



ANALYZING TALK
in the SOCIAL SCIENCES

**Narrative, Conversation
& Discourse Strategies**

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Part I

Analyzing Narratives

Is narrative analysis right for my data? What is a narrative and how is it different from a story? How do I go about narrative analysis? What do I look for? These are some of the questions that concern us when we have collected talk data and are considering whether or not narrative analysis is a suitable strategy with which to approach it. We speak to these concerns in this chapter.

Narrative analysis will appeal to you if you are a **humanist**, interested in understanding individuals' and communities' quests for meaning. Narratives tell us about the perceptions individuals and communities have of everyday life experiences and about how what is meaningful is expressed. You might equally be intrigued by how narratives reflect social norms, mores, and values about what the form and content of a 'good story' should be, as well as larger, more abstract social structures, and institutions. Because narratives are told in interaction between two or more people, at the same time as they are situated in wider and changing contexts, both local and global, narrative analysis will offer you distinctive opportunities to examine the theoretical juncture of the micro and the macro.

While there have been many scholarly waves of interest in narrative analysis, it is presently rising on the same tide as the social and political rights movements and identity politics of the 1960s onwards. Narrative analysis is valued because it can reveal diverse lives, including those that may be bracketed as unusual or socially deviant, those that are broadly perceived as normative, and those that are largely unsung or overlooked. To present the stories of the subjugated can be a means of witnessing and drawing attention to the social inequalities and oppression they experience. As we read for this part of the book, seeking out examples, we felt spoiled for choice, as voices and personalities came powerfully and vividly to the fore. Narrative analysis, if done well, can captivate your readers and persuade them in a distinctive manner.

Narrative analysis offers unique charms for the methodologically minded, too. The strategies we discuss in this part of the book are derived from an extraordinarily wide range of disciplines, each bringing something to the party. You will find historians and

psychologists, philosophers and journalists, poets and geographers, anthropologists and more, jostling noisily and happily. The challenge is largely to synthesize their offerings. Many typologies of narrative analysis are available, most notably that developed by American sociologist Catherine Kohler Riessman (2005). But, when we compare her fourfold typology to those outlined by United Kingdom (UK) health researchers Phoenix, Smith, and Sparkes (2010) or South African education researchers Rogan and de Kock (2005), or UK psychologist Nollaig Frost (2009) we find the same terms, such as 'structural' or 'performative' narrative analysis, to have inconsistent or even contradictory meanings. Our solution has been to avoid choosing amongst the mid-range theorizing that these typologies represent. Instead, we situate NA research questions, concepts, and analytic strategies in relation to their ontological and epistemological underpinnings.



So, what is a narrative? We begin by defining **stories** or **narratives**, two terms we use interchangeably, as recountings of experiences that have taken place over time. Time is an essential element of narratives, whether we are thinking of talk about a specific period, such as this afternoon, about what has been continuous over time, such as our habit of having tea together, or about change, such as what happened after 9/11. Time matters because when narrators turn the vast complexity of their experiences into the stories that they tell, they are mustering what they now understand to be most important about what happened into a parsimonious sequence. To analyze a story is to analyze the consequences, the meanings explicit or implicit in it, to understand how narrators are answering questions such as: What is the essence of what happened? Was what happened ethical? Was it desirable - and by what system of values? Why did it happen? What caused things to differ from 'the usual'? How did I understand it then? What does it mean for me, and others, now? What is to be learned?

We begin with a chapter on 'broad strokes' strategies of working with oral histories or life histories, using narratives to understand the past, or treating narratives as speaking to the perspectives of the present. The next chapter of 'fine-grained' narrative analysis strategies take a magnifying lens to stories and the surrounding text, drawing on literary and psychoanalytic perspectives. It is in Chapter 4, on interviewing, that we shift from thinking of stories as texts to thinking of them as told in the moment of the interview, jointly constructed by narrators and listeners who come to the interview from different social locations, and are caught up in each others' presences as stories emerge. The interdisciplinary party that is narrative analysis smiles on all of these strategies, combining them freely, mixing grain and grape in a way that you will not see elsewhere in this book.

TWO

Broad Strokes Approaches to Narrative Analysis

Broadly different research questions and different ways of conceiving of time inform how we have divided this chapter into sections. We start off with the oral historian's question: 'What exactly happened?' The strategies for answering all orient to time as though it were a river that flows clearly forward from a fixed, knowable past into the present. As we will explain, to believe that this question can make sense in the first place is to rely on positivist/realist paradigms.

Next, we take heed of how time can instead be conceived of as a river's eddy. That is, from the standpoint of the storytelling present at the eddy's center, narrators can be thought of as looking back upon their past experiences. What they see there informs how they gaze toward the future; likewise, what they today imagine or hope their futures will be whirls back to inform how they look back upon their pasts (see Ricoeur, 1984). With this conception of time, narratives do not track the 'real' course of the past, but instead speak to the perspectives of the present and to projections of the future. Exploring narratives in this way involves shifting – to various degrees – toward a constructionist paradigm for research, one that values the multiplicity of narrators' possible subjective interpretations and meanings, and the processes by which they arrive at them. The three broad strokes strategies that we set forth use narratives to explore: present-day meanings of the past; the transitions, turning points, and interconnectedness of lives; and the relation of narrative to the self and its mutability over time.

KNOWING THE PAST THROUGH ORAL HISTORY

Ontology and Epistemology in the Realist Paradigm

Within the discipline of history, the 1960s and 1970s saw a fresh blossoming of **oral history** research, in which personal narratives were recognized as a valuable source of information about overlooked or obscured aspects of the past. At the outset of that new blossoming, historians had predominantly endorsed **positivism**. In response to the **ontological** question, 'What can be known?' positivist historians would say, 'Facts about what took place in the past.' (Historians have likewise tended to be **realists**, which means that they believe some real past does exist, independent of anyone's observing it. If a tree falls in a realist's forest, it always makes a sound.)

With regard to the **epistemological** question, 'How do we know?' positivist historians would answer that they are objective knowers, ones who observe the past from a neutral, value-free position. Thus, although many practitioners of oral history had avowedly political motivations for posing research questions about the hidden histories of subjugated groups, positivism informed how those in history departments defended the validity of their sources and analyses to colleagues accustomed to scrutinizing written sources. 'Our analyses are valid because memories *can* be accurate,' the oral historians would have said, falling back to the position that if the vagaries of oral narrators' memories and ephemerality of talk had tainted their data, so too had the subjectivity of the document writers of times past.

It was historian Luisa Passerini who, in 1979, made a significant intervention into her discipline's paradigm with her interviews about Italy under fascism. Passerini (1979) maintained that the conflicted feelings that her working class narrators recounted did not taint her project of discovering the objective truths of the past so much as they served as truths of a qualitatively different character. That her narrators had felt their labor to be a moral duty at the same time as they found it alienating helped to explain why they initially did not revolt against fascism, but later did: their subjectivity held the seeds for revolt. Since Passerini's intervention, oral historians in history departments have been far less apologetic about working with subjective data. In so doing, those seeking out the truths of the past have not had to abandon their positivist paradigm. As Guba and Lincoln (1994) explain, positivism can be stretched to incorporate and welcome subjective data, treating it as commensurate with what more objective sources offer. Thus, to technical analyses of the 1984 Bhopal, India industrial disaster, Mukherjee (2010) adds the voices of survivors as they recount their first glimpses of the strange white mist that would change their lives, their harrowing stampede for survival, and the continuing ordeal of unpredictable health conditions that they experience as monstrous.

Strategies for Rigorous Realist Analysis

Within both positivism and realism, reliance on talk data gathered well after events have passed means that errors of memory are seeping in, muddying oral

historians' views into the past. Important criteria for such an analysis are whether it minimizes such errors and assesses whether data reliably point to clear conclusions: every single strategy we outline is concerned with achieving **rigor** by that definition. A first strategy is to *take into account oral historians' experiences with the reliability of various kinds of oral evidence*. Finnegan (2006) provides a most helpful summary of the reliability of key data involved in tracking individuals. While people's memories of place names tend to be highly reliable, memories of first names and of dates are fraught with error, owing to nicknaming, mix-ups with similar names, differences between baptism and birth years, and the like. Attending to respondents' comments about the accuracy of their memories of various kinds of information may be useful if they themselves can make comparisons to other sources of data, such as personal notebooks (e.g., Turnbull, 2000); otherwise, say Neisser and Libby (2000), it would be illogical to depend upon respondents' memories of how good their memories are.

When talk data are about long past events or from cultures that rely more upon the knowledge technologies of orality than those of literacy (see Ong, 2012), additional considerations may come into play. Rather than calling your data oral history, you may speak of it as part of **oral tradition**. That is, consisting of cultural knowledge such as laws, legends, proverbs, origin myths, and children's play songs, that have been passed down without having been recorded in writing. The foundational text to consult is Jan Vansina's (1985) *Oral Tradition as History*, which provides additional strategies for assessing the messages from the past, such as asking whether maintaining the reliability of these messages has been culturally rewarded, or whether there are material objects, such as treasured heirlooms or marred landscapes, that serve as **mnemonic devices**.

Psychologists' studies of memory can also be useful to oral historians – but within limits. Oral historians are interested in memories based in natural settings, be they factories, homes, or battlefields. Most psychologists, however, prefer to study memories created in laboratory settings, where they can control the stimuli to which subjects are exposed. Oral historians are often interested in long-term memories accrued over the years. However, few psychologists study such long-spanning **autobiographical memories**. In fact, psychological studies of autobiographical memory need not cover years of lived experience. Studies of it can assess how well subjects remember events that might be only a few hours past. (Psychologists distinguish such memory from **working memory**, which lasts for just the few seconds needed to write down a telephone number.) Thus, relatively few cognitive psychological studies can help us understand particularities of how the more remote past is remembered.

To assess sources, we can factor in these studies' insights about the broader processes by which memories of personal experiences tend to stay stable or alter. Autobiographical memory researchers have found that memories of events are generally more likely to be accurate when the events are more recent, distinctive, or highly emotionally charged (Bauer, 2007), and when the memories have frequently been retold (Neisser and Libby, 2000). Further, in what's termed the **reminiscence bump**, events experienced between the ages of 10 and 30 are more available and

reminisced about than others, perhaps because these ages include distinctive and important changes in social roles (see Bauer, 2007). Meanwhile, common errors of memory include **hindsight**, which makes us believe we always could have foretold what has come to pass, **consistency bias**, wherein we tend to remember our past selves in ways that make them more predictive of our present ones (see Albright, 1994), and **misattribution**, wherein we cease to unite information about an event into a whole, and thus confuse one event with another (Schacter, 2001).

As an example, we can consider how co-author Katherine's mother Johanna once said that she remembered gathering with her family around the radio so as to listen to the first shots of World War II being fired on Poland (see Bischooping, 2014), a distinctive event, but one that was over 30 years past by the time that Johanna told Katherine about it. Johanna's memory does not entirely make sense, since German radio would hardly have announced a surprise attack as part of its programming. However, it's possible that she had mixed elements of this event up with a subsequent radio dramatization. Indeed, it is sometimes to an astonishing extent that what narrators report as vivid personal autobiographical memory can turn out to be filled in with media and mass cultural depictions (for example, see Figs, 2008).

Moving beyond errors in memory, Martha Howell's (2001: 60–8) *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* can be consulted for its excellent overview of historians' strategy of *assessing the accuracy of sources through several criteria*. These include **trustworthiness** (i.e., whether narratives are shaded by vanity, fear, political preferences, and the like), **competence** (i.e., the term that covers how factors such as individual interests, expertise, and capacity for comprehension can influence accounts), and **authority** (i.e. whether the writer was an eyewitness to an event or providing a hearsay account). Whether the account is internally consistent and plausible in light of other information is assessed too.

To see how these criteria of competence and authority work in practice, we focus again on Johanna's not-quite-plausible story of what she had heard on German radio. It makes sense to wonder about Johanna's competence to understand what she might have heard on the radio: born in 1935, she had been not quite four years old on the day that Germany began its attack. Further, because Katherine had herself heard this story in her childhood, her own competence to understand it can be questioned. Finally, we have the issue of Katherine's authority in transmitting Johanna's story second-hand. Although precisely what had been playing on the radio cannot be known, stepping back from that matter, the story can be thought of as offering a vivid and plausible fragment of information about how one German family had understood the importance of the attack on Poland.

For a stronger claim to be made would require additional narrators' voices, but all that Johanna's older sister could remember is that they had been away on a northern island, convalescing with whooping cough. When multiple narrators speak to the same events or era, you can *consider the criteria discussed above*

as you pick out their stories' common thread, a process called **triangulation**. More specifically, we can use Denzin's (1989a) labels of **data triangulation** in instances when cross-checks are made among narrators, across spaces, or over time, and of **methodological triangulation** when cross-checks are made among kinds of data sources, be they narrators, documents, monuments, mementos, mass graves, or scars. As you triangulate, be explicit about how you are choosing among differing possibilities and how confident your choices are. Alagoa (2001: 100) does so very clearly in explaining that his rule of thumb for working with oral histories of the Okpoama community in Nigeria was to accord greater credence to a narrative of an eyewitness that was corroborated by at least one other narrator and that was plausible in relation to other known information, with ties broken by looking for the greatest consensus.

The Case of Testimonio

A specific genre of oral history to which the positivist paradigm fits less than easily is that of **testimonio**, originating in the Liberation Theology-informed social movements of Latin America. In testimonio, '[t]ruth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history' (Yúdice, 1991: 17). In this definition, we see that testimonio is decidedly positivist, laying claim to truth with a capital 't.' Readers may be leery of putting this label on testimonio, because positivism and related Enlightenment sciences have been used to promulgate other so-called Truths that now appear repellent, such as racial categorization schemes.

However, Hardt and Negri (2000: 155–6) turn this concern on its head, arguing that Enlightenment means of seeking Truth become quite palatable when they can be put to the ends of justice. This formulation displaces the standpoint of positivism's knower from one that is objective and neutral to one that is simultaneously objective *and* avowing an ethical and political position. In one way, this change in standpoint works. When vast ominous silences have been produced by the destruction of (or failure to create) archives, the fabrication of data, or harm to would-be narrators, a positivist faith in incrementally discovering truth by relying on the sources that are most plausible 'in light of other information' appears naïve. But, this formulation has built-in contradictions, which come most to the fore when narrators' testimonies come under close scrutiny. When narrators are speaking to extraordinarily painful experiences, such gentle doubts as we earlier cast on Johanna's memory of hearing the first shots fired on Poland could well seem heartless, undermining, and unethical. And yet, truth claims in positivism depend on rigorous scrutiny of their bases.

The social sciences' most famous instance of this conundrum revolves around the testimonio *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian woman in Guatemala* (Menchú, 1984), in which Menchú depicted herself as an illiterate peasant and eyewitness to the

politically motivated murder of two family members during the Guatemalan Civil War. Some years later, after Menchú had become a Nobel Peace laureate, David Stoll (1998), an American political science graduate student, interviewed other Guatemalans who said that Menchú had been attending a Catholic boarding school during these events, and that it was a family conflict that had motivated her father's murder. A storm of controversy broke out about these discrepancies and several others that Stoll discovered (see Arias, 2001). Many who had been moved by Menchú's testimonio returned to its first chapter to mull over the passage: 'My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only *my* life, it's also the testimony of my people' (Menchú, 1984: 1). Some testimonio scholars attempted to defend Menchú, for example, by saying that this passage pointed to a shared authority for the events she had related, and that the work spoke to the truth of others' lives, if not entirely Menchú's own. Others, however, felt betrayed and devastated.

The analytic tension that Stoll's discovery brought to such a breaking point has been manifest in other projects where the stakes are high and the audience extends well beyond the local, such as in the testimonio on the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal children in Australia (Attwood, 2008) or the 'Comfort Women' forced into prostitution for Japan's military during World War II (Kimura, 2008). Can or should a paradigm exist wherein testimonio's claim to capital-t Truth is sustained without subjecting narrators to positivist-style scrutiny? Your analytic strategy may be to *address this tension*. Recently, commentators have done so by arguing that narrators should not be conceived of as victims who passively transmit information for historians to judge. Instead, they should be regarded as active political subjects and interpreters in their own right or as people whose political **subjectivity**, whose self-understandings and self-perceptions as political actors, is being formed by the very process of testifying (see Kennedy, 2006; Kimura, 2008; Uehara, 2007). For example, Choi (2011: 31) describes how a survivor of a Korean War massacre, frustrated by being given only 20 minutes to testify upon her visit to the USA, surprised herself by plucking out her glass eye to make her point.



Textbox 2.1: A Summary of Strategies for Knowing the Past

- Use oral historians' past experience to assess the reliability of various types of oral evidence.
- Use cognitive psychologists' insights to understand whether the memories being studied are likely to be stable or changeable.
- Assess sources in terms of trustworthiness, competence, and authority.
- Triangulate among sources, being explicit about how you resolve ties.
- In testimonio research, address the tension between assessing truth claims and treating narrators ethically.

KNOWING THE PRESENT THROUGH ORAL HISTORY

Ontology, Epistemology, and Rigor in the Constructionist Paradigm

We now make a transition from using narratives to look back in time, to focusing on what narratives about the past reveal about the perspectives of the present, which include projections about possible futures. The different strategies of doing so involve various degrees of shifting away from positivism and realism toward a **constructionist** paradigm. What is the **ontology** of such a paradigm, that is, what can be known through it? Are stories still regarded as routes to an objective reality, as they had been in the positivist/realist paradigms? The short answer to the latter question is that it is not the right question. Following Berger and Luckmann's (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*, narrative analysts understand themselves to know the social world through their research participants' subjective reconstructions of their experiences of 'knowing' and 'being,' whether in speaking with others, or – as Frank (1979) points out – simply in talking to themselves.

Some constructionists, such as sociologist George Herbert Mead (1934) would go so far as to say that it is through language and interaction that meanings are formed, altered and disseminated: we narrate and therefore we are. Others such as Neisser (1994) and Collins (2010) would call this too strong a view, pointing out that we have experiences that we do not put into narrative or even language form. How girls experience their clitorises before having a name for them (Waskul et al., 2007) is a case in point. But constructionists all would agree that narrators engage in a host of interpretive processes before a word of a story crosses their lips. To perceive something as 'experience,' to recollect some aspects of it and not others, to ponder it, and to begin to express it in language, let alone to make sense of it in storied form, is to layer interpretation onto interpretation (Neisser, 1994; Ochs and Capps, 1996).

Further, any story we tell is contingent on the moment of its telling and cannot be expected to be the narrator's last word, even if the narrator herself thinks it is. Boje's study of how stories circulate in an office-supply company emphasizes that '[e]ach performance is never the completed story; it is an unraveling process of confirming new data and new interpretations as these become part of an unfolding story line' (1991: 106). For the epistemological question 'How do we know via narratives?' the answer is intimately linked to ontology – we know through our relations with others. Stories must be understood to be socially constructed or 'literally created' (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 111) by a teller and a listener who might never arrive at a shared understanding (Scheurich, 1995). This occurs within a social setting that influences what is salient or tellable, as well as in a broader socio-political context in which stories are inter-subjectively compared.

Given that constructionists revel in the profusion of interpretations, and that analysis is itself an act of interpretation, constructionist notions of rigor are far removed from those of realists, who aim to show that they have reduced error and are closing in on the truth. Donald Polkinghorne (2007) maintains that

constructionists should seek to persuade their audiences that their conclusions about narrators' interpretations are plausible – a softer claim than realists', but not a simpler one. To warrant it, says Polkinghorne, involves the strategy of *explaining how you've addressed the likely gaps between the meanings that narrators experienced and the narratives that they've provided*. For example, if you have interview-based data, you will want to reflect on how well your interviewing methods addressed the inadequacies of language to fully and easily convey meaning, and your capacity to elicit and be trusted with narrators' self-reflections. Being able to say that you conducted repeated interviews with your narrators, gave them the opportunity to comment on transcripts, or reflected on the differences between theirs and your standpoints (see Chapter 4) would be assets here. Moreover, says Polkinghorne (2007), you'll want to provide an analysis that does not merely reiterate what narrators have said, but instead delves into its meaning, with claims being grounded in your data. Chapter 3 will outline strategies for orienting to spoken narratives as though they were literary texts.

Plural Pasts and their Present-day Meanings

Within the discipline of history, it was literary scholar Alessandro Portelli's (1981/1991) study of memories of the death of an Umbrian factory worker named Luigi Trastulli that most eloquently made the case that a constructionist paradigm could be used to support research questions of an altogether new nature. Portelli discovered that although police had killed Trastulli in 1949 while he was participating in an anti-NATO protest, 30 years later, his co-workers would systematically shift the context of his death to their momentous labor protests of 1952 and 1953. They desired Trastulli's death not to have been in vain, Portelli maintained, and turned it into a symbol of their greatest struggle. Further, since the workers had become pro-NATO by the time they were interviewed, that Trastulli had died protesting NATO had become awkward.

Portelli thus came to the realization that oral histories possessed an untapped potential to explain how the longings and politics of the present shaped memories and narratives of times past. In pressing oral histories into the service of envisioning the past, positivist historians had been discarding as errors the very meanings that Portelli proposed to cherish. It is important to note that with this radical suggestion, he was not taking a purely constructionist position of the type that Trouillot (1995: 4–6) says would call all accounts of the past equal fictions, and thereby depoliticize them. Rather, in contextualizing his analysis with the newspaper report that set Luigi Trastulli's death in 1949, Portelli's constructionism was firmly anchored in realism.

Since Portelli's study, narrative researchers with oral history data in hand *choose to what extent to focus on the past versus on its present-day meanings and the social processes that influence them*. Sometimes the data will almost choose for you, as in our reading of Johnson's (2005) analysis of an oral history-based report on New Zealand's Whanganui River. She describes a passage of the report as follows:

[it] offers many 'reasons' for the lack of fish in the rivers such as sewage discharge, farm run-off, sedimentation and so on. Any discussion of possibly supernatural or non-scientific explanations is excluded from this list. Yet turn the page and under another heading, 'sacred waters', we are told of the 'moving accounts' offered concerning the river's purifying and healing powers. (2005: 266)

With no unified 'real' truth about the Whanganui River's history in sight, the jarring differences in the narrators' ontologies cried out to be investigated. But in other instances, as Kennedy argues (1998), the two choices can be complementary. Kennedy shows how oral histories with lesbian narrators can both establish a fact about the past, such as that a working-class lesbian community had been publicly visible in Buffalo, New York in the 1930s, and reveal how narrations were configured by the myth that no one could have been openly homosexual in the US until the 1969 Stonewall demonstrations.

While realist historians treat memories as though they are retrieved from some haphazard, corruptible archive of the brain, constructionists' understandings of memory align with more recent work in cognitive psychology, in which the act of remembering is posited to entail a creative process of reconstruction, carried out by a generative, ever-changing brain in response to circumstance and social context (Brockmeier, 2010). *To explore how reconstructions of the past change in changing contexts* has proven an effective strategy for illuminating this. Portelli's 'The Death of Luigi Trastulli' essay can also be read as an exemplar of this strategy because it compares what had been documented in 1949 to how it was reconstructed by numerous narrators 30 years later.

This strategy can be extrapolated in a number of ways, for instance, to focus on the history of multiple reconstructions of the past that are made by a single individual. An exemplar here is Curaming and Aljunied's (2013) perceptive study of the public statements made by Jibin Arula, who was the sole survivor of a group of mutinying Filipino military recruits who were massacred by their trainers. Curaming and Aljunied emphasize that the statements Arula made between 1968 and 2010 were largely consistent, especially those depicting the massacre and his life as tragic struggles; in realist terms, he could be considered a generally reliable narrator. Arula's overall reliability makes the instances of variations in his statements all the more interesting. At one point, he emphasized that the mutiny had been class-based; at another, that it was based on the recruits having been Muslim; and at yet others, he expressed remorse for having told anyone what he had gone through. Arula's shifting reconstructions, Curaming and Aljunied propose, could be related to the emergence of a myth that Christians in the Philippines had long been attempting genocide against Muslims, and to an escalating and deadly inter-religious conflict.

Other strategies for examining how the meanings of the past are inflected by the social pay less heed to individual-level memories. More attention is instead given to **collective memory**, a tremendously influential concept developed by French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs (1950). Collective memory, Halbwachs theorized, transcends and extends beyond the memories of the

individual members of a group, and is profoundly affected by social location. A strategy derived from this conceptualization is *to map out and seek to understand the divides in collective memory and, hence, between the groups involved in remembering*. Carole McGranahan's (2010) research on the role of Tibetan women in battles against China in the 1950s and onward is an excellent illustration. Although McGranahan consistently found Tibetan men to deny that women had any role in these battles, several Tibetan women narrated that they had indeed fought. McGranahan interpreted this difference in relation to patriarchal views that women's fighting emasculates men and to Buddhist views that menstrual blood is a dangerous pollutant. It should be noted that this strategy can be applied to investigate the differences between researchers' and research participants' interpretations of the past, an issue that has especially interested feminist oral historians who are uneasy about privileging their own interpretation over participants' (Arat, 2003; Sangster, 1994). We will be taking this up in Chapter 4.

Another common strategy for oral historians is to explore the dynamic between a state's **official history**, i.e., its public narrative of its history, which it bolsters with commemorations, museums, monuments, and so forth, and a multiplicity of possible **histories from below**. Such histories are based on memories of the everyday lives of disenfranchised groups or – in postcolonial contexts – of **subalterns** who fall outside the power structures of both the colony they inhabit and their colonizers' homeland. In some instances, such as Johnson's (2005) Whanganui River example, mentioned above, a history from below unambiguously contests an official account: there is no singular past here, but rather, pasts that are plural, local, and contingent. (For an accessible discussion of the postmodern vision of multiple histories to which this is related, we recommend Keith Jennings's (2003) *Re-Thinking History*.) But, in other instances, dominant narratives are so constraining that histories from below do not emerge fully fledged so much as in ambivalent fragments, contradictions, and silences, for which an analyst should be alert (Jennings, 2004; Loh, 2013; Stoler and Strassler, 2006). If the relations of power to knowledge and to what can be expressed interest you, then so will the Part III discussions of discourse analysis strategies, which can be applied to oral history data.

Following from the formulation of Halbwachs and those working in his tradition, when autobiographical memories turn out to differ from official history, a useful tactic may be to *examine whether families, distinctive for combining an intergenerational structure with passionate bonds and day-to-day transmission of memories, shape how the differences are negotiated* (see Assmann, 2008; Erll, 2011; Mason, 2008). In Dhooleka Sarhadi Raj's (2000) valuable formulation, this might be better expressed in terms of the transmission of ignorance, than of memory. Studying Hindu families in Delhi whose first generations had arrived as refugees from Pakistan at the time of British India's Partition, Raj shows how the refugee generation avoided speaking of the hardships of their displacement. She traces

this generation's strategy of deliberate forgetting to its desire for successive generations to fall in with India's official history, which depicts state formation as a glorious moment of independence. Although Raj's example is of a generation forcibly aligning the memories it transmits with what official history would endorse, such is not always the case. In other settings, as in post-World War II Germany, family loyalties and affections have fostered narratives in which family members are glowingly painted in terms that contradict an official history critical of the Third Reich (Welzer et al., 2001). Within families, it may be the weak, those positioned as most easily disturbed by harsh truths, who paradoxically are positioned as holding the greatest power over what is narrated in other settings.

Textbox 2.2: A Summary of Strategies for Knowing the Present through Oral Histories

In any use of a constructionist paradigm:

- Explain how you've addressed the likely gaps between the meanings narrators have experienced, and the narratives they've provided.
- Choose whether your focus is the past vs. its present-day meanings and the social processes influencing them.

To study plural pasts and their present-day meanings:

- Explore how reconstructions of the past change in changing contexts.
- Map out and seek to understand the divides in collective memory and the groups involved in remembering.
- Compare a state's official history to histories from below.
- Examine families as sites in which official and autobiographical memories may differ.

STUDYING THE PROCESSES OF THE LIFE COURSE

As researchers, our goal instead may be to analyze talk data for stories that illustrate lives as they unfold and change, through planned or unexpected role transitions or turning points, or when one person's experiences ripple into the lives of others. While the previous chapter considered how oral history data speaks of the past or its resonance in the present, in this chapter we more commonly speak of **life history** or **life course** data.

These terms may look confusingly similar, and statements that blur them together – as when Harris and Parisi speak of using a life history calendar technique to capture 'the timing and sequence of life course events' (2007: 40) – may look all the more bewildering. However, we consider the two approaches to have converged and their labels to now be interchangeable. Both are rooted in the



Chicago School of Sociology (see Dewilde, 2003; Stanley, 2010), which had a central concern with how social interaction was shaped by the urban environment, a constructionist approach known as **symbolic interactionism**. In this approach, humans are perceived as exercising agency, ongoingly constructing their social worlds and transforming their environments through shared symbols and acts of meaning-making.

The term 'life history' can be traced to W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's (1918–1920) landmark Chicago School study, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, which used Polish immigrants' autobiographies and letters to preserve and represent the meanings they gave their experiences (Luken and Vaughan, 1999). Thomas was later to become renowned for the dictum that, 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas and Thomas, 1928: 571–2). This dictum neatly sums up how perceptions and interpretations, rather than objective reality, can hold great sway in determining social action.

The life course perspective, which includes both qualitative and quantitative methods, originated decades later with the work of Glen Elder (1974, 1978, 1994). His signal contribution was to propose that any research on how an individual's passage through life unfolds must factor in that person's socio-historical context, family context, and the relation of the family to other institutions (see Brettell, 2002; Dewilde, 2003). Individuals' choices and their opportunities to exercise personal agency, Elder maintained, are simultaneously conditioned by these contexts and by the lives of others to whom they are linked. For instance, soldiers' decisions to desert must be understood in the contexts of the war they have been waging, their families' attitudes toward their options, and the legal, financial, employment, and social repercussions they and their families will face. Coupling the insights of these perspectives, we understand a life history to be an individual's story of the course of their life – a story that must be understood to be created through individual perceptions and agency at the same time as it is shaped by social structure.

Before we start discussing strategies, it is important to observe that Elder's approach, with its emphasis on socio-historical contexts and social structures, is rather more realist than Thomas and Znaniecki's. That the life course perspective to which Elder contributes includes qualitative methods alongside decidedly positivist/realist quantitative ones also means that life course studies are taken up more often by policy developers seeking 'hard evidence.' But, in our review of the recent literature, we found little discussion of the ontological and epistemological divide that this might seem to suggest. Instead, the two strategies blurred together, with an **ontology** and **epistemology** that we would again call constructionism anchored in realism. Strategy-wise, life history and life course researchers seem, like good sisters, to be glad to share what's in their closets.

Life history/life course researchers may focus on the story of one person or several. One concern may be how sharply marked, consequential moments of **role transition**, such as becoming jobless, entering university, becoming a

parent, migrating, caring for an ailing partner, or living under a new regime, are negotiated. Exciting contributions to life course research can come via the strategy of *uncovering how a group of respondents experiencing the same consequential transition turn out to be following one or a few conventional plots*. Among the social sciences' best-known projects of this kind is Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's (1969) interview-based discovery that, among terminally ill patients, grieving moves through five stages, from denial to anger, and then to bargaining, depression, and acceptance in turn.

An exemplary analysis in which two conventional plots emerged is Anya Ahmed's (2013) study of UK retirees who migrated to Spain as 'lifestyle migrants,' i.e., for non-economic reasons. Ahmed found some migrants to narrate a 'quest' plot, in which a calling to move to Spain was succeeded by unanticipated obstacles upon arrival. Although the climate proved harsh, the housing was not in a village but in a pre-built residential area, contacts with Spanish people were few, yet the 'quest' narrators prevailed over these obstacles by finding companions who shared their purpose. Other migrants, however, narrated a 'voyage-and-return' plot, in which obstacles brought them to realize that their true companions had been at home in the UK all along. A life course perspective on these plots involves observing how the narrators' agentic choices were conditioned by the lives of the companions and others with whom they interacted, as well as structural and cultural factors, such as the trajectory of Spanish urban development, the romanticized images the narrators had held of Spain, and the cultural availability of quest and voyage-and-return plots.

You can also analyze life histories for whether they support or dispute the plotline for a role transition that another researcher has set forth. Critics of Kübler-Ross's model, for example, have observed that the dying may skip various stages that she had predicted, experience the stages out of order, or cycle amongst them; any stage model prescribing a lock-step sequence is open to such critiques. Another critically oriented strategy is to question to whom a plotline applies or under what conditions. For instance, while a sizable body of research shows that women with young children cannot necessarily conform to expectations that people on welfare become employable, co-author Amber's most recent, as-yet-unpublished research nuances the understanding of the gendered character of welfare-to-work transitions by showing how criminalized men who are recovering from addiction face similar barriers.

Instead of focusing your analysis on the transitions or life stages that social scientists have deemed significant, you might prefer to *examine how research participants speak of the events that they themselves consider to have radically disrupted or changed their life courses*. UK sociologist Anthony Giddens developed the concept of **fateful moments** to refer to the times when individuals reach 'crossroads' (1991: 143) in their lives, and must make choices with consequences both for the future and for how they understand their identities. In related work, American sociologist Norman Denzin had defined **epiphanies** as 'interactional

moments and experiences which leave marks on people's lives' (1989b: 70) over time and which might take a number of forms, e.g., major epiphanies pervade all aspects of one's life, while relived ones involve arriving at a new insight about a past experience.

As Goodey (2000) discusses, good social scientific analysis of such turning points involves *connecting them to their cultural and institutional contexts*. Berger (2008) does so in presenting the life history of Melvin, an undergraduate and American Paralympian who had been involved in gang sub-culture until being shot and becoming paralyzed from the waist down. Rather than casting Melvin as the hero of an individual struggle to overcome obstacles against all odds, Berger deftly shows how Melvin's adaptation to his disability and his actions were facilitated by structural conditions, such as a strong rehabilitative program and a supportive basketball program, as well as by experiences prior to becoming paralyzed that he was able to transpose onto his new reality (see 2008: 327).

Finally, following from another of the central theoretical principles of the life course perspective, we can *probe how individual experiences are linked with what transpires in the lives of others* (McDaniel and Bernard, 2011). For example, Amber uses a life course perspective in research on how 'families by choice' manage their low income through the instrumental and expressive supports that they give and receive from one another. In this research, participants did not define 'family' in strictly kin terms. Rather, their perception of others as family, especially others who were not kin, was informed by having shared specific kinds of life experiences (Gazso and McDaniel, 2015). In families by choice comprised of groups of lone mothers who were not blood relations, the mothers' senses of one another as 'family' stemmed from how their life courses had followed similar and interconnected paths, including disruptions such as divorce and alcoholism in their childhood homes, and experiences of teen homelessness and poverty as lone parents. Says one such mother: 'because we all are the strays, so we are just kind of family to each other. So that's basically where my family that I have created kind of comes around, we've all been the black sheep of our family [of origin].'

Textbox 2.3: A Summary of Strategies for Analyzing Life Course Processes

- Establish whether a group of respondents experiencing the same transition are following one/a few conventional plots.
 - See whether your data support or dispute a plotline that another researcher has already found.
 - Examine how research participants speak of the events they regard as epiphanies/fateful moments.
 - Probe how individual experiences are linked with what transpires in the lives of others.
-

STUDYING THE SELF AS ESSENCE OR AS NARRATIVE PROCESS

In addition to illuminating the courses of lives and their interconnection, stories about experiences can shed light on a longstanding philosophical puzzle about the self. How can the self be thought of as responding to change in ‘a perpetual state of becoming’ (Chandler, 2000: 211), and, yet, as continuous over time, as somehow identical from one day to the next? A light-hearted example is that of Helen, a Brisbane, Australian interior designer who is positive that she is changing, in that she expects her tastes to become ‘less cottagey,’ at the same time as she’s confident that she’ll always love the cream-colored cottagey chair in her bedroom, meaning that it will always reflect her sense of self (Woodward, 2001: 126). The question is also a serious one. It’s only because your self is understood to have continuity that people can lay plans with you and hold you accountable for your deeds. Otherwise, as Craig (1997) points out, a war criminal could give a ‘That wasn’t really me’ defense. What, then, is the basis of this continuity?

As Chandler (2000) discusses, one tradition of Western thought would reply that the **self is an essence**. That is, we each possess some inner core, whether it be a soul, a destiny, a Cartesian ego who declares ‘I think therefore I am,’ or a bundle of persisting personality traits. Such a reply does not explain how Helen can foresee herself becoming ‘less cottagey.’ It fails to capture the sense that time or change matter. A contrasting reply posits that the self is not so much a noun as a verb, a **process of narration**. This reply builds on the thought of sociologist and symbolic interactionist George Herbert Mead (1934) and philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1984). Mead says that the self has two components, a *me* comprised of the attitudes and meanings we perceive others to hold of us, and an impulsive *I* that makes sense of the *me*. Meanwhile, Ricoeur says that the past is always understood from the perspective of the present and with an eye to the future. Douglas Ezzy (1998) fused these two theories to propose that a present-day narrative self continually updates its own unfinished story. The *I* strives to interpret the meanings of the *me*’s history and to project that *me* into a future. It is through this process that Helen can both affirm her past acquisition of the cream-colored chair and coherently project a future in which her tastes will change.

An initial analytic strategy arising from all this is to *ask whether research participants think of their selves as essences or as processes of narration?* ‘I made one of my participants cry,’ Jodi Kaufmann (2010: 104) writes at the outset of her article about how Jessie, a male-to-female transsexual, had responded to a draft analysis depicting her gender as fluid, as a narrative-in-progress that disrupted binaries of sex and gender. Jessie responded, ‘You have taken away the identity I have worked all my life to build ... Who am I if you take this away?’ (p. 104). Although Jessie had spent nearly 80 percent of her life history interview speaking of how she had been mistakenly born in a male body – i.e., of her self as having a female essence – Kaufmann

had initially considered these passages less relevant because they seemed to her to reproduce heteronormative expectations and the criteria by which psychiatric gatekeepers decide who is eligible for sex-reassignment surgery. Jessie's desire to live her female essence would repudiate any outsider's notion of her gender as fluid.

Note that, with the above question and example, we have shifted into research with a fully constructionist orientation. Even though Jessie, war criminals, and other individual selves may be understood to be anchored in continuity in a realist sense, we have let that anchoring slip, and are engaging more fully with our narrators' self-constructions. We now mark a second shift, into strategies concerned with the connection of narratives to wellbeing or psychological adjustment.

A first such strategy asks *how respondents are affected by the view of self as a narrative or by particular narratives about their selves*. Can thinking of the self in narrative terms offer them resilience in the face of an uncertain or foreshortened future? Chandler et al. (2003) observed that among adolescents in a Canadian psychiatric unit, those who spoke of the self as a narrative process were at lower risk of committing suicide than those who spoke of the self in essentialist terms. Studies of people diagnosed with life-threatening or chronic conditions have similarly explored which kinds of narratives about the future give them the most hope. Ezzy's (2000) landmark study of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in Australia found that they narrated their experiences in three ways. In what Ezzy called 'linear chaos narratives', PLWHA expressed the belief that 'there is no future' (p. 612). In 'linear restitution narratives', they denied the inevitability of death and expressed hope by attempting to 'colonize the future' (p. 615) by making long-term plans such as home-buying. Finally, in 'polyphonic narratives' that were full of contradictions, PLWHA embraced uncertainty and expressed a hope that it could enrich the present, as in this interview excerpt:

It's a bit cliché maybe that it's probably the best thing that ever happened to me. Something like a sentence of death concentrates the mind wonderfully. ... Previously I was wasting a lot of time in that you can, you can always find heaps and heaps of things to do in your life to avoid the, the larger issues. (p. 614)

What happens when the process of narration is disrupted by a past trauma that has breached the self? Here, the psychotherapeutic model for addressing trauma through narrative holds tremendous sway. In it, trauma is understood to disrupt comprehension, remembrance, and the ordinary forgetting required for narration to occur. In the flashbacks of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), memories too painful to be accessed verbally thrust themselves cruelly, vividly, and uncontrollably to the fore, transforming what had been 'there and then' into the 'here and now' (see BenEzer, 1999; Kraft, 2004). If a person with PTSD can externalize a traumatic experience by expressing it verbally to a trustworthy listener, the argument goes, then a narrative can be formed that permits the past and present meaning of the experience to be considered, and that will reduce its intrusions into the future.

Exciting work is being done that *inquires into the generalizability of the psychotherapeutic model*. Such work assesses whether healing need always be language-based (Gheith, 2007; Kidron, 2012), questions whether the communal and enduring injuries of mass political violence are best remedied by treating trauma as an individual pathology (Kagee, 2004; Summerfield, 1999), and scrutinizes claims, such as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission's, that narration can further healing at a national level (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008; van der Walt et al., 2003). The last of these points brings to light how differently the various strategies we have been looking at would approach data about the same period of the past. While positivist researchers are asking, 'Exactly what happened during apartheid?', and researchers interested in histories from below are asking 'How do marginalized groups' accounts of this period differ from what had been official history?', some researchers interested in the self would ask 'Can what helps individuals to heal also help a nation?'

More broadly speaking, we can *observe how narratives serve to explain the breaches, turmoil, discontinuities, or glitches in our lives*. Järvinen (2001), for example, analyzes the justifications and excuses in the life histories of two male alcoholics in Copenhagen to show how they are turning their amoral behavior into moral tales that say more about who they want to be than who they have been becoming. Another strategy holds that the narratives we generate in such circumstances are drawn from **cultural repertoires**, that is, the conventional narratives available in a specific cultural context (Linde, 1993). This focus somewhat echoes our earlier mention of how narrating epiphanies in one's life are linked to cultural and institutional contexts but here we see more specific emphasis on how these narratives are culturally constituted and perhaps constrained. Among Soviet Gulag survivors, Figs found some to offer what he called a 'Survival' narrative of transcending troubles through individual struggle (2008: 126). Although this is a narrative that will be familiar in many cultural contexts, Figs also found survivors to offer a distinctively 'Soviet' narrative (p. 16) of taking consolation in thinking that their forced labor had contributed to the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War (World War II) or to the Soviet economy, creating the industrial towns in which they and former Gulag administrators continued to live and in which they take pride. 'It is our little Leningrad,' (p. 131) says one such survivor of her fume-ridden Arctic mining town.

Within a familiar setting, we may take repertoires for explaining discontinuity, and even for identifying what constitutes a discontinuity, so much for granted that they become invisible. Charlotte Linde (1993) proposes that a strategy for locating discontinuities and repertoires is to *hone in on what narrators take the most pains to explain and how they go about doing so*. Applying this strategy to white middle-class Americans' career histories, Linde (1993) observed that her subjects offered copious explanations of how they found silver linings in the accidental turns their careers had taken. They also exerted themselves to explain how apparent discontinuities in their careers could actually be understood as continuities at some deeper level. These narrators achieved coherence by using cultural repertoires that emphasized the persistent exercise of agency, not to mention having a job.

Linde's strategy is thus alert to the values accentuated in particular contexts and to the hazards of appearing to fail to embody them. (If this appeals to you, then Part III's discussions of discourse analysis should, since cultural repertoires might equally be called 'discourses.')

As this review of strategies for studying narrative's relation to the self draws to a close, we note that it has been preoccupied with projects of self-understanding in which bounded individualism and rationality are valorized (see Bordo, 1986). If individuals can understand themselves and tell their stories, the logic goes, they can become happier. Much as the urge to self-expression may be being experienced as natural, who has been schooled to tell what to whom, and to what end, reflects social inequalities (Tilly, 2006). Steedman (2000) also makes this case through her 300-year history of the project of self-narration, in which she draws parallels between the recent flourishing of pedagogy about self-expression and the requirement in place in England since the eighteenth century that the poor confess their troubles as a condition of obtaining social assistance. Freund (2014) even cautions that oral histories can compel narrators to construct selves as something to be known, to be fixed, and to be surveilled. In Chapter 9, we will see such themes again emphasized by philosopher Michel Foucault.

Moreover, cross-cultural studies have long pointed to alternate conceptions of the self that emphasize relational and communitarian values (e.g., De Craemer, 1983; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). In certain contexts, neither the concept of the self as an essence nor that of the self as a process of narration holds up. Further, citing examples from their own and others' ethnographies around the globe, in which narrators who had been asked for life stories presented information about myths, taboos, or their lineage, sometimes in song, sometimes in dramatic performance, and sometimes by handing over their identity cards, Kratz (2001) and Giles-Vernick (2001) argue that the life story – and the conception of the self that it entails – is far from universal. *If your respondents explicitly or implicitly question the logic by which you understand the self*, consider making that the focus of your investigation.

Textbox 2.4: A Summary of Strategies for Studying the Narrative Process

- Explore whether your narrators think of their selves as essences or as processes of narration.
 - Ask what the implications are of viewing one's self as a narrative (or by a particular narrative about their selves).
 - Inquire into how well models relating narrative to breaches of the self can be generalized.
 - Observe how narratives serve to explain the breaches, turmoil, discontinuities, or glitches in our lives.
 - If your respondents question the logic by which you understand the self, consider focusing your investigation there.
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CHAPTER SUMMARY

Table 2.1 Broad strokes approaches to narrative analysis

<i>Are your data ...</i>	<i>Some typical data</i>	<i>Paradigm</i>
A window into the past	Oral histories Testimonio	Positivism/realism
Offering a perspective on the multiple meanings that the past holds in the present	Oral histories	Constructionism, anchored in realism
Offering a perspective on how life course transitions, turning points, or interconnected lives are experienced	Life histories Narratives about specific transitions, e.g., career/migration/school Narratives about turning points	Constructionism, anchored in realism
Offering a perspective of the nature of the changing self	Life histories Narratives about uncertain future Narratives about past trauma, including testimonio	Constructionism, sometimes anchored in realism

People are storytellers engaged in a search for meaning, their memories and constructions of their experiences intimately linked to the flows or eddies of time. Table 2.1 sums up the relation between how data is viewed, what typical data are, and the paradigm informing analysis. In broad strokes, if we think of time as flowing forward like a river, talk data can help realist analysts piece together the answer to the question ‘what happened?’ If we think of narratives as constructed in the present, but eddying into the future and back into the past, then we have many choices for how analysis of talk data can proceed. Each of these is profoundly humanist in its orientation, valuing the individual search for meaning and capacity to re-evaluate the past, rather than seeing these as impediments. Through talk data, we can aim to understand the present-day meanings of the past, and how and why communities and sub-communities may remember the past in ways that align with or be distinct from official histories. Alternately, we can analyze talk data to understand how individuals experience the course and stages of their lifetimes, in terms of how their agency is conditioned by various social structures and of how their lives are linked to those of others. Our final broad strokes analytic strategies take up how the self can be understood to have continuity, yet be able to change, through its narrative essence. The structure of a narrator’s story thus becomes a clue to the state of the narrator’s self.

