

Situating Narrative Construction within Social Dynamics and Context to Create Complex Meaning: A Review of the Book *Analyzing Narrative Reality*

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Analyzing Narrative Reality (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) examines how stories are constructed for different purposes in a variety of social situations and aims to provide a framework for analysis “oriented both to the internal and especially to the external organization of stories” (p. 2). The authors are keen to create an understanding of how stories emerge and why they are constructed, confident that these factors are vital to creating good stories—“continuously unfolding accounts, whose extensions move in many directions” (p. 228) and that go beyond the boundaries of text. The book covers narrative reality, narrative work, narrative environments and narrative adequacy partly by using Stanley from Shaw’s (1930) study, *The Jack-Roller*, to examine how narratives are socially constructed. Empirical examples and an emphasis on interdisciplinary endeavors are intentionally utilized to create an accessible book for readers from a variety of disciplines. **Key Words:** *Narrative Ethnography, Narrative Environments, Narrative Work, Narrative Reality, Narrative Adequacy, and Qualitative Research*

Introduction

My initial hope, in reading *Analyzing Narrative Reality*, was that it might offer perspectives that would be valuable to me as a writing teacher seeking to help my students develop more powerful narratives. I also hoped that it could be offered as a resource to those struggling with expanding the horizons of their narratives and help them to determine “what the communication process and its circumstances designate as meaningful and important, together with the various purposes stories serve” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 2). While I found some of these expectations realized, I also had the privilege of delving into deep questions and issues involving social construction of stories and how we as humans make meaning of our experiences.

Short-Changing Narrative

If the conventional idea is that storytellers actively assemble the messages that become story texts, the unfolding and ongoing activeness of the process is frequently shortchanged. (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. xv)

As a writing teacher, this statement from *Analyzing Narrative Reality* certainly rings true. I have often been surprised to observe the amount of difficulty writers have with creating narratives of rich complexity—how often, in fact, the narrative itself

appears shortchanged. Of the many students who are referred to me specifically for help with the narrative portions of their qualitative dissertations, most seem to approach the story as a static thing, something that needs to be fit tightly into a box and refused access to air. The magic and messiness of human life and experience is often sanitized to the extent that it has little meaning at all. The writers I work with sometimes appear to neglect the deeper contextual elements that uncover the complexity of a story that is a living thing, dynamic and in continual fluctuation. There *is* a narrative—but how that story fits into a wider societal framework is undeveloped and consequently seems lifeless. As Gubrium and Holstein (2009) point out:

Listeners presume that plots and themes are in place when stories are under consideration. But plots and themes emerge through narrative practice, raising two important questions. In what way is a narrative socially organized, and how is a narrative made meaningful? (p. 227)

The primary purpose of the authors in writing this book is to “present a view of narrativity and its storied by-products as operating within society” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. xv). This provides another level of inquiry around the whole issue of stories—adding to the many questions I already have, not only about the nature of stories, but, from my professional perspective, the issues surrounding the writing of these stories. Who “owns” a story? Is it the person whose experiences are detailed or the one who composes the actual written narrative, choosing the words and structure that make it breathe? As a writer, I cannot help but be committed to the belief that the words themselves are important. If I take someone else’s story and recount it in *my* words, it is much less their story. It does not contain their language. If words have specific meanings and if there are reasons that we have about half a million of them in the English language, then the words we use do matter and they mean something about who we are and where we fit in the world.

But words are not the only factor in determining how our accounts are constructed; not the only important aspect of their veracity. Like Schrodinger’s Cat, whose fate ultimately depends on the fact of observation, a story is also dependent on the observer. We alter our stories, shifting their emphasis, altering our choices of words or the significance of the experiences we relate depending on our audience—and it is important that researchers acknowledge and use this process in composing narrative accounts with depth. According to the authors, “the point is that the environments of storytelling mediate the internal organization and meaning of accounts” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 10).

Jean-Paul Sarte (1948) made a similar point, writing:

As a matter of fact, it has not been sufficiently observed that a work of the mind is by nature *allusive*. Even if the author’s aim is to give the fullest possible representation of his object, there is never any question as to whether he is telling everything. He knows far more than he tells. This is so because language is elliptical... Imagine a gramophone record reproducing for us, without comment, the everyday conversations of a household in Provins or Angouleme—we wouldn’t understand a thing; the

context would be lacking, that is, memories and perceptions in common, the situation and the enterprises of the couple; in short, the world such as each of the speakers knows it to appear to the other. (p. 51)

It is all too easy to see how writers often “shortchange” the process of narrative by choosing to transcribe rather than to situate, to merely report words rather than broader contexts that operate “within society” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. xv). As the authors point out, “The accent on the transcribed texts of stories tends to strip narratives of the social organization and interactional dynamics” (p. xv). Everything we do is social in nature; everything has a context and a focus on reflexivity—situating ourselves in our social world and making sense of our surroundings. The authors of this book specifically state that they aim to “look more carefully at the social dimension of narrativity” (p. xvi) and that the purpose of the book is to provide “a framework for viewing these matters analytically” (p. xvi) and asking “how to think about what comes into view in the process of interpreting and analyzing narrative data” (p. xvi).

Narrative Reality: Documenting the Complexity

The authors of *Analyzing Narrative Reality* are keen to help create an understanding of how stories emerge and why they are constructed, confident that these factors are vital to creating good stories—“continuously unfolding accounts, whose extensions move in many directions” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 228). The book covers narrative reality, narrative work, narrative environments, and narrative adequacy, providing readers with a useful, comprehensive approach to capturing “the richness of narrative reality” (p. 228). It offers a variety of perspectives on the construction of stories that should prove invaluable to those composing narrative research, helping to situate the concept of narrative creation in a framework that enables deeper understanding of our lives and the lives of others—and ultimately giving stories the opportunity to simultaneously create and reflect society. The authors ask, “How are stories activated and put together in practice? How do circumstances mediate what is assembled? What are the strategic uses of storytelling? And how do the personal and social purposes and consequences of storytelling shape their accounts?” (p. 13). These questions help researchers understand the deeper significance of how stories shape society.

Finally, they call for a perspective that takes into account “the practical dimensions of narrativity... that call for a form of analysis and related research procedure that take us outside of stories and their veridical relationship to storytellers and experience” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 22). They call this approach “narrative ethnography” and point out that while the word *ethnography* has become almost meaningless because it is currently used to mean so many things, they use it in relation to narrative specifically to connote “a method of procedure and analysis involving the close scrutiny of circumstances, their actors and actions in the process of formulating and communicating accounts” (p. 22).

Among other things, Gubrium and Holstein (2009) ask questions about the nature of storytelling that may inform the construction of narratives that have individual—and more importantly—social relevance. They recommend “...a different view and an alternative form of analysis oriented both to the internal and especially to the external

organization of stories. Rather than limiting the empirical horizons of stories to the boundaries of text or transcripts, the horizons are expanded to include the diverse everyday contexts in which stories are elicited, assembled, and conveyed” (p. 2).

It is vital, according to the authors, to understand the various contexts of story construction, and to “approach this field in such a way as to avail oneself of the opportunity to document the complexity” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 27). This is, after all, the purpose of narrative—to find and uncover the elusive nature of human experience and to offer glimmers of truth that help society better understand what it is made of. The relationship between storytelling and listener is a vital component of the construction of a story. “Just as an interviewer helps shape an informant’s responses, so does a partner such as a listener in ordinary conversation. A full understanding of storytelling (or narrative silence) requires attention to all participants in the process” (p. 53).

The authors use the classic 1930 Clifford Shaw study of a juvenile delinquent called, Stanley, the “jack-roller”—or young man who robs drunks and otherwise engages in petty crime. Shaw’s book provides “an inside glimpse of Stanley’s world” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 5) and was, at the time, a groundbreaking achievement. Prior to this time period, researchers wrote “about” poor people and delinquents, assuming that in their own scholarly superiority they were better able to make meaning of these peoples’ lives than the people themselves. While Shaw took an important step forward in using the boy’s own words and perspectives, according to the authors, his approach falls short because of a lack of acknowledgement of the fact that “...Stanley actively shapes his story to fit the circumstances” (p. 10). They also point out that Shaw “...fails to notice that stories operate within society as much as they are about society” (p. 11). Stanley tells stories to other inmates in the juvenile home as a way of enhancing his own prestige there. In doing so, he is careful about what he says and how he says it. According to the authors

[Stanley] is a skilled storyteller to be sure, but he also knows that there is something at stake in what he says, to whom, and for what purpose. These contextual matters are morally, not just procedurally, consequential for Stanley. While Stanley aims to tell a good story in the company of others, he has an eye on matters that extend beyond the immediate give-and-take of talk and interaction. (p. 15)

Storytelling is an activity and a “matter of work;” “stories aren’t simply conveyed, but they are given shape in the course of social interaction” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 16). This underscores the concept of society and community as key shapers of narrative; to ignore the larger contextual forces at work in helping individuals construct the meaning of their lives is to miss the significance that gives stories universality and power.

Narrative Work and Narrative Environments

One particularly helpful aspect of this book is its practical emphasis on “narrative work,” a process the authors describe as “purposeful effort” toward the “construction and

elaboration of stories” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 39) and “narrative environments,” or “the settings in which narrative work transpires” (p. 123).

The section on narrative work, which makes up Part II of the book, aims to uncover the way narrative work operates. It focuses on how stories are produced—the process that starts them off—and how meaning is made. It specifically highlights the issues of activation, linkage, composition, performance, collaboration, and control.

Perhaps the most interesting element for me within this section was the focus on linkage—or the way in which meaning is made by attaching events to other events. As an undergraduate student in history, I well remember this process—the way events are linked together within a historical context and how this linkage of events can be said to have “caused” certain big events. Civil Rights, for instance. Even within our individual lives, we present our accounts of our choices and experiences through linking. There are many ways an individual could answer the question, “How did you choose your occupation?” but they would all involve linking a series of events, circumstances, choices, and perhaps completely random events that could be constructed as a narrative in any number of ways depending on how the storyteller chooses to see these—which loom large and which recede. The authors points out that, “In practice, no item of experience is meaningful in its own right. It is made meaningful through the particular ways it is linked to other items. Linkage creates a context for understanding” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 55).

Narrative environments, which “may be as informal as the sequential context of a casual conversation or as formal as a court hearing,” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 123) are also illuminated with a focus on setting, looking specifically at close relationships, local culture, status, jobs, organizations, and intertextuality. Particularly interesting in this section is the focus on local culture, which contains the story of William White, a researcher who “discovered the moral order” (p. 139) of a run-down ethnic neighborhood that most people perceived as a jungle of crime and disrepute with no governing order. His experiences began a great deal of ethnographic work that focused on uncovering the hidden rules and culture of places that seemed to have none—or that appeared to operate in a different way than they did in reality. As the authors point out, “There is social order anywhere human beings talk and interact with each other, which, surprisingly perhaps, develops in the leanest of circumstances” (p. 141). Perhaps what most surprises me about this revelation is the fact that anyone ever doubted its truth. Of course there is a social order anywhere that people exist. Of course *A Place on the Corner*, the title of Anderson’s 1976 ethnographic book which details the activity in an urban ghetto and is referred to by Gubrium and Holstein in *Analyzing Narrative Reality*, “has a story” (p. 141)—as do all places on corners.

Perhaps this is one of the more important lessons of the book: That part of the work of narrative is a willingness to look and try to understand issues that everyone may believe are settled. If we think we “know” what a situation has to offer, perhaps at that moment we should be gearing up to revisit our assumptions and look closer for the story beneath what appears obvious and evident to anyone with eyes.

Narrative Adequacy

From my point of view, as a lover of literature and a teacher of writing, nothing

matters more as far as stories are concerned, than whether the story is “good.” For me, this means it has integrity and wholeness, it has the ring of truth and authenticity, it feels right, it expands when it needs to and contracts when you, the reader, need space for your own interpretation. A story simultaneously envelops you and helps you breathe. Of course, from a research standpoint, a good story must conform to other criteria as well. The authors point out that “with respect to narrativity, we frequently hear that good stories are rich, complete, and insightful and that good storytellers are knowledgeable, honest, and forthcoming” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, pp. 199-200). They go on to note that such criteria are “impossible to specify in a context-free manner” (p. 200). Rather than imposing a set of outside criteria to determine what a good story is, researchers should determine narrative adequacy “from the perspective of those producing and receiving accounts” (p. 200).

Returning to the character of Stanley, the jack-roller, the authors point out that like many people, “Stanley knew a good story when he heard one” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 201). His definition of a good story depended on its purpose—its ability to suit the situation, to increase his status or to make him appear more masculine. Gubrium’s own 1986 research, titled *Old Timers and Alzheimers*, (as cited in Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) confirmed that while subjects could clearly identify elements they counted as vital to a good story, such as whether it rang true or was engrossing, the context in which a story was given could dramatically alter its effectiveness. A story that worked well in one situation was much less successful in another. The authors conclude that “to expect a definitive answer to the question of what a good story is, is to expect the impossible in practice” (p. 210). It is more important and relevant to judge the story based on its impact in the situation, asking whether it is adequate for what it is meant to do—whether it addresses the issues of the people and contexts involved.

Conclusion

Narratives and stories are perhaps the ultimate in natural and traditional human expression. Telling stories is what we do; what we have always done. We try to explain our lives and our choices, where we have come from and where we hope to go from here. Stories are supposed to be fun—they are the reason our ancestors sat happily around the fire for hours. This does create a certain reservation for me, a person from a literary background, in approaching a book like this—particularly as a teaching tool for students already struggling with clear and concise writing. While the book publishers tout *Analyzing Narrative Reality* as “remarkably free of jargon” in a testimonial blurb on the back cover, it feels quite densely written and almost inscrutable in places. While this is balanced somewhat through the practical applications and examples given in the sections on narrative work and environment, it often feels quite heavy.

While I hugely enjoyed the philosophical discussions regarding what stories are and how they function, and found the idea of situating narrative in social context both compelling and relevant, I would hesitate to recommend it to a writer struggling with the essence and meaning of a story or trying to find a way to adequately situate their account in a meaningful context. However, for individuals well-versed in the theory, scholarly language, and background of narrative theory, this book appears to provide an important perspective that adds significantly to the understanding of narrative analysis, particularly

in terms of its emphasis on the social purposes of storytelling, and its illumination of the various functions of narrative work and environment. The empirical examples and emphasis on interdisciplinary endeavors are added benefits, creating an accessible book for readers from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds.

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Author Note

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