WHAT IS NARRATIVE?

*What can be thought must certainly be a fiction* (Nietzsche), cited in Narrative Gravity, by R.B. Nair.


Most readers of this article are likely to be familiar with what has been written about narrative in the social sciences; those who are not are equally unlikely to be interested in this article. Its purpose, therefore, is to examine some commentary on the concept of narrative from outside the social sciences, and to consider the relevance of that to the practice of social science writing.

Porter Abbott (2002) defines narrative as “the representation of an event or a series of events”. Something has to happen; description and counting are not narrative. Nor is the real story, which happens over a length of time, and has an order of events, the narrative: narrative plays with that and is malleable. We as writers think with narrative, and negotiate or contest the story (Porter Abbott 2002). In the social sciences, it is the collection of data that is the story. *From a Western perspective, the villagers were poor; from their own point of view, at that time, they were comparatively well-off.* This is data: and, just as there is no irreducible self in the person (it is inseparable from context, knowledge, relationship, history, well-being and so on), so also there are no irreducible facts in the data. They, too, are inseparable from the context, knowledge, relationship, history and well-being of those who sense or experience the data. Whether broadly or narrowly defined and attended to, the world is a story going on around us: it provides us with data, or the opportunity of it. However, this story is not the narrative: narrative, as stated by Porter Abbott, begins with the contestation or, in social science terms, the interpretation of the story. *Despite their poverty, the villagers generally behaved in a friendly and generous fashion to me; this was instanced on a number of occasions (list them). There were occasional exceptions however (list them). These can be explained by...* At this stage, narrative is moving into meta-narrative or theory. But contrast this etic

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1 In social science terms, the “real story” is arguably the data.
2 For that reason, social science research does not end with the fieldwork, which is then “written up”, as if one were packing a hamper for public consumption: it continues with the deskwork, and does not end until the pen is put down, and the light switched off.
3 In Judaic and Christian mythology, Adam’s plucking of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden was the first act of data collection. Consider how many narratives have been created from it subsequently!
4 Were this a nineteenth century account, instead of a twenty-first century one, taking on the mores of the time, I might have begun *Because they were unsullied by wealth, and in their purity of mind, the villagers etc...* This emphasises the historical embedment of narrative: the story may remain the same; the narrative will change.
account with the beginning of a possible emic one. *Because we feel ourselves well-off, we are able to be kind to strangers...* Thus is the narrative built up.

This process of transmogrification in qualitative writing is probably invariable, although its outcome as content will alter in differing social environments. Although many might disagree, I believe it is also little altered by new technologies in communication. As Cobley (2001) has pointed out, even though hypertext mark-up language (html) allows alternatives within a narrative, as well as alternative endings, and the technological means used are relatively new, the principle enunciated is extremely old. It appears, for instance, in the Talmud, the Divine Comedy, and, more recently, in The Wasteland, and in many other lesser-known religious and poetic texts. The major difference is that, in these, the alternatives and potential variability within the narrative are created by a depth of allusion that depends for its effects on the learning of the reader, and her/his understanding, whereas in html they are prescribed by computer-generated links. This appears to me to have more potential impact on the behaviour of readers, than it is likely to have on the act of creating a narrative; at least in the short term.

But if the process of moving from story to narrative is invariable, as has been proposed above, exactly how is it achieved? Paul Ricoeur (cited by Richardson in Phelan et al. 2004) implies that the foundation of narrative is “plot”. Plot is “the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in a story…A story is made out of events to the extent that plot makes events into…” a narrative (or ethnography, or any other type of account of data in the social sciences). That plot may be the foundation of many widely read anthropological classics (popular and otherwise) is easily exemplified. Consider how Turnbull (1968) sets up his version of plot in The Forest People:

*In the North-east corner of the Belgian Congo, almost exactly in the middle of the map of Africa...lies the Ituri Forest, a vast expanse of dense, damp and inhospitable-looking darkness. Here is the heart of Stanley’s Dark Continent... The world of the forest is a closed, possessive world, hostile to all those who do not understand it. At first sight you might think it is hostile to all human beings...[but this is not the case for the BaMbuti]...the BaMbuti are the real people of the forest...[They have been there] for many thousands of years...They know [its] secret language that is denied all outsiders...*

We do not need to go further as readers to know that we are in for an adventure story, in which we will discover how the BaMbuti survive and thrive in this mysterious world; and Colin Turnbull will be our guide. The plot has been set up and spelled out, as firmly as in the text preamble to a nineteen thirties Alfred Hitchcock movie.

But consider another type of plot, this time from Al-Khayyat’s (1990) sociological text, *Honour and Shame: Women in Modern Iraq*. Again, it is set up early, in the first few pages of the book:

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5 My own position, based on the belief that all language is metaphorical, is that the same applies to quantitative research and writing, but the case will not be argued here.
To understand how behaviour is regulated and conduct controlled in Iraqi society, one must understand the Arab concept of honour, which is generally linked to the sexual conduct of women... If a woman is immodest or brings shame on her family by her sexual conduct, she brings shame and dishonour on all her kin... The phenomenon of ‘honour and shame’ bears a direct relation to family ties, and to the complex interrelation of social organisation and conduct in Arab society.

In this case, it is clear that the kinship structures and relations, and the wider social organisation of the Arab way of life in Iraq will be examined through the lens of one bipolar concept, ‘honour and shame’, with particular reference to the position and role of women. But again, there is a plot: it is the how the endemic persistence of ‘honour and shame’ informs both individual and collective behaviours and beliefs in a culture defined by it. As readers, we will discover how people live in such a world.

What I am now going to suggest, perhaps simplistically, is that these examples represent extreme cases of the two types of plot that underpin narrative accounts of qualitative data in the social sciences. The first I shall call the Odyssey plot; the second, the Iliad plot. All other plots are sub-types of one of these two genres, I contend. Odyssey is now a familiar English word, meaning “a series of adventurous journeys, usually marked by many changes of fortune (Fagles and Knox 1997)”, but it derives from the Greek word Odusseia, which simply means “the story of Odysseus”, that is, of Ulysses, the Greek hero of the Trojan War “who took ten years to find his way back from Troy to his home on the island of Ithaca (Fagles and Knox 1997)”. In other words, this archetypal odyssey is primarily a description of external adventures, and of the natural and social situations in which they occur. The Iliad is the opposite: whilst at the surface level it is a series of epic ballads on different episodes in the Trojan War, its fundamental subject and motivation is “the wrath of Achilles”, and the consequent troubles thence arising (Lloyd 1895)” Put simply, it is about how an internal, conceptual landscape structures and governs the external situations and relationships that it informs. Making the by now obvious parallel, The Forest People is about the BaMbuti’s “series of adventurous journeys, marked by changes of fortune”: it has an externally focussed plot as its interpretative baton; Honour and Shame: Women in Modern Iraq tells how the term in its title, honour-and-shame, which is “an internal conceptual landscape”, has consequences in the external situations and relations of a culture.

The would-be writer of a narrative about qualitative data has first to decide what type of “plot” will structure the account. Of course, if embarking on successful qualitative writing consisted of no more than this, then doing so would be as straightforward as choosing coffee, with or without milk. A possible next step is to consider whether narrative, as a sub-section of communication, has rules, just as, for example, arithmetic does, as a genre within mathematics. Tzvetan Todorov certainly thought it had, when he described his science of narrative (cited by Herman, in Phelan et al. 2004). Whether his claim is defensible or not, it is indisputable that there are rules at the level of grammar,

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6 Robert Graves (1999) devotes seven pages to this in his accounts of the Greek Myths; and the phrase Ilias malorum, an Iliad of woes or troubles, a world of disaster, derives from the centrality of Achilles’ wrath in the poem.
the prescriptions of which effect meaning, as the signs in arithmetic effect calculation. However, there is no need to dwell on these, as it should be taken for granted that the student at postgraduate level and beyond has mastered them.

More interesting, and beyond the question of whether (to misquote Levi-Strauss) one’s “writing assistant”, the plot,\(^7\) has an internal or external focus, is the question of the role and function of a third element in the process of making a narrative. In addition to the data and the plot, there is the ‘I’ who holds the pen, and marks the paper:

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\text{Who am I as I write this book? I am not a neutral, objective scribe, conveying the objective results of my research impersonally in my writing, I bring to it a variety of commitments based on my interests, values, beliefs, which are built up from my own history (Ivanic 1998).}
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Much has been written about how a writer is positioned, and the necessity in qualitative research to make this explicit through reflexive analysis. What is critical for the creation of narrative is that this explication should occur before the beginning of the writing process, and be recorded in the research notebooks, along with all the other data. Reflexivity is not an add-on, no more than ethics is to methodology; people change as they do research. But, even if this happens, and the researcher has painstakingly tracked as data the changes in the self during fieldwork, there is still a further step to take. One of the reasons for writing being such a terrifying process is that, during it, the writer is bringing to birth a *doppelganger*, an authorial identity, which may or may not be likeable to its progenitor. To see oneself in one’s writing is a fearful thing.\(^8\) Nonetheless, this *doppelganger* is as essential to narrative as data and plot. Yet, even if the writer has also done this, and the *doppelganger* passes like the shadow at noon into his or her being, there remains a fourth essential, another step in the making of a good narrative. The clue to this is in the seventeen twenty one definition of narrative offered at the head of this text: narrative is a relation. It is a relating (in two meanings of the term) of what has occurred to other persons, the first of which is the person who had the experience and collected the data i.e. the researcher (hence the need for a *doppelganger*); the second being the hypothetical reader. The reader sits at one’s shoulder like a back-seat driver.

In *resume*: so far, we have four elements entering into what I shall now describe as the manufacture\(^9\) of a good narrative. These are: the data; the plot; the authorial identity; and the reader. Pursuing my analogy of ‘manufacture’, the data are raw materials, plot is a

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\(^7\) It is perhaps too fanciful to claim that the ‘spirit’ of the plot leads the writer through the data, and clarifies the understanding of things seen, in a manner analogous to Virgil guiding Dante through the scenes of the Underworld?

\(^8\) Many creative professional writers, but especially poets, who spin their words from their body as a spider does its web (and lyric poetry, like web, is enormously strong) consequently dissociate themselves from completed productions.

\(^9\) I use this notion to distance myself from the common assumption that writing is a craft, like dry-stone walling, or woodcarving. Admirable as these activities are, they are in no way comparable to the complexities involved in writing. I prefer the term “manufacture”, therefore, whilst at the same time acknowledging that even that is inadequate and too simplistic as an analogy.
manufacturing tool, and authorial identity is the operative; whilst the reader is not only consumer, but a contributor to the design specification as well.

Troublingly, despite the foregoing reflections, identifying what is unique (if anything?) about social science narratives and their treatment of qualitative data continues to pose difficulties. It is relatively unproblematic to distinguish them from reports of quantitative research, it being necessary only to compare the way they are introduced. Consider the following, and contrast it with the introductory excerpts from The Forest People and Honour and Shame, above:

_The aim of this book is to delineate two types of clever schoolboy: the converger and the diverger. The earlier chapters offer a fairly detailed description of the intellectual abilities, attitudes and personalities of a few hundred such boys. In the later chapters, this description is then used as the basis for a more speculative discussion – of the nature of intelligence and originality and of the ways in which intellectual and personal qualities interact_ (Hudson 1972).

To pursue the analogy used previously, this promises neither an Odyssean nor an Iliadic plot; what one would expect to follow as much more likely are official government files on the conduct of the Trojan War! It is in fact the introductory paragraph to a psychological study, using tests that generated quantifiable results, of two different styles of learning in English schoolboys.

It is when a comparison is made with both documentary and fiction that the difficulty of specifying the uniqueness of qualitative social science narratives appears much more intractable. Nietzsche’s remark encapsulates one pole of the problem:

_What can be thought must certainly be fiction._

Walter’s claim identifies the other:

_Whilst the discourse of social sciences based on statistical theories examines contemporary phenomena on an abstract level, [creative] writers and their characters, as agents and subjects of transformation, infuse scientific data with feeling and emotion...thereby rendering the depth of human experience_ (Walter 2003).

It is perhaps easy enough as a qualitative researcher to reject the latter claim, and probably with some indignation, as many of us believe we are, through a variety of practices, ‘agents of transformation, rendering the depth of human experience’. But if we do engage in that rejection, how far can we move away from documentary before our work becomes classifiable as fiction, though not necessarily in the Nietzschean sense? There is a tension in our position, but it is a tension inherent in the narrative forms we choose for communicating with:

_All narrative exhibits tension between the desire to construct an over-arching storyline [THE PLOT] that ties events together in a seamless explanatory framework [THEORY],_
and the desire to capture the complexities of the events experienced [THE DATA], including haphazard details, uncertainties, and conflicting sensibilities among protagonists [RESEARCHER(S) AND PARTICIPANT(S)] (Ochs et al. 2001).\footnote{The bracketed words in capitals are one suggestion (mine) for how the statement may be “read” by social researchers.}

Ochs’ statement, I feel, captures an essential dilemma, essential in the sense that it is unavoidable in the reporting of qualitative research, but also essential in generating the creative tensions on which the persuasiveness of a narrative depends. This essential creative tension is not just a characteristic of narrative as a whole: it also derives from the constituent elements of data, plot, authorial identity and reader, which have been specified and explicated above. Moreover, I have argued that the technique of narrative is a relation: this aspect of it is not merely academic, it maps onto a core feature of our wider humanity:

\begin{quote}
A single person, remaining alone with himself, cannot make ends meet, even in the deepest and most intimate spheres of his own spiritual life, he cannot manage without another consciousness. One person can never find fullness in himself alone (Bakhtin, cited in Young 1995).
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Fullness, therefore, is one of the things to be found in producing a narrative, which is a complex relation, with and of the world around us, and our shared selves.
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