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# Narrative research and the challenge of accumulating knowledge<sup>1</sup>

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Narrative research has produced an array of richly-detailed expositions of life as lived, well-interpreted studies full of nuance and insight that befit the complexity of human lives. This paper inquires into the necessity and possibilities of amalgamation of knowledge obtained through narrative research. As narrative studies, with their accompanying interpretations, accumulate, how do we “add them up?” What would a meta-analysis of narrative studies look like? The challenge that confronts us is how assimilate narrative understanding at a conceptual level in a way that does not return to a modernist frame, treating the various research reports as “facts” — but rather to treat them as situated interpretations. Conversation is offered as a metaphor and context within which knowledge is to be understood. (*Narrative Research, Hermeneutics, Conversation*)

Narrative research, rooted in interpretive hermeneutics and phenomenology, strives to preserve the complexity of what it means to be human and to locate its observations of people and phenomena in society, history and time. Narrative researchers eschew the objectification of the people that we study and we understand and espouse the constructedness of our knowledge. Yet different narrative researchers, situated differently, study different people, make highly contextualized interpretations and theorize their understandings differently. We are then met with the problem of building a knowledge base that can amalgamate the insight and understandings across researchers. This is a problem that has yet to be taken up directly within narrative research.

The practice of narrative research, rooted in postmodernism, is always interpretive, at every stage. From framing the conceptual question through choosing the participants, deciding what to ask them, with what phrasing, transcribing from spoken language to text, understanding the verbal locutions, making sense of the

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meanings thus encoded, to deciding what to attend to and to highlight — the work is interpretive at every point. In addition, from a hermeneutic point of view, there are tensions related to Paul Ricoeur's distinction between a hermeneutics of faith and a hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970; Josselson, 2004). Does the interpreter/researcher privilege the voice of the participant, trying to render the meanings as presented in the interview — or does the researcher try to read beneath — or, in Ricoeur's metaphor — in front of the text — for meanings that are hidden, either unconscious or so embedded in cultural context as to make them seem invisible?

From a hermeneutic standpoint, narrative psychology aims to understand human experience as a form of text construction, relying on the assumption that humans create their lives through an autobiographical process akin to producing a story. It is not just the material "facts" of a life that are of concern here, but the meaningful shape emerging from selected inner and outer experiences. "Facts," in the naive historical sense, are understood as created rather than reproduced. This approach has allowed psychology to view and analyze people's lives as lived, people whose life experience had been lost in the search for central tendencies, for statistically significant group differences on oversimplified measures or in contrived experimental conditions.

As the narrative research agenda has taken hold, we find ourselves with an array of fascinating, richly-detailed expositions of life as lived, well-interpreted studies full of nuance and insight that befit the complexity of human lives. The problem that confronts us, though, is that these studies are accumulating, forming now a mass of studies, many largely, unfortunately, published only as dissertations, that represent thousands of person-hours of intensive work. As scholars, we now have to ask ourselves — are we working together to put together a joint multilayered jigsaw puzzle, each one contributing a piece — or are we instead creating a long gallery of finely wrought miniatures, inviting the onlooker to visit and make of it whatever they will?

A gallery is nice, but I am interested in assembling a puzzle. And I have been occupied with the question of how to advance to the level of theory without reifying or losing the richness of the narrative data base? As narrative studies, with their accompanying interpretations, accumulate, how do we "add them up?" What, in effect, would a meta-analysis of narrative studies look like?

Recently, while preparing a chapter for the forthcoming *Handbook of Narrative Research*, edited by Jean Clandinin, I spent many weeks reading through the existing understanding of this work. In doing so, I came across references to narrative studies of Mexicans, lesbians, drug dealers, strippers, unwed mothers, infertile women, cancer survivors, migrant workers, philanthropists, biracial couples and transvestites — to name just a few. All of them looked intriguing, but I will not live long enough to read them all. Most of the papers in the *Handbook of Interview Research* and *The Handbooks of Qualitative Research* focus on method, citing the approaches of these various studies. But what I found myself wishing for was someone who would summarize for me what these various narrative studies found out. Instead, as I read authors who referenced their own work, my impression was that each wrote as if only their study was of concern. The demands of considering context, reflexivity, co-construction and multiple truths were sufficiently occupying for each writer. In a postmodern framework, there

are no “facts,” so knowledge has to be considered relative to its context of creation — and each study, if done well, includes an awareness of who is the knower, how the knowledge was obtained, whose voice is privileged and how understandings are rooted in the sociohistorical setting and time in which the research interaction occurred. The question that occupies me, though, is how do we build a knowledge base out of these proliferating studies?

As editors of the series, *The Narrative Study of Lives*, we made the decision long ago not to have abstracts for the papers we publish. Abstracting, it seemed to us, was a (modernistic) scientific convention that constrained the complexity and relativity of the intricate matters our narrative research authors were attempting to elucidate in their work. Abstracts inevitably simplify the complex, the very heart of narrative research. Similarly, we felt unable to index the papers — what would be indexed? And how can one index experience?

As researchers experiment with new forms of presentation, we then have our narrative understandings of various psychological and social phenomena expressed as poems and performances or disseminated in multimedia formats. As though just organizing the more traditional prose scholarship weren't challenging enough!

Relatively few theorists of narrative research have taken up the problem of the consumption of research findings. Researchers writing reports of narrative studies often go to great pains to temper and contextualize what they wish to communicate to others only to see their tentative understandings transmuted in someone else's paper into something that resembles fact. After struggling with all the problems of reflexivity and representation, we shudder in horror at the idea of certain ideas being extracted and enshrined, most likely in distorted form, as a citation in someone else's paper. Narrative work articulates on a different set of principles from hypothesis-testing quantified studies. Such research stands outside the hierarchical realm of facts, and the knowledge thus derived cannot be treated in the same fashion. Because narrative research eschews the principles of certainty, understanding is based in scholarly consensus. Donald Polkinghorne put it well by stating, “The conclusions of narrative research remain open-ended. New information or argument may convince scholars that the conclusion is in error or that another conclusion is more likely. Narrative research, then, uses the ideal of a scholarly consensus as the test of verisimilitude (p. 176).”

There is now enough narrative research proliferating to warrant serious concern about how we are to amalgamate what we have learned from these studies. If we don't do this, we are in danger of drowning in a tsunami of solipsistic studies that we are unable to assimilate.

The problems of building a knowledge base out of narrative studies mirrors the dilemmas of cross case analysis (Rosenwald, 1988). Each individual is unique, yet what we seek in narrative research is some understanding of the patterns that cohere among individuals and the aspects of lived experience that differentiate. When we look across our interviews, we try to find a template to place across the various experiences we have had as researchers of this particular topic with these particular people and note, with reference to that template, how the undulations of lived experience and psychosocial realities resonate with other thematic structures — albeit structures of our own de-

vising. In our reports, we reflect on ourselves as knowers, ourselves positioned within culture and language. We try to present what we have learned with all its ambiguity and inconsistency.

When we look across narrative research reports, we have to do something similar to what we do with our case analyses — at a conceptual level. If we are researching Mexicans or lesbians, we need to come to some understanding of the status of interpretive understanding of these groups already present in the literature. But this does not mean that our review should be limited to these groups. Indeed, in some ways, studies of lesbians may have more in common with studies of Mexicans, if we think of these as marginalized, but politically-emerging groups, than studies of drug dealers have in common with other studies of drug dealers. We look for the commonalities and disjunctures that help us go beyond individual studies to larger frameworks of understanding. And we have to try to carry into our summaries the tentativeness and multiplicity of the original account.

We also have to take into account that the reports we are trying to digest are, in Claude Levi-Strauss' phrase, superpositions of the knower on the other. Observations always entwine the observer and the observed. We have to allow for the inherent subjectivity of accounts, recognizing the positionality and personal characteristics of the researcher. But how do we add up intersubjectivities and co-constructed understandings? What do we make of contradictions and disparities?

The challenge that confronts us is how assimilate narrative understanding at a conceptual level in a way that does not return to a modernist frame, treating the various research reports as "facts" — but rather to treat them as situated interpretations.

Let me offer an example: While participating in a committee to approve a narrative dissertation on health information among immigrant groups in Israel, I raised some concerns about the findings in regard to how Ethiopian-Israeli girls learned about menstruation. I referred to findings offered by one of my students, now Dr. Ilana Tal, who had studied first menstruation stories of Ethiopian immigrants to Israel. In Ethiopian society, women are segregated in a special hut during the days of their menstruation. What Dr. Tal had discussed insightfully and at length concerned the dynamics of knowing and not knowing. The girls, she demonstrated, in one sense "knew" about menstruation because they had frequently accompanied their mothers to the menstrual hut. But they didn't "know" that this would also happen to them, and therefore felt shocked, shamed and uninformed when they first saw their menstrual blood. It was a very interesting finding. When I spoke about this in the committee meeting at hand, however, the other student's supervisor said, "but we don't find that. I haven't heard that." The question is how we reconcile these experiences. One response is that my claim is *not* that this is true for all young women, but it is true for some and that it marks a process we can attend to and learn from. Another response is that I wondered if their analysis was deep enough or sensitive enough to be able to discern this process. Perhaps she simply asked her participants if they "knew" about menstruation and received a cognitive answer and left it at that. This example, I think, illustrates the problem at hand — how do we integrate our findings?

What we need to search for together are ways of conceptualizing different levels of psychological, social and cultural reality and relating them to each other in a way that puts a strong theoretical grounding under detailed studies of particular groups or phenomena and thereby allows for some form of aggregation.

We can perhaps look to the field of anthropology for some instruction on these matters. What anthropology seems to have learned is that the more systematic they tried to become, the less anthropological they found themselves. The problem lay in trying to find communality without sacrificing context. Looking for the universalities in initiation rites across cultures, for example, they lost the essence of the phenomena, which was the meanings and construction of the initiation rite within a specific culture. Clifford Geertz largely gave up the quest for commonalities, arguing for the importance of local knowledge and Richard Shweder (1991) has pointed out that inevitably, the transcendental loses its essence.

But there are some directions. Steiner Kvale (1996) has written that “The knowledge produced in an interview comes close to postmodern conceptions of knowledge as conversational, narrative, linguistic, contextual and interrelational (p. 51).” Following Richard Rorty, we might remind ourselves that conversation is the context in which knowledge is to be understood. As narrative researchers, we can only have effective collaboration as scholars if we imagine ourselves — and present ourselves — in conversation with others — and here I mean elaborate, extended conversation, not bracketed citations. We need to converse with each other — in print and publicly about the terms of our knowledge of a group or a phenomenon.

In the mid-90s, I collaborated with Amia Lieblich, Ruth Sharabany, and Hadas Wiseman in experimenting with this process. All of us had done research on the experience of growing up communally in the Israeli kibbutz and, rather than use an expert authorial voice in separate papers or discuss each other’s work in critical reviews, we made public our process of thinking about our material by publishing a book as a conversation among us (Josselson, Lieblich, Sharabany, and Wiseman, 1997). The interconnection between who we are and what we thought we knew was apparent rather than veiled. We could reflect on and try to contextualize and understand the points of difference. We could elaborate on how we arrived at our interpretations, the questions that remained open and the doubts we had — in short, we could explore the subtext of knowing that is usually omitted from academic presentations. Some of the conversation had the nature of deepening the understanding by framing the experiential example from the narrative study in richer conceptual terms, offering a broader interpretation or new connections to other material, or placing it in a different theoretical context. We ended with an effort to summarize our discussion. But presenting our discourse with the process of making conclusions and generalizations explicit left it to readers to make their own criticisms and corrections. We left the reader free to observe the intersection of the multiple truths we encountered and how we attempted to integrate them.

I think this model of conversation is a useful one for the future of narrative research. And I think the conversation must take place on a number of grounds. In what follows, I draw freely on a paper written by anthropologist Jane Guyer (1999)

reflecting on similar dilemmas in anthropology. And to make my point clearer, I will thread the argument with an imagined example. My example is this: as I have traveled to various countries teaching narrative research and, concurrently, consulting to students in these countries who are actively working on narrative research projects, I discovered that in each place there is some young female graduate student, not surprisingly, working on the problem of the transition to motherhood. I try to put them in touch with one another but they resist, fearful that someone else is doing “their” study. Indeed, not all scholars have the luxury that my group on relationships in the kibbutz had — the opportunity to gather together and discuss our shared work and interests in depth. As scholars, we are separated from one another by time and location. But let us imagine someone reading all of these dissertations and trying to say something integrative about the issue of transition to motherhood. How would they begin? And on what would they focus? I would like to offer some ideas about categories and processes for amalgamation of narrative knowledge.

The first ground is the linguistic — We need to compare the language structures of our participants — across studies. What is common? What is distinct and how does the research or cultural context affect the way in which experience is language? We may bring questions not central to the original presentation such as how temporalities are managed. We may look at sequences of expression rather than just concepts. In my imagined example, this would involve looking at the ways in which the various researchers report the language patterns of their participants as the participants, in different languages, try to give verbal shape to their experiences. In what ways are the language patterns denotive of similar experiential frames? In what ways do the languages signify different states of meaning?

The second ground of comparison is the case study or studies. Here it is not a matter of counting instances, but layering studies in a way that establishes correspondence and difference. By viewing overlapping characteristics, we can build support for repeated patterns that remain situated rather than generalized. This, of course, means bringing to our reading of the text of other people’s studies the same attentiveness to detail that we bring to our own. In the example of the transition to motherhood, the aggregating scholar would treat each report as a case study and try to understand the contextual basis of thematic consistency and difference.

Third is reflection on the criteria for judging variation across studies. Different interpreter/researchers take a different stance to what is viewed as same or distinct. The terms of variability across participants within a study are always imposed by the researcher in the hermeneutic circle created by the interpretive process. But we can investigate the variability in the kinds of categories or conceptual frames that emerge from a range of studies. Here, of course, we have to also consider the situatedness of the researcher. For example, do women researchers who themselves are newly mothers categorize their findings differently from nonmothers or older mothers? And what could we learn from this?

Fourth is the pursuit of redundancy. Here we have to retain adequate doubt about our premises and assumptions, but we can adopt a position of iterative thinking. We attempt to illuminate from different angles, with different lenses, a range of views of

a phenomenon and then assess the extent to which we are seeing something similar. To what extent do new observations, again taken across studies, affirm a shared position and give us confidence in our assertions? This is not to suggest that the central or shared is to be privileged. Outliers may give us a map of the repertoire of the phenomenon in which we are interested and provide the keys to an understanding of distribution and process. So here, finding repeated themes across narrative investigations of the transition to motherhood, far from being the already-done, would give us confidence that our understandings reflect something in the experiential world.

Fifth is configuration. Here the effort is to link empirically unrelated phenomena through discovery of related patterning. As I mentioned before, shared psychological patterns may become apparent among marginalized groups that are socially distinct. One traces out themes as they wend their way through lives, rooting understanding in psychological logic, using either classificatory or structural strategies — or deconstructive ones or strategies that we haven't yet imagined. Freud's genius lay in his ability to be a configurational thinker, abstracting a map of the unconscious from unrelated psychopathologies. His approach was configuration through structural analysis. Doing this as narrative researchers involves reading widely, much more widely than is typical, in my experience, both as a supervisor of dissertations and a journal editor. I don't know how this would play out in the imagined example, but I suspect that someone who could find a metaphor that links the transition to motherhood with other phenomena will be credited with the most profound scholarly contribution. Sara Ruddick did something like this in her book *Maternal Thinking*, a meditation on motherhood, morality and the politics of peace.

Sixth is identifying the frontiers of ignorance. Here it becomes important to note what the researcher reveals s/he cannot understand. What remains opaque across studies? What are the dilemmas that cannot be conceived in available terms? Of course, this also speaks to the imperative for narrative researchers to write about what they do not succeed in interpreting as well as what they do. A meta-analysis of interpretive blocks then may point the way to new studies that could transcend the barriers.

Finally, an amalgam of narrative studies ought to imply action in the world. What does this understanding of psychosocial experience suggest about how people may act on their social constructions, or their psychological structures, or their experiences of marginalization, or victimization, or empowerment or idealism? Here, the aim is not statistical prediction but attention to suggested consequences of the interpretive reality of the people we have jointly studied. In other words, if this is what we together understand about how people's interior and social lives are constituted, what does this mean for what they may do or for what kind of world order we are building?

None of the conclusions we draw from this aggregation, however, will be certain, nor should they be. Certainty may exist in models of the material world, but will never apply to the realm of people. We may find some forms of order, but order in the process of never-ending change. Clifford Geertz wrote, looking back over his years as an anthropologist..." It is necessary, then, to be satisfied with swirls, confluxions and inconstant connections; clouds collecting, clouds dispersing...What we can construct are hindsight accounts of the connectedness of things (p. 190)."

I believe, with Bakhtin (1986) that all research is fundamentally conversation. I therefore suggest that the route of developing a knowledge base for narrative research is to privilege dialogue. We can perhaps best know a field of scholarship when we can engage those areas of tension where multiple facets of understanding intersect, interweave, collide, contradict and show themselves in their shifting and often paradoxical relation to each other. Our account of “the connectedness of things” is ultimately a joint effort.

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