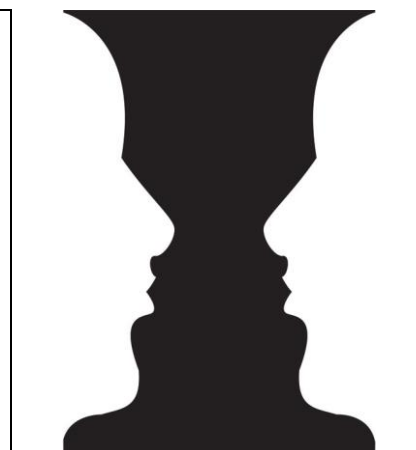


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## Stories in social organization

### Editor's introduction to the [Themed Issue](#)

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I am delighted to have been asked to guest-edit this Special Issue which brings together exciting perspectives on Stories in Social Organization, a topic currently at the forefront of narrative studies. The breadth of the actual topic and the widely acknowledged diversity of narrative studies make it difficult to seek a consensus in the articles without running the risk of overstating connections. In any case, the multiplicity of approaches and data is immediately evident. At the same time, it is pleasing to see insights from recent studies of stories as densely contextualized social practices (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2008), being infused into most of the papers. The other related shift that is attestable concerns the recognition of the plurality and heterogeneity of narrative genres, itself part of a wider move away from text-based to practice-based perspectives on genre. In the case of narrative in particular, this move has implicated the gradual dismantling of the essentializing concept of Narrative Identity in favour of the study of (small) stories and identities in context and in interaction (Georgakopoulou 2007). We can see this pairing of narrative genres with the participants' roles and identities neatly documented in Archakis' paper on narrative genres in Greek contexts. This context-sensitivity of genres is, however, not incompatible with the recognizeability and familiarity that narrative genres come with, as well-rehearsed sense-making devices, that can, for instance, become part of a national fabric, be it Irish, Serbian or Romanian, (Hogan, Ilic, Rusu), or be drawn and fallen back on by individuals (in this case, social work students on their placement abroad) to make sense of unfamiliar situations (Crabtree et al.).

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Bruner (1991) aptly summarized the tension involved in rendering experiences into narrative form and function, as the requirement for a story to have familiarity at the same time as being unique. This tension is at the heart of narrative creativity and the interplay between individual artistry and cultural conventions in telling a story has been much explored in relation to personal identities and autobiography, spoken or written. In this collection, we see glimpses of this interplay at the level of collective stories that create biographies of nations and institutions using familiar plots yet casting them into unique, historically shaped circumstances (Ilic, Rusu). In these cases too, it is interesting to see where the limits of collective narratives are, who they are shared by, how they circulate, diffuse or not, how they become available and to whom, how they are locally resisted, and how counter-stories are created, as much narrative research has documented so far, e.g. in relation to dominant narrative accounts about life experiences. The political potential of stories to create counter-stories, particularly in post-national contexts of globalization and social media, is in this respect an increasingly important focus of inquiry. As we see in Fofiu's paper, in social media environments, collective narratives (in this case, of downshifting from the hectic pace of urban lifestyles) have alternative plots and they are told from below, away from sources of official and institutionalized authority. In fact, studies have shown that this kind of storying tends to involve fragmented, widely distributed and reworked across sites, multiply authored and contested, 'small stories', which resist conceptualizations of 'sharedness' and single authority voices in the emplotment (Georgakopoulou 2014).

In all the articles, the widely held view of stories as action comes alive with insights from richly documented case studies, such as Hogan's study of the Irish revolutionary playwright Pearse where there is a 'crucial continuity between nationalist imagination, on the one hand, and nationalist action, on the other'. At the same time, we also see in the articles how narrative research itself can serve as action too, that can effect change and develop a critical agenda in relation to professional practice (Crabtree et al.) for example, by putting firmly on the agenda the co-construction involved in doctor-patient diagnostic encounters (Smorti & Fioretti). This is in tune with the longstanding key-role of narrative as a method and as an epistemology, often referred to as narrative inquiry, in many fields of research, ranging from psychology to history and education. In fact, there is a recent critical mass on the limitations of conventional narrative inquiry within educational research and on the benefits of cross-fertilizations with paradigms such as small stories research, which have sought to critique certain biases within narrative inquiry (e.g. see Special Issue of TESOL Quarterly 2011).

Overall, the papers of this Special Issue showcase different strands in the study of stories as socio-cultural practices, embedded in and constitutive of institutional and collective identities and ideologies, but/and with a potential for political and social transformation. This is in my view the single most fertile ground where a much needed and long awaited rapprochement between narrative inquiry and narrative analysis can be most effected: a synthesis of the what, how and who of stories, and of the humanistic, hermeneutic, 'imaginative & artful' (Freeman 2011) edge of narrative perspectives with the methodological 'rigour' of the stories' analysis. To put it differently, a synergy can be

achieved of experience-centered with culturally oriented studies of narrative that do not compartmentalize the personal from the collective and the political (Squire 2008).

As I have argued elsewhere (2011), this rapprochement can serve as a counter-balance to certain representational accounts of stories that see them as transparent indicators of who their tellers are. It can do so by providing a framework for researcher reflexivity and for the study of the local context contingencies of a narrative telling along with the irreducible interactional dynamics or co-construction of a story between (main) teller(s) and audience/readers. There is much work to be done towards such synergetic approaches between narrative inquiry and narrative analysis, between big and small stories perspectives, or to put it in terms employed in this Special Issue between perspectives on collective (e.g. national/nationalist, institutional) identities and personal narrative (autobiographical) identities. The step taken by this Special Issue to host diverse approaches under a single narrative-focused concern is a necessary step to that direction.

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