Handbook of Narratology

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Identity and Narration

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1 Definition

Identity designates the attempt to differentiate and integrate a sense of self along different social and personal dimensions such as gender, age, race, occupation, gangs, socio-economic status, ethnicity, class, nation states, or regional territory.

Any claim of identity faces three dilemmas: (a) sameness of a sense of self over time in the face of constant change; (b) uniqueness of the individual vis-à-vis others faced with being the same as everyone else; and (c) the construction of agency as constituted by self (with a self-to-world direction of fit) and world (with a world-to-self direction of fit). Claims to identity begin with the continuity/change dilemma and from there venture into issues of uniqueness and agency; self and sense of self begin by constructing agency and differentiating self from others and then go on to navigate the waters of continuity and change.

Engaging in any activity requires acts of self-identification by relying on repertoires that identify and contextualize speakers/writers along varying socio-cultural categories, often compared to mental or linguistic representations (→ schemata) that are less fixed depending on context and function. Narrating, a speech activity that involves ordering characters in space and time, is a privileged genre for identity construction because it requires situating characters in time and space through gesture, posture, facial cues, and gaze in coordination with speech. In addition, narrating, whether in the form of → fictional or factual narration, tends toward "human life"—something more than what is reportable or tellable (→ tellability), something that is life- and live-worthy (Taylor 1989). Thus, narrating enables speakers/writers to disassociate the speaking/writing self from the act of speaking, to take a reflective position vis-à-vis self as → character.

2 Explication

Taking a reflective position on self as character has been elaborated in the narratological differentiation between → author, → narrator, and character. The reflective process takes place in the present but refers to past or fictitious time-space, making past (or imagined) events relevant for the act of telling, pointing toward the meaningfulness of relationships and worthwhile lives, and exemplifying "the human good" (Aristotle 1996: 1461a). It is against this backdrop that narrating in recent decades has established itself as a privileged site for identity analysis— a new territory for inquiry (cf. Ricœur 1990; Strawson 2004).

Designing characters in fictitious timespace has the potential of opening up territory for exploring identity, reaching beyond traditional boundaries, and testing out novel identities. Narratives rooted in factual past-time events, by contrast, are dominated by an opposite orientation. The delineation of what happened, whose agency was involved, and the potential transformation of characters from one state to another serve to demarcate the identity of the reflective self under investigation. If past-time narration is triggered by the question "Who am I?," having the narrator's quest for identity or sense of self as its goal, the leeway for ambiguity, transgression of boundaries, or exploration of novel identities is more restricted: the goal is rather to condense and unite, to resolve ambiguity, and to deliver answers that lay further inquiry into past and identity to rest.

However, the reduction of identity to the depiction of characters and their development in a story leaves out the communicative space within which identities are negotiated in interaction with others. Limiting narratives to what they are about restricts identity to the referential or cognitive level of speech activities and disregards real life, where identities are under construction, formed, performed, and change over time. It is within the space of everyday talk in interaction with others that narration plays its constitutive role in the formation and navigation of identities as part of everyday practices and that the potential for orientation toward human values takes form. When considering the emergence of identity, the narrating subject must be regarded: (a) as neither locked into stability nor drifting through constant change, but rather as something that is multiple, contradictory, and distributed over time and place, held together contextually and locally; (b) in terms of membership positions vis-à-vis others that help to trace the narrator's identity within the context of social relationships, groups, and institutions; and (c) as the active and agentive locus of control, though simultaneously attributing agency to outside forces that are situated in a broader socio-

historical context. Along these lines, identity is not confined by just one societal discourse but open to change. Identity is able to transform itself and adapt to the challenges of growing cultural multiplicities in increasingly globalizing environments.

Based on the assumption that narration at its origin was a verbal act performed locally in interactional contexts and from there evolved toward other, differently constituted and contextualized media (writing, electronic, and digital media, etc.; cf. Ryan 2006), the function of narration in identity formation processes cannot be reduced to the verbal means used or to the messages conveyed. Rather, the local interactional environments in which narrative units emerge form the foundation for inquiry into identity formation and the sense of self. While transformations from oral to written forms of expression have been studied (e.g. Ong 1982) and text-critical analysis has been undertaken from the perspective of the hermeneutic circle, work with transcripts from audio recordings is relatively new. More recent are concerted efforts to record narratives audio-visually and to analyze the way they emerge in interaction, including the sophisticated ways in which they are performed. Audio-visual material, of course, can be more fully (micro-analytically) scrutinized in terms of the contextualized coordination of narrative form, content, and performance features (→ performativity) in the service of identity formation processes.

Recently, this type of micro-analytic analysis has been applied to identity as achieved in narration under the heading of "positioning analysis" (Bamberg 1997, 2003; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008) in order to focus more effectively on the situated nature of identification processes that emerge from the three identity dilemmas mentioned above. Navigating and connecting temporal continuity and discontinuity, self and other differentiation, and the direction of fit between person and world, take place in the small stories told on everyday occasions in which tellers affirm a sense of who they are. It is precisely this sense of self and identity grounded in sequential, moment-by-moment interactive engagements, largely undertheorized and often dismissed in traditional identity inquiry, that operates on verbal texts or cognitive representations (→ cognitive narratology).

3   History of the Concept and its Study

Self and identity are traditionally bound up with what is taken to be the essence of the individual person which continues over time and space in phylo- as well as in socio- and onto-genetic terms. However, this overlooks how conceptions of self and identity have evolved histori-

cally and culturally and also how each individual's personal ontogenesis undergoes continuous change. In addition, essentialist views of self and identity camouflage the links between these concepts and their counterparts in narration and narrative practices. Section 3.1 will further explore the connection between self and identity dilemmas (b) and (c), while section 3.2 will be devoted to identity and dilemma (a).

3.1   Self and Narration

Although self, like "I" and "me," are highly specific morphological items of the English lexicon, they are commonly assumed to refer universally to corresponding concepts in other languages—an assumption that has been contested, however. A closer look reveals that these concepts most often have a history of their own that varies in illuminating ways (cf. Heelas & Lock eds. 1981; Triandis 1989). Modern notions of self and individuality (cf. Elias 1987; Gergen 1991) are taken to be closely intertwined with the emergence of local communities, nation states, new forms of knowledge and reflection ("rationalization"), feeling, and perception—all in conjunction with increasing interiorization and psychologization.

In this process of becoming individualized, self-narration (autobiography, life-writing, autofiction) springs to the fore as the basic practice-ground for marking the self off from "I" as speaker/agent and "me" as character/actor (cf. the narratological distinctions between "narrating self" and "narrated self" and between narrator and protagonist). Acts of thematizing and displacing the self as character in past time and space become the basis for other self-related actions such as self-disclosure, self-reflection and self-criticism, potentially leading to self-control, self-constraint, and self-discipline. What further comes to light in this process is an increasing differentiation between (and integration of) "I" and "me" (James 1890), and simultaneously between "I-we-us" and "them-other" (Elias 1987). Thus, self, apparently, is the product of an "I" that manages three processes of differentiation and integration: (a) it can posit a "me" (as distinct from "I"); (b) it can posit and balance this "I-me" distinction with "we"; and (c) it can differentiate this "we" as "us" from "them" as "other." This process of differentiation must be taken into account when talking about "self" as different from "other" and viewing self "in relation to self" (as in self-reflection and self-control). Self, as differentiated from other by developing the ability to account for itself (as agent or as undergoer), to self-reflect, and to self-augment, can now begin to look for something like temporal con-

tinuity, unity, and coherence, i.e. identity across a life (cf. Ricœur 1990).

3.2   Identity and Narration: Biography and Life-Writing

The ability to conceive of life as an integrated narrative forms the cornerstone for what Erikson (1950) called "ego identity." The underlying assumption here is that life begins to co-jell into building blocks that, when placed in the right order, cohere: important moments tie into important events, events into episodes, and episodes into a life story.

It is this analogy between life and story—or better: the metaphoric process of *seeing* life *as* storied (in narratological terms: story and discourse) that has given substantive fuel to the narrative turn. The strength of how scholars (and laypeople) in the past have made use of this connection, though, varies: on the one hand, there is a relatively loose connection according to which we tell stories of lives by using particular narrative formats. Lives can be told as following an epic script or as if consisting of unconnected patches. Most often, though, lives are told by depicting characters and how they develop. Character, particularly in modern times, rests on an internal and an external form of organization. The former is typically a complex interiority, a set of traits organizing underlying actions and the course of events as outcomes of motives that spring from this interiority. The latter, an external condition of character development, takes plot as the overarching principle that lends order to human action in response to the threat of a discontinuous and seemingly meaningless life by a set of possible continuities (often referred to by cognitive narratologists as "schemata" or "scripts"; cf. Herman 2002: chap. 3). This interplay of human (and humane) interiority and culturally available models of continuity (plots) gives narrative a powerful role in the process of seeing life as narrative. It also should be noted that the arrangement of interiority as governed by the availability of plots gives answers—at least to a degree—to the "direction-of-fit" or "agency" identity dilemma. With narration thus defined, life transcends the animalistic and unruly body so that narration gains the power to organize "human temporality" (Punday 2003; see also Ricœur 1985): the answer to non-human, a-temporal, and discontinuous chaos.

Another, and probably stronger reason for employing the narrative metaphor for life starts with the assumption of a "narrative mode of thinking." Bruner (1986) and Polkinghorne (1988) similarly vie for the argument that there is a particular cognitive mode of making sense of the (social) world which is organized "narratively" (an important theme

in cognitive psychology; cf. Herman 2002, 2009). Freeman's (1993) and Mishler's (1986) work with autobiographical memories focuses particularly on the interrelationship between memory, autobiographical memory, and narrative. Mishler early on propagated the use of autobiographic narrative interview data in the form of a "contextual approach" which is not limited to recording data about human experience or to looking "behind" the author, but that focuses on interaction and relationships.

McAdams (1985), building on narrative theorists such as Bruner, Polkinghorne, and Sarbin, has turned the assumption of selves plotting themselves in and across time into a life-story model of identity. His model clearly states that life stories are more than recapitulations of past events and episodes, that they have a *defining* character: "our narrative identities are the stories we live by" (McAdams et al. 2006: 4). McAdams' efforts to connect the study of lives to life stories is paralleled in a wider turn to biographic methods in the social sciences, leading to Lieblich & Josselson's eleven-volume series titled *The Narrative Study of Lives*.

The origins of these efforts stretch across a wide range of disciplines including psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Goodson & Sikes (2001: 129) date the origins of life history methods in the form of autobiographies back to the beginning of the 20th century. Since then, life history methods have spread from the study of attitudes in social psychology to community studies in sociology, particularly within the Chicago School, and forty years later back into psychology. Retrospectively, it can be argued that the early studies by the members of the Chicago School, and in particular "oral history" popularized by the works of Studs Terkel, lacked the analytic component of modern day narrative inquiry. However, without these origins and the works of Bertaux (1981) and Plummer (1983), the foundation of the Research Committee on Biography and Society (within the International Sociological Association) would have been unthinkable. The methodological principles were laid out in the early work by Schütze (1977) and later picked up and refined in current narrative interview approaches by Fischer-Rosenthal & Rosenthal (1997).

Thanks to these developments, it is clearer how the relatively massive turn in the social sciences toward biography and life writing was able to gain ground as a new approach to identity research. It emerged as a concerted attempt to wed self-differentiation (self that can reflect upon itself) and narration (plotting a sense of characterhood across time)—in narratological terms: "narrating self" and "narrated self"—into an answer that addresses the three dilemmas of identity laid out

earlier. A teller accounts for how s/he (a) has emerged (as character) over time, (b) as different from others (but same), and simultaneously (c) how s/he views her-/himself as a (responsible) agent. Managing these three dilemmas in concert is taken to establish what is essential to *identity*. Consequently, life-writing and biography, preferably as autobiography or life story, become privileged arenas for identity research.

3.3   Problems of Linking Life, Narration, and Identity

The link between life and narration and the exploration of lives (including selves and identity) through the exploration of narratives have traditions going back to Freud (1900), Allport (1937), and Murray (1938). However, this close connection between life and narrative is said to require a particular *retrospectiveness* that values "life as reflected" and discredits "life as lived." Sartwell (2000) has questioned (a) whether life really *has* the purpose and meaningfulness that narrative theorists metaphorically attempt to attribute to it and (b) whether narratives themselves *have* the kind of → coherence and telic quality that narrative theorists often assume. The problem Sartwell sees in this kind of approach is that the lived moment, the way it is "sensed" and experienced, is said to gain its life-worthy quality only in light of its surrounding moments. Rather than empowering the subject with meaning in life, Sartwell argues, narrative, conceived this way, drains and blocks him or her from finding pleasure and joy in the here-and-now. The subject is overpowered by narrative as a normalizing machine.

Another difficulty resulting from the close linkage between life, narration, and identity consists in what Lejeune (1975) termed "the autobiographical pact." According to Lejeune, what counts as autobiography is somewhat blurry, since it is based on a "pact" between author and reader that is not directly traceable down into the textual qualities. Thus, while a life story can employ the first-person pronoun to feign the identity of author, narrator, and character, use of the third-person pronoun may serve to camouflage this identity (cf. narrative unreliability). Autobiographical fiction thrives on the blurring of these boundaries. Of interest here are "the perennial theoretical questions of authenticity and reference" (Porter 2008: 25) leading up to the larger issue of the connection between referentiality and narration (cf. Genette's 1990 distinction between fictional narrative and factual narrative).

While most research on biography has been quite aware of the situated and locally occasioned nature of people's accounts (often in institutional settings) and the problems this poses for claims with regard

to the speaker/narrator's sense of self or identity, a number of researchers have launched a large-scale critique of the biographic turn as reducing language to its referential and ideational functions and thereby overextending (and simplifying) narration as the root metaphor for the person, (sense of) self, and identity. At the core of these voices is the call for a much "needed antidote to the longstanding tradition of 'big stories' which, be they in the form of life stories or of stories of landmark events, have monopolized the inquiry into tellers' representations of past events and themselves in light of these events" (Georgakopoulou 2007: 147; cf. Strawson 2004).

3.4   Narration as Identity Formation in Narrative Practice

Attempts to transport interactional context and performance-oriented aspects of narration into the analysis of identities reach back to Burke (1945) and Goffman (1959) and have been reiterated repeatedly by others in the field of biography research (e.g. Mishler 1986; Riessman 2008). More recent attempts to integrate this acknowledgment into empirical analysis center around a number of key positions. First is the proposal to resituate narration as performative moves (cf. Langellier & Peterson 2004), calling for the analysis of embodied practices and material conditions of narrative productions. Similarly, Gubrium & Holstein (2008) argue for a narrative ethnography—one that is able to analyze the complex interplay between "experience, storying practices, descriptive resources, purposes at hand, audiences, and the environments that condition storytelling" (250).

Georgakopoulou (2006, 2007) and Bamberg (1997, 2003; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008) have tried to develop an alternative approach to big story narrative research that takes "narratives-in-interaction," i.e. the way stories surface in everyday conversation (small stories), as the locus where identities are continuously practiced and tested out. This approach allows for exploring self at the level of the talked-about *and* at the level of tellership in the here-and-now of a storytelling situation. Both of these levels feed into the larger project at work in the global situatedness within which selves are already positioned, i.e. with more or less implicit and indirect referencing and orientation to social positions and discourses above and beyond the here-and-now.

Placing emphasis on small stories allows for the study of how people as agentive actors position themselves—and in doing so become positioned. This model of positioning affords the possibility of viewing identity constructions as two-fold: analyzing the *way* the referential world is constructed, with characters (self and others) emerging in time

and space as protagonists and antagonists. Simultaneously, it is possible to show how the referential world (what the story is about) is constructed as a function of interactive engagement, i.e. the way the referential world is put together points to how tellers "want to be understood," how they *index* their sense of self. Consequently, it is the action orientation of the participants in small story events that forms the basic point of departure for this functionalist-informed approach to narration and, to a lesser degree, what is represented or reflected upon in the stories told. This seems to be what makes this type of work with small stories crucially different from work with big stories: the aim is to analyze how people use small stories in their interactive engagements to *construct* a sense of who they are, while big story research analyzes the stories as *representations* of world and identities within them.

Behind this way of approaching and working with stories is an action orientation that urges the analyst to look at constructions of self and identity as necessarily dialogical and relational, fashioned and refashioned in local interactive practices (cf. Antaki & Widdicombe eds. 1998) (→ dialogism). At the same time, it recognizes that small story participants generally attune their stories to various local, interpersonal purposes, sequentially gauging themselves to prior and upcoming talk, continuously challenging and confirming each others' positions. It is in and through this type of relational activity that representations in the form of content, i.e. what the talk is intended to be about, are brought off and come into existence. By contrast, story analyses that remain fixated on the represented contents of the story in order to conclude from there how the teller reflects on him-/herself miss out on the very interactive and relational constructedness of content and reflection. Furthermore, this kind of analysis aims at scrutinizing the inconsistencies, ambiguities, contradictions, moments of trouble and tension, and the tellers' constant navigation and finessing between different versions of selfhood and identity in local interactional contexts. However well-established the line of identities-in-interaction may be in the context of the analysis of conversational data, this emphasis still contrasts with the longstanding privileging of coherence by traditional approaches to narrative theory. Through the scrutiny of small stories in a variety of sites and contexts, the aim becomes to legitimize the management of different and often competing and contradictory positions as the mainstay of identity through narrative. A final aim is to advance a project of documenting identity as a *process* of constant change that, when practiced over and over again, has the potential to result in a sense of constancy and sameness, i.e. big stories that can be elicited under certain conditions.

4   Topics for Further Investigation

(a) Whether narratives actually constitute a privileged territory for inquiry into life and identity requires further theoretical and empirical inquiry. Usually, this question is decided on the basis of a pre-theoretical, epistemological (if not ontological) stance. But the question itself may be open to different interpretations. (b) The use of narrative methods in the exploration of hybrid or hyphenated identities constitutes an interesting new development in recent trends of social science research in a turn to questions of citizenship, cultural exclusion, imagined communities, symbolic representations of belonging, and even general processes of globalization. (c) Illness and traumatic experiences are typically viewed as disruptions of continuity and coherence, posing challenges to the formation of a sense of self and (biographic) identity as well as to our sense of agency. Recent discussions about the plot-types employed in illness narratives and how patients' narrative accounts can be made use of more productively in narrative medicine bring up interesting questions with regard to the construction of paths and trajectories of experiences, their inherent action potential, and the relationship to mapping out possible reconstructions from being re-active to becoming pro-active in the construction of patients' *"healing dramas."* (d) The increasing diversification into different narrative methods and approaches (content/thematic vs. structural/formal methods, now joined by discursive/performative approaches) has led to the question whether there is still a common core to the original "narrative approach" as an alternative to the study of subjectivity, self, and identity—the way, in retrospect, it seemed to have begun about thirty-five years ago.

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