Stories, new materialism and pluralism: Understanding, practising and pushing the boundaries of narrative analysis

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A B S T R A C T

This article introduces narrative analysis as a way of engaging with storied data. Some key assumptions are first unpacked, highlighting the philosophical underpinnings of narrative research. The approach to narrative described in this article derives from narrative constructionism. This assumes that stories do more than simply reflect or recount experience: they *act* in people's lives in ways that matter deeply. The paper then distinguishes between two broad standpoints for approaching analysis, those of 'story analyst' and 'storyteller', before going on to describe how to conduct a particular form of constructionist narrative analysis –dialogical narrative analysis. The paper goes on by introducing an emerging trend of thought that attempts to reach beyond the shortcomings of narrative constructionism. That is new materialism. Shifting the analytical focus from stories and narratives to assemblages, new materialism is interested in how narrative and materiality affect each other within networks of human and non-human actors. After discussing what this might mean for researchers, pluralism is presented as an opportunity to combine different analytical worlds in a single study. Finally, an uncommon articulation of pluralism termed diffractive reading is highlighted and exemplified though a study combining narrative dialogism and new materialism. The paper closes with thoughts on the future of narrative in companionship with alternative approaches.

Introduction

In recent years, narrative analysis has become a popular approach to addressing human psychology. But what are the philosophical and methodological commitments that are foundational to a narrative analysis? What is a narrative analysis and what differentiates it from other qualitative analyses? Why use a narrative analysis? How might you go about doing this kind of analysis? On the other hand, what are the new challenges and future opportunities for narrative analysis after recent critiques?

In this paper, we respond to these questions. Our responses should not be seen as the final or definitive word on narrative analysis. This is because there are differing theoretical positions among narrative researchers, diverse definitions of narrative, various types of narrative analysis and different forms of challenging and intervening into this approach. Given that, our aspirations here are modest and choices about what to include are necessarily selective. We hope, however, that the article will not only be a useful 'hands on' resource for appreciating and doing narrative analysis but will also help readers to engage further with and think about the wide range of narrative work being produced, and

the potential actions that could be made to address its shortcomings, as well as expand its possibilities in qualitative psychology research.

Philosophical assumptions and theoretical commitments

To practise a narrative analysis, the philosophical assumptions that underpin it need to be considered. This might seem rather dry and abstract but try to stick with it for now because it is important to have a good sense of these assumptions in order to undertake narrative analysis in a truly informed way. Later in this article, you will see how these assumptions play out in practical terms in narrative analyses.

As described here, narrative analysis is underpinned by 'ontological relativism' and 'epistemological constructionism' (Smith, 2013). The former refers to the assumption that, whilst it is accepted that physical things exist, psychosocial phenomena are multiple, created and dependent on us, as opposed to existing independently of human conceptions and interpretations. The latter means that knowledge is constructed and fallible. In addition to these philosophical assumptions, the theoretical assumptions – methodology – that inform a narrative analysis also need to be outlined. This is because, as Holstein and Gubrium (2012: 5) have

noted, 'Methods of analysis do not emerge out of thin air. They are informed by, and extend out of, particular theoretical sensibilities'. Or, as Schiff (2013: 256) put it, rather than divorcing theoretical commitments from methods (as often happens with other approaches), 'narrative psychology requires a fit between theory and method'.

Various theoretical approaches exist for practising a narrative analysis. The approach taken and discussed in this article is narrative constructionism. This is a socio-cultural oriented approach that conceptualizes human beings as meaning makers who use narratives to interpret, direct and communicate life and to configure and constitute their experience and their sense of who they are. These narratives are passed down from people's social and cultural world.

Narrative constructionism has several key characteristics. The first important point is that narratives are the resources from which people construct their personal stories and understand the stories they hear. To unpack what this means, a subtle distinction between story and narrative is needed. A story is a specific tale that people tell. In contrast, a narrative is a resource that culture and social relations make available to us and, in turn, we use to help construct our stories. Thus people tell stories, not narratives. Narratives are the crucial resources that provide people with a template – a scaffolding of sorts – from which to build and structure their own stories as well as understand the stories they hear or see in action. It is difficult to sustain a consistent difference in usage because the words 'story' and 'narrative' overlap so frequently. Nonetheless, the distinction and the implications it holds are important. The distinction reminds us that a narrative is 'not in itself a story, and stories can be collected into types of narrative' (Frank, 2010:200). Five important implications follow from this.

Firstly, people may tell stories that are very personal but these stories do not spring from their minds nor are they made up by the people themselves. Instead they are constructed from the narratives that surround the storytellers. Secondly, people's stories and their understandings of the stories they hear are not pristine reflections of the experiences depicted in the stories nor are they transparent windows into psychological phenomena or derived from their private minds. This is because when a person tells a story, they draw on the 'menu' of narrative resources that culture and social relations make available. One example of a narrative resource would be what Frank (2012) termed 'the medical restitution narrative' which follows the plotline of 'Yesterday I was healthy, today I'm sick, but tomorrow I'll be healthy again.' This is a dominant illness narrative that many people use to construct personal stories of their own illnesses. Thus, the stories people tell are constructed from resources that emerge from outside them and these stories need to be considered as culturally and relationally constructed, as partly manifested in types of narratives that surround them within culture and relationships rather than inside their minds.

Thirdly, narratives are not only resources for telling personal stories but are, in Frank's (2010) terms, also actors. What this means is that a narrative, far from being passive, has the capacity to *do* things: narratives act on, in, and for people. They shape the beliefs, feelings and actions of those who are caught up in them, thus affecting their lives in ways that can be both positive and dangerous (Frank, 2010). This is not to say narratives determine action or that people are docile selves who passively do what a narrative teaches them to do. As a narrative subject, an individual can openly challenge or resist dominant cultural narratives by telling and living counter stories, which is to say: 'I don't buy that story. It oppresses me. Now you're going to hear what I have to say about who I am' (Nelson, 2001: 171).

Fourthly, whilst people's narrative resources are often stable, storytellers should remain unfinalised. What this means, in light of ideas from Bakhtin (1984) and Frank (2010), is that when a person tells stories there is always the possibility that they and their story can change over time. As long as they are alive, the storyteller has not yet uttered her or his final or last word.

Fifthly, narratives are embodied. Stories are told with, in, through, on and out of bodies. For example, people tell stories with other bodies, co-creating stories in the process. Bodies are also present in stories and in storytelling. Hands, eyes or the voice are often used when telling stories to communicate and clarify meaning. We sometimes use bodily experiences, such as felt bodily sensations towards a person, an event or action (people might call this 'gut feelings'), to inform the stories we tell and listen to within relationships.

What is a narrative analysis?

After considering the assumptions and commitments that underpin narrative analysis, we now turn to the fundamental question of what narrative analysis is. Narrative analysis is an umbrella term for a family of methods that share a focus on stories (Riessman, 2008). This is a useful understanding from which to start. It captures the distinguishing feature of a narrative analysis and its centre of gravity, that is, a focus on the story. But if we are to appreciate and do some justice to the complexities surrounding the 'What is it?' question, narrative analysis needs to be unpacked further. One way of doing this is to consider the different standpoints towards narrative and the specific types of analysis that fall under the stances that characterize the family of narrative analytic methods.

The different standpoints towards narrative research include a 'story analyst' and 'storyteller' (Bochner and Riggs, 2013; Smith and Sparkes, 2006). Despite its differences, a researcher does not have to pledge allegiance to one standpoint only and see the other as a family enemy. Each stance approaches narrative from different angles and each serves certain purposes. Thus, for particular purposes, on some occasions a researcher might choose to operate as a storyteller. On other occasions, for certain purposes, they might shift standpoints and decide to operate as a story analyst.

When adopting the standpoint of story analyst, the researcher places narratives under analysis and communicates results in the form of a realist tale to produce an analytical account of narratives (Bochner and Riggs, 2013).'Narrative-under-analysis 'refers to the practice of using one or more specific types of narrative analysis, such as a thematic or structural narrative analysis, to scrutinize, think about and theoretically interpret certain elements of a story. The research conducted then is *on* narratives where narratives are the object of study and, in analysis, are placed under scrutiny. A 'realist tale' is the most common way of communicating qualitative research. It has three key characteristics (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). Firstly, the researcher/author is almost completely absent from most segments of the finished text. There is no use of the first person and no reflections upon the author's role in constructing the report. This is termed 'experiential authority'. Secondly, the researcher/author presents extensive and closely edited storied data to reveal what is known as the participant's point of view. Thirdly, illustrated through empirical data, the researcher/author tells a theoretical account of the story to provide an explanation of it. This is known as 'interpretive omnipotence'. What the researcher as author then ends up with is an abstract tale of narratives rather than a story itself.

In contrast, when operating as a storyteller, analysis *is* the story and the story is communicated in the form of a creative analytical practice to produce a tale *as* a story. Rather than writing about or commenting on participants' stories, this is where the researcher actually retells those stories in one form or another in order to share key aspects of participants' experiences. In this case, the end product would read more 'like a story' than a traditional research report as realist tale. To say that analysis is the story is to emphasize that, rather than putting a story under analysis and doing research *on* narratives, the story in its own right is analytical and theoretical; it does the job of analysis because analysis happens in a story (Bochner and Riggs, 2013; Ellis, 2004). Given this, storytellers do not transform the story into another (theoretical) language. They use the stories they gather and present these to the audience/reader as a form of theory and analysis. They recast data to produce a story and the story is a theory. To help do this, rather than tell a story and represent results through a realist tale, they use a creative analytical

practice (CAP). As described by Richardson (2000), CAP is an umbrella term for research that is cast into evocative and highly accessible forms, such as autoethnography (a personal story of the researcher's own experience) and creative non-fiction (a genre in which research findings are conveyed in the form of a 'fictional' tale that is grounded in empirical data). Accordingly, rather than produce a research report about narratives as story analysts do, what the storyteller ends up with is an analytical report as a written, visual or performed story itself.

How to do narrative analysis: a guide

We now turn to the question of how to do narrative analysis. What follows is a set of guidelines through which a constructionist narrative approach might proceed. Drawing on Frank (2010, 2012), the analysis described here is a dialogical narrative analysis (DNA). A DNA examines how a story is put together in terms of the narrative resources that are artfully used. It also 'studies the mirroring between what is told in the story – the story's content – and what happens as a result of telling that story – its effects' (Frank, 2010: 71–72). Thus, in a DNA, stories are examined not simply for what is said or the narrative resources used to help structure storytelling. It extends analytic interest to what stories do. Before describing how a DNA might be done, we need to start with a few qualifications.

There are many different types of narrative analysis that a researcher might use for different purposes. For example, if a researcher aims to focus on how an interviewer and interviewee perform a story together and why something is said in the interview context, a performance narrative analysis would be a useful option. If one seeks to focus on what the content of stories is, a thematic narrative analysis would be a sensible choice. However, if one wishes to combine aspects of the previous two analytic orientations but in addition ask 'What as actors do stories do and how well are people served by their stories?', a DNA is an appropriate choice.

As well as a focus on stories, another common thread that binds many narrative analyses together relates to how method is understood. There are at least two different ways to understand method. Neither is superior to the other; each serves different purposes. One understanding has come to dominate much qualitative research. We might term this a prescriptive (Frank, 2010) or codified model (Chamberlain, 2011). Here method is largely understood as a prescribed set of steps or procedures that the analysis should follow. IPA, thematic analysis and grounded theory largely embody this understanding of method. In a codified model, a method is relatively easy to learn and do. Despite that, the codification of methods can lead to researchers producing 'what the method suggests they should' (Chamberlain, 2011: 50). This model is sometimes held up by journal editors, journal reviewers, university research project/thesis examiners and ethics committees as the most rigorous way to conduct qualitative analyses.

Yet, as Frank (2010) reminds us, there has always been another tradition in which method has guidelines but is not prescriptive. In other words, another legitimate understanding of method is as a heuristic guide – a guide to interpretation. This understanding has a long history in the social and human sciences. Many narrative analyses adopt this understanding – and for good reason. According to Frank (2010: 73, emphasis in original), 'Too many methods seem to prevent thought from *moving*'. Without a set sequence of rules or steps that one must follow, narrative analysis encourages movement of thought. For Frank (2010: 73), 'Analytic or interpretive thought that is moving is more likely to allow and recognise movement in the thought being interpreted.' Movement of thought can take the analyst in unexpected and fertile directions, breathing fresh life into moribund concepts, encouraging theoretical curiosity and provoking new ways of seeing in the process. In our own experience, practising method as a heuristic guide has enabled us to consider new stories that participants might tell about disability which had until now not been highlighted in the literature. Thus, the lack of prescriptive procedures can mean that engaging in an analysis is

daunting but there are many virtues that go with understanding and practising method in this way. There may be no definitive rules to follow but guidelines do allow analytical competence to be worked up systematically and rigorously.

Drawing on Frank (2010, 2012), what follows is a guide for doing a DNA which represents an attempt to help aspiring narrative analysts to steer a way through the analytic process. This guide consists of various analytic strategies. These are mostly presented as a set of questions that are grounded in the theoretical assumptions outlined earlier and that orient a DNA. The rationale for approaching analysis as a method of questioning is based on several observations. For Frank (2010: 72), 'Some methods are more useful for the questions they offer than for any procedures they prescribe'. Questions do more than act as a guide for how to move along in the analytic process. Approaching data with a set of carefully considered questions in mind and examining the data with the aid of these questions can help to get thought moving. It can spur imagination and inspiration that, in turn, can lead to insight and understanding.

The analytic process

The contour of the guide for doing a DNA can be viewed as cyclical and iterative as opposed to linear and fixed. The researcher engages in the process of moving forward through each strategy outlined in the guide but can move back and forth between each, circling backward and forward sometimes, even jumping between strategies as well as appreciating that some will have different utility with respect to different stories. Thus, following Frank (2012: 44), some 'will be most useful for thinking about why they do not apply to a story. Others can open up what was unnoticed about the story'.

Getting the story

- *Deciding what is a story and/or narrative.* Many definitions of a story and narrative exist but, to analyse stories, a researcher needs to decide what is a story and if they see it as different from a narrative. These were differentiated earlier in this article but, to reiterate, a story is a tale that people tell. 'Story' is a complex genre that routinely contains characters (for example, people or animals), expresses a point of view and a plot (for example, a structure that connects events over time, which has a complicating action where some event disrupts the initial state affairs, and a resolution, that is, an overarching consequence or explanation for why something happened). To help decide what is a story, a researcher can also use their experiences: often we know a story when we hear one.
- *Collect big and/or small stories.* It may be stating the obvious but, to analyse stories, a researcher needs stories! Whilst interviews are commonly used to collect stories, autobiographies, letters, diaries, vignettes, the media (for example, newspapers), ethnographic fieldwork notes, the internet (for example, blogs), visual material (for example, photographs) and conversations in everyday life can all be good sources of stories – big stories, small stories and everything-in-between (Freeman, 2011; Phoenix and Sparkes, 2009). 'Big stories' are long stories that entail a considerable amount of reflection on an experience or event, a significant part of a life, or the whole of it. In contrast, 'small stories' refer to fleeting conversations told during interaction about mundane things and everyday occurrences.
- *Transcribe data.* If collecting stories from interviews, for instance, you should transcribe the data verbatim as soon as possible after collecting it. Transcription is much more than a technical exercise. It is a constructive process in which analytical thoughts can emerge and 'percolate'. Thus, not only should a researcher carefully decide on what to include and how to present the transcribed data; they should also think of transcription as part of the analytic process. You should jot down notes as you transcribe. For instance, ask yourself what types

of stories might be emerging, which ones seem crucial and how particular stories unfold.

- *Think with theory.* Doing a narrative analysis entails bringing storied data and theory together through interpretation. DNA approaches stories through social constructionist theories, thus challenging cognitive theories to which psychological science has traditionally adhered. Instead of using 'thick individual' theories such as the self-determination theory or the theory of planned behaviour, researchers engage with 'thick social relational' theoretical views (Smith and Sparkes, 2006). Weaving together appropriate psychological theories and concepts (e.g., collective stories, see Caddick et al., 2015; narrative map, see Monforte et al., 2018) is a requirement to produce a rigorous DNA.

- *Writing.* Write continuously throughout the research project. Writing is not a 'mopping activity', something to be done just at the end of the research to communicate the results. Writing is a form of analysis because analysis happens in the process of writing (Richardson, 2000; Sparkes and Smith, 2014). As you jot down notes, write memos, edit your report and so on through the entire research process, you can progressively discover ideas, what counts and how stories 'hang together'. Think of writing as an iterative and inductive process of hearing stories speak to the research aims, representing those stories and theoretical thoughts in writing, revising your selection of stories and theory as you develop your arguments, and revising the writing as those stories and theory require (Frank, 2012). But, of course, writing has to start somewhere. To get analysis moving, to open it up, the following strategies are offered.

Getting to grips with stories

Indwelling. Like familiarization or immersion within other types of analysis, 'indwelling' involves reading the data (for example, an interview transcript) several times whilst, if possible, listening to any recording and jotting down initial impressions. But, according to Maykut and Morehouse (1994: 25) it also 'means to live within … understanding the person's point of view from an empathetic rather than a sympathetic position'. As part of this, the researcher orients themselves to the participant as someone who is a storyteller and who shares a story with another person or other people.

Identify stories. Identify the story or stories in the actual data (for example, in the transcript). To help with this, look out for new beginnings in talk where there are marked shifts in content. The researcher might also try to look for where each line might be seen to begin and end. Once a collection of lines is established, a story may come into view. Another strategy is to look for classic elements of story structure in the text: is there an orientation or setting introduced? Is there a complicating action and a resolution? Is there a coda (a summary or concluding event) that returns to the present? To help with this, look for phrases like 'It all started with … ' because these can signal an opening to a story, and declarations such as 'So that's why I left' because these can highlight the end of the story. Finally, try to get a feel for stories being developed across the interview/transcript as a whole.

Identify narrative themes and thematic relationships. The focus here is on 'what' is said, that is, the content of the story. A narrative theme is a pattern that runs through a story or set of stories. To generate themes – as opposed to extracting themes or thinking of a theme as emerging - in a manner that keeps the story or stories intact, closely read the text or other data for patterns. To help with generating patterns, the researcher can ask, 'What is the common theme(s) or thread(s) in each story?', 'What occurs repeatedly within the whole story?' As you systematically work through the text, consider identifying themes also by highlighting key sentences in different colours, underlining key phrases in the textand/or circling keywords. In addition, in the margins of the transcript, field notes or other data source, write extended phrases (e.g. in four or five words) that summarize the manifest (apparent) and latent (underlying) meanings of the data. Do not think of this process as a typical sort of coding which, in other qualitative approaches, usually involves coding

line by line and summarizing data in a code of one, two or three words. As we noted earlier, this can result in over-coding which can break the text down too much for a narrative analysis to work; the researcher is left with a set of codes, not a story. Thus, rather than over-code by coding the data line by line, think of the process as 'theme-ing' the data.

Identify the structure. The focus here is on 'how' the story is put together. To help with identifying the structure, consider (a) the direction(s) of the story (for example, decline and then progress) and depict this in a graph; (b) the use of terms which point to structure (for example, when the participant refers to experiencing a 'crossroads'); (c) the participant's reflections on specific phases or chapters in their life (for example, 'It was then that I realised I had to fight to recover from my illness'); (d) the use of evaluative comments (for example, 'My life has gone downhill since I retired from the army'); (e) tone and changes in tone within the story (for example, pessimistic and later optimistic); (f) the objectives or 'wants' of the characters involved (for example, after spinal cord injury Jon wants to walk again); the conflicts or obstacles they face as they try to achieve their objectives (for example, doctors say that medicine has not yet found a cure for spinal injury); tactics or strategies they employ to reach their objectives (for example, going to the gym to keep muscles healthy for when a cure does come); their attitudes towards others and towards given circumstances (for example, optimistic about walking); the particular emotions they experience throughout (for example, sadness and a sense of loss); and/or their 'subtexts' or underlying and unspoken thoughts (for example, scared about a cure not happening).

Opening up analytical dialogue further

Following Frank (2010, 2012) and Sparkes and Smith (2012), when reading the data, thinking with it and travelling with the stories in their everyday lives, a researcher might next ask the following questions. Some questions can open up what was unnoticed about the story; the usefulness of others will arise from thinking about why they do not apply to a story. Each set of questions and each response to them will not always be applicable for inclusion in the final research report but asking each question can enhance understandings of the story. In addition, when asking each question, a researcher can think with the story as a whole. It can also be useful to write a paragraph or two in response to each question or group of questions, revising and editing as needed.

- *Resource questions.* What resources does the storyteller draw upon to shape their experiences? What narrative resources shape how their story is told? Not everyone can simply access any narrative resource they wish and people cannot simply tell any story they choose about their lives and expect to be believed. Who, then, has access to which resources? Who is under what constraints in the resources they use? To understand the resources being used, it might be useful also to ask what other resources might lead to different stories. What might be preventing those alternative resources from being mobilized? How does the story reiterate, borrow or counter these narratives?

- *Circulation questions.* Understanding who your participants tell their stories to in everyday life can reveal useful insights into who those stories are intended for and how they may have been constructed with that intended audience in mind. Who, then, tells which stories to whom? Who would immediately understand that story and who would not understand it? Are there some people to whom the storyteller would not tell that story, and why not?

- *Connection questions.* The stories we tell to others can appeal to or repel those others. To whom does a person's story connect them? Who is placed outside this connection? How might groups be formed through sharing a common understanding of a certain story? Whom does the story render external or 'other' to the group? Who is excluded from the 'we' who share the story? Who does the storyteller speak against? Who does the storyteller want to hear the story and who might they be afraid to hear it?

- *Identity questions*: What stories give people a sense of who they are? How do these stories do this? How do people tell stories to explore who they might become, and if not, why?
- *Body questions*: Stories are told not only about our bodies but using – and out of – our bodies. We often get a sense or a feeling within our bodies of what stories are good, virtuous and worth listening to or acting on, and which are bad, loathsome or best ignored. What stories do the participant and the researcher hold close to their hearts? How do these stories enable and constrain the ways we understand participants' experiences? What stories evoke fear in our bodies? What is our body telling us about the story, the storyteller and what it means to live well? How does your body respond to the story and what might that tell you about the story that was told? For an example in action, see Sparkes and Smith (2012).
- *Function questions*: As an actor or form of action, what does each story do for and on the person? That is, how might the story a person tells be useful to them, help them live a good life and do things 'for' them, and how might it lead them down dangerous roads and do things 'on' them? What does this story do for and on other people? How does a story shape a person's conduct, affecting what they do and do not do?

Pulling the analysis together

This can be done in numerous ways. For example, a researcher might choose to move from a story analyst to a storyteller. Drawing upon a creative analytical practice like creative non-fiction, they might synthesize the results of a dialogical narrative analysis (DNA) in and as a story. The researcher might also produce a traditional realist tale in which the story – and its effects – are described systematically and explained to the reader. Here a researcher might blend the results generated from the strategies around a set of interacting and interplaying themes that capture the content of stories and their functional dynamics or they might begin with a particular analytic interest and then organize the stories around it. Alternatively, as in the work of Frank (2010) and Phoenix and Orr (2014), there can be a focus on pulling the results together to build a typology of narratives. This analytical move of identifying different types of narratives that people draw on to construct their stories is summarized as follows.

Build a typology. This can be done by reading through each result from the phases and then bringing these together – clustering them – into a set of narratives that constitute various 'ideal types' (that is, clearly defined narratives that are different from other ideal types and express something unique about participants' experiences). A story identified as belonging to a particular ideal type should capture not just content and/or structure but also functions – what it can do. To help with this process the researcher can (a) translate the stories into images and then imagine these impacting on people and consider the consequences; (b) create time to think about the story, tell the story slowly to themselves, wait and listen to it and reflect some more without rushing the thinking process along; and (c) structure their writing around each type, revising and editing along the way to help 'discover' further the types of narratives used. After identifying the types of stories people tell, name each in a way that captures the essence of each narrative, for example a 'quest' narrative that speaks of life as an adventure or a 'chaos' narrative that speaks of life as an endless series of destructive events or a meaningless and empty vacuum. It can be useful after this to revisit the data to ensure the typology being built is grounded in the stories collected. The researcher may then need to revise the typology and names of the narratives.

Represent the results. Structure the report around the typology (for example, see the paper by Smith and Sparkes and Smith (2008), which is structured around a typology of three ideal types). The report can take the form of a realist tale but, given the commitment to 'unfinalizability', any ending of a DNA as represented in a realist tale is necessarily provisional. This does not mean that the results or end report are tentative. Rather, whilst all reports need to close for practical reasons, participants in most studies are still alive and, rather than giving their last word, can tell new stories in which they may become someone different (Frank, 2010).

Some useful examples of DNA in action are as follows: Smith (2013), Sparkes (2015), Caddick et al. (2015), Monforte et al. (2018) and Sparkes and Stewart (2019). See also Chapter 5 in Frank (2010).

Opening up new horizons for narrative analysis: a view from new materialism and pluralism

Since the narrative turn in social sciences was taken, a growing number of qualitative psychology researchers have focused the attention on how human subjects construct meaning through stories. Lately, however, narrative constructionism has been criticised for maintaining an excessive focus on human meaning-making whilst neglecting the significance of materiality and the non-human world (Feely, in press). Alongside these critiques, we have witnessed the emergence of an intellectual project called new materialism, which attempts to address the perceived limitations of social constructionist theories, and the methodologies they inform (Feely, in press).

The theoretical work that is associated with new materialism is diverse (see Lupton, 2019a), but in general terms, this project is characterised by challenging the hegemonic status of 'meaning' as the primary substance of qualitative research, and by paying attention to the material world –which comprises both organic bodies and material objects. Far from being entirely new, new materialism engages with old materialisms, such as that of Spinoza or Deleuze. On the other hand, it is discontinuous from other forms of materialism, including the materialism of Marxism, 20th-century material feminisms and critical realism. For example, critical realism defines entities through their participation in a common essence (i.e., essentialism), whereas new materialism understands them as continually becoming, which makes impossible to speak of the essence of any entity (i.e., anti-essentialism) (Feely, 2016).

Although new materialism emphasises the materiality of the world, it does not privilege matter at the expense of narrative. In fact, matter and narrative are given the same ontological status (Barad, 2007; Monforte, 2020). This means that they are not regarded as separate realms, but rather as mutually articulated forces that maintain a symbiotic relationship. Here, then, the process of deciding what a story is (crucial in narrative research) becomes irrelevant, for 'there is no important difference between stories and materials' (Law, 2000: 8). Further dualisms are collapsed within new materialism, including human/non-human, human/environment, reason/emotion and mind/matter. Likewise, the conventional view of the social, the psychological, the biological, the economical and the emotional as separate domains of reality is abandoned.

Whilst accepted in specific academic circles, this idea of a 'flat' or monist (as opposed to dualist) ontology whereby seemingly inchoate elements are intertwined is controversial and counter-intuitive. According to Feely (2016), we are at odds with taking this angle.

Because we are accustomed to academic analyses which, implicitly or explicitly, privilege one order of analysis, and read an entire system through that particular order. Being (perhaps unfairly) reductive: for the Marxist it is the economic base; for the sociobiologist it is the gene; and for the constructionist it is the signifier. (p. 274).

For the narrative researcher, as we indicated previously, it is the story. In contrast, the new-materialist researcher refuses to privilege and grant final causality to a particular order. Instead, he or she takes the assemblage as the primary focus for analysis (Fox and Alldred, 2015).

The notion of assemblage is associated with the philosophy of Deleuze, which is characterised by its complexity and dense language (DeLanda, 2016; Nail, 2017). Painting with broad strokes, assemblages can be defined as multiplicities or networks of mobile connections that produce something. Such connections encompass heterogeneous elements that come together temporarily and work as a whole. Within assemblages, there is not 'a knowing (human) subject who acts and a passive (nonhuman) object that is acted upon: everything is entangled' (Snaza et al., 2016: xvii). Indeed, the very notion of the 'person' itself is questioned. In assemblage thinking, the person is a posthuman subject,

inextricably connected to and made through multiple others, including other people but also animals, tools, technologies, ideas and myriad entities of diverse orders of existence, all of which are considered to be ontologically equal (Nicholls et al., 2016).

According to Nicholls et al. assemblages can break apart to form other assemblages with other elements in other contexts. As such, they are fluid and continually in flux, as elements connect and disconnect. Although assemblages are not stable and closed structures, connections can coalesce into relatively stable systems where continuity, sameness, borders and boundaries are sustained across time and space (Feely, 2016). Deleuzian researchers are interested on the processes or flows of continuity and change within assemblages, and the capacities these flows produce in the assembled relations (Fox and Alldred, 2015). Moreover, they strive to find ways of enabling fruitful connections within the assemblages under study (Feely, in press; Nicholls et al., 2016).

Meritoriously, Feely (2016, in press) proposed a set of analytic concepts, principles and accessible steps to analyse assemblages. Even though, he made clear that what he proposed is not and cannot be prescriptive either for him or for others, because there is not a pre-existing method of how assemblages could be analysed. Indeed, new materialist scholars propose an open system, which Jackson (2017) called thinking without method. This consists on the use of concepts or 'acts of thought' instead of procedural methods to inquire. Here, as St. Pierre (in press) indicated, concepts are *philosophical*, by which she means that researchers do not 'apply' concepts to interpret human experience, but rather use them for thinking and re-orienting thought in ways that cannot be determined in advance. In practice, this implies that

The researcher using a concept would not necessarily use conventional methods of "data collection" (e.g., interviewing, observation, survey) or methods of "data analysis" (e.g., grounded theory analysis, thematic analysis, coding, statistical analysis). Instead, the concept would orient her thinking and her practices, which might or might not include conventional practices (Lenz Taguchi and St. Pierre, 2016: 646).

When the referred conventional practices are included, the researcher must make reflexive decisions. For instance, when it comes to gathering empirical material, it is argued that narrative constructionism has limited qualitative psychology to mostly using interview research as the primary mode of data collection. The narrative interview privileges the voices of human actors and an anthropocentric conception of voice (Mazzei and Jackson, 2017). In doing so, it reduces our world to a social world; it dematerialises the world into narrative constructions and position all other non-human forces that are at play as 'neutral bearers of meanings' or 'symbols of underlying social mechanisms' (Aagaard and Matthiesen, 2016: 35). Since new materialism seeks to be attentive to material, embodied, affective and non-human forces, alternative forms of data also become relevant. Aagaard and Matthiesen made a renewed case for participant observation, whereas other scholars point out innovative research material such as photo-diaries, items of clothing, films and walking tours, dream data, sensual data, music and sound data, digital memes, GIFs, clothing, wearable devices, apps and mix data of which interview data might or might not be a part (Lupton, 2019b; Sheridan and Chamberlain, 2011).

Still, as Feely (2019) demonstrated, the above does not mean that researchers using the analytical lens of assemblages are not allowed to analyse storied data only generated through in-depth narrative interviews. This author detailed how he performed an 'experimental method of narrative analysis' that does not take a unilateral focus on stories but rather is attentive to both narrative and material forces. But - despite points of connection between strands of narrative and new materialism (see e.g., Rosiek and Snyder, in press)-, is that a narrative analysis? What is meant here by narrative, and how this comes to matter? Does a new-materialist view of stories as matter involve a violation of assumptions underlying a narrative method? Can underlying paradigmatic differences be reconciled, and if so, how? A fruitful way of dealing with those questions is by engaging with literature on pluralism.

In qualitative research, pluralism denotes the use of different forms of analysis within the same study (Frost and Nolas, 2011). Although this raises important concerns for epistemological anarchism and ontological confusion, some qualitative psychology researchers are showing its potential to make significant contributions to knowledge. The work of Papadimitriou et al. (2018) constitutes an excellent example. These authors argued for the intersection of multiple ontologies and approaches as a new forward to analysing motivation, showing how, if we admit to ontological pluralism, different versions of 'what motivation really is' can coexist –to accept your reality is not to deny mine.

One could go even further from intersection of ontologies and engage with diffractive reading, which entails a detailed, attentive and careful reading of different views of one through another. Through diffraction (i.e., through rethinking difference beyond binary oppositions), ideas blurs into one another, the first partly remaining within the new one, as in a wave-like motion. The notion of diffraction was initially developed by Haraway (1997) and taken forward by Barad (2007, 2014) in a series of intricate argumentations. Geerts and van der Tuin (2016) condense their key ideas, offering an accessible reading of the otherwise complex idea of diffractive reading:

Rather than employing a hierarchical methodology that would put different texts, theories, and strands of thought against one another, diffractively engaging with texts and intellectual traditions means that they are dialogically read "through one another" to engender creative, and unexpected outcomes (Barad, 2007: 30). And that all while acknowledging and respecting the contextual and theoretical differences between the readings in question. This methodology thus stays true to Haraway's idea of diffraction: Rather than flat-out rejecting what has been theorized before, the foundations of the old, so to say, are being re-used to think anew.

As Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) noted, the aim of putting two ideas (or concepts, or theories, or practices) in conversation is to delve more deeply into their continuities and breaks, and not reading one idea against the other. As Barad (2014) put it, diffraction is about superposition/entanglement, not opposition. This practice makes things more interesting, as it is never closed, never finished. It demands taking risks and embracing the tensions that arise when working with disparate, if not competing assumptions. In return, it has the potential to lead to more generative provocations and transdisciplinarity, rather than interdisciplinarity (Bozalek and Zembylas, 2017).

A fitting example of diffractive thinking in action that will help to clarify such practice is the inventive process of analysis that we developed during a study exploring rehabilitation environments (Monforte, Pérez-Samaniego and Smith, 2020). Prior to discussing this paper, a previous study connected to the same project has to be mentioned (Monforte et al., 2018). As conventionally, this predecessor research used a monological approach to analysis. Namely, DNA was used to explore the experiences of Patrick, a man living with cancer and spinal cord injury. The research revealed how the restitution narrative acted on and for Patrick, first motivating him to engage in active rehabilitation and then leading to exercise drop out. Despite its capacity to generate potentially useful knowledge for exercise psychology (see the article for more information), we realised that this analytical approach failed to engage with the material realities of his rehabilitation process. More concretely, we noticed that the environments in which Patrick used to do exercise with the purpose to walk again were being ignored, regardless of their impact on Patrick's story. This concern appeared after a first contact with new materialism, and pushed us into this literature with more force. In our readings, we saw the possibility of injecting new materialist ideas into narrative dialogism to address our empirical interests.

Although these two approaches share some common commitments and aspirations (e.g., reality is a constant process of becoming, and thus research should avoid finalisation; analysis is not guided by predetermined and linear methodological instructions), significant points of disconnection should be taken into account regarding the views on the nature of knowledge, the role of theory, the researcher role and how

agency is understood, among other aspects. Given the divergences, we made some strategic emphases and undertook several adjustments and expansions to build a meta-paradigm.[1]

Importantly, this paradigm is an entanglement, not a synthesis of different approaches into a new totalizing epistemic unit that blurs their differences. As Barad, 2014: 176) argued, 'entanglements are not unities. They do not erase differences; on the contrary, entanglings entail differentiatings, differentiatings entail entanglings'. Narrative dialogism and new materialism became two in one body, generating what Anzaldúa, 1987: 194, quoted by Barad, 2014) called 'the coming together of opposite qualities within'. Resulting from this hybridisation, we re-imagined the ideas of voice and dialogue, central to DNA. Moreover, we reworked the idea of narrative environment to create the concept of material↔semiotic environment (building on and acknowledging a strand of both new-materialist thinking and the dialogical narrative perspective (Frank, 2010) called Material Semiotics; see Law, 2019).

At first glance, this may seem 'just a label'. However, labels are far from trivial, as they act as ontological and methodological reference points (Koro-Ljungberg, 2015). In our case, changing the label through which we defined environments determined the focus of the study –a focus on assemblages, not just on narrative– and the way we approached the analysis. While narrative environments denote the place in which stories circulate (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008), and can be analysed by identifying which narratives are supported and valued, which are inhibited and marginalised, and what do narratives do in specific settings, material↔ semiotic environments avoid narrative exceptionalism by using principles from assemblage analysis. Far from frivolous, the double arrow of the term conveys the flat ontology in which matter and narrative maintain horizontal, rather than hierarchical relations.

To start with, we identified three material↔semiotic environments: the hospital gym, the personal gym and the adapted gym. As an assemblage, each environment is composed by smaller assemblages. For example, the hospital gym was composed by the connections between machines, patients and health care staff, wheelchairs, motivation, hope and physical pain, among other components. We examined the relationships between the key component parts of each assemblage, or what DeLanda (2016) called relationships of interiority. Concurrently, we payed attention to relations of exteriority, that is, the connections between the three environments. In doing so, we observed that restitution was produced across the environments, revealing a continuity. In other words, the three environments constituted a larger, composite assemblage, which we termed the restitution assemblage. In this, human stories and narratives were important elements, but not the only and privileged ones. Broadening our discussion, we suggested that narrative typologies could be reinterpreted as assemblages. Here, the term assemblage is framed as a sensitising concept that offers researchers (and other audiences) the possibility of thinking differently from the beginning. The work of Monforte, Smith and Pérez-Samaniego, (2020) on the struggle of a disabled man who became (and is still becoming) en-wheeled (i.e., entangled with his wheelchair) within a restitution assemblage is an example of it.

Even though this is a substantial shift, here previous narrative foundations are not completely abandoned. Following Clark and Thorpe, (2020) we did not take up diffractive reading to 'move on' from or counter narrative analysis, but rather to 'work the limits of theory–method to prompt new connections, relations, collaborations, and transformations'. Undoubtedly, without the narrative approach, we could have not reimagined and extended previous narrative knowledge. This creates an interesting paradox: thinking with narrative helps thinking beyond narrative and transcending its boundaries. Likewise, it leaves us a take-home message generalizable to other

theoretical and methodological contexts: even when breaking with the past is justified, nothing "new" can emerge without the "old". '*There is no moving beyond, no leaving the "old" behind*' (Barad, 2014: 168).

Provisional ending

Calling into question some assumptions and practices of social constructionist narrative analysis does not mean that we advocate for getting over it. This position is shown in our article, both explicitly and implicitly. For example, we have dedicated space to explain what it is, which its underlying assumptions are, and how it can be done. Obviously, if we would not believe in the virtues of narrative anymore, we would have not written about all that. Despite acknowledging the shortcomings of narrative constructionism, we will not prevent ourselves from keep practicing narrative analysis, talking about narrative types and highlighting stories as key cultural resources that change people's lives.

At the same time, we believe that other forms of research can breathe new conceptual life into narrative analysis, keeping us intellectually in check and pushing us to innovate and challenge established assumptions when appropriate. In this paper, we have chosen to talk about new materialism due to its relative novelty and transformative potential. We have tried to illuminate, rather than prescribe, such alternative approach. Certainly, as any other form of research, new materialism is imperfect and receives critical assessments. For instance, new materialism has been criticised on the grounds of semiotic indifference, a problematic use of the label 'new', an alignment with late capitalism ideologies, and failing to recognise their connection to or misrepresenting past strands of thought, including narrative (see Devellennes and Dillet (2018) for more. Interestingly, narrative can challenge the direction of new-materialist work in constructive ways. Sometimes, and under certain conditions, this critique might result in intersection or hybridisation of ideas.

This is far from easy, though, because both traditions are plural, complex and dynamics in themselves, and their intersection is even more complex. For Rosiek and Snyder (in press), the first pitfalls to be avoided will be oversimplifications of the possible relations between the divergent forms narrative research takes and the multiple implications of the idea that we live in a posthuman world. Another key issue for enabling a productive coexistence will be finding ways to avoid protectionist paradigmatic behaviours and blame games without having to establish a rational consensus that hide contradictions, disagreements and passions (Monforte and Smith, forthcoming). Efforts in this regard can bring beneficial consequences for all. Importantly, being open to discussion would help narrative researchers acquire a more nuanced and autocritical understanding of narrative that, in turn, will aid them in doing better empirical research to advance psychological theory and practice.

Overall then, it is safe to say that narrative research is an unfinalised project that will keep evolving in multiple directions and –either alone or accompanied– will deliver significant insights to the field(s) of psychology. We are expectant to witness and participate in the exciting times to come. For today, we offer this paper, hoping that it will provide the readers initial resources for understanding, practising and pushing the boundaries of narrative analysis in productive and respectful ways.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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[1] These adjustments have been documented and discussed at length in the mentioned paper and thus do not require detailed reiteration here.

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