Narrative Works

Narrative and Sociology

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Résumé de l'article

The story of narrative sociology began in the mid-1980s, when such scholars as Elliot Mishler introduced narrative terminology into sociological research. The article suggests that narrative studies in sociology have three different orientations: narrative analyses of various texts, storytelling sociology, and sociological analyses of narrative realities. This division is far from categorical, and several scholars have moved between the orientations. It is argued that the shortage of sociological theory of narrative is the fundamental problem of narrative studies in sociology. Socio-narratology, as a project combining theoretical ideas from postclassical narratology and sociology, is therefore suggested as a potential remedy.

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NARRATIVE ACROSS DISCIPLINES

Narrative and Sociology[1]

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The story of narrative sociology began in the mid-1980s, when such scholars as Elliot Mishler introduced narrative terminology into sociological research. The article suggests that narrative studies in sociology have three different orientations: narrative analyses of various texts, storytelling sociology, and sociological analyses of narrative realities. This division is far from categorical, and several scholars have moved between the orientations. It is argued that the shortage of sociological theory of narrative is the fundamental problem of narrative studies in sociology. Socio-narratology, as a project combining theoretical ideas from postclassical narratology and sociology, is therefore suggested as a potential remedy.

Sociology has always afforded a difficult terrain for the exploration of narrative studies. While the 1980s witnessed such prominent narrative philosophers as Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) and Paul Ricoeur (1984-1988), and psychologists such as Donald Polkinghorne (1988) and Jerome Bruner (1986, 1987), the whole current of narrative studies remained rather subterranean in sociology. Even when sociologists studied such narratives as biographies, the core theoretical concept remained *biography*, leaving only a contingent position to the

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more abstract perspective of *narrative*. Perhaps the most far-reaching problem with sociology and narrative has been the shortage of sociological theory for narrative. The current sociological approaches to narrative may be characterized in terms of three partly overlapping alternatives: the sociological analysis of narrative texts, the storytelling sociology, and the analysis of narrative realities.

Where does the story of narrative sociology start? Before the narrative turn in literature during the 1960s, and before the time of narratology, there could be no narrative sociology (or any other narrative discipline). The reason is simple, and concerns the way stories were conceptualized. "Narrative" was not yet a generalized, abstract, and theoretically dense concept (Hyvärinen, 2010, p. 72–73; Ryan, 2005, p. 344). Before the 1960s, literary theorists studied novels, folk tales, and autobiographies; sociologists studied diaries and biographies. The contemporary possibility for theorizing and analyzing all of them and many other texts *qua* narratives was entirely missing during the pre-history of narrative sociology. The abstract idea of "narrative" carries with it another important aspect of the narrative turn: the relevance of interdisciplinary studies, a change of narrative ideas and methods among a variety of disciplines. To understand the potentials of narrative sociology thus necessitated the search for theoretical and analytical ideas from the neighbouring disciplines.

In this article, I first outline the pre-history of narrative sociology, in particular the biographical tradition, and locate the final breakthrough of narrative studies in sociology. Second, I present the narrative ideas suggested by the prominent sociologists Anthony Giddens (1991) and Richard Sennett (1998). Third, I examine the above-mentioned three existing alternatives of narrative sociology: that is, sociological analysis of collected narrative texts, storytelling sociology, and the analysis of narrative realities and narrative genres. I conclude the article by developing a version of socio-narratology, originally suggested by the literary theorist David Herman (1999). Sociology is a treacherously broad and porous discipline, and many scholars coming from neighbouring disciplines write sociologically relevant narrative analyses. However, to limit the scope of this article, I have focused my discussion on explicitly sociological writers, and even then, very selectively.

The Pre-History of Narrative in Sociology

The pre-history is characterized by the usage of narratives as research materials without recourse to any narrative theory or theoretical concept of narrative. In particular, the history of biographical studies in sociology is long, much longer than any explicit interest in narrative. Thomas and Znaniecki's (1984) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, first published between 1918 and 1920, is famous for its use of immigrants' letters and a longish life story as source material for sociological analysis. Stanley (2010) maintains that despite not using narrative terminology,

> narration appears in Thomas and Znaniecki's social theory in a particular way. They are not interested in narrative in the sense of telling stories *about* a life and a self. Instead their analysis is concerned with stories … because they *are* (part of) social life, not a proxy or a commentary about it. (p. 148)

In this comment, Stanley succinctly exhibits one crucial dilemma sociology has with regard to narrative analysis. I will return to this point in the discussion of narrative realities.

Within the Chicago school, the study of life stories most prominently continued in the work of Shaw (Bulmer, 1984; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, pp. 9–13; Plummer, 1983, pp. 39–61). Yet the surge of quantitative methods after World War II marginalized biographical research onto the verge of oblivion, extending the relatively silent period until the late 1970s and early 1980s. Bertaux (1981a) published an important anthology, *Biography and Society,* tellingly during the same year as Mitchell's (1981) famous collection, *On Narrative,* was launched. Mitchell introduces, among others, several philosophers, literary theorists, one anthropologist and one philosopher of history, but no sociologists in his volume.

The critical question in Bertaux (1981a) concerns the problem as to how social scientists should use life stories. "Narrative," strictly speaking, remains in the background but receives two interesting entries in the volume. Bertaux (1981b) himself introduces the later prominent theme of sociological writing by criticizing both "the 'scientific' form that the quantitative empirical discourse invariably takes," and the "philosophical form of abstract theoretical discourse," both of which to him were "obsolete" and represented a "dull style of writing" (p. 43). As

a solution, Bertaux suggests, sociologists should adopt "a different form of discourse, namely 'le recit' (narration)." Briefly, he argues that sociologists should tell stories. Bertaux frames this method of narration primarily as a matter of the *style* of writing sociology, whereas thirty years later the idea tends to focus more broadly on *doing* sociology.

In the same volume, Kohli (1981) launches a different narrative initiative. For Kohli, the key concepts are still biography, autobiography, and text. Nevertheless, he is one of the first sociologists to make relevant Labov and Waletzky's (1967/1997) theory of oral narrative. Kohli does not exactly draw theoretical tools from literary narratology, yet he takes the theory of literature as a model in answering the methodological question as to how well the life stories "mirror" or "represent" past "reality" (p. 67). According to Kohli, sociologists should read life stories as literary theorists read fiction—that is, as texts. This is, of course, one way to circumvent the perennial problem of the truthfulness and adequacy of biographies, yet his answer remains sociologically problematic. What could be the sociologically valid reasons for studying something as a mere text? A novel is veritably a complete work of art as such, but a life story also refers to a past by making it possible to tell a fake life story or calling a life story a fake, whereas to call a novel a fake does not make sense (Cohn, 1999). Life stories were meant to return action and the agent back to the study of sociology, which of course would have been impossible if the documents were reduced to anonymous texts. I call this the problem of narrative representation, and later in this paper I claim that the study of narrative realities has solved the dilemma in a sociologically more tenable way.

In biographical research, a thorough narrative turn barely even took place. Plummer (1983) writes to revitalize the biographical inheritance of the Chicago school, and thus defends the "humanistic" approach to sociology. Denzin's (1989) textbook discusses critically "the classical" and objective approach, framing his alternative in terms of symbolic interactionism. He undeniably uses "story" as a term, yet without reference to any explicit narrative theory (pp. 50-54). Stanley's (1992) *The Auto/Biographical I* already has a rather contemporary understanding of narrative. She discusses "coming out stories" as a genre with variations (pp. 115–118), and contemplates the impact of narrativity ("narrations") on the artfulness of auto/biographies (pp. 128–130). Plummer (2001) already employs narrative terminology and perspective throughout the book. In Germany, sociologists Fritz Schütze, Gabriele Rosenthal, and Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal developed the procedures of

narrative-biographical interviews (Rosenthal 1993, 1998, 2003, 2004). Yet on the whole, biography remained the crucial catchword of research, and narrative an optionally used methodical perspective. The celebrated "turn" was toward biographical methods (Chamberlayne, Bornat, & Wengraf, 2000; Roberts, 2002).

Gareth Williams (1984) brings narrative to sociology in his article "The Genesis of Chronic Illness: Narrative Re-construction." Williams interviewed people with rheumatoid arthritis in order to chart the lay accounts of the reasons for the disease. Illness causes a "biographical disruption," the essay argues, and this disruption calls for "narrative reconstruction" of one's story. In order to point out the constructedness of the stories, he recounts three radically different stories. Workplace and politics is at the centre of the first, womanhood at the centre of the second, and God and his secret wisdom at the centre of the third. Williams' understanding of the "disruption" and the recuperative power of narrative could be seen as one predecessor of Bruner's (1990) theory of canonicity and breach, yet Bruner does not refer to his work. Williams' own narrative sources are rare; he refers only to the novelist Robert Musil and the Aristotelian philosopher MacIntyre (1984), who is his major source of narrative inspiration. Williams' essay provides an almost present-day concept of narrative and a fine-tuned model for narrative analysis, yet it was not widely influential immediately after its publication. References to him and discussion of his ideas did not become more prominent until twenty years later (Frank, 2010, pp.114–117; Hydén, 2010, pp. 34–35; Riessman, 2008, pp. 54–59).

Narrative Beginnings

The necessary context for the turn to narrative includes at least such factors as increased interest in language, the circulation of social constructionist ideas, qualitative research, and also, as Catherine Kohler Riessman (2008) points out, certain "developments in technology" (p. 15), which provided researchers with miniature tape recorders.

The beginning of the properly narrative sociology remains, of course, a matter of dispute. My choice is to give the credit to social psychologist Elliot Mishler (1986) and his book *Research Interviewing*: *Context and Narrative*. In outlining the scene of narrative studies, Mishler is radically interdisciplinary by reading anthropologists, linguists, philosophers, historians, psychologists, sociologists, and a number of literary theorists. Notwithstanding the fact that his main topic is

interviewing, he affords a compelling and still useful introduction to narrative thought in the social sciences. "Narrative" is distinctively the conceptual perspective that guides him in gathering studies and theories from other disciplines. Mishler's main interest throughout his book is expository; he intends to chart the whole narrative field, along with the new methods of analyzing oral interview narratives. For good reasons, one can argue that he opens the explicit discussion about narrative analysis in the social sciences.

Riessman (1990) continues Mishler's work by presenting a detailed sociological analysis of divorce talk. Riessman's interest is no longer expository; instead, she adopts Labov and Waletzky's (1997) theory of oral narrative in order to use it in her interpretative work. Riessman does not confine herself to applying the linguistic theory; she equally detects narrative forms that do not fit the Labovian model, such as the "habitual" and "hypothetical" narratives (p. 76). In the appendix to her study, Riessman recounts "a narrative of methods"—that is, the story of her project and her turn to narrative methods (pp. 221–230). The story is both personal (for example, she mentions her own divorce) and scholarly, upholding the point that "narrativizing is a major way that individuals make sense of their past marriages and heal biographical discontinuities" (p. 230). Nevertheless, the main role of narrative is to provide a sociolinguistic method for the study of talk. In her concluding remarks, Riessman summarizes her observations about marriages and divorces, not presenting divorce narratives as a potential genre, or as an element of narrative reality.

The publication of these early works, and Riessman's (1993) important textbook, had a slightly paradoxical impact on the development of narrative sociology. On the one hand, the way was now open, the methods were competently introduced, and a model study existed. On the other hand, the new field as established was a thoroughly interdisciplinary field of narrative studies—not in any relevant way merely narrative sociology. As a result, a great many narrative studies conducted by sociologists seamlessly merge into the wave of social studies of narrative. One sign of a "turn" was the appearance of programmatic text advocating narrative in sociology. For example, Reed (1989) approaches the theme from the perspective of "the standard of writing" in sociology, which he considers to be "appallingly low." His interest is in giving "enough attention to narrative skills in graduate training" rather than seriously learning from the narrative theories other disciplines have developed, as is evident in his credo: "I am talking about narrative in the simpler, old-

fashioned sense of story-telling, not about the Paris fashions modish these days in New Haven and Berkeley and the intellectual suburbs" (p. 2). Narrative is welcome as a fashionable catchword or metaphor, not in the form of an overly sophisticated literary theory of narrative (Hyvärinen, 2013). In a similar proposal, Maines (1993) suggests "sociology *of* narratives" and "sociologists *as* narrators" (p. 17). The shortage of proper narrative theory and analytic narrative concepts undermine both of these programmatic proposals; they do not direct research attention to problems, which would be solvable with particular narrative tools. Mishler's (1986) expository style was evidently more efficacious in inviting followers.

Mainstream Narratives

"The importance of the 'narrative turn' is undoubted, witnessed by the mushrooming of popular as well as scholarly interest in lives and stories and the widespread academic engagement over the last few decades with the broad developments and issues covered by the term," write Stanley and Temple (2008, p. 275). While agreeing with these authors, I want to add the other side of the coin: the relative silence among the leading theoreticians of sociology. As a contradictory example, Charles Tilly (2002, 2008) has criticized the "simplifying" stories in science and human life without any reference to sociological, literary, or philosophical research into narrative, stories, or storytelling. In order to characterize this gap in mainstream sociology, I discuss two different (and rare) contributions by major sociologists to the theme of narrative and sociological theory.

Anthony Giddens, one of the most influential sociologists from the last few decades, briefly inscribes "narrative" in his *Modernity and Self-Identity*. While writing on ontological security and existential anxiety, he comes to argue for the necessity of "biographical continuity," as what is needed for a "reasonably stable sense of self-identity." He concludes that a "person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*" (Giddens 1991, p. 54). In this formulation, one may hear echoes from MacIntyre's (1984) discussion on narrative identity; and just as MacIntyre did, Giddens entirely passes by all detailed discussion of narrative theory. From MacIntyre and Taylor (1992) he also adapts, without explicit argumentation, the normative ideals of coherent biography and continuity of the identity narrative. Of

course, Giddens' discussion legitimizes theories of narrative and narrative identities in sociology. Somers (1994) makes a considerably more systematic entry to the theories of narrative identity, foregrounding the fact that "new approaches define narrative and narrativity as concepts of *social epistemology* and *social ontology*" (p. 606).

Sennett (1998) provides an entirely different example of the ways sociological theorists have imbibed and used narrative. His book title, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in New Capitalism*, already contextualizes the pivotal role of narrative. In his study, Sennett compares the immigrant father, the janitor "Enrico," and his son "Rico," working in short-term project work in business consulting. Sennett rests his argument on life-story interviews he conducted with people with different working-life backgrounds. Sennett's critical thesis suggests a strong connection between the conditions of work and the stories people are able to tell. The father, Enrico, "carved out a clear story for himself in which his experience accumulated materially and psychically; his life thus made sense to him as a linear narrative. … The janitor felt he became *the author of his life*, and though he was a man low on the social scale, this narrative provided him a sense of self-respect (p. 16; emphasis added). For MacIntyre (1984), "we" are never more than co-authors of our stories (p. 213). Ricoeur (1991) straightforwardly rejects the whole idea of authorship, arguing that in the best case we can become the narrator of our story (p. 32). Had he truly been the author of his life, Enrico would hardly have remained a janitor or lived a bureaucratically linear life. Nevertheless, Sennett (1998) continues that the son, Rico, is missing a narrative that could organize his experiences. More to the point, Enrico had a narrative for his life, linear and cumulative, a narrative which made sense in a highly bureaucratic world. Rico lives in a world marked instead by short-term flexibility and flux; this world does not offer much, either economically or socially, in the way of narrative. Corporations break up or join together, jobs appear and disappear, as events lacking connection (p. 30). Sennett suggests nothing less than the idea that "the world" conditions narratives "economically" and "socially." Enrico's linear and "bureaucratic" life afforded a linear and good narrative, while Rico's rapidly changing environment obviously made a coherent narrative impossible.

The idea that a relevant life story requires a linear and stable life finds no evidence from biographical studies. Illness narratives (Frank, 1995) and Holocaust survivor narratives (Bar-On, 1995; Levi, 1996) offer just two examples of radical life disturbances that prompt the need to tell,

and constitute the necessity of biographical work, even though they can render the narration extremely difficult. Bruner (1990) distills a large amount of preceding narrative work, while claiming that "it is only when constituent beliefs in a folk psychology [read common sense] are violated that narratives are constructed" (p. 39). For Sennett, narratives seem to mirror straightforwardly the economic and social terms of society, without being realities or discursive-cum-mental resources in reshaping the social conditions. Narratives do not belong to the sphere of social, cultural, and political action. In brief, neither Giddens nor Sennett manage to theorize narratives' active, reconstructive capacity.

The Analysis of Narrative Texts

After the breakthrough of narrative studies in sociology, the whole scope of this article becomes somehow blurred because of the interdisciplinarity of the field. There are no known sociological fora—journals, associations, or meetings—dedicated specifically to narrative sociology, and the narrative continuities are rather continuities of the interdisciplinary field. In a way, the task of this article resembles the piecing together of a jigsaw puzzle, most of whose parts are lost in the neighbouring disciplines.

In what follows, I portray three different research orientations toward the use of narrative in sociology. The suggested distinctions are by no means categorical but primarily prototypical and heuristic. For reasons of simplicity, I call these options *the study of narrative texts*, *storytelling sociology*, and *the study of narrative realities*. "Texts" should be understood broadly, including images and other collected semiotic objects; it does not imply any neglect of context, nor does it mean that the material is studied "merely as a text." Numerous writers have fluently moved between these positions, yet each of these options has its own particular agenda, problems, and priorities.

Perhaps the primary way sociologists have understood narrative and narrative inquiry is to see it within the frame of qualitative research methods, as analysis of purposefully collected narrative texts. Over the last twenty years, I have taught "narrative analysis" at my own university as a part of faculty-level courses on qualitative research methods. Following Mishler (1986), Riessman (1990) and scholars from the neighbouuring disciplines, it became increasingly popular to gather interviews and analyze them with narrative methods adopted from

sociolinguistics (Labov, 1972). "Narrative analysis takes as its object of investigation the story itself," writes Riessman (1993), and "the purpose is to see how respondents in interviews impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives" (pp. 1–2). However, Riessman was never satisfied with finding any kind of subjective meaning. The point of sociology signifies "patterns" for her; "Thus at the same time that I focus on individuals' own accounts of their experience, I have also looked for patterns across the experiences of many individuals to see what can be learned more generally about the process of making sense of divorce" (1990, p. 17).

According to Chase (2011), researchers from this group "study narrative as lived experience." The use of interview data, usually detailed transcripts of interviews, "close attention to the narrator's linguistic practices," and the study of "how storytelling is embedded in the interaction between researcher and narrator" (p. 422), all characterize this kind of narrative research. However, what eventually makes this kind of research sociologically relevant? Chase (1996) points out how the "aim of narrative analysis is not to impose immutable or definitive interpretations of participants' stories … its goal is to turn our attention elsewhere, to taken-for-granted cultural processes embedded in the everyday practices of storytelling" (p. 55). Chase (1995) highlights that by being sensitive in terms of "*how* speakers express themselves," she is also able to "understand better how cultural processes are manifest in and shape their speech" (p. 39). The cultural and social is encountered, that is, through nuanced analysis of the hows and whats in the interview interaction. In contrast to Sennett, Chase explicitly inscribes the active role of narration, maintaining that she treats "narration as a form of social action that is itself worthy of study" (p. 5).

Over the decades, this perspective on narrative has grown increasingly nuanced. Riessman (2008) divides it now into thematic analysis (what), structural analysis (how), and dialogic/performance analysis (the activity of telling). She also extends the scope of the "text" to cover visual analysis (see also Bell, 2012). The visual aspect also plays an important role in Sparkes' and Smith's (2012) and Hydén's (2012, 2013) emphasis on embodied stories. In interview situations and elsewhere, sociological research should "include various aspects of actual, physical bodies both in storytelling and in stories" (Hydén, 2012, p. 127). In particular, the uses of voice, hands, and eyes are actively engaged in human interaction and communication (p. 131). The early emphasis on strictly linguistic phenomena in narrative studies, therefore,

is now increasingly challenged by the new focus on narrative interaction and communication, be it verbal, aural, bodily, or otherwise visual. De Medeiros (2014) provides an extensive survey of different narrative genres and media.

Storytelling Sociology

In the previous model, the researchers listened to and collected other people's stories in order to analyze them with the best available methods. But other scholars suggested that sociologists should write their own work in narrative form. At first, this was argued for stylistic reasons, as in Bertaux (1981b, p. 43) and Reed (1989). Richardson (1994) radicalizes this change of perspective while reasoning that "writing is also a way of 'knowing'—a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it" (p. 516). In post-positivist, qualitative research, writing can never be reduced to mere documentation of preceding analysis and results. Richardson's argument begins with the observation that many qualitative research texts are simply "boring" (p. 517). Richardson's advice is to employ many, different genres in writing about one's research topics. The new key word is "evocative writing," and one of its key forms is "the narrative of the self." Such a narrative is "a highly personalized, revealing text in which the author tells stories about his or her own lived experience" (p. 521).

Ellis and Bochner have explored such a project of personal, evocative writing under the umbrella term of "autoethnography" (Bochner, 2012; Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Ellis & Bochner, 1996, 2000). Their approach wants to surpass, in the spirit of postmodern thought, the distinction between the academic researcher and the analyzed stories and storytellers by situating the researcher bodily, emotionally, and culturally in contact with the studied themes and persons with the help of personal and ideally co-composed narratives on the topic, or as Spry (2011) points out, "performative autoethnography is a critically reflexive methodology resulting in a narrative of the researcher's engagement with others in particular sociocultural contexts" (p. 498). According to Spry (2001), the method provides personal, professional, and political "emancipatory potential" (p. 706).

The mere description of autoethnography in traditional academic prose is a problem because, according to the authors, the use of "the elements of good storytelling" is preferred to "the conventional form of

academic argument" (Ellis & Bochner 2006, p. 439). In other words, within the space of this survey, I am not able to incorporate proper illustrations of the style and discourse of autoethnographic prose. Instead, I resort to Spry's (2001) helpful criteria for "effective autoethnography." The first and most demanding criterion concerns the quality of writing: the text should be respectable equally for social scientists and critics of literature; second, the text should be "emotionally engaging" and "critically self-reflexive"; third, a good autoethnography "strives to use *relational* language" in order to invite "*dialogue* between the reader and the author." Finally, for good autoethnography, it is not enough to present "a confessional tale of self-renewal"; it is equally important to present "a provocative weave of story and theory" (p. 713).

Many of the most compelling autoethnographic studies closely reflect Spry's (2001) clever subtitle, "emancipating the body from the shadows" (p. 724). The sporting and injured body is at the center of the essay in Sparkes and Smith (2012), eating and bulimia in Tillmann-Healy (1996), coping with own voice in Ellis (2003), and cancer in Kolker (1996). Weaving personal voice and personal experiences together with theoretical considerations indeed enables the creation of a new kind of knowledge in such cases.

Berger and Quinney (2005) endeavour to establish a partly similar, partly different "storytelling sociology" between autoethnography and biographical study. The authors are influenced by the "crisis of representation," and pose the rhetorical question of "the postmodern period"—namely, "who can lay claims to speak the truth?" (p. 6). The authors distinguish the "analytic" and "storied" approaches in narrative studies. "The analytic, as we have seen, is more positivist in orientation, maintaining the analyst's neutral stance," whereas the "storied" version "is theoretically minimalist, seeking meaning in the stories themselves" (p. 9). This argument itself is slightly paradoxical because it simultaneously advocates "theoretical minimalism" and accuses the analytically oriented narrative scholars of being "more positivist," that is, resorting to high-level and abstract theorizing.

The postmodern credo, "who can lay claims to speak the truth?" is problematic for two reasons. First, the narrative scholars from the "analytic" orientation almost without exception abstain from the language game of "truths," reject the premises of positivism, and understand their work as entirely interpretive (see Brockmeier & Meretoja, 2014). Second, the credo is politically hazardous in a time when the entire role of research discourse is challenged by everyone's right to "his or her own

truth." For example, the youth organization of the Finnish nationalist party has recently launched a campaign "There are only two sexes," providing photos with boys and girls wearing caps embellished with the text "boy" or "girl." Who can now lay claims against such truths? The research community definitely needs more rigorous arguments about the quality of the knowledge it produces, even when it remains skeptical of the language of absolute truth claims.

My claim, also, is that narrative scholars have no reason at all to celebrate theoretical minimalism (and I return to this aspect in the last section of this paper). I argue that a much greater problem concerns badly informed and overly abstract theorizing. For example, there are good reasons to restrain from the sweeping use of such ideologically charged theoretical terms as "positivism" and "postmodernism." The call for theoretical minimalism specifically raises the unsolved problem of how the reading of personal stories adds up. The answer that the reader should feel engaged with and start writing his or her own stories is not nearly adequate enough.

One further argument of storytelling sociology that needs closer attention is the following. The authors maintain that "much sociological writing is, quite frankly, dull and turgid" (Berger & Quinney, 2005, p. 10). This is hardly any news to any experienced sociologist. There is a lot of bad, but also a lot of excellent writing. Nevertheless, if you earnestly try to eschew the objectivism of the sociological voice, you should add, "This is boring and dull *to me*." "Boring" is a word that also needs to be understood in relational and dialogical terms, not as a quasi-objective feature of the text. The other side of the argument is equally risky. The personal stories sociologists tell are by no means automatically exceptionally interesting, while many of them certainly are. Were these stories actually written by Alice Munro, Zadie Smith or Ian McEwan, or any other professional writer, they certainly would pass the test, and be hugely less boring than the majority of sociological articles. And yet, I know sociologists who would still find contemporary fiction more boring than good sociological theory.

One obvious problem resides in the occasional difficulty in holding dialogues with other orientations of narrative research. For example, when Bochner (2012) maintains that "most published [narrative] research omits concrete details of connected lives, eclipsing lived experiences with concepts, categories and typologies" (p. 159), he writes about research I am not familiar with. Instead of trying to find dialogue between different approaches to narrative research, he seems to

build categorical distinctions between research orientations. The research I have discussed under the title "narrative analyses" does not eclipse "lived experiences with concepts, categories and typologies," but tries to tease it out and discuss it in a dialogue between researcher and storyteller. As Spry (2011), for example, has elegantly indicated, there are better ways to advance research in autoethnography than to attack theory or other types of narrative research (see also Bishop, 2012; Pierce, 2003).

The Study of Narrative Realities

The basic assumption of this research orientation is that various narratives, narrative situations, and genres already exist out there, in the socio-cultural world, and the primary task of the narrative scholar is therefore to investigate these realities. This is a thoroughly constructionist perspective which highlights the active role narratives and narrative genres play in constituting the worlds we inhabit. The term "narrative reality" itself was suggested by Gubrium and Holstein (2009), yet my point is that this way of understanding narrative research has a longer history. As I have earlier proposed, this research orientation has a particular relevance in terms of narrative genres (Hyvärinen, 2015).

Plummer (1995) opens his book, *Telling Sexual Stories*, in a way that challenges both of the previous approaches to narrative studies. Neither does he begin with collecting interviews on people's sexual experiences, nor does he start with telling his "own" sexual story. Instead he portrays a cultural phenomenon, "the culture of sexual storytelling," which frames all of the forthcoming stories. As he has it, "The media has been sexualized" (p. 4), and the demand for stories is culturally established:

> Tell about your sexual behaviour, your sexual identity, your dreams, your desires, your pains and fantasies. Tell about your desire for a silky hanky, your desire for a person of the same sex, your desire for young children, your desire to masturbate, your desire to cross dress, your desire to be beaten, your desire to have too much sex, your desire to have no sex at all. (p. 4)

Plummer fashions an exceptionally broad research scheme comprising such issues as the nature of stories, the making of stories, the consuming of stories, the strategies of storytelling, and finally, stories in the wider world (pp. 29–30). This is an ambitious program, and he frames

the social life of stories in a genuinely sociological way. Storytelling as individual action connects to a myriad of received examples, styles, and genres.

Plummer's main contention is that the primary function of sexual stories is to "assemble a sense of self and identity" (p. 172). This was not a very exceptional result in a narrative study twenty years ago; however, Plummer continues by specifying that public sexual stories are about community building. He even claims that "stories that are not involved in community-building do not become strong stories" (p. 174). "Rape stories, coming out stories and recovery stories feed upon and into community" (p. 174). At the time I write this article, the European refugee crisis seems to encourage the public telling of both factual and invented stories about sex crimes committed by the refugees. The invention, falsification, and circulation of the rape stories contribute to the building of the populist anti-immigration movement and far right organizations.

Davis (2002) provides an intriguing case study about "creating the sexual abuse survivor account" (p. 107). Davis locates the beginning of such stories in April 1971, when Florence Rush presented her story in a public address. The first story, its reception, and the discussion that followed made it possible for other women and men to come out and tell their experiences, gradually establishing the genre of the sexual abuse survivor story. In a similar way, Langellier and Peterson (2004) locate the birth of illness story as a genre in the 1950s, as a part of the post-war wave of trauma stories.

The reception of Frank's (1995) *The Wounded Storyteller* is a case in point in distinguishing the "analytic" and "narrative realities" perspectives in narrative studies. In an analytic frame, Frank gathers a great number of illness narratives, and suggests that they can be divided into restitution, quest, and chaos narratives. However, Frank does not contend to show the analytic differences between these story types; he also indicates the way medical institutions rather unanimously and, sometimes against all expectations, nurture the restitution narrative with the promise of "tomorrow you will be healthy again" (pp. 77–82). The quest narrative, on the other hand, which tells the story of personal growth due to the illness experience, is similarly preferred by patient organizations and the media. The chaos experience and narrative, by contrast, is marginalized by all institutions, and remains almost outside of social tellability. From this perspective, Frank primarily studies narrative

realities, the institutionally and culturally supported ways of accounting for one's illness.

Genre is one essential element of the narrative realities, or the life of narratives in society. Squire (1999, 2012) explicitly and helpfully uses the concept of genre in her studies of HIV-narratives. The argument echoes Plummer since Squire is no longer content with categorizing HIV-narratives in order to "take people's accounts of their relations to HIV as data about their subjective states" (1999, p. 112). First, she discusses genres such as the *coming-out* story (1999); and later in the South-African context prominently, the religious genre of *conversion* (2012). In both cases, the found genres have a connection to existing cultural institutions (e.g., the gay movement, churches). Squire's point is not to distribute colourful names for the categories found in narration but to argue for the cultural existence of narrative realities in the form of genres.

This perspective on narrative realities is elaborated most explicitly by Gubrium and Holstein (2008, 2009). The authors have a long history in the study of various health care and geriatric institutions and the narrative practices within these institutional settings. It is sociologically untenable, the authors argue, to address the narratives either as products of the generalized culture and society, or as straightforward expressions of an individual mind. Between society and the individual there are many mediating levels that should be seriously considered (2008, pp. 255–256). This observation leads to their vital concept of the *narrative environment*. The argument, compellingly documented in their work, is that the same problems (alcoholism, children's problems, etc.) can be narrated and evaluated in radically different ways, depending on the institutional context.

The authors continue by suggesting relevant concepts for the study of narrative environments. Instead of mere recorded narratives, they suggest, sociologists should locate the existing *narrative practices* and the mechanisms of narrative *controls*. Institutions always already have sites of official or unofficial narration and preferred ways of telling, the regulated narration in AA-meetings (Arminen, 1998) being the most well-known example. Gubrium and Holstein (2009) suggest another:

> A psychotherapy clinic, for example, provides a different situation for storytelling than a retirement party … The narrative environment of the clinic is an accountable context of its own for storying experience. As a narrative experience, a retirement party

is commonly light-years away from this, one that can humorously disparage what the clinical context privileges. (p. 32)

Gubrium and Holstein's work suggests a change to the whole design of narrative studies. The first observation, of course, concerns the "sample" of stories that is found most relevant for a particular study. Typically, the first idea is to collect narratives about a theme from different people, as if pursuing representativeness. The idea of narrative environments, however, suggests a more specific focus on terms of institutions and situations. Secondly, the "empirical material to be analyzed is not simply stories, as if they were self-evident texts with plots, themes, points, beginnings, middles, and ends" (2009, p. xvii). Accordingly, they call their approach *narrative ethnography*. The traditional limits and agendas of narrative studies appear to be too limited from their perspective.

Gubrium and Holstein emphasize the study of narration within particular contexts. As relevant and necessary a perspective as this is, it downplays one crucial feature of the "good narratives" (Bruner, 1990; Herman, 2009): the fluid capacity to travel across different media and social contexts. "The claim that stories are shaped by their institutional contexts is right," Polletta (2012) writes, "But it is also incomplete in several ways" (p. 230). She illustrates her argument with an example drawn from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Even though the storytelling within the Commission was planned to take place within the frame of therapy, many participants refigured it in terms of legal discourse (Andrews, 2007). To rephrase Derrida's (1981) idea, stories do not belong to a single genre, but storytellers draw from a number of available genres and contexts.

Nevertheless, Polletta's work intensively focuses on the narrative realities, and in sociologically innovative ways. Polletta (1998) identifies the crucial role played by stories in the US Civil Rights movement in the early 1960s. "I have argued that narratives of the sit-ins, told in formal and informal settings, made participation normative. Rather than simply persuasive devices deployed by strategic collective actors, narratives help to *constitute* new strategic actors," she writes (p. 154).

In a study about a public discussion forum after 9/11, Polletta and Lee (2006) were able to pose such questions as when and to what effect stories were used instead of mere explanations and arguments. One of their exciting suggestions is that "storytelling is able to secure a sympathetic hearing for positions unlikely to gain such a hearing otherwise" (p. 718). In other words, people who felt that they held a

minority opinion often used a personal story in order to earn a more understanding response from the forum. However, how could it be that stories helped these dissenting voices become heard? The authors maintain that even though every story has a moral dimension, this aspect of the story is characteristically ambiguous, and invites the telling of other stories with different evaluations—as it often happened during the discussions. "Stories' openness to interpretation makes it possible for deliberators to suggest compromise or third positions without antagonizing fellow deliberators" (p. 718). Polletta (2012) reformulates this argument of openness by maintaining that "one reason is that stories are both normative (they make a point) and allusive (the point they make is rarely obvious)" (p. 239). Because of this open and allusive character, stories give new possibilities to disadvantaged groups and minority opinions to contribute to debates (p. 718). This is an entirely new perspective, which contrasts with the old claim that narratives are dubious because of the aspect of evaluation and moralizing (White, 1981/1987, pp. 24–25).

Polletta's work departs from the mainstream of narrative studies in significant ways. Instead of mere narrative meaning, her focus has also been on narrative as rhetoric. She has studied the use of written narratives, thus the sociolinguistic tradition of Labov and Waletzky (1997) has been only one source of inspiration, literary theory being among the others.

Towards Socio-narratology?

The survey of narrative and sociology does not reveal much familiarity with literary narratology, despite all the talk about the narrative turn. Sometimes, as for Reed (1989), it has been a matter of bravado to indicate rejection of the "the Paris fashions modish these days in New Haven and Berkeley" (p. 2). I have written earlier that during the narrative turn in the social sciences, the methods or theories of literary narratology were never adopted, and this is particularly true concerning sociology (Hyvärinen, 2010, p. 2013). Atkinson (1997, 2009), who argues that narratives must be analyzed and not just celebrated, nevertheless promotes the stronger anchoring of narrative studies to sociology and discourse psychology—that is, to two disciplines remarkably lacking a theory or elaborated method of narrative analysis.

The narratologist David Herman (1999) suggests a new brand of theory, socio-narratology. His main contribution in this article is to

discuss the linguistic theory of Labov and Waletzky (1997), and suggest relevant revisions to it. He proposes that social research should adopt from narratology the distinction between story (the presumed sequence of events) and narrative discourse (the way the story is represented). The global message is that narratologists should be more interested in non-fictional narratives. This argument reveals the climatic change in narratology, a change that has mostly gone unnoticed among sociologists, that narratology passed beyond its one-sided focus on narrative forms a long time ago, and exhibits increasing interest in non-fiction, new media, and mediation in general (Herman, 2009). Frank (2010) has imbibed the idea of socio-narratology, yet without substantially drawing from the theoretical resources of current literary narratology.

Postclassical narratology (Alber & Fludernik, 2010) comprises a substantial number of narrative concepts and conceptual perspectives that deserve to be considered in sociological research of narrative. Voice, focalization, mind representations, and social minds are only a few recent examples. In sociology, the decisive narrative element seems still to be "the method," which too often is understood in terms of applying one or another "model" (e.g., Labovian). Tellingly, sociology seems to lack almost entirely a proper theory and an interest in theorizing narrative, the most promising exceptions being the theories by Gubrium and Holstein (2008, 2009) and Polletta (2012). In contrast, narrative psychology has provided such theoretical work as Bruner (1990), Freeman (2010), and Brockmeier (2015). These psychologists have taken a detour through philosophy and other neighbouring disciplines in order to deepen the understanding about narrative functions.

In narratology, the theory-method dilemma is resolved in an entirely different way. To begin with, there is no distinction between methods people and theory people. The study of literature does not know such a genre that would "apply" a complete "method" in analyzing fiction. In addition, there is no developing theory without using it simultaneously with fictional or non-fictional examples. New theoretical concepts constitute, in fact, new "methods" that other scholars can immediately test with new materials, but the purpose of this use is pronouncedly to advance the theory. Sociologists are too often satisfied with summarizing their results in terms of "substance" theories (divorce, aging, migration), and not in terms of narrative theory (voice, double-deicted you, social mind). The result is that the studies do not properly add up, and narrative sociologists do not feel much need to refer to the other work of narrative scholars. In other words, the absence of a

continuous debate on narrative results in the lack of continuity and convention of narrative studies in general.

Narratologists have a long history of defining such basic concepts as narrative and story (e.g., Abbott, 2002; B. Richardson, 2000; Tammi, 2006). The outcome from this longstanding debate is less an authoritative consensus on the correct definition, which does not exist, but a mutual understanding within this convention. One of the benefits is that narrative is not defined too narrowly, as, for example, in Labov and Waletzky (1997). This also means that narratologists do not tend to invent new and idiosyncratic distinctions between "story" and "narrative" as sociologists often do (see Frank, 2010, pp. 121–122, 199–200).

None of these outlined orientations of narrative studies can alone and exclusively solve the problem of narrative sociology. In terms of contemporary sociology, with its strong interest in material issues, the narrative turn begins to recede into the distant past. Narrative as a method or sociology as mere storytelling cannot alone answer the question about the relevance of narrative sociology. The attempts at bringing biography, storytelling, and narrative to sociology have always contained, such as in Plummer (2001), a wish for a more humanist sociology. Would it be time now to accept that part of such a humanist approach should also include the recognition of the theory of literary narrative? Or shall we continue to believe that entirely different laws are at work in literary narratives, laws that narrative sociologists do not need to understand at all? Luckily, work such as that of Mildorf (2007) and Andrews et al. (2013) already offer a different answer.

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