities but importantly, also to shed light on current conceptions of hegemonic Israeli masculinity.

While some narrative researchers endeavor for a sounder understanding of the phenomenon they study, others take a further step by striving for personal, social or political change. In Josselson’s terms (2004), the former aim at “decoding” their participants’ texts in order to analyze unconscious or socially constructed processes, while the latter seek to “give voice” to their participants. Indeed, the question whether narrative inquiry “is descriptive or interventionist; that is, does… [it] set out to change the world… or is it a more descriptive kind of inquiry” (Clandinin, 2007b, p. xv), is a pressing debate among narrative researchers.
The “interventionist” stance highlights the postmodern foundations of the narrative paradigm. According to Guba and Lincoln (2005), “The mandate for social action, especially action designed and created by and for research participants with the aid and cooperation of researchers, can be most sharply delineated between positivist/postpositivist and new-paradigm inquirers” (p. 201). The first group sees action as a matter for policy makers, legislators, public servants and politicians, maintaining that it damages the objectivity of the inquiry, while researchers working from interpretive paradigms wish to advance their participants’ quality of life. This effort takes different forms in narrative inquiry. For some researchers the very narration of significant life events encourages positive change in the participants, whereas others emphasize the participants’ desire that others hear their stories, thus seeking to “give voice” to marginal populations by publishing the narratives told in research (Chase, 2005). A third group of “interventionists” comprises researchers who endeavor to develop practices based on narratives as a tool in improving teaching, advising or mental treatment, as demonstrated by the uses of stories in therapeutic settings (Angus & McLeod, 2004; Lieblich, McAdams, & Josselson, 2004; White & Epston, 1990).

Inquirer posture

In contrast to the positivist premise, that it is possible and imperative to distinguish between the known and the knower, between reality “as it is” and the researcher “discovering” it, the narrative paradigm, like other interpretive paradigms, maintains that researchers and the phenomena they study are inseparable. As mentioned, the reality being studied is often created only during the inquiry. This is most prominent when the research data are stories told to the researcher: Those stories were not previously there; they were created for him or her, in his or her presence and under his or her direct and indirect influence. This influence is unavoidable even when the researcher invites the interviewee openly to tell a story with no apparent direction or intervention, for his or her external characteristics and visible social ascriptions (age, sex, ethnicity) inevitably influence the narrator’s selection. The very fact that the story is being told in a research setting also bears an influence. When stories are collected through observation researchers still influence them, by their mere presence. Thus, often the data of narrative research is not “clean”, in the sense that it is exclusively the narrators’ creation. Rather, it is the co-construction of two (or more) persons.5

The inability to separate the researcher and the phenomenon under study is further marked at the stage of interpretation. While positivism conceives of the researcher as being neutral, free of values and “biases”, the narrative paradigm emphasizes that the researcher reads the stories through a prism of values, images,
stereotypes, inclinations and personality traits. Thus, the research report is always a partial version of the reality. Just like the participants, the researcher tells stories. The researcher’s narrative is not more correct or true than the participants’ or alternative interpretive narratives. As Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) emphasize, “… narrative inquirers recognize the tentative and variable nature of knowledge. They accept and value the way in which narrative inquiry allows wondering, tentativeness, and alternative views to exist…” (p. 25).

This pluralist position, which does not regard the researcher as the exclusive owner of truth but as contributing to the understanding of a kaleidoscopic reality, is related to the issue of control (see next section) and projects onto the way narrative studies are written. Like most qualitative researchers, narrative investigators are present in their texts; not only by writing in the first person and expressing their personal subjective voice, but also by a deliberate reflection on the ways in which they influenced the participants’ stories and their interpretation. Within this basic stance, Chase (2005) distinguishes between three “voices” of the narrative researcher: the authoritative voice is separated from the narrators’ voices proposing an interpretation of their narratives; the supportive voice presents the narrators’ voices as central in the text; and the interactive voice aims at expressing the mutual influence between the researcher’s and the narrators’ voices, focusing on the researcher’s interpretations and personal experiences.

**Participant/narrator posture**

Thus far it is clear that participants — narrators — stand at the center of narrative studies; not as informants, as seen in some qualitative traditions, but as active agents, inseparable from the phenomenon under inquiry. This conception is related to the issue of control, described by Guba and Lincoln (2005) as the major bone of contention between research paradigms. Questions like who initiates the inquiry, who defines what findings are, how the data will be collected and represented — have different answers in the conventional paradigms and the new ones. The positivist view grants the researcher exclusive control over all these junctions while postmodern researchers, and narrative researchers among them, cultivate democratic relationships with their participants and share control over the various aspects of the inquiry with them.

Shared control between researcher and participants is particularly marked in writing the final research report. Most narrative researchers inform their participants of their reports’ drafts, asking for their agreement and often for their comments. The reports’ contents, in emphasizing the voice of the narrators or that of the researcher, are also important. Some investigators base their reports on the participants’ stories. This kind of writing — the inductive mode (Connelly
& Clandinin, 1990) — is demonstrated by Bateson’s (1989) *Composing a life* that presents the life stories of several women. In other studies the researchers add their own voices in order to locate the participants’ narratives within contexts of society, culture and psychology, thus enriching their understanding. In Chase’s typology mentioned above this is the researcher’s *authoritative voice*, and in Connely and Clandinin’s terms (1990), the *demonstration mode*. One way or another, it is widely agreed that in every report of a narrative research the narrators’ voices should be heard clearly, mainly by way of extensive quotations of their own words (Riessman & Speedy, 2007).

### The narrative paradigm: Why does it matter?

To concluding the paper it should be asked: why is acknowledging the narrative paradigm important? The simplest answer would be: because it exists. That narrative inquiry comes out “of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p.477), thoroughly connecting ontology, epistemology and methodology, is widely accepted among narrative scholars. However, puzzlingly, this premise is not translated into a paradigmatic claim, thus the emphasis given in the literature on the unique philosophical infrastructure of narrative research stands in sharp discrepancy to the meager use of paradigmatic language. A central instance is the *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry* (Clandinin, 2007a), in which the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of narrative research are a principal motif; still the central terms throughout the chapters are narrative *inquiry* and *methodology*. From a perspective sensitive to *how* things are said alongside to *what* is being said, we can not discount the gap between the content, which points to a paradigm, and the form, namely the titles that often reduce narrative research to a set of strategies and tools for inquiry.

Recognizing the narrative paradigm is, however, significant far beyond language. First and foremost it may be useful in the face of the variety found in narrative studies. Contemporary narrative research is an extremely diverse field, arising from various origins (Hyvärinen, 2006) and developed in multifold directions, disciplines and practices. Various distinctions have been offered in attempting to map this diversity: Chase (2005) identifies five central approaches rooted in different disciplines; Bamberg (2007) distinguishes between the *person* or *subjectivity-centered* and the *social* or *plot* orientations; Freeman (2003) differentiates between *expressivist* researchers, interested in the “aboutness” of the narrative, and *productivists*, “who look toward the specific ways in which people talk about experience and the specific situations within which this talk takes place” (p.335); and
Georgakopoulou (2006) relates to this division by distinguishing between narrative inquiry scholars and narrative analysts. More specific distinctions have been also suggested, especially regarding narrative psychology (e.g., Smith & Sparkes, 2008).

Although the differences between narrative studies should not obscure the common ground existing among them (Freeman, 2003), this often seems to be the case. Emphasizing diversity as the hallmark of narrative studies (Mishler, 2006) and the efforts devoted to analytically map it, might even evoke doubt whether a “narrative approach” still exists as a distinct mode of inquiry (M. Bamberg, personal communication, May 14, 2009). The vagueness around the core of narrative research is further intensified in light of its popularization. Like the term narrative itself (Riessman & Quinney, 2005), narrative inquiry seems to have lost specificity with popularization. Reviewing narrative literature in social work, Riessman and Quinney (2005) found that writers often “said they applied ‘narrative analysis,’ but on closer inspection findings were constructed by inductive thematic coding”. They conclude that “appropriating the terminology of narrative… appears to be on the rise among those doing forms of grounded theory research” (p. 397). This impression was confirmed when the scope of the review expanded to include articles in counseling and psychotherapy. Here too, “many investigators adopted reductionistic techniques, in what became a kind of statistics of qualitative research” (Riessman & Speedy, 2007, p. 435. emphasis in the original). In addition to the “…tendency for researchers to claim glibly to be working with narratives” (Smith & Sparkes, 2009, p. 2), the blurred conception of narrative inquiry runs the risk of encouraging low quality research. This is particularly so because of the appeal and sense of comfort ascribed to narrative inquiry, sometimes resulting in it been seen as an easy kind of research, disregarding its complexities (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007).

Considering the drawbacks resultant from the dramatic expansion of the narrative idea and research, and the literature’s emphasis on diversity, a complementary debate should be initiated that focuses on the core of narrative inquiry. Just as “for narrative to have conceptual and analytical force, and lest it be misunderstood as to mean anything and everything, a working definition is required” (Smith & Sparkes, 2009, p. 2), it seems to me indispensable to specify what narrative inquiry means, rather than only recognizing that it means many things. In the same way that limiting the total openness of “narrative” is necessary to “defend the term against being emptied of all semantic content” (Rimmon-Kenan, 2006, p. 17), dispersing the fogginess of what constitutes narrative inquiry is required in order to defend it from being emptied from essence.

The narrative paradigm is suggested as a possible reference point for this urgently needed dialogue. In my own view, it constitutes the core of narrative inquiry, asserting it to be far beyond a method of collecting and analyzing data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b). Narrative inquiry certainly includes methods, but these
emerge from a well-established theoretical framework. Considering the narrative paradigm as the essence of narrative inquiry conceives the latter as a full-fledged research world view that closely binds up the “hows” of investigation (methodology) to the “whats” and “whys” (ontology and epistemology). It also implies that definitions of the field that focus on the type of data — stories — as the principal or sole criterion (e.g., Josselson & Lieblich, 2001; Lieblich et al., 1998), might be overly broad. Like Smith and Sparkes (2009), I deem that “for narrative inquiry to flourish… it is vital that a theoretical grounding…. is laid out and made available” (p. 1). This “theoretical grounding”, however, is not limited to the general philosophy of the interpretive paradigms, as emerges, for instance, from Pinnegar and Daynes’ (2007) identification of four turns in the transition to narrative inquiry, that apparently characterize the broad transition from positivist to postmodern paradigms. As stressed throughout the paper, the narrative paradigm draws from other interpretive paradigms but also embraces a unique vision of reality and of human beings.

In this respect, recognizing the narrative paradigm may contribute to a clearer dialogue not only among narrative scholars but also between them and adherents of other research paradigms, consequently enhancing the “paradigm dialog” needed in light of the contemporary challenges posed to qualitative research (Denzin, 2008). In a different vein, outlining the narrative paradigm might help to restrain “narrative imperialism”: the expansionist “impulse by students of narrative to claim more and more territory… [which] can stretch the concept of narrative to the point that we lose sight of what is distinctive about it” (Phelan, 2005, p. 206). This is so, for discussing the narrative paradigm distills not only what narrative research is but also what it is not; hence when and where other research paradigms may fit better.

Though in my view narrative inquiry and narrative paradigm basically overlap, other visions may stress the distance between them, conceiving the first as a much broader landscape than indicated by the latter. Rather than demarcating the borders of narrative inquiry, my main purpose in this paper was instigating dialogue on what may constitute its core. Hopefully, the suggested discussion will serve as a point of departure for further conversation among scholars, narrative and others.

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Notes

1. Whilst some scholars distinguish between narrative and story (e.g., Smith & Sparkes, 2009), the terms are commonly used interchangeably in the social sciences (Riessman, 2008), as I do in this article.

2. Although every paradigm is “an interpretative framework” (Denzin & Lincoln 2005a, p. 22), the term “interpretive” commonly refers to nonpositivist paradigms.

3. For example, several dimensions employed by Guba and Lincoln (1994, 2005) to characterize paradigms change in different editions of the Handbook of Qualitative Research.

4. These parameters are also adopted by Shlasky and Alpert (2007) in defining paradigms. All except the last are discussed in Guba and Lincoln’s classic chapters on paradigms (1994, 2005).

5. Obviously, these influences of the researcher do not exist when dealing with already told stories, such as autobiographies written prior to the study.

6. See especially the chapter that maps the field in comparison to its philosophical “neighbors” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007) and the final chapter in which three major narrative scholars — Amia Lieblich, Don Polkinghorne and Elliot Mishler — emphasize the philosophical uniqueness of narrative research (Clandinin & Murphy, 2007).

References


