

## **An Anthology of Narrative Research**

**Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire, and Maria Tamboukou  
Present Their Second Volume of *Doing Narrative Research***

Molly Andrews / Corinne Squire / Maria Tamboukou (Eds.): *Doing Narrative Research*. Los Angeles / London / New Delhi / Singapore / Washington DC: Sage 2013. 270 pp. Paperback GBP 27.99, ISBN 9781446252666

For those of us currently engaged in narrative research or looking to use narratology as a method or methodology for doing social research, it often seems a challenge to understand how to go about this, how we can gather narrative data and how we can adequately analyse the collated data to produce a narrative that would make sense. Sometimes we are even confused about what a narrative is and what narrative research can offer us. Five years ago, in an attempt to answer some of these questions and to give readers a sense of how experienced narrative researchers have used narratological methods in their scholarly pursuits, Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou made an innovative theoretical and methodological contribution to the study of narrative research through their edited volume, *Doing Narrative Research* (2008). For the first time, internationally well-known scholars, whose works are theoretically diverse, have analytically and innovatively explored the world of narrative in a single volume, demonstrating the diverse ways in which various forms of narratives can be produced. The authors argued that narratives are contextual and that their meanings are variable. In an age of narrative research, this anthology became as popular as stimulating, and therefore was reprinted four times since.

Very much in line with the arguments presented in the earlier anthology, the three editors now introduce the second volume of *Doing Narrative Research* (2013), which considers both the diverse theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of narratives in research. This new volume includes five more chapters, in addition to the earlier eight contributions by distinguished scholars in the field. Beginning with an excellent introduction, in which the editors recognise the diverse histories and theoretical contradictions of narrative research, and discusses the broad scope of narrative, the book moves to explore the “world of narratives” (p. 14) through original researches which demonstrate how narratives extend the textual forms and how narrative researchers engage with diverse, innovative, and challenging methodologies to produce narratives.

## Structure of the book

The book is structured around three main sections: a) methodological debates concerning the structure and analysis of narratives, b) exploration of innovative narrative works that go beyond the textual and c) ethical challenges in doing narrative research in the real world. Within this structure the book presents, promisingly, the various approaches to and basic models of narrative research, and discussions of what the editors call “the less concrete and ethically pregnant questions” (p. 19), such as what happens to narrative work after it is released into the public domain.

The first section comprises the first five chapters of the anthology and sets out some of the key paradigms within narrative research and focuses primarily on methodological debates, concerning the structure and analysis of narratives. The discussion starts with Wendy Patterson who describes the classic and famous Labovian account of the structure or ‘syntax’ of the personal experience narrative, which demonstrates the significance of event-centric approach to narrative analysis. Patterson shows how the story of a single event that happened to the narrator in the past can be useful as a model for analysis, at the same time she highlights some limitations of the Labovian approach, which Corinne Squire successfully picks up, in chapter two. Squire addresses the problematic of the ‘event- centric’ approach and focuses on ‘semantics’ rather than the ‘syntax’ of narrative, and discusses large narratives as integral to people’s lives and sense of themselves. But Ann Phoenix, in chapter three, emphasises the significance of smaller-scale narratives and “interpersonal aspects of context” (pp. 48-71) which stresses that the interpersonal relations between interviewer and interviewee within which narratives are produced, are important. She analyses the ways in which narratives are co-constructed within such interpersonal contexts. Unlike Phoenix, Maria Tamboukou offers a Foucauldian approach to narrative analysis, by unravelling the threads of the relationship between power, discourse, and history. She suggests that a Foucauldian approach is practical to re-imagine history, investigating the interrelationships between narrative, subjectivity and power (pp. 88-107). Finally Gerrit Loots, Kathleen Coppens and Jasmina Sermijn introduce a ‘rhizomatic narrative perspective’ and discuss the usefulness of this approach to the study of the re-integration processes of former child soldiers in their post-war communities in Northern Uganda (pp. 108-125).

The second section of the book begins to explore the ‘world of narratives’, with some powerful and innovative contributions from scholars from a range of disciplines, which demonstrates that narratives extend beyond the purely textual. Lars-Christer Hydén, for example, explores eloquently how narratives are embodied. By turning readers attention away from the written and spoken words, the author addresses the concern with, of what he calls “broken bodies and narratives” (p. 127). Susan Bell examines the growing field of visual work within narrative research and argues for unique contribution and challenges of

incorporating visual narratives into the study of social life by analysing original data. The various chapters in this section take the reader from initial decisions about forms of narratives, through more complex issues of reflexivity, interpretation, and the research context. Some chapters are more convincing and successful in developing arguments than others, but each chapter seems useful to understand the diversity of narrative research.

The third and final section of the book focuses on the relationship between personal and public narratives, and explores how “narratives exist within, transform, and are transformed by their location in the real world” (p. 17). This section includes contributions from senior narrative scholars, such as Phil Salmon and Catherine Kohler Riessman. This section gives consideration to some of the challenges, of what the editors call “the ethical dilemmas” (*ibid.*), which narrative researchers confront in their scholarly pursuits in the world of narratives. Researcher, for example, Paul Gready, reflects on the public life of narratives, considering the effects of narratives studies when it reaches the public sphere and how such effects must be factored into the research (pp. 240-256).

## Core arguments

Throughout the anthology the authors make a number of arguments in which a core assumption that narrative is contextual and narrative research is

a multilevel, interdisciplinary field and any attempt to simplify its complexity would not do justice to the richness of approaches, theoretical underpinnings and unexpected findings that it has offered (p. 13),

becomes obvious. From the introduction to the concluding chapter, authors have reaffirmed that in a fundamental sense narratives are co-constructed (pp. 197-204) and “meaning is only ever contextual and is thus forever in flux” (p. 17). Salmon and Riessman, in their written exchange, further argue that “the speaker’s intent is always met with the analyst’s interpretation, which in turn is situated in discourses, history, politics and culture. It is never ending, always open to re-interpretation” (p. 200).

The arguments begin with an exploration of event-centric and experiential approaches, in which Patterson suggests that despite some theoretical limitations of the Labovian approach, “there are many ways in which narrative analysis can utilize the valuable aspects of Labov’s work by using more inclusive definitional criteria” (p. 43). Through using an extract from her own work on personal narratives of the experience of trauma as a model of analysis, she stresses that an experiential definition of the oral personal experience narrative is “broad enough to include all aspects of personal experience narration without being so broad as to suggest that everything anyone says may be counted as narrative” (*ibid.*).

But Squire argues, with some superb examples, that we need to consider the ‘semantics’ rather than the ‘syntax’ of narrative. By describing the assumptions

underlying the experience-centred approach, she calls for an exposition of the more interpretative experiential perspective. Squire examines two large and interrelated narrative research perspectives and describes narratives as integral to people's lives and sense of themselves. Sketching out the approach's modes of material collection and analysis, she recognises the difficulties associated with this approach's potentially over-strong interpretative claims, over-psychological framework and simplifying assumptions about subjects and time. She explores attempts that have been made to depart from such "experience-centred models" into "context-rich frameworks" that pay attention to social discourses and practices, and cultural genres (pp. 60-66). The chapter exemplifies the continuing contradictions and difficulties associated with these moves, and returns to many of the narrative examples used by Patterson. In her meticulous discussion about how an experiential approach can be useful, Squire also illustrates a number of examples from her own research, involving stories that HIV-positive South Africans tell about living with the virus, all of which substantiates her argument for the practicality of the experiential approach to narrative.

Phoenix addresses the importance of interpersonal aspects of context and the issue of 'subjectivity trouble', and "provides a discussion by combining biographical, experiential, and contextual approaches to narrative analysis" (p. 74). In her analysis of smaller-scale narratives, she demonstrates how narratives are produced and co-constructed within interpersonal relations between interviewer and interviewee, and shows how the complexities of understanding can be achieved through different levels of analysis of narrative context. She uses extracts from a study of social identities, drawn from an interview with a white mother of child of mixed-race parentage, and through it she examines how, in interviews, people both demonstrate awareness of what society thinks of them, simultaneously rationalising their individual positioning, moving in and out. Such social and emotional contexts, as Phoenix argues, change over time. Narrative analysis provides a means to consider the multilayered ways in which research participants understand their situations in contexts such as these. A wider contextual analysis is necessary in order to understand stories.

Tamboukou argues that a Foucauldian approach is most practical, because in taking this approach we can analyse the "processes, procedures, and apparatuses whereby truth, power, knowledge and desire are interrelated in the production of narratives and in their effects" (p. 90). She divides the discussion into three sub-sections: a) genealogical problematic, in which she discusses the particular problems that Foucault's theories raise in narrative research; b) questions of method, a section where the 'how' of a Foucauldian approach to narrative analysis is under scrutiny; and c) emerging themes, a section where the author draws on her own research to demonstrate some of the research effects of a Foucauldian approach to narrative analysis. For Tamboukou, rather than being considered as representing reality, narratives should be seen as productive. She argues that "narratives do things, they constitute realities, shaping the social rather than being determined by it" (p. 15), and that narrative researchers

know what they do and why they do it. Tamboukou gives an open methodological framework, of what she calls “a map charting genealogical trails and at the same time inviting the researcher to follow these lines, but also bend them, erase them or add his/her own” (p. 89). Thus, Tamboukou emphasises the ‘discursive agency’ in autobiographical narratives.

Loots et al. argue for a rhizomatic approach by exploring fragments of stories and forming rhizomes with fragmented selves in which the self narratives of former child soldiers in Northern Uganda and the community narratives about the war and re-building of the post-war society are explored, connected and investigated according to the principles of rhizome concept of the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari. The rhizome concept refers to an open and decentralized underground root system, which branches out to all sides, unpredictably and horizontally. The rhizome is used as a methodological metaphor to conceive and study narratives as characterised by the principles of multiple entryways, multiplicity, horizontal connectedness, a-signifying ruptures, and cartography (p. 120). The rhizomatic perspective considers the narrative construction of selfhood a multi-voiced process of co-constructing a multitude of fragmented, temporal and context-bounded stories, pathways and new voices. It also demonstrates the unspeakability of some sensitive issues. This approach fits the cultural-centred approaches which consider narrative as performance, as narrative-in-context.

Throughout the anthology, issues of power, agency, narratability and challenges in doing narrative research are discussed from a range of angles. Unlike Loots et al., Andrews and Margareta Hydén scrutinise the subjectivity of the narrative researcher. In discussing what constitutes an adequate interpretation and appropriate analysis, Andrews notes, drawing on Rosaldo, that “all interpretations are provisional and that “there is no view from nowhere” (Rosaldo 1989, 8, cited here p. 18). She suggests that revisiting narrative data could help us see things differently from before. M. Hydén, Gready and several others argue that sensitivity is an important issue in narrative research. For M. Hydén, the concept of sensitive topic itself is relationally and culturally defined. But Gready argues, considering the effects of a narrative work once it is published, that we need to deal with potential effects of our works. The argument made here is that research on public narratives, without an understanding of the public sphere, of the unsafe spaces surrounding the so called safe spaces of delivery, can become a violation of trust. Although it is believed that “with voice comes power” (p. 19), Gready argues that the lack of control over representation in human rights reports, the courtroom, the media or elsewhere, marks a return to powerlessness (p. 245). In this context, to speak is not a one-off event, but a process, spanning various narrations and interpretations. This argument is important, even if not relevant to academic writing where narrative researchers are required to use pseudonyms to safeguard participants’ confidentiality.

## Illustrations

The anthology is filled with excellent illustrations that examine a range of narrative scholarship which operates across different media. In addition to the already discussed chapters, there are a number of empirical chapters which present rich illustrations. L.-Chr. Hydén, for example, provides illustrations of narratives as he looks into various aspects of “actual, physical bodies both in storytelling and in stories”, and explores “broken bodies and narratives” (p. 127). He explores five aspects of embodiment: the present body, the story telling body, the embodied story, the represented body, and the broken body, through oral interview extracts. His participants talk about illness and dysfunction of bodies and demonstrate that bodies are never neutral and that words and memories are both deeply connected to bodily experiences (pp. 127-154). The notion of bodies presented in this chapter includes voice, silence, gaze, touch, scent, gesture, positioning, and other movements. The attention to the sick body is an important and provocative intervention which opens up possibilities for more research and theorisation in the field of embodiment from a variety of perspectives.

Likewise, Bell presents powerful illustrations of visual work as she examines how images of the self intervene into how stories are told and understood. In discussing the growing field of visual work within narrative research, she analyses visual materials and argues that we should recognise the need for such “unique contribution” and the “challenges of incorporating visual narratives into the study of social life” (p. 142). The chapter provides a contextual discussion of the visual narratives and describes two broad approaches within the field of visual studies: studying social life with images and studying images. It then moves to exemplify two aspects of visual narrative research. The first keeps with theme of embodiment and offers an interpretation of photographs made by the well-known British artist Jo Spence after she developed breast cancer in 1982. The second example is an interpretation of memory, family, and history by two sisters in the contemporary USA based on a series of objects collected by their mother’s and father’s families from the nineteenth century to the present. She discusses the stories with visual images and makes a powerful argument that visual narrative needs wider recognition. Davis raises questions around virtual subjectivities by exploring the various ways in which narratives of lived experience can be generated through the internet, including in synchronous and asynchronous online chat rooms, blogs, and in social and sexual networking platforms (pp. 160-172). He expands the discussion to examine the effect of internet technologies on the creation of new kinds of narratives and demonstrates, through superb illustrations, that ‘internet technologies’ are extremely diverse and that they are combined and used in everyday life that cannot be easily categorized.

In his discussion about how to deal with the methodological problem of whether researchers need to anticipate the public life of narratives and, if so, in

what contexts, why and how, Gready provides evidences from a range of sources, including advocacy networks, truth and reconciliation processes, Holocaust testimonial video archives (pp. 241-250), which substantiate the arbitrariness of testimonial uptake and circulation in the public sphere. He stresses that testifiers' senses of control and ownership are violated when their testimony takes on an unanticipated public life. He outlines a methodological ethics and politics for contemporary testimonial research by focusing on oral testimony narratives, which are an increasingly common focus of interest and research.

## Implications

Stimulating and innovative in terms of both theoretical and empirical analysis, the book closes with concluding comments by Riesman and an afterword by Jens Brockmeier, which stipulates "context cannot be stripped away, nor can it be separated from questions of meanings" (p. 21). The question of how we hear and how often we fail to hear, aspects of the narratives we encounter, and how we decode their meaning, is addressed from a number of different angles throughout the book. It was with the hope for both original empirical research and methodological innovation that this anthology brought together essays drawn from a range of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, cultural studies, Art and technology studies, and gender studies, which relate to theories, histories, contexts and genres of narratives. As the editors argue, this anthology can be "a compass for navigating the seas of narrative research; a resource that can suggest paths to take, but also allows for diversions and excursions" (p. 13). Written by an international and interdisciplinary team of experts in the field of narrative research, the anthology demonstrates theoretical, methodological and practical issues of narrative research. This volume can be an invaluable resource for understanding what is narrative research, how we do this and what narrative does to our lives.

## Bibliography

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**Sie können den Text in folgender Weise zitieren / How to cite this article:**

Hashem, Rumana: "An Anthology of Narrative Research: Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou Present Their Second Volume of *Doing Narrative Research* [Review of: Molly Andrews et al. (Eds.): *Doing Narrative Research*. Los Angeles et al. 2013]". In: *DIEGESIS. Interdisziplinäres E-Journal für Erzählforschung / Interdisciplinary E-Journal for Narrative Research* 3.1 (2014). 96-103.

URN: [urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20140523-111618-1](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20140523-111618-1)

URL: <https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/view/154/206>



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