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**[Review - Narrative](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/9027222363/themetapsycholog)**

State of the Art

by Michael Bamberg (Editor)

John Benjamins, 2007

Review by Yves Laberge, Ph.D.

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There are many academics (such as I) who were reluctant, if not suspicious, in the uses of narratology during the 1970s and 1980s: inspired by the works of the French structuralists and literary studies, specially in French contexts, it was clear to me in those days that this abstract trend only lead to a dead end. How could that fashionable, complex theory ever produce some "useful" knowledge after such a suspect demonstration ? The old narratology seems to be forgotten. But a change has come in the recent two decades. Narrative studies, as made by Michael Bamberg (from Clark University) and his colleagues, are completely different and much more rigorous: clear, dynamic, interdisciplinary in its essence, without jargon, and moreover, it makes us understand something important that lies in the texts: how meanings are communicated and negotiated in discourses. The previous books in that vein and from the same publisher were all at the cutting edge of that innovative approach (Bamberg 2004; Georgakopoulou 2007; Quasthoff and Becker 2006).

Although it seems new, *Narrative: State of the Art* is not a breakthrough book: a few former titles in these series have already paved the road, and most of these books take from previous special issues from the journal *Narrative Inquiry* (Bamberg 2004; Georgakopoulou 2007; Quasthoff and Becker 2006). We find here 24 chapters focusing on narrative research from various perspectives, borrowing mostly from linguistics, microsociology, social psychology. As opposed to the "old" narratology which focused on "the narrator" in some novel, there are almost no analysis of books or creative works, but rather conversations and social interactions, as did for instance Erving Goffman in his posthumous book "*Forms of Talk*". To put it simply, narrative research acknowledges the fact that individuals retell their own experiences into stories they make; that process can be studied, compared and understood. For instance, dialogues (interviews, conversations, debates, story-telling talk) are essential elements that are used in discourse analysis, but scholars do need accurate methods (mostly qualitative) and theoretical frameworks in order to use these materials

In a first step, some core concepts have to be explained. For example in her fine chapter titled "Narrative as construction and discursive resource", Stephanie Taylor give a useful definition of the narrative, which is presented as "a construction, in talk, of sequence or consequence"; but the following sentence explains more, since narrative "can be established minimally: for example, sequence is implied by expressions like 'then' or 'next', consequence by 'so'." (p. 114). In other words, scholars studying narratives have to understand how the elements of a story were put together; which logics were used in the conversations to guide each participant. Moreover, for Paul Atkinson and Sara Delamont who refer to Barbara Czarniawska, "the study of narratives is by no means confined to the narration itself. Narratives are embedded in interactional and organizational contexts" (p. 196).

In this book, many authors give an impressive variety of examples of how the study of narratives can help and inspire research in their specific fields. For instance, in his piece related to the field of personality psychology, Dan McAdams indicates that "Freud wrote about dream narratives; Jung explored universal life myths; Adler examined narrative accounts of earliest memories; Murray identified recurrent themes in TAT stories and autobiographical accounts." (p. 19). In the following chapter, Brian Schiff argues that "narrative research holds the promise of seeing psychological processes in their correct context" (p. 35). One of the few chapters related to artistic works, James Phelan's "Rhetorical aesthetics and other issues in the study of literary narrative" focuses on the case of how director Howard Hawks adapted Raymond Chandler's novel *The Big Sleep* into a movie (p. 111). In their piece on "narrative therapy", Mary Gergen and Kenneth Gergen argue that "narrative is the problem" for psychoanalysis at work, in the sense that it is how the patient formulates his perception that can tell the inner conflicts that have to be resolved (p. 134).

To my eyes, *Narrative: State of the Art* is an important, overlooked book that will inspire scholars in linguistics, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, ethnography and education. My only quibble would be the lack of an index: I know special issues of journals never carry an index, but since we have a real hardcover book with many authors and themes, the lack of an index had to be mentioned. Another problem lies in the way titles of chapters are formulated: some remain vague unless you read the whole text and do not indicate the disciplinary approach, when you find pieces titled "Life 'on holiday'. In defense of big stories" or "Stories: Big or small. Why do we care?". What do these titles suggest ? Incidentally, these contributions are nonetheless among the most interesting pages of the whole book. Speaking of titles and vagueness, the book's main title does not indicate much either; I even found a better presentation of its main contribution on the back cover with a much clearer description, which could even be a future title for a possible new edition of that same book: "Current narrative theorizing and emerging new trends in narrative research". Sometimes these catchy formulas give a clear idea of what is to come.

Works cited:

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