

## **An Analysis of Analyses: Options for Narrative Analysis**

Narratives are stories that individuals use to recount events, share information, knowledge, experiences and emotions with others (OED, 2013). Barthes and Duisit (1975, pp. 237) consider them to be the most powerful tools available to people for ordering and sharing the human experience; for Barthes, narratives are a key part of what it means to be human. Although in the first chapter of her book, Riessman (2008, pp. 3) cautions readers not to expect a simple, all-encompassing definition of what makes a narrative, narratives do share these common traits which allow them to be, if not defined, then at least identified as such.

Narrative analysis rests on the epistemological belief that people acquire and share their understanding of experiences through the use of story-based structures (Bell, 2002, pp. 207). By analysing the stories that people tell, narrative researchers endeavour to unpick what was said (and how it was said) in order to gain a sense of underpinning meaning from the perspective of the narrator. However, narratives are not constructed by individuals in isolation, but are influenced by social, cultural and historical factors, as well as the relationship between the narrator and their audience (Pavlenko, 2002, pp. 214). This means that within any narrative, personal elements contained within the structure and content will be combined with and shaped by other contextualising information, adding to the richness and complexity of the story and its meaning (Gee, 2005, pp. 57). The shared narrative is merely the surface layer of a more complex and hidden story, which can be discovered and understood by the application of the appropriate analytical tool (Bell, 2002, pp. 209-210).

There are a number of allied but differing approaches by which narratives can be explored and interpreted (Riessman (2005, pp. 1) refers to these approaches as a 'family'), based on either their structure or their content, or both. This paper seeks to compare and critique the relative effectiveness of several key analytical approaches, focusing predominately on the four broad categories of thematic, structural, discourse and genre. However, brief mention will also be made of two other methodological groups identified by Riessman (2005, pp. 2-5) - interactional and performative. These additional approaches are included as they contain important elements that may be incorporated into other methodologies, namely the concept of narrative co-construction and non-verbal gestures/body language.

### Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is one of the most commonly used forms of narrative analysis (Greg, 2012, pp. 11). Thematic analysis is a form of content analysis that applies careful attention to what is said, rather than how things are said (Riessman, 2005, pp. 2). It focuses on identifying and recording patterns, themes or key words within the narrative, and these themes become the categories for subsequent analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006, pp. 82-83). However, there is a degree of conflict that arises from the application of a thematic approach to the analysis of a narrative. Although the identification of themes can be a valuable way in which to evaluate the 'gist' of what is being said, thematic analysis is by its very nature a disaggregating approach (Ezzy, 2002, pp. 95), seeking to break down the narrative into the essence of its content. Riessman (2005, pp. 2) considers thematic analysis to be a valuable tool for generating theory across several narratives in search of elements that might shed light on shared experiences or perspectives. However, within a single narrative, thematic analysis is somewhat limiting, enabling the categorisation of narrative elements in a very efficient but unidimensional manner, focusing on *what* is said but ignoring *how* these things are said, sidestepping the subtleties of meaning contained within the narratives structure. Even in situations

where thematic analysis is used to compare several narratives, there is often the assumption that each narrative that falls within a particular thematic category is actually trying to say the same thing, thus justifying the comparison (Riessman, 2005, pp.3). This best-fit approach may be useful in obtaining a general understanding of a shared experience but risks lacking the sensitivity to be able to draw out differences in meaning and understanding between narratives. As a result, Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 27) argue that thematic analysis has limited interpretive value if not anchored to an existing theoretical framework.

### Structural analysis

While thematic analysis focuses on the content of a narrative, structural analysis emphasises what Barthes and Duisit (1975, pp. 238) refer to as the ‘code’ hidden within the narrative structure. The most famous form of structural analysis was developed by the American linguist William Labov, although several other forms of structural analysis are in use.

Labovian analysis is text focused and designed to evaluate narratives containing two (or more) temporally ordered clauses (Labov, 1972, pp. 360). It focuses on the distribution of narrative elements, or ‘clauses’, across six categories within a clearly defined structural model. The model seeks to discover meaning within a narrative through a combination of what is said (narrative content) and how the narrative elements are structured (narrative structure) (Patterson, 2008, pp. 22-23). Labov’s categories are outlined by Elliot (2005, pp. 42-43) as ‘*abstract*’ (a summary of the narrative to follow), ‘*orientation*’ (setting the scene in which the narrative occurs), ‘*complicating action*’ (events recounted during the narrative), ‘*evaluation*’ (the meaning of these events to the narrator), ‘*resolution*’ (how the sequence of events ended), and finally ‘*coda*’ (returns the narrator to the present).

Patterson (2008, pp. 28-29) highlights several advantages to the Labovian approach. Firstly, the method is effective in helping to draw out narratives from within a longer transcript through the identification of clause types as narrative markers. Additionally, the fixed categorisation approach utilised by Labov allows a degree of standardisation of, and therefore comparison between, different narratives, as each is broken down into the six Labovian clause types. Coding also allows the consideration and evaluation of narrator perspective, particularly useful when considering the impact of an event or experience from a number of different viewpoints. This makes the approach particularly suitable to event-narrative research around highly emotive or subjective topics – Labov himself modified the process in 1982 to look specifically at violence (danger of death) narratives (Labov, 1982, pp. 354).

However, while Labovian analysis may offer several distinct advantages over a purely thematic approach, it does have a number of weaknesses and limitations. Mishler (1995, in Patterson, 2008, pp. 30) highlights that the Labovian approach represents the referential clauses of the narrative always as things that actually occurred, taking no account of the potential for narrator construction; in a ‘*this happened* (referential) and *I feel this way about it* (evaluative)’ situation, the referential is not questioned. Further, where the Labovian approach categorises particular types of clause as referential (e.g. orientation or complicating action), and others as evaluative (e.g. evaluation or resolution), this distinction may not be accurate. Labov (1971, pp. 371) himself concedes that the referential clauses of a narrative may be just as much about evaluation as the evaluative clauses, being shared retrospectively as part of a completed narrative in order to drive home the narrators key point. The rigid structure underpinning the Labovian approach is ill-suited to make this distinction, and therefore to profit from it.

An additional concern regarding the use of Labovian analysis is that it was developed in the United States to analyse English language text and so the approach should therefore be treated with the greatest of caution outside this validated demographic. Ferns (2011) highlights concerns regarding the validity of this instrument, even in circumstances when the narrative is provided in English, but where English is not the first language of the narrator. This fragility, firmly embedded within the approach, renders the Labovian system vulnerable to an array of possible differences in narrative construction in the world at large. There have been additional criticisms of sufficient differences in narrative construction, both between distinct social groups of native English speakers (Patterson, 2008, pp. 30) and between genders within the same group (Langellier and Peterson, 1992, pp. 157) to have the potential to negatively affect the outcome of Labovian analysis. Finally, Labovian analysis, while considering both the content and the structure of narrative text, ignores many of the subtleties of spoken language. The meaning of words, and of entire clauses, can be changed by altering the intonation of how these words are spoken. By ignoring this element of the spoken narrative, the Labovian approach runs the risk of misinterpreting the narrative, leading to an incorrect analysis.

While still being firmly structural, the work of James Gee has gone some way towards including intimated but unarticulated narrative elements, such as changes in pitch or the stressing of particular words within a clause (Patterson, 2008, pp. 34-36). For Gee, the structure of a narrative is not determined, as it is for Labov, by the temporal categorisation of particular functional clauses, identified and then boxed as a '*complicating action*' or an '*evaluation*'. Instead, Gee's approach is to pay particular attention to the first-hand audio recording of the narrative in order to identify separate '*stanzas*' according to their spoken linguistic qualities (Riessman, 2005, pp. 3-4). In this way, those who employ Gee's methods are able to apply them to a broader range of narrative types beyond the intrinsically linear, temporally ordered narratives required by Labov. However, as with Labov's approach, Gee's work was based on narratives drawn from the United States and so the use of the method outside of this context may be of questionable validity.

Although the structural approach in general, and Gee's method in particular, may be a more complete approach to the analysis of narratives than thematic analysis alone, it is not perfect. Riessman (2005, pp. 4) highlights the fact that structural analysis can be a very slow process and unsuitable for the analysis of large volumes of text or spoken narrative. There is also the risk that excessive focus on the structural (at the cost of the thematic) may decontextualize the narrative (Riessman, 2005, pp. 4).

### Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis concerns itself with the interpretation of narratives presented across a variety of media forms (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984, in Potter and Wetherall, 1987, pp. 7), sometimes even making use of Gee's stanza approach to include the analysis of non-textual linguistic indicators (Elliott, 2005, pp. 54-56). However, unlike standard thematic or structural approaches, discourse analysis seeks to reveal the socio-psychological characteristics of the narrator rather than simply the story that they are trying to tell (Mills, 1997, pp. 8-9). According to Fairclough (2003, pp. 42), discourse analysis tries to make explicit the implicit rules and norms that underpin everyday life, on the basis that all societies are laden with a range of discourses that direct individuals to behave in particular ways. These discourses bind people together (in both positive and negative ways), encouraging the development of shared cognitions and ideologies as language is 'performed' (Potter and Wetherall, 1987, pp. 8). Additionally, as discourses bind individuals, they themselves are also bound to, and informed

by, other current and historical discourses that work together to co-construct ideologies and beliefs (Potter and Wetherall, 1987, pp. 181-182). A procedure for conducting discourse analysis is provided by Potter and Wetherall (1987, pp. 160-176), consisting of ten steps. Although the process of conducting discourse analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, the analysis itself involves a deep and detailed reading of the narrative text in order to identify and 'repair' discourses fractured within the narrative (*ibid*).

There are several approaches to discourse analysis, each exploring narratives from a slightly different perspective. However, each of these originally stems from the ideas expressed by Foucault in his noted 1969 work '*L'Archéologie du savoir*', translated into English in 1972. In this, Foucault discusses how discourses are formed, evolve and are regulated within society, demonstrating their importance to the way in which individuals think and behave (Foucault, 1972, pp. 34-43). While all forms of discourse analysis are concerned with these relationships, critical discourse analysis has emerged as a distinct method by which important issues of power relationships can be uncovered. This approach is underpinned by the idea that those with power create dominant discourses that influence or subjugate the less empowered and these discourses can be explored and understood through the analysis of narratives (Mills, 1997, pp.17). For example, within a hospital setting, discourses constructed and maintained by doctors with regard to their professional status may dominate the discourses of nursing staff in relation to their own role and status, institutionalising power inequity.

Due to its socio-psychological focus, discourse analysis may tell the analyst less about what the narrator is actually *trying to say* than other forms of narrative analysis. However, where the approach excels is in helping to explain the role of the narrator within the wider societal discourses that influence their own story (Potter and Wetherall, 1987, pp. 6). The value here is that the narrator does not need to be explicit about these discourses, and perhaps they are not even overtly aware of their existence. None-the-less, as language is both "constructed and constructive" (Potter and Wetherall, 1987, pp. 36) these discourses emerge from the narrative during analysis, shedding light on their wider psycho-social world.

### Genre analysis

Genre analysis is an approach to narrative analysis originally devised by Frank (1995, pp. 75-136) as a way to connect peoples stories to archetypal literary genres, such as restitution, chaos or quest. By doing this, Frank considers it possible to be able to identify and explore meaning in relation to the social and cultural context from which the narrator derives, and so understand the overarching theme of their story. Jordens and Little (2004, pp. 1636) explain that no social situation is really unique and that similar kinds of things happen to people all the time, eventually becoming institutionalised and recognised as genres. In genre analysis, the words themselves are less important than the text that they construct, and the genre that this text in turn reveals. Peter Campbell's mental health testimony, discussed above as part of Labovian analysis, was also analysed from the perspective of genre. Originally, the literary genres of philosophical (Lavery, 2007, pp. 171-189) and paranoid (Flieger, 1997, pp. 87-109) were suggested. However, Frank's original chaos genre, in which only immediacy matters (Frank, 1995, pp. 98), fits the narrative well as Campbell relates the day to day uncertainties of his confinement.

Plum (2004, pp. 263) provides a slightly different take on the work of Frank by identifying five types of story genre that he identifies as recount, narrative (a slightly different use of the term here), exemplum, anecdote and observation. Each of these genres exists for a different purpose

and the identification of the genre being used within a narrative provides context to its meaning and purpose. While genre analysis may be an effective way to rapidly evaluate a body of text, highlighting not only what is being said but also its purpose, it lacks some of the sensitivity to content provided by structural approaches, such as Labovian analysis, as well as the ability to pick up on wider discourses as effectively as formal discourse analysis.

### Interactional and performance analysis

Riessman (2005, pp. 4-5) includes two further categories of narrative analysis which bear mentioning. Interactional analysis (in her later work, Riessman (2008, pp. 105) reclassifies interactional analysis as dialogic analysis) is concerned with how dialogue between the narrator and their audience works to shape and direct the narrative – a process Riessman (2005, pp. 4) describes as ‘*co-construction*’. The approach retains an interest in the thematic and/or structural content of the narrative but is also concerned with its dynamic evolution as all parties work to collectively generate meaning. Possibly the most frequently used form of interactional analysis is conversation analysis (Bryman, 2008, pp. 495-6), an approach that pays careful attention to how talk is structured and forged within the context of its performance between individuals. Although later included with dialogic analysis by Riessman (2008, pp. 105-140), performance analysis primarily considers the physical elements of performance that often underpin the sharing of narratives – the facial expressions, hand gestures and body language. In the same way as old silent movies, or the actions of a mime, are able to transmit narrative content, the inclusion of the physical alongside the linguistic can add much to any attempt to understand meaning (Riessman 2005, pp. 5). By considering these unspoken but important elements of communication, performance analysis does for observed narrative performances what the Gee’s stanza approach does for audio recorded narratives, helping analysts to evaluate much more of what the narrator is actually *trying to say*.

### Conclusion

Narrative analysis is a diverse topic, incorporating a wide variety of tools and approaches designed to extract meaning from stories and their telling. Although the range of methods for analysis are diverse, no approach is necessarily superior to the next; in all cases the methods adopted by researchers will very much depend on the type of narrative being analysed, the volume of material under analysis, and the medium by which the narrative is shared (written, audio recording, live performance etc.). Thematic analysis is efficient and allows for the rapid evaluation of the thrust of what narrators are trying to share. Structural analysis is typically slower and more time consuming but helps to draw out narrative elements hidden within the structure of the text (or the audio, in the case of Gee). Discourse analysis allows the exploration of wider societal discourses from individual narratives, something that the other approaches discussed here do not, although this external focus may come at some cost to the individual narrative. Finally, genre analysis is an excellent way to explore the ‘flavour’ of a narrative and to understand its intended function within the context of an institutionalised genre as a frame of reference. However, as with thematic approaches, there is the risk that many of the subtleties of intended (or even unintended) meaning may be lost through the simple categorisation of the story by genre. Interactional and performance approaches provide additional ways in which to explore and analyse narratives. The former acknowledges that in certain circumstances dialogue co-constructs meaning, and the latter that the visual unspoken aspect of communication may also hold significant narrative content.

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