

The copyright law of the US(Title17, USCode) governs the making of photocopies of other reproductions of copyrighted material.

A Short Story About Long Stories

Catherine Kohler Riessman

Department of Sociology and School of Social Work, Boston University

I encountered Labov and Waletzky's original article (1967/this issue, henceforth L&W) in the context of very specific problems in working with qualitative textual data. It was 1983, and I was a (not so young) postdoctoral fellow wrestling with talk about marriage, in the form of transcripts of interviews with more than 100 separating and divorcing women and men. My sociological training in research methods called for fragmenting the data in service of interpretation (Strauss, 1987) and, accordingly, I was moving through the lengthy interviews cutting, categorizing, and grouping responses into a common set of thematic elements.

A recently separated man challenged my fragmentation efforts: responding to an interview question asking for the "reasons for his separation," he laughed and said, "Well, you know, that's a real long story. Maybe I can sum it up by saying . . ." He then gave a list of complaints. Only later did I realize the full significance of his message: He had knitted the disparate events of his marriage into "a real long story," but traditional social science methods of interviewing and coding fragmented and decontextualized them (Mishler, 1986). The insight, and an alternative way to approach interviews, crystallized when I was handed Labov's (1982) paper on personal narratives of violence by my postdoctoral mentor, Elliot Mishler. From that paper—which transformed forever my way of working with textual data—I worked my way back to L&W.

The fundamental structures of oral versions of personal experience, and their functions, provided a way into the "long stories" about divorce. In addition to healing biographical discontinuities (Bury, 1982) and facilitating the construction of identities, I also came to see how stories justify decisions to divorce (Riessman, 1990). That women and men needed to go to such narrative lengths to explain to the listener what "really happened" in their marriages (our questions did not ask

for this information, or even encourage narrativization as a discourse strategy) challenges the conventional wisdom that divorce is no longer deviant. Narratives serve a persuasive function in social interaction, in addition to the referential and evaluative functions L&W identify. Looking back, it is hard to imagine we didn't always know the fundamental structures out of which stories are made (orientation, complicating action, evaluation, etc.), because they are so intuitive, logical, and clearly "there" in a wide variety of contexts.

However, not all tales about marriage involve protagonists, events, complications, and consequences. A central problem I encountered with the model is the very definition of narrative. Some of the long stretches of talk about marriage were unanalyzable units in L&W's terms, yet they recapitulated the past, "felt" like narratives in the interview interaction, and were responded to as such (e.g., the teller held the floor for a lengthy turn in the interview conversation and was interrupted only for clarification). They were accounts, they functioned to construct and interpret the past (a perspective I prefer to the authors' implicit correspondence theory), they were recipient-designed, and they were efforts to persuade. How could they be analyzed as formal narratives?

Ultimately, I resolved the problem by developing a beginning typology of narrative *genres* that builds on the work of Linde (1986) and Polanyi (1985). Genre refers to types of narrative that are distinguished by a definite style and are constituted by specific conventions and codes of speech, including verb tense, temporality, sequencing, discourse markers, and other linguistic elements. I reserved the term *story* for the structure identified by L&W. Other genres of narrative include habitual narratives, which emplot durative events and blur time with the conditional past tense. In my research, this narrative form was used persuasively to convey the gradual downward spiral of a marriage and the experience of deadness or heavy hanging time. The hypothetical narrative genre, by contrast, uses the subjunctive to emplot events that never happened, but should have. Like an elaborate fantasy, the form was typically juxtaposed with a story in the simple past to construct a moral opposition—what marriage should have been and what was. Another set of genres attempted to recapitulate emotional "events." Narrators pulled the listener into the unfolding experience of disruption and upheaval of divorce in long passages that are highly structured and metaphored (Riessman, 1991). To interpret these narratives of distress, I needed to reach beyond a Labovian framework and used Gee's (1985, 1986, 1991) structural analysis instead. In sum, extensions of the method were necessary to render the divorce accounts meaningful, given all their diversity. The divorce narratives became analyzable as presentations of self (Goffman, 1959) and as cultural products (Rosenwald & Ochsberg, 1992), over and beyond their reference to events that may (or may not) have happened in the marriage.

Perhaps the most controversial stretch of talk I attempted to analyze as a formal narrative was the lengthy (25 min) account of a working-class Puerto Rican woman

("Marta"). I was drawn to it initially precisely because it was not temporally organized and consequently confused the listener-interviewer (Riessman, 1987). The text alerted me to taken-for-granted assumptions about time in research interviews—violated in this case—and their possible connection to class and culture. Labov, of course, studied language and social class (Labov, 1972), but his work is curiously silent about how the story form might vary with culture, although L&W (1967/this issue) had earlier suggested the research topic (p. 38). In the sequence of my own evolving understanding of what differentiates narrative from other forms of talk (such as question and answer exchanges, chronicles, arguments, etc.), Marta's account represented a turning point. It raised fundamental theoretical questions about the boundaries of narrative, which subsequent work has examined systematically. Peterson and Langellier (1995) argue that interpretation is fundamentally affected by how one locates the boundary between text and context, that is, where the analyst chooses through transcription practices to begin and end a narrative segment.

Marta's account raised additional questions about time. As Michaels (1981) showed with children's narratives, a particular kind of temporal ordering is expected in institutional settings that evaluate children on a regular basis, and those who deviate from these preferred styles are evaluated negatively. Marta's narrative, like the Black children's talk that Michaels analyzed, is organized topically rather than temporally—it is a series of linked "episodes" in the life story of courtship and marriage, with moves and shifts between settings that signal the narrator's experience of migration. Like the children's narratives, its meaning was problematic for the listener, but the text becomes artfully senseful when L&W's assumptions about linear time and narrative structure are suspended.

Personal narratives, in all their diversity, offer social scientists a window into personal experience, specifically human agency in the face of life events. Individuals craft their tales collaboratively with listeners—two human agents make sense of personal experience in interaction. Crucial meanings are lost if the form of telling is ignored, and the text is fragmented and decontextualized into symptom counts and lists. There is reciprocity between form and meaning: The way individuals craft their tales, including the narrative genres they select, carry crucial interpretive understandings. Methods that allow for the examination of narrative form—and diverse ways of telling—counter tendencies (all too frequent in social science research) to objectify the subject.

As a conclusion to these brief thoughts about "long stories," I suggest that what's at stake here is more than academic disputes about the defining features of narrative. Narrative has now become a household word in the social sciences and a common tool for evaluation in clinical and educational settings. However, there is a danger: the tyranny of the narrative. How can we open up the concept so that a diversity of styles of telling about consequential events can be honored, but at the same time avoid the pitfall of banalizing the concept—treating all talk as narrative? Can we

develop meaningful and useful typologies of narrative than counter restrictive definitions, but avoid reifying narrative form? Given the increasing trend toward the use of storytelling as an evaluative device in educational and clinical settings, what is to forestall the tendency to label those who narrate "differently" as "deficient"? In a word, narrative runs the danger of becoming the new hegemony. I have no clear answers to these problems and questions, though I have pointed in this essay to some directions for future theory and research. In a sense, the problems are a testimony to the success of an intellectual movement that started 30 years ago with L&W's generative paper.

REFERENCES

- Bury, M. (1982). Chronic illness as biographical disruption. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 4, 167-182.
- Gee, J. P. (1985). The narrativization of experience in the oral style. *Journal of Education*, 167, 9-35.
- Gee, J. P. (1986). Units in the production of narrative discourse. *Discourse Processes*, 9, 391-422.
- Gee, J. P. (1991). A linguistic approach to narrative. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 1, 15-39.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Labov, W. (Ed.). (1972). *Language in the inner city: Studies in the Black English vernacular*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press.
- Labov, W. (1982). Speech actions and reactions in personal narrative. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Analyzing discourse: Text and talk* (pp. 219-247). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Labov, W., & Waletzky, J. (this issue). Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience. In J. Helm (Ed.), *Essays on the verbal and visual arts: Proceedings of the 1966 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society* (pp. 12-44). Seattle: University of Washington Press. (Original work published 1967)
- Michaels, S. (1981). "Sharing time": Children's narrative styles and differential access to literacy. *Language and Society*, 10, 423-442.
- Mishler, E. G. (1986). *Research interviewing: Context and narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Peterson, E. E., & Langellier, K. M. (1995). The politics of personal narrative methodology. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 17, 135-152.
- Polanyi, L. (1985). *Telling the American story: A structural and cultural analysis of conversational storytelling*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Riessman, C. K. (1987). When gender is not enough: Women interviewing women. *Gender & Society*, 1, 172-207.
- Riessman, C. K. (1990). *Divorce talk: Women and men make sense of personal relationships*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Riessman, C. K. (1991). Beyond reductionism: Narrative genres in divorce accounts. *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 1, 41-68.
- Rosenwald, G. C., & Ochberg, R. L. (1992). Introduction: Life stories, cultural politics, and self-understanding. In G. C. Rosenwald & R. L. Ochberg (Eds.), *Storied lives: The cultural politics of self-understanding* (pp. 1-18). London: Yale University Press.
- Strauss, A. L. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. New York: Cambridge University Press.