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ANALYSIS OF PERSONAL NARRATIVES

◆ Catherine Kohler Riessman

It is a common experience for investigators to craft interview questions carefully only to have participants respond with lengthy accounts, long stories that appear on the surface to have little to do with the questions. I became aware of this in the early 1980s while researching the topic of divorce. After completing a household interview with a divorcing spouse, I would note upon listening to the tape that a respondent had gone "on and on." Asking a seemingly straightforward question (e.g., "What were the main causes of your separation?"), I expected a list in response but instead got a "long story." Those of us on the research team interpreted these stories as digressions.

Subsequently, I realized that participants were resisting our efforts to fragment their experiences into thematic (codable) categories—our attempts, in effect, to control meaning. There was a typical sequence to the moments of resistance: The long story began with the decision to marry, moved through the years of the marriage, paused to reenact especially troubling incidents, and ended often with the moment of separation (Riessman 1990a). If participants resisted our efforts to contain their lengthy narratives, they were nonetheless quite aware of the rules of conversational storytelling. After coming to the end of the long and complex story of a marriage, a participant would sometimes say, "Uh, I'm afraid I got a little lost. What was the question you asked?" With such "exit talk," the interviewer could move on to the next question.

Looking back, I am both embarrassed and instructed. These incidents underscore the gap between the standard practice of research interviewing on the one side and the life world of naturally occurring conversa-

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tion and social interaction on the other (Mishler 1986). Although dehumanizing research practices persist, feminists and others in the social sciences have cleared a space for less dominating and more relational modes of interviewing that reflect and respect participants' ways of organizing meaning in their lives (DeVault 1999; see also Reinharz and Chase, Chapter 11, this volume). We have made efforts to give up communicative power and follow participants down their diverse trails. The current wellspring of interest in personal narrative reflects these trends.

◆ *The Narrative Turn*

The burgeoning literature on narrative has touched almost every discipline and profession. No longer the province of literary study alone, the "narrative turn" has entered history (Carr 1986; Cronon 1992; White 1987), anthropology and folklore (Behar 1993; Mattingly and Garro 2000; Rosaldo 1989; Young 1987), psychology (Bruner 1986, 1990; Mishler 1986, 2000b; Polkinghorne 1988; Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992; Sarbin 1986), sociolinguistics (Capps and Ochs 1995; Gee 1986, 1991; Labov 1982; Linde 1993), and sociology (Bell 1988, 1999, 2000; Chase 1995; Boje 1991; DeVault 1991; Frank, 1995; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Williams 1984). The professions, too, have embraced the narrative metaphor, along with investigators who study particular professions. These include law ("Legal Storytelling" 1989), medicine (Charon 1986; Greenhalgh and Hurwitz 1998; Hunter 1991; Hydén 1997; Kleinman 1988), nursing (Sandelowski 1991), occupational therapy (Mattingly 1998), and social work (Dean 1995; Laird 1988). Storytelling, to put the argument simply, is what we do when we describe research and clinical materials, and what informants do with us when they convey the details and courses of their experiences. The approach does not assume objectivity; rather, it privileges positionality and subjectivity.

Narrative analysis takes as its object of investigation the story itself. I limit discussion here to first-person accounts in interviews of informants' own experience, putting aside other kinds of narratives (e.g., about the self of the investigator, what happened in the field, media descriptions of events, or the "master narratives" of theory).[1] My research has focused on disruptive life events, accounts of experiences that fundamentally alter expected biographies. I have studied divorce, chronic illness, and infertility, and I draw on examples from my work throughout the chapter.

Narrative analysis, however, is not only relevant for the study of life disruptions; the methods are equally appropriate for research concerning social movements, political change, and macro-level phenomena (see in this volume Cándida Smith, Chapter 34; Czarniawska, Chapter 35). Because storytelling "promotes empathy across different social locations," regarding the U.S. abortion debate William Gamson (1999:5) argues, for example, that storytelling has counteracted excessive abstraction, bridging policy discourse and the language of women's life worlds; storytelling has fostered the development of constituencies—communities of action. Ken Plummer (1995:174) puts it vividly: "Stories gather people around them," dialectically connecting the people and social movements. The identity stories of members of historically "defiled" groups, such as rape victims, gays, and lesbians, reveal shifts in language over time that shape, and were shaped by, the mobilization of these actors in collective movements. Examples here are "Take Back the Night" and gay rights groups (see Kong, Mahoney, and Plummer, Chapter 12, this volume). "For narratives to flourish, there must be a community to hear; . . . for communities to hear, there must be stories which weave together their history, their identity, their politics" (Plummer 1995:87).

Storytelling is a relational activity that encourages others to listen, to share, and to empathize. It is a collaborative practice and assumes that tellers and listeners/questioners interact in particular cultural milieus and historical contexts, which are essential to interpretation. Analysis in narrative studies opens up forms of telling about experience, not simply the content to which language refers. We ask, "Why was the story told that way?" (Riessman 1993).

The study of personal narrative is a type of case-centered research (Mishler 2000b). Building on the kind of analysis articulated most vividly by C. Wright Mills (1959), the approach illuminates the intersection of biography, history, and society. The "personal troubles" that participants represent in their narratives of divorce, for example, tell us a great deal about social and historical processes—contemporary beliefs about gender relations and pressures on marriage at a junction of American history (Riessman 1990a). Similarly, coming out stories, in which narrators proclaim their gayness to themselves and to others, reveal a shift in genre over time; the linear, "causal" modernist tales of the 1960s and 1970s have given way in contemporary stories to identities that blur and change (Plummer 1995). Historical shifts in understanding and growing politicization occur in the stories of women with cancer whose mothers were exposed to diethylstilbestrol (DES) during their pregnancies (Bell 1999). Illness narratives reveal "deeply historicized and social view[s] of health and illness," as Vieda Skultans (1999:322) shows with post-Soviet women patients' accounts of hardship, whose explanations are erased in their physicians' biomedical definitions of problems. As Mills said long ago, what we call "personal troubles" are located in particular times and places, and individuals' narratives about their troubles are works of history as much as they are about individuals, the social spaces they inhabit, and the societies they live in. The analysis of personal narratives can illuminate "individual and collective action and meanings, as well as the processes by which social life and human relationships are made and changed" (Laslett 1999:392).

◆ *Defining Narratives for Analysis*

There is considerable variation in how investigators employ the concept of personal narrative and, relatedly, in the methodological assumptions investigators make and the strategies they choose for analysis. These are often tied to disciplinary background. In one tradition of work, typical of social history and anthropology, the narrative is considered to be the entire life story, an amalgam of autobiographical materials. Barbara Myerhoff's (1978) work offers an early example of the life story approach and illustrates its potentials and problems. Myerhoff constructs compelling portraits of elderly Eastern European Jews who are living out the remainder of their lives in Venice, California. She builds these portraits from the many incidents informants shared with her during extended fieldwork. She artfully "infiltrates" her informants, "depositing her authorial word inside others' speech" to speak her truth without "erasing the others' viewpoint and social language" (Kaminsky 1992:17-18). In this genre, the stories that informants recount merge with the analyst's interpretation of them, sometimes to the point that stories and interpretation are indistinguishable.

In a very different tradition of work, the concept of personal narrative is quite restrictive, used to refer to brief, topically specific stories organized around characters, setting, and plot. These are discrete stories told in response to single questions; they recapitulate specific events the narrator witnessed or experienced. William Labov's (1982) work illustrates this approach. For example, Labov analyzes the common structures underlying a series of

bounded (transcribed) stories of inner-city violence told in response to a specific question. Narrators recapitulate sequences of actions that erupt and bring the danger of death. The approach has been extended by others who include more than brief episodes to analyze a variety of experiences (Attanucci 1991; Bamberg 1997a; Bell 1988; Riessman 1990b).

In a third approach, personal narrative is considered to encompass large sections of talk and interview exchanges—extended accounts of lives that develop over the course of interviews. The discrete story as the unit of analysis of Labov's and others' approach gives way to an evolving series of stories that are framed in and through interaction. Elliot Mishler (2000b), for example, studied the trajectories of identity development among a group of artists/craftspersons that emerged from his extended interviews with them. The approach is distinguished by the following features: presentation of and reliance on detailed transcripts of interview excerpts, attention to the structural features of discourse, analysis of the coproduction of narratives through the dialogic exchange between interviewer and participant, and a comparative orientation to interpreting similarities and contrasts among participants' life stories (see also Bell 1999).

Despite differences in these approaches, most investigators share certain basic understandings. Narration is distinguished by ordering and sequence; one action is viewed as consequential for the next. Narrators create plots from disordered experience, giving reality "a unity that neither nature nor the past possesses so clearly" (Cronon 1992:1349).[2] Relatedly, narrators structure their tales temporally and spatially; "they look back on and recount lives that are located in particular times and places" (Laslett 1999:392). The temporal ordering of a plot is most familiar and responds to the characteristic Western listener's preoccupation with time marching forward, as in the question, "And then what happened?" But narratives can also be organized thematically and episodically (Gee 1991; Michaels 1981; Riessman 1987). Narrators use particular linguistic devices to hold their accounts together and communicate meaning to listeners (for a review, see Riessman 1993:18-19). Human agency and imagination are vividly expressed:

> With narrative, people strive to configure space and time, deploy cohesive devices, reveal identity of actors and relatedness of actions across scenes. They create themes, plots, and drama. In so doing, narrators make sense of themselves, social situations, and history. (Bamberg and McCabe 1998:iii)

If all talk in interviews is not narrative (there are questions and answers about demographic facts, listings, chronicles, and other nonnarrative forms of discourse), how does an investigator discern narrative segments for analysis? Sometimes the decision is clear: An informant signals that a story is coming and indicates when it is over with entrance and exit talk (Jefferson 1979). In my divorce interviews, for example, responding to a question about the "main causes" of separation, one man provided a listing and then said, "I'll clarify this with an example," an utterance that introduced a lengthy story about his judging a dog show, an avocation his wife did not share. He exited from the story many minutes later by saying, "That is a classic example of the whole relationship . . . she chose *not* to be with *me.*" As the story was especially vivid, I used it along with others to theorize about gender differences in expectations of companionate marriage in the contemporary United States (Riessman 1990a:102-8).

Stories in research interviews are rarely so clearly bounded, however, and often there is negotiation between teller and listener about placement and relevance, a process that can be analyzed with transcriptions that include paralinguistic utterances ("uhms"), false starts, interruptions, and other subtle features of interaction. De-

ciding which segments to analyze and putting boundaries around them are interpretive acts that are shaped in major ways by the investigator's theoretical interests.

Deciding where the beginnings and endings of narratives fall is often a complex interpretive task. I confronted the problem in a study of stigma and infertility as I began to analyze a woman's narrative account of her multiple miscarriages. The research was conducted in Kerala, South India, and elsewhere I describe the fieldwork (Riessman 2000a, 2000b). At a certain point in the project, I began to focus on identity development for women beyond childbearing age, how older women construct identities that defy stigma and the master narrative of motherhood.

Below, I present a portion of an interview with a woman I call "Gita," who is 55 years old, married, childless, Hindu, and from a lower caste. Because of progressive social policies and related opportunities in Kerala, Gita is educated, has risen in status, and works as a lawyer in a small municipality. The interaction represented in this extract took place after she and I had talked (in English) for nearly an hour in her home about a variety of topics, most of which she introduced. These included her schooling, how her marriage was arranged, and her political work in the "liberation struggle of Kerala." We enter the interview as I reintroduce the topic of infertility. My transcription conventions are adapted from those recommended by James Gee (1986).[3]

Although Gita could answer my question "Were you ever pregnant?" directly with a yes, she chooses instead to negotiate a space in the interview to develop a complex narrative. She describes terminated pregnancies, going to a political demonstration, and coming home to her husband's anger, whereupon the scene shifts to the actions of her in-laws and her husband's refusal to be examined for infertility. This was unlike other women's accounts about failed pregnancies in my interviews. Although temporally organized, Gita's plot spans many years and social settings, and emotions related to the events are absent. She makes no reference to sadness, disappointment, or other feelings common to narratives of miscarriage and infertility.

In an effort to interpret this segment of the interview, I struggled to define its boundaries. Initially, I decided to conclude my representation of the narrative with what seems like a coda at the end of Scene 4: "But afterwards I never became—[pregnant]." The utterance concludes the sequence about pregnancies—the topic of my initial question. Ultimately, however, I decided to include the next scene, which communicates various family members' responses and the reported speech of Gita's husband ("No, no, I will not go to a lady doctor"). The change in decision coincided with a theoretical shift in my thinking about identity construction. I became interested in how women in South India resist stigma when infertility occurs (Riessman 2000b). It was crucial, then, to include the episode about the in-laws, the interaction with the gynecologist, and the husband's response to the request that he be tested.

Although not my focus here, the narrative excerpt could have been analyzed as an interactional accomplishment, that is, as a joint production of the interviewer and the respondent. Such a focus would require retranscription so as to include all of my utterances (deleted and marked with == in the interview excerpt), the ways I elicited and shaped the narrative (for examples of this approach, see Bell 1999; Capps and Ochs 1995; Mishler 1997; Riessman 1987; see also Poland, Chapter 30, this volume). The narrative also could have been analyzed with a primary focus on cultural context, centering on the prominent role of the wife's in-laws, for example, in defining and managing infertility in India (for an example, see Riessman 2000a). And the narrative could have been analyzed in terms of problems it solves for the narrator—an angle into the text I will develop shortly—and other problems that narrative creates. Investigators interested in psychological processes, narrative therapy, and change

Cathy: Now I am going to go back and ask some specific questions.
Were you ever pregnant?

Gita: Pregnant means—You see it was 3 years [after the marriage] — Scene 1
then I approached [name of doctor]
then she said it is not a viable—[pregnancy].
==
So she asked me to undergo this operation, this D&C
and she wanted to examine him [husband] also.

Then the second time in 1974-in 75, — Scene 2
next time—four months.
Then she wanted [me] to take bed rest
advised me to take bed rest.

Because I already told you — Scene 3
it was during that period that [name] the socialist leader
led the gigantic procession against Mrs. Indira Gandhi,
the Prime Minister of India, in Delhi.

And I was a political leader [names place and party]
I had to participate in that.

So I went by train to Delhi
but returned by plane.
After the return I was in [name] Nursing Home
for 16 days bleeding.

And so he [husband] was very angry — Scene 4
he said "do not go for any social work
do not be active" this and that.
But afterwards I never became—[pregnant]
==
Then my in-laws, they are in [city] — Scene 5
they thought I had some defect, really speaking.
So they brought me to a gynecologist,
one [name], one specialist.

She took three hours to examine me
and she said "you are perfectly-[normal], no defect at all"
even though I was 40 or 41 then.
"So I have to examine your husband."

Then I told her [doctor] "You just ask his sister."
She was—his sister was with me in [city].
So I asked her to ask her to bring him in.
He will not come.
Then we went to the house
so then I said "Dr. [name] wants to see you."
Then he [husband] said "No, no, I will not go to a lady doctor."
Then she [sister-in-law] said she would not examine him
they had to examine the—what is it?—the sperm in the laboratory.
But he did not allow that.

(White and Epston 1990; Josselson and Lieblich 1993; McLeod 1997) might explore Gita's account of infertility for its closed, sealed-off features; Gita displays a set of understandings that seem to defy redefinition and change. Or silence about emotions might be a focus. These are just a few of the analytic strategies available.

Across the board, the discernment of a narrative segment for analysis—the representations and boundaries chosen—is strongly influenced by the investigator's evolving understandings, disciplinary preferences, and research questions. In all of these ways, the investigator variously "infiltrates" the text. Unlike some of the life story approaches mentioned earlier, especially Myerhoff's, my approach here includes detailed transcripts of speech so that readers can, to a much greater degree, see the stories apart from their analysis.[4] The selves of storyteller and analyst then remain separate (Laslett 1999).

◆ *Analyzing Narrative as Performance*

Personal narratives serve many purposes—to remember, argue, convince, engage, or entertain their audiences (Bamberg and McCabe 1998). Consequently, investigators have many points of entry. Personal narratives can be analyzed textually (Gee 1986; Labov 1982), conversationally (Polanyi 1985), culturally (Rosaldo 1989; Mattingly and Garro 2000), politically/historically (Mumby 1993; White 1987), and performatively (Langellier 1989).[5] It is the last of these analytic positions that I emphasize primarily here. A story involves storytelling, which is a reciprocal event between a teller and an audience. When we tell stories about our lives we perform our (preferred) identities (Langellier 2001).

As Erving Goffman (1959, 1981) suggests with his repeated use of the dramaturgical metaphor, social actors stage performances of desirable selves to preserve "face" in situations of difficulty, thus managing potentially "spoiled" identities. Relatedly, gender identity is performed, produced for and by audiences in social situations. To emphasize the performative element is not to suggest that identities are inauthentic, but only that they are situated and accomplished in social interaction.

Applying these insights to interviews, informants negotiate how they want to be known by the stories they develop collaboratively with their audiences. Informants do not reveal an essential self as much as they perform a preferred one, selected from the multiplicity of selves or personas that individuals switch among as they go about their lives. Approaching identity as a "performative struggle over the meanings of experience" (Langellier 2001:3) opens up analytic possibilities that are missed with static conceptions of identity and by essentializing theories that assume the unity of an inner self.

Personal narratives contain many performative features that enable the "local achievement of identity" (Cussins 1998). Tellers intensify words and phrases; they enhance segments with narrative detail, reported speech, appeals to the audience, paralinguistic features and gestures, and body movement (Bauman 1986). Analysts can ask many questions of a narrative segment in terms of performance. In what kind of a story does a narrator place herself? How does she locate herself in relation to the audience, and vice versa? How does she locate characters in relation to one another and in relation to herself? How does she relate to herself, that is, make identity claims about who or what she is (Bamberg 1997b)?

Social positioning in stories—how narrators choose to position audiences, characters, and themselves—is a useful point of entry because "fluid positionings, not fixed roles, are used by people to cope with the situations they find themselves in" (Harré and van Langenhove 1999:17). Narrators can position themselves, for example, as

victims of one circumstance or another in their stories, giving over to other characters rather than themselves the power to initiate action. Alternatively, narrators can position themselves as agentic beings who assume control over events and actions, individuals who purposefully initiate and cause action. They can shift among positions, giving themselves active roles in certain scenes and passive roles in others. To create these fluid semantic spaces for themselves, narrators use particular grammatical resources to construct who they are. Verbs, for example, can frame actions as voluntary rather than compulsory. Other grammatical forms intensify vulnerability (Capps and Ochs 1995). These positionings of the self in personal narratives signify the performance of identity. They are enacted in an immediate discursive context, the evolving interview with a listener/questioner, and can be analyzed from detailed transcriptions.

I illustrate this approach by returning to Gita's narrative account in the transcript excerpt above. In the larger research project from which the transcript is taken, I show how the cultural discourse of gender defines women by their marital and childbearing status. In South India, married women face severe stigma when they cannot, or choose not to, reproduce (Riessman 2000b). Self-stigma was a recurring theme in my interviews, even as historical developments in contemporary India are enabling some women to resist the "master narrative" of motherhood. Gita deviated from the general pattern. She was beyond childbearing age, and the absence of motherhood did not seem to be a particularly salient topic for her (I was always the one to introduce it); she did not express sadness or negative self-evaluation about not having had children, as younger women did. It turned out that Gita had built a life around principles other than motherhood; she is a lawyer and political activist. Close examination of the narrative reveals precisely how she constructs this preferred, positive identity, solving the problem of stigma and subordination as a childless woman in South India. She resists the dominant cultural narrative about gender identity with an autobiographical account that transforms a personal issue into a public one (Richardson 1990).

Gita carefully positions the audience (me) and various characters in constructing her story, which is, as I noted earlier, a complex performance that I have represented in five scenes. Each scene offers a snapshot of action located in a particular time and setting. Unlike narratives in the discrete story approach (Labov 1982), Gita's narrative is complex in its organization. Attention to how scenes are organized within the performance is my analytic point of entry.

The first two scenes are prompted by an audience request ("Were you ever pregnant?"), my attempt to position Gita in a world of fertility. She reluctantly moves into the role of pregnant woman in these brief scenes, quickly chronicling two pregnancies several years apart (the outcomes of which I attempt to clarify, in lines deleted from the transcript). She does not provide narrative detail, elaborate meanings, or describe emotions associated with the miscarriages; the audience must infer a great deal. Gita constructs the first two scenes with only one character aside from herself, her doctor. She "approached" the doctor, who "asked" her to have a D&C. In a quick aside, she states that the doctor wanted to examine the husband, but we infer that this did not happen. With this utterance, Gita prefigures her husband's responsibility, anticipating the final scene and the moral of the narrative. Gita again casts the doctor as the active agent in Scene 2; she "wanted" and "advised" Gita to take bed rest. Through her choices of verbs and the positioning of characters, Gita constructs scenes in which she has a relatively minor role. From the lack of narrative detail, the audience assumes that the events in the plot up to this point are not particularly salient for Gita.

The narrator's position and the salience of the events change dramatically in the third scene. Gita shifts topics, from preg-

nancy "to what I already told you," which is the primacy of her political world. She now constructs a scene in which *she* is the central character, the agent of action, a "political leader" in her Kerala community who "had to" participate in a demonstration in Delhi against Mrs. Indira Gandhi, who was seeking reelection. Verbs frame the narrator's intentional actions, situated as political exigencies, and there is considerable narrative elaboration, which is a sharp contrast to the spare, "passive" grammar of the previous scenes, in which Gita was the object of the doctor's actions.[6] As Gita locates her private fertility story in the larger public story of India's socialist movement, the audience is not left wondering which is more important. Ignoring her doctor's advice "to take bed rest" during her second pregnancy, she traveled to Delhi to participate in a mass demonstration, which probably involved a three-day train trip in 1975. Despite her return by plane and a 16-day nursing home stay for "bleeding," the audience infers that Gita lost the pregnancy (a fact I confirm a few moments later in lines not included here). She constructs a narrative around oppositional worlds—family life on one side and the socialist movement of India on the other. The personal and the political occupy separate spheres of action and, as such, do not morally infringe upon each other.

Moving along, in the next two scenes Gita shifts the plot to the family world. In Scene 4, she again introduces her husband as a character and reports that he was "very angry" at her "social work," meaning her political activism. She communicates a one-way conversation; Gita does not give herself a speaking role. She positions herself only as the object of her husband's angry speech. We do not know what she said to him, if anything. Her passive positioning in this scene contrasts with her activity in the previous one. Is she displaying here the typical practice in South Indian families, which is that wives are expected to defer to their husbands' authority (Riessman 2000b)? If so, her choice of language is instructive; he said "this and that." Could she be belittling her husband's anger and directives? She concludes Scene 4 with a factual utterance: "But afterwards I never became —[pregnant]".

In the fifth and final lengthy scene, Gita introduces new characters—her parents-in-law, an infertility specialist, a sister-in-law—and an intricate plot before the narrative moves toward its moral point, which is that Gita's infertility is not her responsibility. The final scene is most elaborate, suggesting importance. Gita's performance of identity is quite vivid here. She begins by constructing a passive, stigmatized position for herself: Her in-laws "brought" her for treatment to a gynecologist in the major South Indian city where the parents live because "they thought I had some defect." As in earlier scenes involving pregnancy, others suggest or initiate action.[7] She intensifies meaning and thematic importance with repetition ("defect") in the next stanza; the gynecologist determined after a lengthy examination that Gita has "no defect at all." She is "perfectly" normal. Blame for her infertility, Gita intimates, resides elsewhere. Using the linguistic device of reported speech, she performs several conversations on the topic of getting her husband tested. Everyone is enlisted in the effort—gynecologist, sister-in-law—but he refuses: "No, no, I will not go to a lady doctor." Nor is he willing to have his sperm tested in a laboratory. (Gita returned several other times in our interview to his refusal to be tested.) The narrator has crafted a narrative performance in which she has no responsibility whatsoever.[8]

Readers might question Gita's attributions. She ignored her physician's advice to "take bed rest" during her second pregnancy, choosing to travel instead to Delhi. She gave primacy to political commitments, valuing work in the socialist movement over her gendered position in the home. She was also "40 or 41" years old when she was finally examined by a specialist. Age may have been a factor. Gita had

conceived twice, but could not sustain pregnancies, implying a possible "defect." Gita's performance, however, suggests how she wants to be known as a "perfectly" normal woman "with no defect at all." The way she organizes scenes within the narrative performance, the choices she makes about positioning, and the grammatical resources she employs put forth the preferred identity of committed political activist, not disappointed would-be mother.

Later in the interview (in a portion not extracted here), she supported this interpretation. Resisting once again my positioning of her in the world of biological fertility, she said explicitly, "Because I do not have [children], I have no disappointments, because mine is a big family." She continued with a listing of many brothers, their children, and particular nieces who "come here every evening . . . to take their meals." With these words, she challenged my bipolar notions of parenthood—either you have children or you don't. Gita performs a gender identity that resists the master cultural narrative in place in her world: that biological motherhood is the central axis of identity for women. Elsewhere, I historicize Gita's life chances and locate her in an evolving cultural discourse about women's "proper" place in modern India, a "developing" nation that is formulating new spaces other than home and field in which women may labor (Riessman 2000b).

The analytic strategy I have illustrated is generalizable. Narrators can emplot events in their lives in a variety of ways. They "select and assemble experiences and events so they contribute collectively to the intended point of the story . . . why it is being told, in just this way, in just this setting" (Mishler 2000a:8). How narrators accomplish their situated stories conveys a great deal about the presentation of self (Goffman 1959). To make the process visible, we can analyze scenes in relation to one another, how narrators position characters and themselves, and we can "unpack" the grammatical resources they select to make their moral points clear to the listener. Interpretation requires close analysis of how narrators position audiences, too, and, reciprocally, how the audience positions the narrator. Identities are constituted through such performative actions, within the context of the interview itself as a performance. Audiences, of course, may "read" events differently than narrators do, resulting in contested meanings.

◆ *The "Truths" of Personal Narrative*

I stated at the outset that my approach to narrative analysis assumes not objectivity but, instead, positionality and subjectivity. The perspectives of both narrator and analyst can come into view. As the Personal Narratives Group (1989) articulates, "truths" rather than "the" truth of personal narrative is the watchword.

Not all scholars who work with personal narratives would agree (see in this volume Atkinson, Chapter 6; Fontana, Chapter 8, Cándida Smith, Chapter 34). Daniel Bertaux (1995) believes that "every life story contains a large proportion of factual data which can be verified" (p. 2), for example, with respect to the dates and places of biographical events. Locating himself in the "realist" research tradition, Bertaux argues that informants' stories collected from the same milieu can serve as documentary sources for investigating the world "out there." Although acknowledging that informants do not "tell us the whole truth and nothing but the truth," Bertaux claims that by collecting many stories from the same milieu, a researcher can uncover "recurrent patterns concerning collective phenomena or share collective experience in a particular milieu" (p. 2).

Those working from social constructionist or performative perspectives approach the issue of truth differently. Verification of the "facts" of lives is less salient than understanding the changing meanings

of events for the individuals involved, and how these, in turn, are located in history and culture. Personal narratives are, at core, meaning-making units of discourse. They are of interest precisely because narrators interpret the past in stories rather than reproduce the past as it was.

Returning to Gita's narrative account of infertility, it is irrelevant whether the events "really" occurred just as she reports them. Gita was one informant in a larger project about identity for childless women, and she clearly performs one strategic solution to the problem infertility poses for her; she is "perfectly" normal, with "no defect at all." As noted earlier, it is possible to question her causal attributions. It also goes without saying that the passage of time since the miscarriages has softened their emotional impact, and consequently she can be silent about her feelings. As all narrators do, Gita presents past events from the vantage point of present realities and values. Not unlike other women I interviewed who were beyond childbearing age, she minimizes the significance of biological motherhood and emphasizes, instead, occupational and political identities. The truths of narrative accounts lie not in their faithful representation of a past world, but in the shifting connections they forge among past, present, and future.

The complex relationships among narrative, time, and memory are currently a vital topic of research and theorizing (Freeman 1998, forthcoming; for a review, see Hinchman and Hinchman 1997). Storytelling among those with chronic illnesses offers a case in point (see Morse, Chapter 16, this volume). Serious illness interrupts lives (Charmaz 1991) and occasions the "call for stories" (Frank 1995:53). Friends want to know "what happened," and stories provide maps for the ill themselves "to repair the damage that illness has done to the ill person's sense of where she is in life, and where she may be going" (Frank 1995:53). Yet the storylines or plots into which the seriously ill pour their experience may be at variance with biomedical plots. Patients with incurable cancers, for example, construct "restitution" narratives that suggest positive end points, whereas others represent themselves in "chaos" narratives, where continuity between past and future is unclear (Frank 1995). Oncologists are often asked about time, and they construct narratives of hope for families that blur endings and leave the future ambiguous (Good et al. 1994). For both practitioner and patient, a storyline locates the threatening illness in an imagined life trajectory (Mattingly 1994; Riessman 1990b).

The meanings of life events are not fixed or constant; rather, they evolve, influenced by subsequent life events. According to Mishler (1999), "As we access and make sense of events and experiences in our pasts and how they are related to our current selves, we change their meanings" (p. 5). Ends beget beginnings, in other words (Mishler 2000a). Personal narratives—the stories we tell to ourselves, to each other, and to researchers—offer a unique window into these formations and reformations: "We continually restory our pasts, shifting the relative significance of different events for whom we have become, discovering connections we had previously been unaware of, repositioning ourselves and others in our networks of relationships" (Mishler 1999:5).

A useful way to see how identities can shift over time is to look at "turning points" in stories—moments when the narrator signifies a radical shift in the expected course of a life. For example, in my research on divorce, it was common for informants to report moments when they realized retrospectively, "This is it"—the marital relationship had crossed a line beyond repair. Such turning points often coincided with incidents of physical violence, directed toward either the spouse or a child. One woman said: "That was the last straw. You just don't hit me. . . . I wasn't going to stay around to be hit again." Another woman, who had been physically abused for years, spoke of "the final blow": Her husband "punched our oldest daughter across the

living room . . . if he was going to start doing that to the kids, that was it." A divorcing man told a long narrative about his wife's open infidelity, culminating in a moment when he hit her. He said to himself, "This is it . . . there wasn't any reason to be there other than to hurt" (Riessman 1990a). Such turning points fundamentally change the meaning of past experiences and consequently individuals' identities. "They open up directions of movement that were not anticipated by and could not be predicted by their pasts"—an insight Mishler (1999:7-8) applies to the narratives of sexual abuse survivors. Past abuse is given new significance as women move out of destructive relationships and construct new identities.

The "trustworthiness" of narrative accounts cannot be evaluated using traditional correspondence criteria. There is no canonical approach to validation in interpretive work, no recipes or formulas. (For a review of several approaches that may be useful in certain instances, see Riessman 1993:64-69.)

◆ *Conclusion*

I began this chapter with an account of my difficulty in doing research interviews with individuals whose lives had been disrupted and being initially annoyed at interviewees' lengthy and convoluted responses. Since then, many investigators have given a name to my problem—these were "narratives"—and offered analytic solutions for working with interview responses that do not require fragmenting them. The field now named *narrative analysis* has grown rapidly, and no review can be complete and summarize the many types of work that are evident today. I have purposively bounded the field, focusing on the personal narrative and emphasizing the performative dimension, but I have also pointed the reader toward other perspectives. (For reviews and typologies of research strategies, see Cortazzi 1993; Langellier 1989; Mishler 1995; Riessman 1993.)

Narrative analysis has its critics, of course (Atkinson 1997; Atkinson and Silverman 1997). Its methods are not appropriate for studies of large numbers of nameless, faceless subjects. The approach is slow and painstaking, requiring attention to subtlety: nuances of speech, the organization of a response, relations between researcher and subject, social and historical contexts. It is not suitable for investigators who seek a clear and unobstructed view of subjects' lives, and the analytic detail required may seem excessive to those who orient to language as a transparent medium.

Narrative methods can be combined with other forms of qualitative analysis (for an example, see Riessman 1990a), even with quantitative analysis.[9] Some fancy epistemological footwork is required, because the interpretive perspective that typically underlies narrative work is very different from the realist assumptions of some forms of qualitative analysis and certainly of quantification. Combining methods forces investigators to confront troublesome philosophical issues and to educate readers about them. Science cannot be spoken in a singular, universal voice. Any methodological standpoint is, by definition, partial, incomplete, and historically contingent. Diversity of representations is needed. Narrative analysis is one approach, not a panacea; it is suitable for some situations and not others. It is a useful addition to the stockpot of social research methods, bringing critical flavors to the surface that otherwise get lost in the brew. Narrative analysis allows for the systematic study of personal experience and meaning. The approach enables investigators to study the "active, self-shaping quality of human thought, the power of stories to create and refashion personal identity" (Hinchman and Hinchman 1997:xiv).

Narratives are a particularly significant genre for representing and analyzing identity in its multiple guises in different con-

texts. The methods allow for the systematic study of experience and, for feminist researchers such as myself, the changing meanings of conditions that affect women disproportionately, including domestic violence, reproductive illness, and poverty. Personal narratives provide windows into lives that confront the constraints of circumstances. Attention to personal narratives in interviews opens discursive spaces for research subjects, representing them as agents acting in life worlds of moral complexity.

Notes

1. There are, of course, narrative sites other than interviews (see Ochs, Smith, and Taylor 1989; Polanyi 1985; Gubrium and Holstein 2000).

2. There is lively philosophical debate in this area about whether primary experience is "disordered"—that is, whether narrators create order out of chaos (see Hinchman and Hinchman 1997:xix-xx).

3. I have grouped lines about a single topic into stanzas, which I have then grouped into scenes. Because of the narrative's direct performative reference, I have organized it into "scenes" rather than "strophes," as Gee (1986) does. I have deleted brief exchanges between Gita and me, questions I ask to clarify what she has said, which are marked ==.

4. Transcriptions, of course, are themselves theory-laden; how we choose to represent spoken dialogue is not independent of theoretical goals (see Ochs 1979; Mishler 1991; Kvale 1996:chap. 9; Poland 1995).

5. Lisa Capps and Elinor Ochs (1995) provide a compelling analysis of conversations with a single narrator over several years. They combine textual and conversational approaches in their study of the discourse of a woman suffering from agoraphobia (severe panic attacks).

6. The verb construction *had to* is, in fact, ambiguous. It might refer to others' expectations that Gita participate in the political demonstration, a consequence of her leadership role in the community, or it might refer to an "inner" compulsion to participate, arising out of her own political convictions and priorities. The narrative context supports the latter interpretation.

7. Infertility is a family event in the Indian context, and husbands' relatives often suggest and initiate treatment for daughters-in-law, including medical and religious cures (Riessman 2000a, 2000b).

8. The physiological responsibility for infertility in this and the other cases is unclear. India's infertility clinics require both spouses to be tested, and about a third of the time the problem lies in the sperm. Elsewhere, I have described Indian women's management of male responsibility; they do not disclose it to deflect stigma but, in an effort to keep families together, absorb the "fault" themselves (Riessman 2000b).

9. The material in this paragraph is adapted from Riessman (1993:70).

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