Narrative Matters

# Looking Forward, Looking Back: Future Challenges for Narrative Research

## *An event commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Centre for Narrative Research, University of East London*

Molly Andrews, Jens Brockmeier, Michael Erben, Cigdem Esin, Mark Freeman, Alexandra Georgakopoulou, Margareta Hydén, Matti Hyvärinen, Margaretta Jolly, Michael Rustin, Olivia Sagan, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou

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Article abstract

The Centre for Narrative Research was founded at the turn of the millenium. To commemorate its tenth anniversary, we organised an event which took place on November 10, 2010, at the Marx Memorial Library in London. The day had a very flexible format. We began with a few opening words from the three co-directors (Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire, and Maria Tamboukou) and the Research Fellow (Cigdem Esin) of CNR. This was followed by contributions from six leading narrative scholars (Jens Brockmeier, Michael Erben, Mark Freeman, Margareta Hydén, Margaretta Jolly, and Olivia Sagan) to which Alexandra Georgakopoulou and Matti Hyvärinen then responded. Following lunch, the sixty participants were broken up into smaller groups, where they discussed issues raised in the morning session. The day concluded with a final discussion piece offered by Mike Rustin. The six presenters were faced with a formidable challenge. We invited them to write pieces of approximately 500 words on "the promise and challenges for future narrative research, including critiques of and hopes for our own scholarship." These were prepared in advance of the event, and sent to the discussants, who were asked not only to comment upon the set of issues raised, but also to provide a framework for looking at the problems as a whole set. Not only did the contributors and discussants come from a range of different backgrounds and geographical locations, but the range of intellectual interests represented by those who attended the day was very marked: poets, writers of fiction, policy makers, psychoanalysts, sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, social workers, and others. Perhaps the most outstanding feature of the day was the conversations which happened across boundaries, characterised by both a search for common ground as well as a recognition of the different intellectual standpoints represented by the people there. What follows are written versions of the prepared, spoken contributions, which helped to frame the discussion for the day. It is our hope that the stimulating thought pieces prepared for this event can be used as a launch pad for further discussion into the realm of our shared endeavors in narrative scholarship.

To listen to recordings of the day, please visit:
http://www.uel.ac.uk/cnr/CNRTenthAnniversaryEvents1.htm

NARRATIVE WORKS
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

# Looking Forward, Looking Back: Future Challenges for Narrative Research

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**Molly Andrews**
*Centre for Narrative Research*
*University of East London*

I want to start with a short story. This summer, I found myself in San Francisco, and like so many tourists, ill-prepared for the cold Pacific winds which deprive that city of anything which can meaningfully be called a summer. In my attempt to purchase a warm top, I found myself in the midst of a famous, large department store. There I was, in an ocean of women's clothing, when my eye caught sight of a huge sign. It read, simply "Narrative." Have we really come full circle—is everything, and therefore nothing, a narrative? As Ian Craib wrote in his chapter in CNR's first book:

> One might think that a concept which brings together the world religions, all of Western philosophy, large-scale statistical correlations in the social sciences, every biography and autobiography that's ever been written, every work of fiction and my account of losing a pet cat obscures more than it illuminates. Narratives are stories and stories are not simple. (Craib, 2000, p. 64)

Indeed. I think I can safely say that the last ten years have been spent exploring how very not simple narratives are. One of the key challenges for us as narrative scholars is to dispel the myth that doing narrative research is an easy option. Like Caesar's wife, narrative scholars must be even more rigorous and more robust in their critical and analytic endeavors than we would were we to stand on more well-travelled territory. That means that we must not shy away from the difficult questions—both methodological and theoretical— that are part and parcel of narrative scholarship. We hope that we will explore some of those issues together today.

As narratives are inherently bound to questions of time and timing, it is, I think, appropriate here to comment on both the time and the timing of CNR. In terms of the question of time, it is only now in retrospect that the story of the creation of CNR seems evident, maybe even inevitable. It is almost as if certain key players were drawn inexorably together, to create this vibrant intellectual community. Here I do not mean merely those whose names were on the original pieces of paper which gave birth to the Centre, but indeed many of you in this room today, as well as absent friends, who have given so very much to CNR. The timing of the creation of CNR owes much to the inspiring scholarship of other colleagues. As we all know, the last quarter of a century has been characterised by a sharp increase in the interest in narrative research, particularly in the social sciences. Nineteen ninety-three was a particularly important year: Cathy Riessman's *Narrative Analysis* and Mark Freeman's *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* were both published then. And we at CNR were very lucky that both Cathy and Mark would become longtime friends of our Centre and help us to build it. We knew we were not alone in our shared passion, and

this gave us strength. We were clear that we wanted to make a space for people from a wide range of disciplines to come together and share their ideas about narrative: what it is and what it isn't; what it can illuminate and what it obscures; how the spoken and written word relate to the visual world; the meaning and sometimes lack of meaning of silence and the unspoken.

Looking back on ten years of CNR, and looking around the room today, it is with a sense of deep accomplishment and camaraderie that I can say with some confidence that our research Centre has at least partially fulfilled its mission: to provide for us, our students, and our colleagues a place in which to share and debate our thoughts about narrative research. Some people may not know that our formal name was originally "Centre for Narrative Research in the Social Sciences." However, we soon dropped the last bit, as we realised that much of the work we were interested in came not only from outside of the social sciences, but from outside of the academy. We have amongst us here today artists, poets, documentary film makers, therapists, writers of fiction, as well as a good number of social scientists. From the beginning, we decided to adopt a broad approach to that which we considered "narrative." We are often asked exactly what we mean by the term narrative—and on this question I'm sure we will have some interesting conversations today (I'm still perplexed by the large neon sign in the department store). Our interest was not in being self-appointed "narrative police," but rather in helping to create a rigorous intellectual forum where the importance of story as a prism through which to explore meaning-making could be explored.

In the early years we ran a number of one-day workshops: Narrative and Discourse; Narrative and Education; Narrative and Politics; Narrative and Mental Health; Narrative and Refugees—the list goes on. Many of you participated in one or more of those. They were very intensive events; time consuming to organise and exceptionally rewarding (and draining) intellectually. We also had an Economic and Social Research Council sponsored seminar series with Phil Cohen's London East Research Institute, which culminated in a three-day residential conference which many of you helped to make a most memorable event. After a few years of running workshops, seminar series and symposia, we decided we somehow needed to "bottle" the excitement that these events created. This was our hope in devising the book which eventually was published as *Doing Narrative Research*.

To say that it has been rewarding to be part of the creation and nourishment of this Centre is a typically dry English understatement. When so many of our colleagues feel that ideas no longer matter in the academic world, that bureaucracy and institutionalisation have taken the place of intellectual inquiry and debate, I, and we, feel most appreciative of what we have. We are clear that the success of our Centre has been a group effort, and we thank everyone who has helped to make it so. May we continue to encourage and debate with one another for many years to come.

**Corinne Squire**
*Centre for Narrative Research*
*University of East London*

CNR is characterized by two orientations which are important not just for the Centre, but within contemporary narrative research generally. First, CNR's approach is defined by openness—not just inclusivity for the sake of it, but theoretical and methodological openness that promotes critical discussion. This approach also involves an understanding of narrative that, while it does not include everything within that category, is open to the possibilities of narrative taking in more than spoken, written, and filmed texts. In addition, the approach adopts an understanding of narratives as necessarily and definitively incomplete, contradictory and disunified, that derives from a range of disciplinary approaches to narrative, within the arts and humanities as well as the social sciences, and that is emblematized in the recent book *Beyond Narrative Coherence*, edited by and contributed to by many of the participants in this anniversary event (Hyvarinen et al, 2010).

The second element distinguishing CNR research is its commitment to treating narratives as politically active texts and practices. The work of Centre members and associates addresses the politics of personal and particular stories, the ways in which they are "telling" in the second sense of this word: that is, salient and effective. This approach positions CNR's critical openness not as a general property, but in terms of specific—if changing—positions and investments.

**Maria Tamboukou**
*Centre for Narrative Research*
*University of East London*

If somebody asked me to summarize in a sentence our work at the Centre for Narrative Research in the last ten years, I would probably say: "Well, we have been trying hard not to answer the question of 'what is narrative?'" This has been our main challenge for a decade and indeed we have been trying hard to leave this question open against all kinds of pressures from publishers, funding bodies, academic bureaucrats, and our students—although the latter have not only been the easiest to persuade but have also become ardent campaigners of the idea: "leave the question open." But why is it so important to leave this question open? And what do we offer as an alternative?

Well, the answer figures prominently on the cover of our last co-edited book, *Doing Narrative Research*. Narrative is not and should not be ontologically defined; narrative is about doing; it is a process that is open, in movement, in the intermezzo of academic research fields, philosophical traditions, scientific methods; it is forceful and dynamic since it constantly

creates conditions of possibility for an experience of "pure time," a conceptualization of time as an assemblage of moments, wherein past and present co-exist in opening up radical futures.

It is for this reason that we insist upon the futility of pinning down "what narrative is," since the moment we think we have grasped it, narrative is already, always elsewhere. And here lies the challenge: if we can't enclose narrative in a tiny little box or maybe fence it within a beautiful garden, what do we do? Cigdem Esin has put it very beautifully in her thesis: "We are narrative travellers, we embark on a journey—this is where the pleasure and joy of narrative research lies: in the doing, on the road." But it is not just that: while travelling, we also make cartographies of our narrative journeys, retracing our paths while constantly opening up new ones or abandoning others. Our maxim is a verse from Spanish poet Antonio Machado: "caminante no hay camino, se hace camino alandar," which could be freely translated as "there is no path; you open up your path while walking." It is on these journeys, in the doing, on the road, that we constantly draw and redraw boundaries and make multiple connections between and amongst countries and continents, disciplinary fields, academic and activist communities.

Indeed, amongst the many things that narratives can be about is a network of people and ideas in communication. But this pluralistic and relational component of narratives is also in danger of being transmuted into a tribalistic assemblage, small elites with their little gods and goddesses, blissfully oblivious of each other and of what is going on around them. Well, this is a serious challenge for us: how to work against the little Englander trends within narrative research, celebrating what narrative is mostly about: the materialization of the Arendtian paradox of uniqueness and plurality. In an Arendtian mood then, narrative research facilitates and charts memory journeys through which "we leave" the world and then return to it, conscious of the uniqueness of the existential experience: "being-in-the-world-with-others."

**Cigdem Esin**
*Centre for Narrative Research*
*University of East London*

## Postgraduate Research in CNR

The Centre for Narrative Research has been accommodating interdisciplinary, intercultural and inter-lingual postgraduate research since its formation. The expertise of the co-directors and their celebratory approach towards academic creativity attract many postgraduate researchers who want to situate their research in the world of narratives.

Mastoureh Fathi's research on class narratives of Iranian women migrants in London, Sharon Gallagher's work researching ways of living

with severe illness through narrative, Solveigh Goett's work that analyses everyday textiles in the narration of the self, Mary Lodato's research on the narratives of institutional abuse in Ireland, Linda Sandino's research about the narratives of visual art professionals, Nicola Samson's work about narratives of belonging in an east London street which has been home to migrants for decades are just examples of the exciting postgraduate research for which CNR provides room.

The intellectual and emotional space that CNR opens up for postgraduate narrative researchers is what makes it a productive centre. In this space, CNR students learn how to think, discuss, and write narratively; to think about narrative research critically; to challenge the ways in which narrative research is conducted; and to create further narrative methods in their experiences as narrative researchers. In other words, CNR constitutes a turning point for its postgraduate students at which they learn how to construct their research path and become part of this construction process as narrative researchers.

Becoming a narrative researcher is closely linked to being part of dialogical networks in which narratives are constituted and function. CNR plays a very important role in guiding postgraduate researchers in their narrative journey(s), in which they appreciate the necessity of listening to the stories of stories. Being connected to broader narrative communities is a part of this journey. CNR provides various opportunities for postgraduate students to build up connections with narrative communities all over the world; the CNR community is aware of the fact that to support postgraduate work means to contribute to the constitution of the future in the narrative world.

**Jens Brockmeier**
*Free University of Berlin*

## Unravelling Human Meaning-Making

"And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss," Shakespeare has Juliet say. And we believe her because we know that if there is anything that makes the metaphor of holding hands as kissing possible and believable, it is the thunder of first love. First love does not compare to anything else that happens thereafter. All loves after first love, it has been said, bear the traces of disappointment that the first was not the only one. I think the success story of the first decade of London's Center for Narrative Research, which is part of the success story of social sciences and narrative studies over the last three decades, is not the story of a first love. It is the story of a relationship that emerged out of a profound disappointment: the disappointment over the narrow limits and restrictions of traditional academic attempts to understand the complexities of lived and experienced human reality.

To be sure, efforts to understand the subjective dimension of human reality are all but new. It did not need narrative theorists to discover that it is subjectivity that makes us human. Neither have narrative theorists revealed that meanings and processes of meaning-making are essential for human subjectivity, and that these processes are tied up with manifold actions and interactions—in fact, that their principal residence is humans' cultural forms of life, as Wittgenstein put it. What narrative research, both literary and social-scientific, has developed is the argument that the more these acts of meaning become complex, that is, the more they become constructive, creative, and interpretive, the more they are inextricably intertwined with language, with narrative language.

There is nothing that captures the complexities of human meaning-making more appropriately than narrative. "Appropriately" means intelligently, sensitively, sympathetically. What is the reason for this elective affinity? It is because the intricacies of human meaning-making are not just represented or expressed by narrative; they only come into being through and in narrative. I call this the *strong narrative thesis*. The strong narrative thesis applies to a set of phenomena that only exist due to narrative, to this most comprehensive and subtle of language forms that has evolved in a long and intimate interplay with human actions, emotions, and intentions, manifesting itself in many variations in many different linguistic and cultural worlds.

Yet make no mistake, the universe of human existence, of action and interaction, of mind and culture, is of course much wider than the realm of language. In many human activities language does not play a major role or no role at all—although there may be fewer than we think (considering that every human activity always takes place as a socially and culturally mediated act within a symbolic space, and this space does not exist without language).

Still, there is one domain where language and, in particular, the constructive, imaginative, and creative potentials of narrative, of narrative world-making, are crucial—whether it is labelled in terms of fiction or nonfiction, literary or everyday discourse. This area emerges whenever our attempts to give meaning to and interpret the meaning of the world in which we live become complicated, troubled, and messy; and some say the human condition as such is complicated, troubled, and messy. To come to terms with this complexity we can't do without the options of narrative—or only in restricted and further complicated ways, as in the case of physical and mental illnesses that break our narratives and often even silence them.

It is here, in this privileged access to human subjectivity and its intentional, emotional, and social fabric where I see the very strength of the narrative approach, a strength that distinguishes it from other approaches; and there are, as we know, quite a number of them which are certainly not at all disappointing. It is here, then, where I see the genuine contribution of narrative research and thus its most promising potential for the future.

How do phenomena look that owe their existence to narrative world-making, that only exist in this unique linguistic form? Consider this little story. When I wake up tomorrow morning and reflect over what I'm trying to explain right now, I might think I should have put more emphasis on the meaning the story of Romeo and Juliet had in Shakespeare's world, where it was not at all a touching story about first love, as most nineteenth- and twentieth-century audiences saw it—and as Juliet's kissing metaphor suggests—but about the impossibility of true passions in a hostile political environment: a story about violence, brutality, hopelessness, and the desperation of people who see no way out other than suicide.

This is my story. Now let me outline a thumbnail narrative analysis. What we find in this story is not only a number of quick time shifts—flashforwards (my waking up tomorrow morning) and flashbackwards (thinking back to today; from this moment in my talk to my previous quote of Juliet; from today's to Shakespeare's world). It also includes an excursion, a comparison of three interpretations of Shakespeare's play against the backdrop of different ways of narrative and dramatic understanding (in the Renaissance, the nineteenth and twentieth century, and the one I just sketched). In this way it interweaves a number of different moments in the time of my life—after all, this is a little autobiographical story: it's about my remembering an event in my life—with a number of historical times. And what's more, all of it is carried out in the subjunctive, playing through a possibility that might come up in the future ("tomorrow morning I might feel…").

By *strong narrative thesis* I mean the claim that temporal scenarios of such multilayered and pluri-temporal complexity are only possible in narrative; in fact, they are only imaginable in narrative. There is no other sign or symbol system and certainly no pure thought or cognition that would be able to evoke a complexity that even comes close to this little story which, let's not forget, took not even a minute to be told.[1]

Much of what is at stake in autobiographical stories, big and small, in discursive presentations of self and identity, in the experience of the healthy and the sick, and, more generally, in the landscape of fictive imagination which is so much part and parcel of our life, is made of such narrative fabric. It is likewise complex, likewise messy, and likewise sophisticated. And it likewise would not exist without narrative.

The point is not whether these storyworlds are developed and coherent. All happy and coherent stories are alike; every unhappy and incoherent story is unhappy and incoherent in its own way, to change Tolstoy's (1878/2000, p. 3) sentence only a little. After all, we know exactly how it would look if Juliet's story ended happily, and why Shakespeare didn't go for it; why he went for a unhappy version, full of complication and

[1] There is, perhaps, only one exception to this strong narrative claim: music. But then, most musical compositions in the European tradition since Monteverdi have a strong narrative charge.

messiness. Because it is here where the narrative imagination, our furthest reach for meaning, is at its best.

In a nutshell, in unravelling the complexity, messiness, and sophistication of human meaning-making I see one of the most promising challenges for future narrative research.

**Michael Erben**
*Centre for Biography and Education*
*University of Southhampton*

## Two Status Challenges: The Status of Narrative Research in the Academy and the Status of Emotions in Narrative Reporting

> ". . . as if every passion did not contain its quantum of reason." (Neitzsche)

There are two challenges for narrative research in the future that I wish here to raise briefly.

The first relates to the standing of narrative enquiry in relation to officially recognised and sanctioned research. A problem for the growing number of narrative researchers who wish to declare themselves primarily narrative researchers and not something else has intensified. Not very long ago, a piece of research was recognised as worthwhile and interesting by unconstrained peers; here work done was appraised, noted, and recognised and so became legitimated as part of the intellectual history of an area of study. This is no longer regarded as sufficient. While there were matters to criticise in the older system, academic freedom was nonetheless greater than now. Because narrative research is often marked by intimate descriptions of lived experience when such accounts present a cultural and political scenario at odds with officially approved regimes of research, the consequences for researchers can be both acute and chronic. This has happened glaringly and publicly with Professor Andrew Sparkes' leaving Exeter University and, in a lower key, it is happening regularly where voluntary severance, early retirement, and other managerial devices are being deployed. As Dan Zahavi (2005) has recently said in relation to narrative understanding, "ideals can be identity-defining; acting against one's ideals can mean the disintegration of one's wholeness as a person" (p. 129). This is not a matter of special pleading for narrative research, nor is it a matter of trying to dodge the question of what is genuine as opposed to bogus work. It is a matter of a different ethical apparatus for judgement. When I am presented with naturalistic narrative description, I believe it because I believe in the person supplying it—first and foremost because they are part of (or are becoming part of) an attested community that acts in good faith, which is, in fact (without wishing to sound too pious), a moral communitarian organisation. (I would characterise the CNR as such a body.)

We will be increasingly challenged over this way of judging validity. Alasdair MacIntyre was the first, superbly, to alert us to what has become a growing problem where he argued (and continues to argue) against the pursuit in universities of instrumental, quarantined objectives that are removed from a general appreciation of lives' narrative journeys.

This links directly to my second point of challenge for narrative research. Narrative research is concerned with the intricacies of lives lived through time. The results of this research are provided for the illumination of the research community (we ourselves). Such research often involves depictions of high affect. The research community (we ourselves) then add purposefully to this research by supplying forms of perfectly good commentary, usually in the form of some variety of documentary analysis. Most frequently (but not, admittedly, always), we exhibit little working out of our emotional response to the narrative examples we have encountered. This is somewhat surprising, given just how interested narrative researchers are in emotional development. Consider just a single example of emotion in a piece of narrative research (one could choose from many), here published in the *Auto/Biography Yearbook for 2008,* in an article by Jenny Byrne:

> Carole decided to seek advice; this was to give up her role. This was a sensible and sane idea, but wasn't that exactly what the opposition wanted? She was suffering badly and the lack of sleep, incessant anxiety, panic attacks, dreading work, fear of meeting people in corridors, in the senior common room, opening email and all the other plaguing . . .

I was editor for this article. Here is an edited response (given with permission) from a referee but not, at the referee's request, sent to the author:

> What do I do in responding to this? What I feel is a resurgence of emotions—in a related situation I was at a meeting, week after week, and I followed less and less. I was losing myself in a sea of garbage, I felt like one of those poor turtles imprisoned in discarded fishing nets. I couldn't escape into my work and I couldn't understand a thing anymore—it wouldn't go in and I didn't want it to go in . . . .

Typically, comments like this rarely transform themselves into published third-person commentary. Should we not when we publish our commentaries on the published work of others be able to respond, amidst more traditional protocols, in such a way? To build up a palimpsestic range of informed emotional responses to the narrative life under discussion? May not sometimes the act of interpretation involve some thoughtful emotional declaration? It has always been a maxim of narrative research that the stories lie upon each other—each interpretation not acting in any crude way as superior to the one before, but going toward the process of hermeneutical

narrative understanding. This seems to me a challenge for narrative in the next years—to engage with the narratives before us, in good faith, and by employing as well as the techniques of documentary analysis also, more frequently than hitherto, emotional commentary. I can imagine how this would go down with the REF committees, but then that takes me back to my first point.

**Mark Freeman**
*College of the Holy Cross*

**Reflections on the Future of Narrative Research**

Rather than focusing explicitly on "challenges" tied to the future of narrative research, I'm going to focus on "worries." After voicing these, I'll try to say something about the challenges implied therein. Let me be quick to add that some of these are no doubt idiosyncratic, tied to my own personal predilections and biases about what's happening in the world of narrative and where it ought to go. Let me also add for every one of these worries, there's something very valuable going on, something that ought to be preserved in some way. In this sense, I suppose that, in addition to worries and challenges, they're about important dilemmas. So, what are they?

First: I worry about narrative losing some of its humanistic edge and spirit, perhaps by becoming too readily assimilated to mainstream social scientific thinking. This worry bespeaks the fact that, for me, the main impulse for turning to narrative in the first place was broadly humanistic; it was a way of placing front and center persons, human lives, in all of their messiness and complexity. In some quarters, narrative research seems to be on the way to scientific "legitimacy." As nice as this is on one level, I'm concerned about it too. A challenge, therefore, for at least a portion of our work, is to keep people front and center.

Second: I worry about narrative being reduced to method – and for some of the same reasons just mentioned. Systematic, method-driven approaches have their place, in narrative research as elsewhere. They're particularly useful in convincing others about the scientific legitimacy of the work we do and, perhaps, in reassuring ourselves that our work is appropriately rigorous. But insofar as messy, complex human lives remain focal, some of our work should remain methodologically messy too: exploratory, imaginative, art-ful. A challenge here, therefore, is to retain rigor in our work but without turning that rigor into discrete methods and techniques.

Third: I worry about narrative inquiry becoming too "meta," too much about itself and, at times, too abstract. This sort of work can be excellent in its way. But it's also likely to be read mainly or even exclusively by fellow travelers in narrative research interested in working

out this or that methodological or theoretical issue. In a related vein, I worry about "competition" between different frameworks of narrative research and our resultant efforts being directed more at one another than at the phenomena of interest. Digging at one another's work can of course be good fun; I do it myself on occasion. But it can also become autistic and take us away from things that matter more. I hope to see narrative research move into a larger, less methodologically and theoretically specialized arena of ideas. This is certainly where I'm trying to take the narrative psychology series I'm currently editing.

Fourth: Finally (for now), I worry about narrative become a catch-all term that, by virtue of being everywhere, ends up being nowhere—that is, losing its specificity as an idea, a tool for thinking. I also worry about the fact that narrative work sometimes arouses either the skepticism or indignation (or whatever) of people who find it faddish or who believe it's overextending its reach. However wrongheaded I/we may find them to be, there can be (small) grains of truth in their assessment of things. The challenge here is for narrative research to remain wide-ranging and inclusive without losing a sense of its proper limits, its central aims, and, most fundamentally, its critical, transformative edge as a lens for exploring human lives.

**Margareta Hydén**
*Linköping University*

There are two sets of questions I would like to propose for discussion at the event:

The first set of questions concerns the future context and companionship needed for maintaining and developing narrative studies as a method and a form of research that matters for people inside and outside of the research community.

In my field, social work, the one-liner in charge at the moment is "ideology is out and pragmatism is in." "What works is what matters" is another, related statement. They are both contested statements and have been launched as arguments for an evidence-based practice in social work. I will not further debate this here—what I want to suggest as a future challenge for narrative research is to adopt a similar pragmatic and "what works is what matters" kind of state. Few of us would oppose this statement; as a matter of fact, the basic claim guiding the "narrative turn" in social sciences is that "narrative matters." What I think we need to consider, however, is the consequences for narrative research. If narrative research is proven useful and incorporated in various empirical fields, will it be possible to hold the narrative research field together, or will it be divided into sub-specialties, such as narrative research in social work, in sociology, in studies of violence in close relationships, etc.? If so, is this a desirable development of narrative research, or the beginning of the end, or something

in between? Will narrative studies gain or lose? Could a narrative research success story mean the end of narrative research as an identifiable unit?

The second set of questions concerns the basic assumption of narrative as a method and a form of research and suggest that it reduces stories to objects to which are attributed the ability to represent our lived experiences, helping us to know ourselves and see us as active agents in the world. What I am suggesting is not that we need to critique the ideas of "identity narratives" or "narratives of social life" per se, but encourage us to consider the promise that narrative research would provide us a more complex and complete picture of social life than the positivist views of knowledge are capable of.

I will approach this set of questions by bringing to the fore what I learned about systems theory as a young family therapist many years ago. I learned that the dissection of lived experience, and the practice of looking at "parts" to understand the "whole," maintained an atomistic view of experience. I learned that living systems are integrated "wholes" whose properties could be reduced to those of smaller parts and could be understood only within the context of the larger whole. From a systems point of view, relationships between parts are primary. To take these ideas to the future of narrative research, I would like us to be concerned with a focus on relationships of "parts": such as individual narratives, between individual narratives and sub-narratives, between sub-narratives, between individual narratives and counter-narratives, etc. I think the underlying question is if we should move in the direction of macro-analysis, of analysis of "the whole," by focussing on narrative relations.

**Margaretta Jolly**
*Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research*
*University of Sussex*

81 Shi'a religious parade standard
82 Miniature of a Mughal prince
83 Shadow puppet of Bima
84 Mexican codex map
85 Reformation centenary broadsheet

Narratives are built from objects like these. But narratives are more than lists. Narratologists, since the Russian formalists in the 1920s, have conceptually separated the narrative as "plot" from the narrative as "story," a mere sequence of events. Narratives arrange. E. M. Forster's (1927/1955) explanation remains the pithiest: "The king died and then the queen" is a story. "The king died and then the queen died of grief" is a plot (p. 86).

The challenge that Molly, Corinne, and Maria have set for us today is to pick out one issue that we see as crucial to the future of narrative

research. My one word answer is *plot*. By this I mean narratives that dramatise causality and consequence, and with this, fate and choice.

I say this because, like many, I have become concerned about how to return from the lure of "little stories" to the challenge of "big stories," from the wonder of individual life narratives to the problem of history-writing. This is a question of how we analyse the political plots of our age, but also how we ourselves can express collective change. We have rightly celebrated the diversification of culture and authority that has come with the end of old enlightenment tales of last century Marxism and liberal humanism. But we can't fail to note the narrative vacuum into which fundamentalisms, new nationalisms, new patriarchies, have poured.

My view is that we need to fight fire with fire, to create other equally powerful collective plots. My contentious example is Neil McGregor's *History of the World in 100 Objects*, which he presented on BBC Radio 4 this year. The structure, or story, was one hundred 15-minute episodes, each about an object made during the last two million years, and currently housed in the British Museum. McGregor is the Museum's director and no revolutionary. But in this episodic radio programme, and its related interactive website , he has given us a contemporary epic of human war and peace. By telling world history through things people have made, traded, prized, and lost, he shows we are tied together through material economies, as well as through art. The list of objects with which I opened this talk were made between 1550 and 1770. He interprets this couple of centuries through the theme of Tolerance and Intolerance. And this is his narrative:

> The Protestant Reformation split the western Church into two rival factions and triggered Europe's final major religious war. The failure of either side to achieve victory in the Thirty Years War would lead to a period of religious tolerance in Europe. Three great Islamic powers dominated Eurasia: the Ottomans in Turkey, the Mughals in India and the Safavids in Iran. The Mughals promoted religious tolerance, allowing the Indian subcontinent's largely non-Islamic population to continue to worship as they pleased. In Iran the Safavids created the world's first major Shi'i state. Exploration and trade provided opportunities for religions to attract new followers. Catholicism in Central America and Islam in South East Asia both adapted to accommodate the existing rituals of their new converts.

In some ways, I am returning to Hayden White's 1980 argument about the construction of historical consciousness through narrative. And I am fully aware that all of you here are wrestling with the question of how to relate individual to collective in newer terms, whether through collective memory, prosopography, or the analytical stage of psychosocial methods.

But what happens if we look again to plot, and even to epic plot, as a way to connect particular to general? Epic is usually seen as either tribal heroic quest, or nationalist history. However, McGregor's narrative ends

with objects that express the power of totalitarian regimes, the sexual revolution of the 1960s, and the end of Europe's colonial empires. And his final object dramatises our need for the biggest big story yet, one of ecological sustainability that goes outside the human life story altogether:

96 Russian revolutionary plate
97 Hockney's 'In the dull village'
98 Throne of Weapons
99 Credit card
100 Solar powered lamp and charger

**Olivia Sagan**
*Anna Freud Centre*
*University College London*

## Reflections: Challenges to Narrative Research

> To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.
> (Samuel Beckett, quoted by Driver, p. 23)

For those of us who are narrative researchers, oral historians, gatherers of, and listeners to stories, there is always an elephant in the room which is both private and intimate, and shoutingly political. This elephant sits, heavy and impervious, representing a singular question: how is the unspoken, and the unspeakable, narrated? For me, the challenge, or suite of challenges, which flow from the instance of silence, of repression, of the unwordable—remain intractable, and yet alluring. For those of us who attend to the narratives of individuals whose life course is ploughed and churned by histories of mental ill health, the weight of a silence, the sideways glance, the quiver of a cheek, is often the most accurate purveyor of a narrative untold.

Brendan Stone suggests that to "faithfully describe or express the manifestations of madness within a discourse governed by reason will be an undertaking, which, at the least, is fraught with difficulty" (Stone, 2004a, p. 50), and continues by arguing that "narrative's tendency toward linearity and resolution" is "inimical to the expression of madness" (Stone, 2004b, p.16). This perspective is important for its positing of the idea that squeezing such stories into a coherence alien to them inevitably means the end result will be a false story, "a kind of violence inflicted on the life narrated" (Stone, 2004b, p.19). Indeed, many of my "case histories," with retrospective reading, fail to conjure the experience of being with that person—fail, too, to be even a passable approximation of the internal world into which I was given rare, intense insight, through the unspoken, as "the unanalysable aspect of experience that crouches always at the margins of awareness" (Frosh, 2002, p. 115).

"As pines keep the shape of the wind… so words guard the shape of a man" (Seferis). But do they? Arguably our narratives re-imprison us in our subject positions, giving us the shape an order requires us to occupy. Frosh (2002) argues that postmodernism "demonstrates the insufficiency of language, the way in which all this narrativising is a defence against something else" (2002, p. 101). So we are led to account for the silences, represent the stutters of anxiety, document the pain-ful frisson. But in our attempts to answer "defence against what?" the narrative researcher is immediately grabbing at licence: of interpretation, of re-construction, a permit to create a "truth"—"delightfully bendable and politically powerful" (Slater, 2000, p. 219).

In the slippery exercise of narrative research, there is one further addendum: that in the calling forth of stories which is triggered by illness (Charon, 2004, p. 23), in the intimate process of telling and recording, there is a re-scripting. Such re-scripting may serve to re-inscribe illness onto our bodies—and into our minds—in an elaborate, iterative bad faith narrative (Craib, 2000). Returning to Stone, for relief, however, one clings to his reminder that "the irruptions of otherness within speech and writing" may "help effect a reconciliation" (Stone, 2004, p. 30) with what Kristeva, whom he quotes, calls "the foreigner within ourselves" (Kristeva, 1991, p. 1). And this may be what keeps me here, as listener, as counsellor, as narrator, as narrative researcher: reconciliation, reparation—the phantasy of the return of the happy ending.

**Alexandra Georgakopoulou**
*King's College London*

**Response**

I feel honoured to have been invited to offer my thoughts on six very stimulating contributions and I am aware that I cannot do justice to them in five minutes, so apologies in advance for some inadvertent schematizing. In many ways, the contributions have confirmed my own sense that narrative research has lately been going through a period of soul-searching, which I personally see as necessary and timely. I believe that the CNR has greatly contributed to and facilitated this engagement with who we are and where we are going in ways in which, hopefully, we can talk about in our discussion. The soul-searching cannot be isolated, in my view, from a more generalized crisis of qualitative social science research that has been partially blamed by many sociologists for the mainstreaming of qualitative research methods, their appropriation and over-use by the public and popular culture domain of narrative and interviews, making narrative analysts occupy an uneasy position between under-resourced academia and having to argue in what ways they add value to the docu-soaps and reality

shows and all other sensational displays of people's lives in public and mass-mediated arenas.

If this internal dialogue is good to have, I would like to think that it equips us better to deal with the institutional difficulties lying ahead, particularly for various "humanistic" disciplines. My view is that the terms of this internal dialogue that has been going on within narrative research can be diagrammatically described in the form of two pulls, each of which has had a strong hold in narrative research in its own right. I personally saw arguments in each of the contributions that could more or less neatly fall into one or the other pull. The two pulls are, on the one hand, a nostalgic attachment to the past, the roots and origins of the field; and on the other hand, a revisionist pull: could we see these pulls as centripetal and centrifugal perhaps? And we might even see them as articulating a dilemma regarding the field's striving for coherence and self-delimitation on the one hand and, on the other hand, the area looking out to form distinct disciplinary affiliations (e.g., with sociolinguistics, sociology, psychology), but in the process losing something of its autonomy. Great things have come out of both pulls, but I think that there are certain dangers to both and in this respect I share some of the worries that the contributors have raised. Let me be more specific: what I call attachment to the roots of narrative research, an area that has an indelible past of critical and political edge, refers to scholars feeling compelled to value, preserve, and nurture the humanistic, anti-positivist edge of narrative. In this pull, we see scholars being animated by the politics of faith in the subject and in the scholars themselves, and by the irreducible emotional appeal of the subject. And it is in this pull that we see people feeling very strongly about narrative being viewed as an epistemology and not be reduced to a method. Privileging human experience remains the main aim here and untold, silenced stories are central to the project of narrative analysis.

On the downside, appeals to this pull have legitimated a resistance to narrowing down and specifying the object of inquiry: formulating frameworks of analysis and working towards agreed upon principles of analysis. The worthiness of the subject is proclaimed so much that undertaking its study at times seems sufficient—taking the epistemological stance exactly like narrative researchers did at the inception of the area is at times seen as an end in itself rather as a means to an end.

In the interests of a balanced discussion, I want to bring in now what I see as the revisionist pull: this is about opening up the area of narrative research to less canonical stories in terms of form and social actions, but also about problematizing the taking-for-granted significance of the object of inquiry: recognizing that the place of narrative needs to be argued against a myriad of other communicative, semiotic and social activities. There is a tendency towards systematizing narrative in this pull as an observable activity—not "exotizing" human subjectivity but pinning it down, not exempting it from the aim of developing an agreed upon set of principles and tools of analysis. This, at times, involves close disciplinary affiliations

(e.g., of narrative research with sociolinguistics, with discursive psychology, etc.) with the aim of developing an analytical apparatus for narrative. Lately, the revisionist pull has been associated with the opening up the area of narrative research to less canonical stories in terms of form and social actions. The de-throning and de-mythologizing of narrative has led to a forgotten appreciation of the very mundane stories, not the extraordinary or the ones deemed as "worthy" by the analysts, but the stories of the often unremarkable everyday life. This shift of focus from stories in research environments (e.g., interviews) to stories abounding in a variety of face-to-face and mediated contexts (from chats with friends to Twitter and status updates on Facebook) may be one way in which the pledge of narrative research for relevance can be renewed.

In my view, a danger lurking in revisionist approaches is throwing the baby out with the bathwater; as some of our contributors have pointed out, this involves forgetting about or pushing aside the sensitivity to the tellers and to their lived experience in favour of an emphasis on the technicalia of the analysis. An over-emphasis on the rigor and benefits of a particular method of narrative analysis may also close down other possibilities and create a new hegemony of sorts. Another pitfall is the resistance of researchers to exposing themselves, to asking: "Why these data now? And how come I am here and not somewhere else?"

Striking a balance between these two pulls, as I outlined them above, perhaps seems like an obvious thing to suggest as part of the agenda but also as a big challenge ahead for narrative research. And certainly the need for a higher level of standardization and disciplinary consensus in narrative research seems a fairly uncontroversial thing to suggest at this point in time. This attempt for standardization, however, has got to be gauged and calibrated in the context of the challenges that navigating the humanities-social sciences interface poses, for which the two aforementioned pulls may well serve as metaphors.

**Matti Hyvärinen**
*University of Tampere*

**Response: Narrative as a Method, and as Something Else**

Most of the speakers expressed strong reservations regarding the narrow idea of narrative as a method. If the narrative approach were only a method, the new narrative areas would have nothing to say to each other beyond the methodological concerns, as Margareta Hydén suggests. However, the prevailing academic division of work seems to constantly allot to us one sub-slot within the category of "qualitative research methods." Narrative materials that sometimes require an emotional reaction to be properly understood, as Michael Erben notes, do not have proper space within such rigorous methodological frames. The one-sided fascination with

method contains other problems as well. There is, for example, an eternal and mistaken search for the method of narrative analysis. Jaber F. Gubrium has said that he does not have a method but an "analytic vocabulary," each term of the vocabulary providing a distinct analytic perspective for the study. The literary scholars of narrative do not fancy "method talk" at all; they systematically privilege talk about narrative theory. In so doing, they do not apply a finished method or model from text to text; they clearly prefer to challenge and test their methodological tools with the help of the studied novels and stories. We certainly need to give various tools to our students, and we need to be able to communicate our argumentation step-by-step, but we hardly need to dream of a strong and solidly scientific interpretative technology, to quote a term by Dominick LaCapra (2004).

The bias towards method tends, equally, to impoverish theoretical work. Any problem, out there "in the real world," and we seem to be ready to collect stories about the problem, and analyse them. However, what Jens Brockmeier is saying above, is entirely different: "This [privileged narrative] area emerges whenever our attempts to give meaning to, and interpret the meaning of, the world in which we live become complicated, troubled, and messy." Narrative and narrative language are already there, as a part of human meaning making. Olivia Sagan acknowledges the other, dark side of narrative, that is, narratives that impose "a kind of violence" on lived, perplexing experience. Sagan thus invites a certain methodological—and possibly emotional—distance to at least some narratives and their seductions. More than anything else, these comments emphasize the need for further theoretical work on narrative minds.

Contributors also shared worries about the space of narrative studies within the competitive and even narrowing field of social research. Whatever the critics of narrative keep claiming, narrative studies are not fashionable or privileged within academia. Michael Erben and Mark Freeman observe complementary problems: Erben seeing the pressure of the mainstream pushing narrative scholars out of departments; Freeman lamenting the disappearing "humanist edge" due to the pressures exerted by the mainstream. The pressure is surely the same, but the effects are nevertheless experienced differently. A retreat toward strictly method-driven enquiry cannot be a proper response to this challenge. As an alternative, I tried to read the contributions more carefully in order to find helpful counter-arguments embedded in them. This is what I found:

*Narrative strength.* We are no longer the pioneers of the narrative turn; we have faced both criticism and flashbacks. Often, we (at least the current author) are (self-)critical and hesitant as regards the premises of narrative studies. Partly for this reason, I warmly welcome Jens Brockmeier's proposal about the thematic "centre" or specifically narrative problem field. Even though narrative enquiry is not a universal answer to all problems, it may quite obviously be the best available perspective in making sense of the messiness of the human condition.

*Narrative environments.* Margareta Hydén mentioned the risks of looking at the separate parts, at the singular narratives, instead of what she calls the "system." Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (2009) have made a similar point of foregrounding "narrative environments." Narratives, even deeply personal narratives, do not exist independently, but are circulated among and associated with other narratives. The sociology of narrative badly needs such environmental concepts as genre, master narrative and narrative networks.

*Narrative exploration.* Rigorous narrative analyses, personal research narratives, and theoretical investigations all have the capacity to become routine and safe mannerisms. Mark Freeman is therefore perfectly right in asking for regenerated narrative exploration, even if I may have partly different priorities as regards how to reach such ingenious, exploratory narrative moves. In particular, the observation that narrative enquiry is becoming too "meta" needs further scrutiny. Opposite examples come easily to mind: years ago, in a narrative conference, I was attending a panel. Sidonie Smith, the famous literary researcher of autobiography, posed a slightly frustrated question in the following discussion. It was something like this: "I fully agree with you that these are truly interesting stories. However, I am totally at a loss about where the narrative analysis comes in." A taste for powerful narratives should not culminate in the simple reciting of these narratives. Instead of fearing one-sidedly the high degree of "meta" and abstraction, I would welcome more circulation between powerful narratives, innovative analysis, and theory. In particular, I think, we should not teach or presume any particular style of writing narrative research as "the narrative style of study." Margaret Jolly suggests one recommended method of narrative exploration in discussing the lists preceding and breaking down chronological and all too covering narratives. I wonder if we should more often take a similar approach in researching live stories.

*Narrative revisionism.* I feel a certain ambivalence as regards Mark's comment on debates. Often, when differences are relatively small, participants indeed get carried away (at least, this seems to happen to me). Yet, without debates and criticism, we are hardly able to resist the risk of narrative becoming a "catch-all term" (and here I fully share Mark's worry). For this reason, I prefer contrasting the critical reception and automatic repetition of the heritage of narrative thought. If we are seriously worried about the position of narrative studies in the academic world, we should be more concerned about the unfortunate possibility of understanding narrative studies in the form of a "camp." Revisionism need not be equal to self-denial; it might also include a re-statement of the undeniable narrative strengths. Of course, even revisionism cannot be an answer as such, as revisionists are fully accomplished at creating new orthodoxies. My point is simple and it has been learned from the recent intellectual history of narrative studies. After a period of greatly expanded empirical work on narrative, we are now able to witness an increasing interest in theory. This

interest invites debates—at least civil ones—and it definitely invites maturing and sobering revisionism. In other words, we need to re-read carefully and critically such epoch-making authors as William Labov, Jerome Bruner, Alasdair MacIntyre, Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur. In this project, we even need the critics of narrative studies; and in this project, we are equally free to maintain that "narrative's tendency toward linearity and resolution" (Stone, 2004b, p. 16) is valid only for some narratives and more generally within the structuralist theory of narrative.

**Michael Rustin**
*University of East London*

## Concluding Reflections: Where is the Narrative of Narrative Research?

Is there a narrative which helps us to understand the life history of narrative research itself? And more particularly, in what narrative does the Centre for Narrative Research, whose tenth anniversary this is, belong? This seems an appropriate question to be asking on such an occasion.

Narratives, of course, are everywhere. At a recent Soundings seminar, in the Marx Memorial Library from which this symposium came, the guest speaker was the eminent sociologist and writer, Richard Sennett. He told us, with evident feeling, that the Spanish Civil War Posters which were around us on the walls of the Library's meeting room were familiar to him from the kitchen of his parents' house in New York in which he grew up, as they had been active supporters of the campaign for the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War. It was not difficult to see an implicit narrative which connected this memory to Sennett's lifelong radical convictions.

Narratives provided two of the most memorable moments of two of my recent summer holidays. One included a weekend visit to Newcastle, where across the Tyne in Gateshead we visited the Baltic, the complex of art galleries made from the conversion of the former Rank Hovis Flour Mill. There was an exceptional exhibition, of an installation by Sarah Sze. But on the way out, on the entrance floor, we came upon monitors on which were screened interviews with former Rank employees, describing, in talk, photographs and film, their working lives at the Mill. Newcastle-Gateshead has lost most of its industry in recent decades, and the Baltic, like the Sage concert hall next to it along the Tyne, is a major feature of the city's attempt to renew itself as a centre of culture. The workpeople's life stories were an evocative reminder of the city's industrial history.

This year, my equivalent holiday visit was to Saltaire, near Bradford, the "model town" built by the great nineteenth century woollen manufacturer, Sir Titus Salt. The well-planned town, with its streets of houses, hospital, college, church and other buildings, is a visual narrative in itself. The small cricket pavilion in the beautiful town park had a notice

commemorating the great England cricketer, Jim Laker, whom we learned first played his cricket for Saltaire Cricket Club.

But Salts Mill, the huge original mill buildings which are now Saltaire's central attraction, told more specific stories. A film described, in its first part, the achievements of Titus Salt, much as one might imagine it. Its second part told the story of Jonathan Silver, who had been responsible from 1986 for saving the disused Mill buildings from possible demolition, and for converting the largest one into the exceptional centre for art, design shopping, and tourism, that it is today. Jonathan Silver had also been an entrepreneur in textiles, but in his case as a fashion retailer in the new "sixties" style, not a great manufacturer like Sir Titus. Growing up in Bradford, he had been a college friend of David Hockney, and as a consequence in Salts Mill—and its leading attraction—is a large gallery devoted to Hockney's work. Jonathan Silver died quite young, in 1997, and it was moving to see his own achievement in finding a lasting use for Titus Salt's great woollen mill remembered in this way.

Margaretta Jolly discusses Neil McGregor's recent series of talks for radio, "The History of the World in 100 Objects," in which he drew on artifacts in the collection of the British Museum to tell many historical stories (McGregor, 2010). There was debate about the point of view which shaped McGregor's narrative, and what alternative points of view it might have obscured. But most striking to me is the achievement of this exceptional museum curator in telling stories which can bring objects to life for a multitude of people untrained in archaeology or the history of the arts. This is popular education as one wishes it to be.

All four of the examples of story-telling that I have so far given have a historical dimension, setting particular human experiences in a larger context of events and circumstances. This connection between subjective human experience, and its location in time, is indeed a characterising feature of narrative methods.

The foundation of narrative method lies in large part on its insistence on the importance of both these dimensions of understanding, in opposition to approaches which have been inclined to disregard them. English Marxist historians such as Christopher Hill and Edward Thompson developed a method of research and writing which gave great weight to the writings and actions of radical activists and ordinary citizens, insisting on their agency in the making of history. This was in opposition to more conservative histories which had focused largely on social elites, and even to "progressive" histories which based themselves on mechanistic explanatory laws, usually at root the laws of economics interpreted in contrasting ways. The development of "history from below" and oral history, for example, in the work of Raphael Samuel (1999) and the *History Workshop Journal*, and of Paul Thompson (2000) and the local history movement, developed this work with the aim of recovering everyday experience as a central element in the writing of history.

It seems to me that the democratic purpose of giving a voice to ordinary people who were previously left out of "official" history has been one of the main impulses in the development of narrative research. The subordinated and suppressed lives of subordinated citizens, as these were framed by divisions of class, gender, and race, have all become elements of this emerging tradition. The idea that everyone has his or her own story, if only one accords it recognition and respect, is an assertion of shared human dignity. It has been given expression in many different ways. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, and the later initiatives it gave rise to (Andrews, 2007) sought to resolve difference and divisions through giving voice to both sufferers and perpetrators under oppressive systems such as apartheid, the former usually reflecting more searchingly on their experiences than the latter. Alex Haley's (2007) book, and television series, "Roots," sought to bring the history of people of colour in the United States a new kind of public recognition. The current fashion for family genealogy, given its exemplary instances through following through television/film particular people's search for their origins, is another example of the widespread interest in personal narratives as a source of shared understanding of the links between past and present which are more moving and memorable than many more generalised depictions and enumerations of tragedies. I felt that I understood the class warfare of post-Revolutionary Russia most clearly when read Daniel Bertaux's (1997) narrative of the life history of an upper middle class woman who had struggled over years to maintain the integrity of her family's way of life, against the struggle of the Soviet regime to remove its traditions and practices from the face of the earth. Stories of individual lives can indeed illuminate historical situations. Two of Richard Sennett's most important books are given the form of a family narrative. The central figure of *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972), by Sennett and Cobb, works as a janitor, depicted as an exemplary American working man, enduring a life of hard work and modest means in the hope and expectation of a future which would bring more opportunities for his children. The central figure of *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) is this janitor's adult son, exemplary of his time in a different way. This man has had a good university education, and has a successful professional career. But he is also depicted by Sennett as living in a moral and psychological vacuum, such has been the erosion of social solidarity in the transition from one generation to another.

Several years ago I was engaged in a research project, called Social Strategies in Risk Societies (SOSTRIS) which used a Biographical Interpretative Method developed in post-war West Germany to investigate the experience of "social exclusion" in the European Union (Chamberlayne, Rustin, & Wengraf, 2002). Our project was funded by the EU, as part of a larger Targeted Programme of Research. This programme had its place in the larger political scheme of things. Jacques Delors (then President of the European Commission) had essentially failed in his attempt to move the EU away from its dominant free market principles towards social democracy.

As a consolation, one could thus be allowed to research social exclusion even if noone could do much about it politically. We and our six European national partners in this project identified six categories of social exclusion (early retirement, graduate unemployment, ethnic minority status, for example), and selected a sample of six individuals representing each of these, in each participating country.

The Biographical Interpretive Method is well designed to elicit complex and interesting stories from its subjects. It allows them the greatest possible freedom to construct their narratives in their own terms, imposing very few constraints upon them. Its interpretive energy goes into the analysis of this free-formed data, and in seeking to clarify what is significant or exemplary about each case—what we called "the structure of the case."

Our difficulty was that our sample of interviewees belonged to so many different contexts (seven nations, six varieties of exclusion), that it became very difficult to find what were the "typical" or exemplary features of the lives of our subjects.Our intention was to move iteratively between the individuals' experiences, and their generic or "typical" features. Our hope was that we would learn about social structures and processes through studying the life-journeys of individuals within them, and to learn about individuals through understanding how they had given shape to their lives within the influence of structures and cultures. It would have been much more feasible to do this if the fields of comparison within which we were working had been more confined. Comparing just two or three kinds of experience of exclusion, in only two or three national contexts, with larger samples of individuals in each chosen category, would have made the mapping of structural and cultural differences, as they are manifested in individual life-journeys, more practicable than it was. Scientific method usually proceeds through holding most factors in a situation constant, so that one can better understand the behaviour of those few that vary. Our problem was that there were very few constants, and many variables. I now regard this study as something of an heroic failure, which was able to reveal the great sociological potential of the biographical method without being sufficiently concentrated in its empirical focus to be able to deliver many definitive findings from it.[2]

One lesson to be drawn from the SOSTRIS project is that if one wishes to study the interactions between individuals and their social milieu, or between "agency and structure" as these are lived by individuals, one needs to study both ends of this chain in equal depth. A much smaller study in which I have a secondary role, that by Camillus Metcalfe on the life-experiences of a cohort of Irish nuns, may be meeting this dual requirement

[2] We were not helped by the fact that in the third year of the project, when we needed to be continuing the detailed analysis of our voluminous biographical findings, we found ourselves obliged, through prior commitment, instead to apply our biographical method to the study of exemplary social institutions which had been set up in each participating nation to respond to problems of social exclusion. Once again, this was a valuable inquiry to engage in, but with too little time to do it in adequate depth.

more successfully. This is because her study involves both the analysis of the complexity and subtlety of the nuns' life stories, and an investigation of the institutional order in which the nuns lived for all of their adult lives which draws on data other than the nuns' life-histories themselves. From this study we may hope to learn something both about a number of Irish convents, including their weakening and near-collapse as institutions in the recent period, and about the kind of lives which many women who entered them enjoyed or suffered.

*Doing Narrative Research* (Andrews, Squires, & Tamboukou, 2008), one of the several works published by the leading members of CNR, points out in its introductory and concluding chapters (by the editors and Catherine Riessman, respectively) how very diversified the field of narrative research is. I have focused on the humanist and democratic impulse in narrative studies, the search for and facilitation of "voices," especially hitherto unheard or suppressed voices. While also sympathetic to this tradition, the editors of *Doing Narrative Research* also drew attention to a contrary one, to a form of investigation concerned less with the experiential content and more with the rhetorical or discursive form of narratives—that is, with their role in shaping and constructing experience, rather than giving it expression. (Or, one might say, between narratives as an element of structure, and as a form of agency, to use a familiar sociological polarity.) Paul Ricoeur (1984-1988), who sought to define the significance of narrative in part against the determinism, abstraction and atemporality of structuralist theories and methods, perhaps provides a way of bringing together these opposite ways of thinking, just as he held that Freud's writing has both an interpretive and a causal dimension.[3]

My own view is that the extreme diversity of approaches found in narrative research now constitutes a real problem for its development. There is the risk in studies which give so much attention to the particulars of individual lives that no common patterns or "forms of life" emerge at all. There can be so many stories that meaning disappears. Social understanding cannot merely be accumulated by serial instances, unless some aspects of the common and the typical are revealed from particular cases. This is the case even for the modes of representation of all others most dedicated to the particular, namely representations in fiction and art. Here, as Aristotle pointed out in his writings on tragedy, the individual story (like that of Oedipus or Medea) becomes powerful through being shown to have an exemplary significance.

So it seems to me that it is time for some greater codification and systematisation of narrative research to take place. Perhaps this is a project for the next ten years of the Centre for Narrative Research! One way of

[3] Incidentally, I regard psychoanalysis as a field based fundamentally on the understanding of individual cases, with the identification from those of generic and typical forms of personality structure and development. From psychoanalytic case studies we learn both about recognisable individuals (and their relationships) and about structures and processes. (Rustin 2007). On unconscious elements in narratives, see Rustin and Rustin (2005).

approaching this task might be to proceed from exemplary particulars, to the construction of a "canon" of exemplary works in the field. The purpose of this might be to show how "universal" kinds of understanding have been discovered through narrative methods, and to identify the common procedures by which this has been accomplished. The reasonably-ordered development and accumulation of knowledge depends, in the arts as well as in the sciences, on the establishment of a measure of consensus concerning what good work is, and how it has been accomplished. A field cannot develop, even where it is inherently committed to the uniqueness and value of particular experiences, if every new practitioner has to reinvent his or her field from the beginning. It is time that those committed to the "scientific revolution" of narrative research became bolder in setting out their new paradigm, and thereby gave shape and pattern to the practices of "normal science," "puzzle solving," and subsequently, as Kuhn later wrote, "speciation" within it (Kuhn, 1962, 2000).[4]

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[4] "The Road since Structure" (Chapter 4 of Kuhn, 2000) develops this idea of speciation, comparing scientific development to biological evolution.

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