



Narratives as instrumental research and as attempts of fixing meaning¹. The uses and misuses of the concept of “narratives”

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Abstract

Narratives are the most important means of fixing the meaning of events and of the social and cultural construction of reality. This is the main assertion of this text, together with a detailed explanation of what is to be understood by narratives and narrative research. A particular topic of the paper is what is meant when the concept of narrative is used in the social sciences, for not everyone seems to be talking about the same thing. The misuses of the term borrowed from the common language often pervade scientific speech when dealing with the concept of narratives. Narrative research has gained a lot of ground in the humanities in the past two decades; this paper shows the directions and patterns of this development and how the new branch – enabled by poststructuralist thought – can be put into the older frame of anthropological research. The truth that every truth is socially constructed is taken as granted by the new approach to narratives and this problematic is left behind in order to focus on the how of the construction of meaning. As already stated above, it is my hypothesis that narratives (not to be confused with narrative research in this respect) are one of the most important means of constructing and fixing meaning. Working with narratives can be confusing in a number of ways detailed in the paper, but also clarifying in the respect that it explores more and assumes less than the more traditional approaches of social sciences.

¹ The phrase “fixing meaning” was coined by Johannes Angermüller (2012) without referring to the narrative concept discussed in this paper. In his article, professor Angermüller performs discourse analysis on political speech, and although the subject is unrelated, the phrasing caught my eye and I found it particularly useful to describe the phenomena I was to write about. But a deeper look into these matters shows that actually, the intended meaning isn’t that far away from the original use of the term in his article: from many possible readings of a speech, the participants to the political discourse each attempt to “fix the meaning” of it in a certain way. So it is with narratives as well: after a certain situation occurs, there are many possible meanings we can attribute to it, and the way this attributing is done is by the mental construction of narratives to explain the situation and the people involved in it.

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Introduction (and putting narratives in an anthropological context)

This paper explores the way that narratives construct our understanding of things and people. The statement that almost any given experience and the way it is perceived is a social construct is an old classic of anthropology, fitted in the whole debate over nature and culture (synthesized, for example in works such as MacCormack & Stratherm, 1980; or Keesing, 1974). But how exactly is this experience constructed through the social influence outside the self? Is that influence really purely external? I don't think so. This socially constructed reality is generated both from outside and within; and the limits between the two sources are highly blurred. Don Slater's work (1998) shows that nothing within human nature is indeterminate, outside cultural construction, not even the most primal of instincts or basic needs like survival. Some scholars argued that there is, still, a certain breaking point of extreme conditions in which the basic needs emerge and the social and cultural layers that enveloped them are cast aside. In a response to these assertions, Slater says that even in that kind of a situation, every satisfaction of such a basic need is still cultural and ritual in nature, thus meaningful. Nothing we do even in the direst of circumstances is without a given meaning. "And even if a breaking point comes at some degree zero of human existence at which "basic need" emerges, this is surely no basis on which to define human need, for what we observe in these catastrophic conditions is not the "truth" of the need, but the extremes of social failure" (p 134-135). Taking this observation further, I would also state something perhaps a bit hazardous in the context of the nature-culture debate: that, most probably, the very nature of "human nature", understood as our humanity, is in fact culture. What makes us human is our ability and need to "culture-ize" everything, to give meaning (as Slater would put it). But it would be pointless to develop on this idea here, as the topic of this paper lies somewhere else.

Another debate or defined opposition, besides the nature versus culture debate, that would like to define culture as an artificial ornament painted upon the "true" nature of reality is the assumed contrast between culture and practical reason; this one has been eloquently described and deconstructed by Marshall Sahlins (1976). In his work that bears this exact title ("Culture and practical reason"), the American anthropologist showed how the whole concept of practical reason is also a cultural construct and not even a global one, pertaining solely to the West (and the Westernized World and intellectual tradition).

Even though the concept of narratives is fairly new (the focus on narrative research dating back to the early 1990s, according to Riessman and Quinney, 2005), at least on the large-scale mainstream scientific writings (which may seem a bit suspicious to a scholar wary of intellectual fashion trends), I think it could be successfully put in the context of these past debates that defined the very subject of anthropology. Some

scholars push the boundaries by placing narrative research into anthropology not only by identifying these past debates (like nature versus culture) as central to the narrative perspective, but also by defining classical works like Margaret Mead’s as foregoers of narrative research that opened up the way for the mainstream enterprises of such research of today (for example, Bold, 2012, p 12). If this field has always dealt with what makes us human and with the meanings which we ascribe to everything we experience, narratives should indeed have a key place within anthropological research. In this respect (of the connection between narratives and past classical debates), narratives may seem suspicious in another way: the concept is perhaps something old with a refurbished naming. Still, this isn’t the case: narratives are both old to anthropological thought because they’re intrinsically connected to cultural constructs and also new because only the recent shift in humanities that emphasizes subjectivity brought into focus this particular part of the social construction of meaning.

As for the question on how exactly the reality is culturally constructed; what are the exact means through which it is done, that brings us closer to the matter of narratives. I’m wary of going as far as to state that narratives are the sole means of the social (and cultural) construction of reality, as experimental psychology shows us the great role that physical sensations play as well in the process; but I support the idea that narratives are a great part, (maybe) the most part of it. All this will be detailed below, after some necessary conceptual clarifications.

But in order to talk about narratives further, some things should be clearer: namely, what is generally to be understood by narratives and the use of this concept in scholarly context.

Narratives in scientific discourse: two meanings

The term “narratives” can be seen springing up a lot in the scientific research of the humanities in the past one-two decades. This terrain seems to be both fertile (producing valuable research in a newly-discovered way) and hip (one can find the “term” narrative attached to many scientific or pseudo-scientific without any relation to the true content of the text, in which it seems to be only an attempt to give said text a more appealing aura by making use of the trendy concepts of today’s academic *langue du bois*). This inflation of the term can make it difficult to discern between what various actors mean when they talk about narratives, or – even more often – use the term “narratives” to talk about something else. The situation is a source of confusion and conflicting discussions even among the most well-intended scientists whose work is centered around narratives: they can’t seem to agree on what is to be understood by this term. Given its rather new presence in the scholarly field outside of literature studies, it may in fact take a while until scientists can agree on what is to be understood by narrative. But beyond its prodigious use, the term narrative may refer (mainly) to two things when it’s encountered in the scientific discourse (in my opinion).

The first meaning is narrative research, where it is used to describe a fairly new technique of investigation in the humanities and, more generally, sciences that

investigate people. This meaning has strictly to do with methodological thought and development; it refers to the fact of using stories and story-telling/writing activities as instruments for scientific investigation. The area is quite fertile in the humanities and it's developing at a fast rate; both in qualitative and quantitative approaches and not limited to qualitative studies as our scientific prejudice might suspect. Two of the most detailed and well-developed compendiums that comprise the methodology of narrative research are Czarniawska (2004) and Bold (2012).

When one hears about narratives in the humanities – either as a theme or as a technique employed for any kind of analysis that deals with human experiences – it's easy to mistake it for a form limited to stories or accounts made of words, written or spoken. Although stories do comprise a large segment of everything that is narrative, this isn't the only form narratives can be found in. For example, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010) make a clarifying description of how narrative research can work with graphic narratives like photography and painting. The work of Barbara Czarniawska (2004) also provides the most explicit and detailed account I've encountered so far on how narrative analysis can be used for a very wide range of subjects connected to a lot of preexisting social science directions (like, for example, the dramaturgical perspective, structural analysis, the actant model etc).

According to Christine Bold, the three major themes of narrative research are auto-biographical self-reflection, biographical data and representative constructions (or fictions) (p 9-12). I will further detail her classification because it seems to be a bit more systematic than the others I've encountered. The first theme may seem a bit unscientific or leaving room to too much speculation and personal stories, but if done by the rules of this kind of research the reflection upon past personal circumstances and the performance accomplished in them can be quite revealing about the nature of those social circumstances and whatever else is to be researched. The research diary, for example, is one of the tools used in the auto-biographical self-reflection, and given that this kind of keeping track of the field research experiences and observations isn't at all new, but something anthropologists were already using on a large scale, the narrative research got a better chance at being accepted and integrated into the research methodological repertoire. Another example of an autobiographical way of research that the author also includes here, besides the research diary, is the "living theory" approach (promoted by Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff, 2006) that favors the immersion of the researcher in the research environment and a detailed anthropological style of reporting using photo and video footage; this approach, according to Christine Bold, is becoming more and more accepted and widely spread³ throughout scientific communities.

The second theme according to the author, biographical data per se, is also an old favorite of social research. Data bases of biographical information, as accurate as possible, are always useful tools in investigating a piece of social reality, when the

³ A collection of various doctoral theses that use this "living theory" research approach can be found on the website www.actionresearch.net. I first picked up the reference in Bold's book (2012) but browsed it myself and became convinced of the good example value of the collection.

collection is carefully selected and constructed. But the method of collecting this data can be, according to Bold, very different from one case to the other: the selection of preserving of the stories can be automatic, done with the help of a specialized computer program, or ethnographic, or by conversational means, or even non-conventional means like photography or drawing for subjects who, for certain reasons like a speech disability, can use graphic support in order to be able to tell their tale (Bold, 2012, p 12).

The third theme (narratives as representative constructions) coincides with the second meaning of narratives (by my own classification) which will be detailed below, only that in narrative research those kind of narratives are used as a method rather than a subject.

Narratives as social construction of meaning

The second meaning of narratives is the one referring to their capacity to fix the meaning of human experience, a meaning that varies until the internal debate on its meaning ends, or, better said, until the narrative construction process is finalized. This is why the research of narratives (not narrative research that employs narratives as means to a different end) can show more about what our understanding really is, how it works and how we construct a system of meanings for our experience. This theoretical concept can be useful not only in understanding the general aspects of human thought and experience deeper, but also in understanding scientific understanding better (in the kind of self-reflexivity so tied to postmodernity announced, for example, by Lyotard, 1979). Christine Bold refers to this valuable trait of the concept of narratives in a similar manner: "My research interest is constructivism and constructive interpretivism; I am interested in how people construct meaning of the world around them, and how researchers make sense of what they see. I believe narratives of various kinds help people to construct and understand their social world. [...] A common factor among many who use narrative in research is a belief in the importance of subjective meaning and emotion in making sense of social events and settings, together with the need for reflexivity in that sense making" (Bold, 2012, p 13). I share this view in all extent, sharing the belief that reflexivity and self-reflexivity are crucial to really understanding what to make of what we perceive and what to make of what others make of everything.

I have already stated above that I think narratives are precisely the means of the social construction of reality. Narratives are also the product of this social construction of our experience, since they are the only way through which we can express this experience and make it intelligible. The traditional objection that narratives are too "subjective" to be taken into account as scientific data, trustworthy enough to work with or base one's hypothesis upon, is false mainly because it gives a narrative too much credit as being the product of one actor (its author). The subjectivity accusation implies that the narrative discusses shares and imposes a unilateral view on the story it tells, that it is the direct product of the will and perspective of the one(s) who birthed it. This assumption is wrong because it gives the story-shaper's agency too much credit. It ignores the fact that everything, and especially everything that is felt, imagined and

communicated (thus, narratives), is a social and cultural construct. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson made the same point in their work, when discussing how the study of narratives challenges traditional notions of agency: “We like to think of human beings as agents of or actors in their own lives rather than passive subjects of social structures or unconscious transmitters of cultural scripts and models of identity. Consequently, we tend to read autobiographical narratives as acts and thus proofs of human agency. They are at once sites of agentic narration where people control the interpretation of their lives and stories, telling of individual destinies and expressing “true” selves. In fact, traditional forms of autobiography have often been read as narratives of agency, evidence that subjects can live and interpret their lives freely as transcendental, universal “enlightenment” subjects. But we must recognize that the issue of how subjects claim, exercise, and narrate agency is far from simply a matter of free will and individual autonomy” (Smith and Watson, 2010, p 54). This “but” can be freely applied to almost everything humanities have taken for granted so far as the “reality” of things that is just waiting to be discovered by the inquisitive researching eye. The problem in social sciences is that it’s always been assumed that any problems encountered in knowing the truth was a matter of methods used: perhaps they weren’t appropriate to the subject. Only recently the idea that maybe there isn’t a “truth” to be known (at least not in its strong sense) came up in this new self-reflecting wave of thought. This is problem posed not only to the volatile truths of humanities, but also to the natural sciences that one might suspect immune to such debates. The similar debate in the natural sciences was generated by Jonah Lehrer’s article in 2010 (titled quite provocatively “The Truth Wears Off: Is there something wrong with the scientific method?”), that pinpointed that the same problematic seems to take place in their backyard as well. Its conclusion was unsettling: “We like to pretend that our experiments define the truth for us. But that’s often not the case. Just because an idea is true doesn’t mean it can be proved. And just because an idea can be proved doesn’t mean it’s true. When the experiments are done, we still have to choose what to believe” (Lehrer, 2010, p 7).

The problem with the volatility of the “truth”, at least the way it’s generally understood right now, is, therefore, not a scientific problem confined to the humanities. But viewed from a narrative research point of view, it isn’t a real problem: everything is a social and cultural construct (therefore not true) and a sincere narrative at the same time (therefore true). This idea that unites almost all narrative research, in my opinion (because it’s not explicitly declared so, just subtly implied), of the social construction of reality, obviously has older roots than the emergence of poststructuralism or narrative research. One of the best known works that explores this is the philosophical essay of Searle (1995), but the idea is even older than that. An essay that takes this thought even further is Ian Hacking’s response to Searle’s work (1999), that refuses to take a side in the debate and tries to find balance between “reality” and “social construction”. It is ironic to add that one of his arguments was the fact that natural sciences are harder to fit into the pattern of social construction (Hacking, 1999, p 63); but as Lehrer (2010) has shown, that might have been just another assumption the scientific community took for granted.

So, if the truth is so volatile, where do narratives fit in this picture? To answer that, I will further sustain my claim that narratives are the main means and source of creating or transforming meaning. I believe that when an event occurs, although we may in fact be quite moved by it in one way or another, until we formulate a narrative about it (even though only to ourselves) the meaning of that event isn't yet fixed. Thus, narratives are, in my opinion, attempts (more or less successful in the extent that narratives also change and adapt to strong meanings they clash with) of fixing meaning.

The idea may seem a bit far-fetched (though I believe intuitively everyone can relate to it), but it can be verified in (at least) two ways: by autobiographical introspection and self-reflexivity (a method so loved by narrative research); or, in a less attackable manner, by browsing accounts of field research in social sciences and seeing how the scientists plunging into the social world have had intuitions about the way in which people construct their meanings.

An example is Catherine Kohler Riessman's tale of subjects who tended to bore their interviewers by insisting to “go on and on” about personal tales irrelevant to what the inquiry asked for (an event any social scientist who has conducted interviews can relate to, I think): “It is a common experience for investigators to craft interview questions carefully only to have participants respond with lengthy accounts, long stories that appear on the surface to have little to do with the questions. I became aware of this in the early 1980s while researching the topic of divorce. After completing a household interview with a divorcing spouse, I would note upon listening to the tape that a respondent had gone “on and on”. [...] Those of us on the team interpreted these stories as digressions. Subsequently, I realized that participants were resisting our efforts to fragment their experiences into thematic (codable) categories – our attempts, in effect, to control meaning. [...] Looking back, I am both embarrassed and instructed,” (Riessman, 2003, p 331).

The story of the interviewed subjects who insists on eating up the interviewer's time with seemingly unrelated narratives is precisely that: a battle for giving a certain event (which the interviewer asked about) a certain meaning (which is not only my opinion, but also the original author's (Riessman), as stated in the excerpt above). Of course, other explanations might also fit into the real causation of the digressions: perhaps a certain subject fancied the interviewer and wanted to spend more time with her and so on. But it is not only unlikely that such alternative explanations can be found in every such situation, but also very much counter-intuitive. In most situations, subjects digress greatly from the interview's main theme. And in most cases (in my field experience as well), the person(s) conducting the interview can “feel” that the subject “resists” any predefined impersonal meaning already prescribed to their experience. The subject insists on digressing because he or she doesn't want that event to have the meaning required by the interviewer. So they'll tell their story no matter how long it takes, even though at the end the interviewer might just tick a certain predefined option

on his worksheet⁴. So, in this struggle for fixing meaning (to themselves and to the person they're having a conversation with), what are the most effective tools to fix meaning and the main sources for the flow of this meaning? Narratives.

In this claim I make about narratives as ways of creating and fixing meaning, I can again quote Riessman, who quotes another number of authors in return to support this perspective: "A primary way individuals make sense of experience is by casting it in narrative form (Bruner, 1990; Gee, 1985; Mishler, 1986a). [...] Narrators create plots from disordered experience, give reality "a unity that neither nature nor the past possess so clearly. In so doing, we move well beyond nature into the intensely human realm of value" (Cronon, 1992, p 1349). Precisely because they are essential meaning-making structures, narratives must be preserved, not fractured, by investigators, who must respect respondents' ways of constructing meaning and analyze how it is accomplished" (Riessman, 1993, p 4).

This way to look at narratives is also supported by the conclusions of Corrine Squire (Squire, 2008, p 41-42), who states that narratives are never simply accounts of the event which tale they tell, but they are significant for the narrator's story of "who they are". Emphasizing the narratives' role in constructing meanings, Squire calls them "experience-centered narratives" and calls the research done on them "experience centered narrative research", as opposed to a focus on the events accounted for, a focus which she feels weakens the full range of meanings comprised in the narrative. The meanings constructed by narratives, Squire asserts, tend to be volatile: "The uncertain, changeable nature of written, spoken and visual symbol systems means that stories are distanced by the happenings they described, have many meanings, and are never the same when told twice" (idem, p 41). In spite of this volatility observed and described by Squire, I would add that the meanings may vary a little and may be quite overlapping in many cases, but through narratives such meanings are not only constructed, but also fixed, by repeating a certain viewpoint (even with the inevitable variations and adjustments) on each account of the narrative.

Uses and misuses of the concept of *narrative* in academic discourse

I have detailed above the multiple meanings the concept of narratives can take in the scientific discourse. But beyond those, what is usually understood by narratives (in the common sense) is what the literature studies first made of this term: the rendition of an event from a certain perspective, a related happening, with a focus on the process of telling it, on the rendition itself. Today, we may call this type of narratives the *explicit* ones, the stories themselves; while the ones defined as constructed meanings (discussed

⁴ In a non-scientific context, I find this also to be the case with people who talk a lot, or at least more than average: even when their companions tend to rush them by asking precise questions, they insist on telling a long story in spite of all signals of annoyance coming from the people listening to them, in order to be able to transmit an exact meaning. And they are very bothered by attempts to alter those meanings that are at stake through the conversation. So besides being a bit socially awkward, people who tend to talk very much are also people who are more sensitive to meaning variations, it could be said.

above) could be called the *implicit* ones. In the assertion I make in this thesis (that narratives are the means through which reality is socially and culturally constructed), the implicit narratives are, of course, what I’m referring to.

It is interesting enough to note that the explicit narratives work pretty much the same as implicit ones in means of social dissemination: both are learnt and practiced within the same contexts. The study performed by Fivush (1991) on the impact of mother’s stories about the past on the children’s narrative skills shows that our ability to construct complex narratives is very much tied to our exposure to complex stories. In this matter,

Obviously, the direction of research that uses narrative as its instrumental focus deals mainly with the explicit narratives. But it could be added, more on a personal observation level, that the studies that employ these techniques usually are very open to a greater degree of subjectivity and their sympathy for narratives leads to the use of personal narratives as a means of exposure, of presenting the information. So, in a way, one could say that the studies that use narratives as a research method, thus dealing with explicit narratives, tend to also use the implicit narratives slightly more than classic scholarship texts; but this is different topic all-together which I will not explore here.

Still, there seems to be a connection between increased subjectivity in exposure in scholarly texts and increased use of narratives, whether as method or as subject. What I mean by increased subjectivity here is the more visible “I” in scientific texts, the more-often-than-most personal touch and the use of phrases like “my opinion”, “my experience” etc. Scholarly tradition opened up to this style gradually, and although it is generally accepted and encouraged today as opposed to the more artificial and ceremonious style of a conservative-wing academia that still clings to the “we” instead of “I” and abstains from too many personal notes, the abuse of such individuality in texts is frowned upon. The author must be present in the text, but not too present. The study of Yahia (2010) is a useful description of the contradicting trends in the academic discourse on this matter. After analyzing the presence of the author in recent texts from various sciences, the study concludes that the personal note, although accepted, is still preferably avoided, and a trick of avoiding it is the prodigious use of the impersonal pronoun “it” (in French: “on”): “A partir d’une réflexion sur l’identité de l’auteur/chercheur et sur les indices de sa présence dans l’article de revue, genre constitutif du discours scientifique, nous avons vu qu’à l’aide de sa flexibilité sémantique, le pronom « on » interagit de différentes manières, en contenant une gamme de sens qui permettra à l’auteur de manifester sa personne dans un genre qui se veut non personnel, mais qui est rédigé par des chercheurs qui doivent se manifester et même se positionner dans une communauté de recherche déterminée, ce qui fait de ce pronom le moyen le plus approprié au genre en question.” (“From a reflection of the identity of the author/researcher and the indices of his presence in the journal article, constitutive type of the scientific discourse, we have seen that using its semantic flexibility, the pronoun “it” interacts in different ways, containing a range of meanings that allow the author to express his personal touch in a way that wishes itself impersonal, but is written by researchers who expressed and positioned themselves in a certain way in a given

research community, which makes this pronoun the most appropriate to the genre in question.”) (Yahia, 2010, p 47). Apart from noting that it would be interesting to see how do scientists deal with this problem when writing in languages that don’t allow this subterfuge (though English, German and French, the main academic languages of today, don’t pose this problem, which means that the possibility of languages that don’t allow the use of “it” means very little now), what is relevant here is the general picture painted by this article, that shows how the question of a personal presence in one’s produced text is problematic, and the fact that scholars have become more aware of it doesn’t make it any less problematic.

Especially in this context of increased openly declared subjectivity, it is interesting to note that there are some cases when the term “narrative” can be encountered in a very casual meaning within the scientific texts: it means roughly something like “what I’m about to tell you here”, only sounding a bit more scientific. There are quite a large number of texts that start with “This is a narrative of the time I spent on the research field in...” or “This narrative is an account of the research experience on...” and so on. It is true that using the concept of “narrative” as meaning a “tell”, a recount of a certain event is an old reflex of the social sciences, considering that these sciences have been dealing with narratives since forever, and not only since the recent conscious focus on them (basically most of the data the social sciences have ever worked with have been presented in the form of narratives, as pointed out in Franzosi, 1998). But still, this isn’t a reason to continue to casually use this term in scientific discourse, ignoring the fact that the term has come to signify something a little more complex in the meantime. Another misuse of the term narratives is using it as an equivalent of a fictional construct, a non-authentic story, a slightly elaborate falsehood. The same kind of treatment is applied to the concept of myth, which should mean something else entirely than fictional construction. There are a great number of academic texts that use “narrative” with this meaning: an elaborate falsehood, widely spread and believed, as opposed to the “truths” of reality. It could well be just a reflex of common sense speech leaking into scholarly discourse, but still the frequency of such misuses unveils a certain degree of scientific prejudice. From my personal experience with scientific debates, I’ve observed that the easiest way to deconstruct the discourse of another scholar is to be able to successfully place it within a certain paradigm and then apply the universally used objection of today: “But this is a narrative as well!” Of course, this is inspired by Lyotard’s book on the post-modern condition (1979) that defined this condition as the incredulity towards the meta-narratives that were successful in the near past. This work (which, ironically, Lyotard later called “a parody” and “simply the worst of my books”⁵, referring to the huge popularity his theory had gained in the humanities, outshining all of his other works) is used a premise for gratuitous deconstruction of almost any given discourse on the basis that it is part of a system. And to some extent the objection is well-founded: of

⁵ According to Perry Anderson, 1998.

course everything is just discourse, but that doesn't make it any less true⁶. This is a lesson I have learned on the field, during so many ethnographical researches that made us hear the contradicting discourses the people practice in the same interview or talk. The only way to resolve this apparent cognitive dissonance was either to suspect the subject being interviewed of cheating and lying (involuntarily), either to accept the fact that there is no coherence, that the ideal of coherence itself is also a social construct. There is, of course, no problem with identifying the “narrative” construction of any discourse, this kind of critical perspective is what science is supposed to be doing; the problem is to mentally oppose this “narrative” to a abstract notion of truth and to define the two in such opposite positions. More broadly speaking, this is a problem encountered at the base of many scientific enquiries from the social sciences: the distinction between the subject as an unity acting “behind” a discursive surface, attempting to “hide” from the scientist's inquisitive gaze, and the latter's aim to understand the subject or to “reveal” the social reality (this distinction is further described in Angermüller, 2007) In the work referred to, the author is analyzing tendencies in the post-structuralist frame of the discourse analysis field, but my personal experience tells me this kind of problematic approach that suspects the “reality” is “hiding” somewhere behind the interviewed subject's words is commonly found in all social sciences that are faced with the necessity of working with people. Having a person as a subject indeed gives way to the risk that the subject will use its agency to avoid being in the spotlight or revealing its “truths”; but that is no reason to for scientists to deny the truths present in conflicting discourses. From this point of view, the objection that everything is a narrative (as in a cultural or social scientific construct) is not only a misuse of the conceptual body of narrative, but also a misuse of the scientific range of methods (a misuse of deconstruction as a technique of active interpretation and problematization of concerns raised by the object of study).

The idea that persists upon going through the majority of scientific works that use the term “narratives” is the often misuse of this term, either by making it equivalent to “chronic”, “tale”, or to “falsehood”. This occurrence gives more concrete meaning to the observation that although the humanities are starting to make ample use of the concept of narratives, not everyone uses it in a similar manner, even beyond conceptual debates on what the term actually means. I believe that this poses a risk to the potential development of the field, because if things continue on this trend and the use of “narrative” tends to be reckless and unmindful of the context in which it is used, that

⁶ This is a conclusion I have reached not on my own, but within an informal talk during a meeting as part of the Workgroup of Political Anthropology coordinated by Jun.-Prof. Asta Vonderau within the University of Mainz (the web page of the work group can be found here: <http://www.kulturtheaterfilm.uni-mainz.de/363.php>). We were discussing our experiences with scientific debate and I talked about how I've noticed that everything can be deconstructed with this objection, that “this is also a narrative”, the others said that they have noticed it too and that it seems to happen more within groups of sociologists rather than anthropologists (coincidentally or not this coincides with my personal experience as well). I assume that this is because sociology focuses a bit more on the clash between major paradigms and anthropology focuses more on understanding the “truth” of all discourses, even contradictory ones.

might bring an overall bad name to the concept which might then seem as a fancy folly which was at some point hip.

If we were to define post-modernity (at least in sciences and arts if not also in everyday life) as the turning of the subject's critical gaze from the object towards one's self (as I personally define it), this is definitely the time when the academia looks more carefully at its own discourse and tries to analyze it using the same means research applies to its more traditional subjects. Self-reflection is, of course, not something entirely new, but the scope and intensity of it in the present have no precedent. The study quoted above dealing with the uses of the pronoun "it" in scientific discourse is but a small part of a growing trend. A useful collection of studies on the broader matter of looking scientifically at our own scientific products and the academic discourse is comprised in Suomela-Salmi and Dervin (2009).

Although much criticized for its flaws, postmodernism undoubtedly brings into focus an acute awareness of our own products of thinking (the incredulity towards meta-narratives announced by Lyotard, 1979; and the increased self-reflexivity discussed by Bold, 2012 and Czarniawska, 2004). If anything, this self-reflexivity is a central trait of narrative research and can contribute a lot, in my opinion, to a better understanding not only of the social contexts it investigates, but of understanding itself. Being self-aware of one's perceptions and meanings (of one's narratives, in other words) enriches the depth of understanding in ways some classical investigations (with a predictable pattern of choosing and applying a method, gathering data and cropping the results) can not. In the words of Christine Bold herself, "Some of the most enlightening texts about social events do not present a researcher's interpretation of events but tell the stories of perceptive human beings about the social and educational situations in which they have found themselves" (Bold, 2012, p 16). In a way, one could identify these "perceptive human beings" the author talks about with those "local informers" on the field of research used by anthropology (for more details, see David Katan, 2012; and Goertz and Diehl, 1992), use which was many times problematic in terms of accuracy and trustworthiness. But when this trait of being a perceptive observer and self-observer (in short, of possessing the kind of heightened senses of self-reflexivity I discussed above as being central both to scientific postmodernity and to narrative research) is found within the researcher himself (and not a bright informer), the conditions for a deeper understanding and for taking research to another level are ideal.

From this point of view, working with narratives will take social sciences and humanities in general to the next step, as long as the research animated by this doesn't fall too deep into the spiral of too much self-deconstruction, when debate risks becoming sterile and pointless. As Greg Denning put it, when talking about pushing such line of thought too far, "I have no desire to be absurdist or deconstructionist. I am not intent on making a jungle of history's enchanting garden. I know the lethargy that too much reflection creates" (Denning, 1995, p 13). The poststructuralist frame of work, influenced by thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, does indeed tend to take things so far into relativism and hypercomplexity of everything that most of the time it seems to encourage the idea that nothing can be known so the whole attempt at

knowing it is futile. An author that explores this idea and that argues against this trend, saying that complexity should be approached more responsibly and avoiding the vague, is Paul Cillers (2005). Narrative research surely draws heavily on poststructuralist texts, as shown in Czarniawska's handbook, but she adds that such texts (deconstructivist) are valuable merely as techniques of analysis and "should serve as a source of inspiration not a prescription to be followed literally" (Czarniawska, 2004, p 97). She also points that the use of post-structuralism to the humanities in general and particularly to narrative research lies exactly in the relaxation of the rigid pursuit of truth that characterized the scholarly readings of a text before: "Almost before structuralism acquired legitimacy in the social sciences, it was swept away by poststructuralism. The move from structuralism to poststructuralism was not as dramatic as it may seem. It meant, above all, abandoning "the depth" for "the surface": if deep structures are demonstrable, they must be observable. [...] This meant abandoning the idea of the universal structure of language, or of mind, and accepting the idea of a common repertoire of textual strategies, which are recognizable to both the writer and the reader. Such relaxation of basic assumptions also led to the relaxation of the technique: as there is no one true deep structure to be discovered, various techniques can be applied to structure a text and therefore permit its novel reading" (idem, p 88). In other words, since all truths we can know and explore are personal and personalized worlds and systems of meaning, (almost) anything goes, in the sense that it may be time to try working with concepts and techniques that seemed until now too "subjective" or "unscientific" to employ.

I would add that narratives, if anything, are perhaps the least vulnerable direction of research to this hyper-abstraction of the contemporary hyper-analysis trend; the reason for what I perceive to be a safe level of immunity against this temptation that befalls all humanities at a certain point is, without a doubt, the fact that narrative research deals with the multiple personal and subjective truths that construct reality. After the initial shock to the scientific mind – that coherence is illusory and that all narratives are "true", even the contradictory ones, discussed at large above – grasping the idea that deconstruction beyond the point where it makes personal sense to people's narratives is artificial becomes easier.

Conclusion

Working with narratives (doing narrative research, using narratives as technical means or investigating narratives as a process of producing mental representations and creating sense out of experience) can be confusing, at least at the current state of development of this field. This confusing character is derived both from using the term narrative to denominate more than one thing (detailed above) and from the original approach this research poses (no hypothesis to start with, for example). Christine Bold talks about this too: "Narrative research does not usually set out to test a hypothesis, which is more typical of scientific research. You might wonder whether a distinction is made between narrative as data (the content narrative) and the meta-narrative told by the researcher (e.g. the research story or report about the research that brings together all the

component parts)” (Bold, 2012, p 16). The words above are written both as a warning to the ones new to narrative research that they might find themselves in a position to doubt their work at some point, and as an account of the disbelief this research is sometimes faced with within the more conservative and not-so-well informed branches of the scientific community.

And researching more deeply into the matter of narratives only seems to make matters worse in terms of complicatedness. For example, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson begin their account of narrative research with the same feeling, referring mainly to autobiographical accounts and their use in science: “What could be simpler to understand than the act of people representing what they know best, their own lives? Yet this act is anything but simple, for the teller of his or her own story becomes, in the act of narration, both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation. We might best approach life narrative, then, as a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present. We intend in this book to complicate ordinary understandings of the concept and practices of self-referential narrative” (Smith and Watson, 2010, p 1). Although this statement is an opening phrase, I feel this could work even better as a closing phrase for any chapter of narrative research that means to expose the intricate relations between knowledge and knowledge production.

In this paper, I have emphasized the distinction between narrative research and the research of narratives as a way of constructing meaning and (social) reality. But it is also necessary to clarify in which way the general research focus on narratives is related to the focus on discourse in postmodern humanities (namely, in the poststructuralist perspective that has dominated any reflexive and self-reflexive thoughts in the humanities of the past decades). I would say that the focus on narratives is in great respect overlapping with the discursive perspective, but it is not completely associated with it. Considering that the poststructuralist perspective that claimed everything to be discourse has been countered by a recent shift on material culture; and that this focus on material culture, on the culture created by and based on the concreteness of objects and things, also employs narratives in its methodology, narrative research is clearly not limited to the discursive approach. Perhaps narratives as ways of constructing meaning are not one of the main concerns of this new trend that focuses on material culture, but narrative research as methodology is clearly employed by it, thus the presence of narratives is not restricted to the poststructuralist discursive focus in the humanities.

One of the few certainties that remain in the end of this paper is that a focus on narratives is increasing in the past two decades and counting. In a way, as hazardous as that might seem to assume, it could be said that the attention channeled towards narrative is just post-modernism’s way of picking up the pieces and making sense of everything that has happened (the shifts in knowledge it underwent, the bloody clashes of shattered paradigms, all the transformation that made it impossible to go back even though they didn’t do too much for opening new roads). It’s like a childhood reflex: when in doubt, return to fairytales. They’re one of the safe truths. But this comment is

already stretching too far from scientific thought and transgressing into the poetic⁷, so I'll return to discussing the inclination for narratives in postmodern humanities. In her work, Barbara Czarniawska discusses the contribution of Richard Rorty at understanding the issue of narratives in a postmodern context: he answers the assertion made by Lyotard in his famous work (1979) by adding that the world may have abandoned meta-narratives only to make more way for the narratives, a view which Lyotard, she shows, shared (Czarniawska, 2004, p 12-13). In what way is this relevant to social sciences, to their classical themes of research? The answer is in this paragraph: "History may be dead⁸ but only if we were attached irrevocably to one specific version of it. Abandoning the modern metanarrative of emancipation does not mean giving up the longing for narratives we happen to like in a benign ethnocentrism which values our own way of life but relinquishes the idea of "modernizing" other people who are "underdeveloped", "premodern", or in some other way different from us" (idem, p 12). In this resides, in my opinion, the quintessential spirit of our epoch (*Zeitgeist*), whether it be called post-modernism or history will deem it otherwise: even though we see the failure of metanarratives, or, as Lyotard would put it, we're less likely to fall in love with them, the longing for the narratives these metanarratives employ persists and generated our worlds of meaning. Of course, "narratives", in the above quoted paragraph, isn't used in its strict sense of stories, but in the secondary sense of mental representations and constructions that help us make reality intelligible and thus, help build it (the meaning discussed above in this paper).

The problematic that arises after all this is somewhat settled are of a different nature: "whether it is in fact possible to construct any shared concepts, whether it is possible to have a conversation, an exchange of narratives – without recourse to a metanarrative of some kind" (idem, p 13). The answer to this implicit question is affirmative: "Such construction is never finished and in the negotiation of meaning the results are for ever uncertain. The old metanarratives sinned in their ambition to end a conversation by trying to predict its outcome. If a canon is already known, there is nothing to talk about" (idem, p 13). The delicate and intricate systems of meaning are what the narrative research deals in, and the results are often even more volatile than those of the other branches of humanities. In way, this may seem to complicate, perhaps unnecessarily, the scientific process and existence. But it complicates it only for as long as we remain encapsulated in traditional notions of truth and of what complicated means. To quote Czarniawska further, "Unpredictability does not imply inexplicability. Explanations are possible because there is a certain teleology – sense of purpose – in all lived narratives. It is a kind of circular teleology because it is not given beforehand, but is created by the narrative. A life is lived with a goal but the most important aspect of life is the formulation and reformulation of that goal. This circular teleology is what MacIntyre

⁷ Although one might ask: why is that boundary such a certain fact? In the words of Greg Denning, talking about one of his colleagues whom he felt thankful towards, "He is bolder than I. He knows not only that anthropology has a poetic. It can also be a poem." (Denning, 1995, p ix)

⁸ Allusion to Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" thesis, which the author discussed earlier, before the excerpt I chose to quote.

calls a *narrative quest*. [...] The proponents of means-ends rationality defend the notion of the a priori goals, while the pragmatists declare it to be impractical. A narrative view gets rid of the problem by reinstating the role of goals as both the results and the antecedents of action. Whole communities as well as individual persons are engaged in a quest for meaning in “their life”, which will bestow meaning on particular actions taken” (idem, p 13). What the author means by this is that abandoning traditional notions that focus too much on the limits and boundaries can be favorable to a deeper understanding on things; in a way that works around the “problem” and sees it in its artificiality: there is no truth except the meaning and systems of meaning that we bestow on things. As shown by Slater (1998), there is close to nothing that we do that is meaningless; we want to give – and we do – a meaning to everything. And narratives are not only the sole observable product, expression of meaning, but also one of the primary sources of meaning for human thought. Therefore, an ideal scientific means and target of exploration. No hypothesis pre-required.

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