Narrative and Identity

Edited by Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh

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Volume 1

Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture
Edited by Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh
Narrative and Identity
Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh

Narrative and identity: The conference and charge

The starting point of this book was a conference on narrative and identity that took place at the International Research Center for Cultural Studies (IFK) in Vienna, in December of 1995. Scholars from psychology, philosophy, social sciences, literary theory, classics, psychiatry, communication, and film theory gathered to explore, from the vantage points of their disciplines and their individual work, the importance of narrative as an expressive embodiment of our experience, as a mode of communication, and as a form for understanding the world and ultimately ourselves.

Indeed, a central issue around which almost all presentations and discussions revolved was the question how we construct what we call our lives, and how we create ourselves in the process. The question of what type of construction this is proved, thus, to be intermingled with the question of what type of self is being created in this construction. The various approaches to these questions and to possible answers outlined at the conference and in this book focus on the process of autobiographical identity construction. What all of them highlight is that this construction of self and life worlds draws on a particular genre of language usage: narration.

Not many questions in Western literature and thought have a longer, deeper, and livelier intellectual history than how we give meaning to our lives — and how, in doing so, we construct our selves as *Gestalten* in time, as personal and cultural beings. But this question is newly alive today, for modern scholarship in various disciplines has brought new challenging perspectives to our understanding of human identity construction. These are the perspectives of narrative study. In dealing with them, the Viennese conference addressed a number of new (and old) problems that, we believed, deserve not only more attention but
also continual reflection, study, and discussion. In fact, the Conference initiated such reflection, study, and discussion among its participants, and we are pleased to present with this publication some of the outcomes.

As a result of the Conference and its subsequent discussions, almost all papers collected here underwent far-ranging elaborations. Also, we have decided to include a difficult-to-find essay by Jerome Bruner, which formed the basis for his Conference talk. Bruner’s essay has become a point of reference in many discussions included here and elsewhere. Further, two additional chapters (each jointly written by two Conference participants) have been added, as well as two invited chapters by Kristin Langellier and Jerome Sehulster. Both scholars present results of extensive case studies that shed new light on the relationship between narrative and the emotive and evaluative dimension of identity construction, an interplay that, as we will see, proves to be of central importance for what is at stake here.

Worlds in narrative

The notions of identity and narrative stand for two large areas of intellectual problems that have been studied in a variety of disciplines and from diverse theoretical points of view. Oddly enough, given the long tradition of these studies, there have been few and rather accidental connections between the areas of inquiry concerned with either identity or narrative. Consider, for example, psychology, on the one hand, and literature and literary theory, on the other hand. While the psychological investigation of human nature has claimed a particular competence for subject matters like memory, mind, and the self, countless texts of literature and literary criticism have been exploring the linguistic nature of the same aspects of human existence. In doing so, however, both approaches have almost entirely ignored each other. And that is no wonder, as literary critic Daniel Albright (1996) remarks, because they only seem to be concerned with the same subject. In reality, their intellectual interests as well as their concepts of human nature are fundamentally different. “Literature”, Albright writes, “is a wilderness, psychology is a garden” (p. 19). Albright claims that literature is fascinated by undomesticated nature with all its irregularities and deformations, while psychology is obsessed with gardening instruments and methodological cleanliness. Indeed, at any dinner of academics from various disciplines, the least probable of all cases is to see a psychologist and literary critic being engaged in a scholarly conversation. And if they do, it
most likely is about “methodology”. While the psychologist might point out that in order to prove that life is short there must be statistical evidence from at least five different experimental studies, a like-minded philologist may refer to at least five quotations from classical authors in order to come to the same conclusion.

It is the idea of this book to narrow the gap between the study of human identity, on the one hand, and narrative and cultural discourse, on the other hand — a gap that in part coincides with the gap between psychology and the other human sciences. The essays presented in this volume show that the focus on narrative is not only useful, but proves to be supremely productive for the exploration of autobiographical memory and identity. We believe that traditional psychological issues of memory and identity may be enriched when they are integrated with matters of language, discourse, and narration.

In developing this line of argument, this book draws on various ongoing developments. Each has been opening up the scope of narrative study, deepening our understanding of the very notion of narrative. In a number of disciplines and fields of inquiry, a new awareness of narrative construction has grown; and it is not difficult to predict that this growth will continue. There is an increasing awareness about two aspects of the narrative fabric of human knowledge and communication. On the one hand, more and more scholars have become aware of the meandering, discursive web of narrative in which all our knowledge — what in German is called *Wissen* and in French *savoir* — is entangled; on the other hand, we have come to see that the same is true for the way we gain or construct knowledge — the German *Erkennen* and the French *connaître*. In terms of an historical epistemology of the human sciences, this narrative and discursive turn stands for a number of attempts to explore new constructionist perspectives that have come into sight as a complement to the positivist paradigm. In what follows, we want to sketch some phenomenological aspects of the inquiries that currently take place in the world of narrative studies. But we better speak of these as “worlds of narrative”, considering the many different communities and cultures of narrative study.

Let us begin with a worldview of narrative that can draw on a long intellectual history: the world of literary narrative and narratology. We are not talking here mainly about historical traditions. There is an unparalleled scholarship with which the narrative fabric of literary production and reception is being examined in hundreds of languages and literatures. Yet, as these fields of inquiry have steadily expanded, their margins have become fuzzy. For a long time, such study has developed the idea that literary texts presume “textual
realities” in a sense that goes far beyond the traditional philologist notion of text as simply the written word. New theoretical and empirical approaches have freed themselves not only from this orthodox conception of literary texts, but also of literacy. Dealing with phenomena of the mind, communication, visual and performing arts, public spaces, material artifacts, and other forms of culture, these approaches have redefined traditional concepts of narrative as well as developed different methodological instruments. Consider the following three examples.

The first, and perhaps most significant, example of a different vision of narrative is the development of narratology and contemporary narrative theory itself. In fact, the traditional project of narratology has undergone radical changes that sometimes make it difficult to remember its beginnings. Narratology emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a particular structuralist way of studying written narrative texts, primarily of fictional literature. Since then, narratology has moved towards an interdisciplinary semiotic and cultural theory of narrative texts, and contexts. Narrative texts, in this view, are all sign systems that organize meanings along narrative lines. This includes visual, auditive, and three-dimensional sign systems, both static and dynamic — such as physical activities like dance and sport events, artifacts of remembrance like memorials and museum displays, social rituals like funerals and public ceremonies, and other cultural phenomena like fashion and landscape design. The narratology of such texts, as Mieke Bal (1997) has pointed out, is the theory of oral and written genres of language, images, spectacles, events, and cultural artifacts that “tell a story”.

This, we think, is an important development of a discipline that came into existence under the name of narratologie as a child of French structuralism and as grandchild of Russian and Czech formalism. From the point of view of today’s semiotic, cultural, and “natural” conceptions of narrative — as represented by authors like Bal (1997), Fludernik (1996), Lachmann (1997), Newton (1995), Toolan (1988, 1996), and others — traditional narratology had important contributions to make, but also carried the limitations of classical structuralism. Particularly limiting, these authors find, were its adamant positivistic claims, reductionistic formalist explanations, reliance on generative causal mechanisms, and, not least, an inaccessible idiosyncratic vocabulary, its jargon of technical “scientificity”.

In order to understand these alleged limitations of structuralism, it is helpful to remember what the structuralist enterprise of narratology was about. It can be described by four characteristics. First, it conceived of narrative as a
sort of Saussureian *langue*, a system of invariant forms and rules, ignoring it as *parole*, as language which is effectively used in concrete cultural contexts. As the structuralist narratologist put it: “If structuralism generally concentrates on the *langue* or code underlying a given system or practice rather than concentrating on *parole* or instantiation of that system of practice, narratology specifically focuses on narrative *langue* rather than narrative *parole*” (Prince 1997, p. 39).

In consequence, traditional narratology — and this is the second characteristic — sought to formulate what it assumed to lie beyond the “surface structure” of stories: a sort of Chomskyan “deep structure” of narrative whose studies were to reveal universal systems of codes. The classical narratological project, thus, can be viewed as a modern or modernist version of the older attempt to discover a “universal grammar” (Herman 1995).

Third, structuralist narratology took linguistics as its explanatory role model, limiting it to sentence-level syntax, rather than focusing upon systems-of-use-in-contexts. And fourth, it aimed to apply universally the analytical model of “duality of patterning”, a model based upon dualistic thought that brought contrastive analyses to structures internal to language.

In contrast, an increasing part of today’s narrative theory, in extending its scope and cultural interest, has distanced itself from the “grand narratives of structuralism” and its focal concerns upon invariant rules, deep structures, sentences, and dualism. For example, Mieke Bal’s intellectual development can be traced in the three very different versions of her book on narratology (1977; 1985; 1997), which nicely reflect the transformation of the field. In her 1997 book, she points out that she has come to see narratology no longer as an end in itself, but rather as an instrument, a “heuristic tool”, that can be, and must be, used in conjunction with other concerns and theories. In this way, narrative analysis turns into an activity of “cultural analysis”, that is, into a form of interpretation of culture. Bal’s project does not have any longer much to do with the formalist theory of structuralism. In fact, her narratology is explicitly laid out as a poststructuralist project that wants “to keep present the procedures of and responsibilities for meaning” in the face of culturally oriented and, thus, necessarily “more ‘messy’ philosophies of language” (Bal 1997, p. 11). She insists, with Bakhtin, on the diverse provenance, the multivocal nature and, with Derrida, the irreducibly ambiguous meanings of any narrative utterance. As a result, in her studies, invariant structures of sentences and linguistic forms give way to variable structures of narrative texts in their cultural contexts.

As a second example of recent developments in narrative and narrative analysis we want to refer to another break with the structuralist project of
narratology that has taken place in sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, and the ethnography of communication. In these studies, it also is the context of structuralism in which we find the starting point of the narratological study of nonfictional and everyday narrative. Many scholars today would assign a pivotal place to William Labov and Joshua Waletzky’s essay “Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience” that was presented in 1966 at a meeting of the American Ethnological Society and published in 1967 in the proceedings. Significantly enough, the institutional context of the presentation of this landmark study of narrative analysis was neither that of literary theory and narratology, nor of linguistics, but of ethnography, anthropology, social sciences and “applied” linguistic sub-disciplines. In 1997, the four issues of the *Journal of Narrative and Life History* were published in one single volume assessing and reassessing Labov and Waletzky and its importance for the last (and first) thirty years of the field. All 47 contributions made it clear that this classic paper not only paved the way for a systematic investigation of all forms and genres of nonfictional narratives and everyday communication, but it also, in turn, has influenced the study of fictional narrative. And what’s more, in the wake of Labov and Waletzky’s approach to natural narrative, the seemingly clear-cut borderline between the realm of fictional and nonfictional stories has become blurred. Once freed from dualisms and binarisms, such a distinction loses its foundation. As Cynthia Bernstein (1997, p.45) writes: “Although any given story might be classified as natural or literary, oral or written, simple or complex, those classifications are not binary opposites, but merely the definable extremes of endless possibilities”. What defines the classifications along such continua is not the putative “deep structure” of formal qualities but the concrete contexts of use in which the meaning of a story is created, and in which it takes its very form as a narrative. Taking up the earlier point of Dell Hymes (1986), Bernstein suggests conceptualizing narrative phenomena in terms of “dimensions” or “continua” rather than dichotomies or dualisms.

It is true that Labov and Waletzky were particularly concerned with identifying the overall formal features or “segments” of a well-formed narrative. They believed to have found them in constituent clauses that have a tightly defined structural relation to the narratives they comprise, much as with the structural link between distinctive features, phonemes, and morphemes. But if this project ultimately “failed” — by structuralist standards — to describe the universal structure of a compositional narrative system, it nonetheless succeeded, as Jerome Bruner (1997) emphasizes in his commentary on Labov and Waletzky’s paper, in blazing a trail for students who seek to explore situated
uses of narrative structures. To be sure, many of these students today are inclined less to seek such structures through formal “clausal analysis”, and more to investigate them through cultural analyses of the forms through which, and the contexts in which stories are told. Bruner’s (1997, p.67) suggestion for such analyses is to focus on the “processes of linguistic constructions by which prototype narratives are adapted to different and varying situations”. As we will see in a moment, Bruner’s point echoes anthropological and ethnographic studies of narrative (e.g., Bauman 1986; Hymes 1981; Miller 1994), especially the idea that narratives give “voice” to social relations and locally embedded cultural meanings (Hymes 1996).

As a third example of how traditional conceptions of narrative and narrative theory have changed, we want to refer to the great attention that has been dedicated to an author already mentioned: Michail Bakhtin. The influence of his work has extended far beyond literary theory and philosophy of language, where Bakhtin originally began his narrative analyses. The still growing number of admirers of Bakhtin’s theory of novelistic discourse includes students of language, communication, culture, and mind across all human sciences. For example, ideas about the multi-vocal and polysemic nature of narrative, first elaborated in Bakhtin’s (1973) analysis of Dostoevsky’s novels, have been applied to the study of the narrative registers not only of literature, but also of social life. This has unveiled amazing structural analogies between novelistic discourse, life stories, and autobiographical memory, which led to new conceptions of the (“multivoiced”) mind and the (“dialogical”) self (e.g., Hermans & Kempen 1993; Wertsch 1991). Bakhtin’s ideas can even be linked to a new strand of studies in cognitive sciences, reflected in concepts such as the “poetics of mind” (Gibbs 1995) and the “literary mind” (Turner 1997) that aim to capture our fundamentally figurative way of thinking and communicating.

Bakhtin described the richness of the language of life narratives in terms of tropes (or forms of figurative language) which, he believed, are constituent features of novels. What, in his view, is distinctive about the modern novel, such as its special sense of temporality, polyphony, and intertextuality (that is, every text derives from, and refers to, further texts), is a basic characteristic of the narrative construction of a life. As every narrative self-account is itself part of a life, embedded in a lived context of interaction and communication, intention and imagination, ambiguity and vagueness, there is always, potentially, a next and different story to tell, as there occur different situations in which to tell it. This creates a dynamic that keeps in view actual stories about real life with possible stories about potential life, as well as countless combinations of them.
As a consequence, life narratives, like most literary texts, can be treated as open, without end. They are, as Bakhtin (1981) put it, “unfinalizable”, for life always opens up more options (“real” and “fictional” ones), includes more meanings, more identities, evokes more interpretations than even the number of all possible life stories could express.

In every person’s life there always remain unrealized potentials and unrealized demands, unfulfilled options of identity, as we could say. And it is this dimension of the possible, the fact that “all existing clothes are always too tight” (Bakhtin 1981, p.37), that partly makes living so, well, human. The language of the novel, therefore, is a most appropriate form to express and shape this “un-fleshed-out humanness” inherent in every identity construction. Bakhtin’s theory of narrative discourse suggests a view of human beings as always making themselves, as always able to render untrue any definitive version of identity. He came to view the novel as the genre that offers an understanding of people in just this way. For in the novel, no matter how many views and interpretations of a character it contains, something is always left over — an “unrealized surplus of humanness”, as Bakhtin (1981, p.37) remarked. Viewed in this way, we may conclude that the study of life narratives is not only wedded to actual and particular human lifeworlds, but turns into a laboratory of possibilities for human identity construction.

The notion of narrative in the human sciences

As we have suggested, there are two developments that have shifted traditional notions of narrative. Both can be traced to understandings of fictional and nonfictional narratives that have taken form in diverse post-structuralist approaches, ranging from literary and cultural narratology to sociolinguistics, conversation and discourse pragmatics. For one, there have been extensive applications of the concept of narrative that have widened the scope and consequently the very nature of the study of narrative. At the same time, there has been a growing interest across the human sciences in treating narratives as the means through which social and cultural life comes into being, an interests that includes the narrative and rhetorical fabric that underlies most of our knowledge, including scientific thought.

Lewis and Sandra Hinchman (1997) point this out in their preface to a collection of essays on the idea of narrative in the human sciences. They note that the turn to narrative as an organizing concept in various fields can be
viewed as a classical paradigm shift, one that leads away from nomological models and towards a more humanistic approach to the study of diverse individuals and groups. The reasons for this reorientation towards a more cultural and historical vision of human reality are, as in every paradigm shift, not merely epistemological, but cultural, reflecting fundamental shifts in societal and academic institutions. Lewis and Sandra Hinchman (1997) observe that many narrativists challenge longstanding psychological and social-scientific efforts of elaborating a body of authoritative knowledge like that of classical natural science. This sort of project seems to them to be somewhat misguided, problematic, even repressive, because it presumes that there could be (or should be), today, a body of indisputable truth: an authoritarian “grand narrative”. In fact, the idea of an abstractly conceived subject of knowledge — a subject who can only exist in the metaphysical realm of “pure thought” — has been increasingly questioned by many social scientist and philosophers (e.g., Gergen 1994; Geertz 1995; Habermas 1992; Rorty 1979; Taylor 1985). Invoking this critical line in their narrative, the Hinchmans want “to reaffirm the plurality of stories that different cultures and subcultures may tell about themselves”. As an example, they affirm the current of “personal narrative” studies, a kind of narrative inquiry that focuses on personal stories that try to resist the grand narratives, adopting a view that “marshals the diverse, historically concrete stories and experiences recounted by non-elite people against the version of reality allegedly sanctioned by mainstream social science and philosophy. Story telling becomes for its supporters an act of resistance against a dominant ‘Cartesian’ paradigm of rationality” (p.xiv).

From the vantage point of the philosophy of science, we can conceive of this anti-Cartesian orientation as part of an even more general post-positivist movement. This trend is associated with further shifts in the architecture of the human sciences, shifts that have been variously dubbed “interpretive turn”, “discursive turn”, “cultural turn”, and — as already mentioned — “post-structuralist turn”. Let us highlight some more scenes in this puzzling picture. Not aiming at a complete account, we can limit ourselves to referring only to few exemplary figures in each of the fields at which we briefly want to look.

Psychology, in this respect, is a particularly interesting case in point. In sharp contrast with the traditionally positivistic self-understanding of academic psychology, the discipline has seen in the last twenty years of the twentieth century the emergence of an amazing sub-field called “narrative psychology”. This development has been strongly influenced by the general trend that we have just outlined. Narrative psychology is not one, well-defined theory or
school. It rather names a theoretical and methodological orientation that aims at examining the nature and role of narrative discourse in human life, experience, and thought (Bruner, J.S. 1986; McAdams & Ochberg 1988; Rosenwald & Ochberg 1992; Sarbin 1986). The basic idea is that in ordering experiences, shaping intentions, using memory, and structuring communication, narratives are at work. From early on in human development, narrative practices provide fundamental devices that give form and meaning to our experience (Bamberg, 1997). As Bruner (1990) argued, whenever it comes to matters of identity and, inextricably interwoven with it, autobiographical memory, story-telling is needed. The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and others organize our senses of who we are, who others are, and how we are to be related. How we learn to tell such stories, to understand and assess them, and to use particular ones in order to achieve particular goals is, for Bruner (1996), what the “culture of education” is all about.

Not surprisingly, this view is distinct from, and aims to complement the traditional individualistic focus and the mentalistic epistemology of psychology. How a life and, in the process, a self is constructed is a question to be examined in the light of the narrative forms and discursive formats that are provided by culture and used by individuals in certain social events. Viewed in this way, narrative is a central hinge between culture and mind.

Obviously, this “cultural way” of looking at things is not limited to psychology. Already at an early point of the narrative turn, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntayr (1981) set out to show that narration is the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human action. No doubt, a psychologist tells one story of human nature, an anthropologist another. And what’s more, both stories are not only bound to the inherent “narrativity” of their particular subject matter, but each also to a culturally established set of rhetoric and literary devices. For the academic author, as Clifford Geertz (1988) pointed out, these are not least devices of positioning and self-fashioning. Similarly, ethnographer Edward Bruner (1986) has remarked that there is a momentous dialectic between story and experience, and this might be true in a twofold sense. He argues that the production of ethnography is continually oriented toward what he calls the dominant narrative structure. “We go to the reservation with a story already in mind, and that story is foregrounded in the final professional product, the published article, chapter, or monograph. If we stray too far from the dominant story in the literature, if we overlook a key reference or fail to mention the work of an important scholar, we are politely corrected by such institutional monitors as thesis committees, foundation review panels, or
journal editors” (Bruner, E. 1986, p. 146). Bruner concludes that at the begin-
ning and the end the production of ethnography is somehow being framed by
a dominant story. Necessarily, this canonical story becomes the matrix of
experience according to which the collection and interpretation of narratives
“in the field” is being laid out. What we face here, in the end, is a double
dialectic between story and experience. It seems that the only way to tackle this,
as it were, inescapable hermeneutic constellation is to dedicate great attention
explicitly to the “framing” that stories bring with them, and to the “local”
narrative constraints that are at work in a cultural world, and explore their
relationships to the possibilities of experience. In fact, such works have already
begun, early on by Marcus and Cushman (1982), and later by authors such as
Clifford and Marcus (1986), and Hymes (1996).

Moreover, there are a number of scholars in various social sciences who
have especially reflected upon narrative frames at work, seeing narrative both as
an organizing concept or a “root metaphor”, and as a methodological orienta-
tion from which to study social life. For example, in rhetoric and communica-
tion studies, Walter Fisher (1989) has suggested that all symbolic action can be
understood as part and parcel of stories, in that such action is grounded in
particular histories and cultures with narrative formulations creating a rhetori-
cal reserve of those very histories and cultures. As a result, narrative is erected
upon a universal value-logic of presumable “good reasons” that itself presumes
particular beliefs and actions as a condition for its production — a view that is
quite similar to Jerome Bruner’s idea of narrative as the very fabric of “folk
psychology”. All of this, as Fisher argues, is, and ought to be, assessable through
a basic human capacity, the ability of people to utilize a rhetorical logic of
narration. All symbolic interaction, including its countless genres of discourse,
therefore, could (and should) be read into a larger narrative, constructed by the
analyst in order to provide an account of the particular values and logics that
are present in the symbolic action of concern. By specifying beliefs and reasons
that are symbolically active, the analyst can formulate narratives as a way of
revealing how values and rationalities are pressed into rhetorical service. This is
done in Fisher’s case by constructing a “logic of good reasons”, in Bruner’s, by
positing a folk psychology of “narrative prototypes”.

These perspectives on narrative have also found expression in a particular
approach to the study of discourse — including narrative discourse — which
has become known as “discursive psychology”. Discursive psychology, as
developed by Rom Harré and Grant Gillet (1994), Derek Edwards (1997), and
others, combines sociopsychological and linguistic insights with a philosophical
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line of argument that finds its origin in the later work of Wittgenstein and the philosophy of “ordinary language”. Jerome Bruner, in a sense, operates similarly, even if perhaps closer along the intellectual lines of psychology. Opening a new door for psychological investigations, he seeks to provide access to a space where traditional issues such as the mind, memory, cognitive and linguistic development become resituated within a larger cultural and discursive matrix. “Narrative psychology” in this sense merges into a new interpretive cultural psychology — a project also advocated (albeit in different disciplinary constellations) by Michael Cole (1996) and Richard Shweder (1991). As a result, classic psychological concerns are moved from internal workings of the mind into the discursive arena. Jerome Bruner, Edward Bruner, Cole, Edwards, Geertz, Harré and Gillet, Shweder, and others stand for various approaches that are sensitive to local cultural dynamics, each proposing narrative as a paradigm that promises to explore these dynamics and their sociohistorical groundings.

In conversation and discourse analysis the story of narrative, again, is told with a different, more sociological accent. Here, the focus shifts even more to narrative in the context of its telling, to the fact that stories are collective or collaborative productions that not only take place under particular social conditions, but are social actions. Harvey Sacks’ (1972) and Erving Goffman’s (1981) pioneering studies played a major role in the emergence of this current of research. Works like Barbara Johnstone’s (1991) and Keith Basso’s (1996) investigation of narrative and place, have integrated such classical sociolinguistic perspectives with ethnographic ideas of mind and self and insights about narrative from social constructionism. Examining how stories activate a personal and social dialectic, Johnstone found that in the narrative process various senses of personal identities and social relationships are constructed simultaneously. Parts of the stories she dealt with weave a robust communal narrative about a city in the American Midwest — Fort Wayne in Indiana — evoking the picture of a “city that saved itself”. Johnstone’s (1991) analyses of Stories, Community, and Place highlight the intimate link between narrative and environment, each providing tellers with a variety of themes that express a sense of who they are through the idea of where they are. Stories, Johnstone emphasized, are told — as identities are constructed — in particular places. It is stories that connect the identity of people with the identity of places and spaces; in fact, it is here were the very sense of a local identity emerges and takes shape.

A related work by Kenneth Plummer (1996) enters this scholarly conversation on narrative inquiry with an explicit interest in developing “a sociology of stories”. Plummer studies narrative from what at first sight looks like a particular
Introduction

Plummer's thematic perspective. His corpus consists of a rich collection of stories about sexual life. His aim is dual, to show how personal narratives of sexuality are simultaneously personal, social and political actions, and to develop a preliminary framework for a sociological theory of storytelling. Plummer's question is: How does one put a story together about personal sexual experience? More specifically, how if at all do people who have been raped, are "coming out", or recovering from sexual abuse narrate their experiences? How does narrative give a public form to what seems to be most private and personal matters? Plummer works at the juncture of several traditions, combining social constructionist, symbolic interactionist, and pragmatic thought with a conceptual frame that seeks to keep in view the features of story texts and the political conditions of their making. In what he calls the "generic process of telling sexual stories", there is a move from the individual autobiographical story to contestable discourse about individual and social problems and their remedy. Narrative, as it is viewed here, organizes the transformation of sexuality as a putatively private and intimate concern into social and political action.

Similar notions of narrative have been developed in anthropology and folklore, drawing attention to the situated accomplishment of stories and storytelling, treating them as cultural performances. Richard Bauman's book *Story, Performance, and Event* (1986) is a fine example of just this understanding of narrative. Bauman examines the oral performances of stories told by Texans on specific social occasions, bringing into view the relations between the story itself, the events which it recounts, and the social occasion in which the two are brought together. Bauman demonstrates how the investigation of narrative is a study of social and cultural life. His aim, like Johnstone's, is to offer insights into both the symbolic fabric of local lives and the general role stories play in creating and fashioning societies. For stories, as these investigations demonstrate, not only reflect and express social reality, they also are formative of societal life.

Authors like Johnstone and Bauman are influenced not only by Goffman (1981), but also by Geertz (1973; 1983) and Hymes (1981; 1996), other pioneers in the cultural study of narrative and symbolic forms. Both Geertz and Hymes suggested focusing on narrative as a form of symbolic communication in a particular cultural context, as when one tells a story to a particular audience on a specific social occasion — for example, about the great flood in Fort Wayne, or about trading coon dogs in Texas — with the local specifics of these performances themselves being worthy of careful study and reflection. From this angle of vision, narrative is a prominent and potent form of symbolic action, shaped