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EMPIRICAL QUESTIONS ABOUT NARRATIVE

Although the term “narrative” often is in the titles or keywords of books and articles authored by social researchers, it nonetheless is common for literature reviews, data analysis, and conclusions in these works to focus on substantive topics rather than on narrative. While using narrative to examine substantive topics has yielded many important insights on a wide variety of topics and therefore should be continued, narrative research has done too little to increase understandings of how stories work and the work stories do in social life. My argument is that it is productive to *foreground* questions about the production, use, and consequences of the narrative communication form in social research.

Because empirical research addresses questions about how the world works, each research project begins with a question or an interrelated series of questions. Although questions leading research often are only implicit in published research, it is good practice to have explicit and precise questions when designing, conducting, and reporting research. Explicit questions help keep readers (and researchers themselves) tightly focused on the particular issues at hand and therefore help avoid becoming sidetracked into topics that are tangential.

As a framework for presentation, I will order possible research questions about narrative into five general categories, the first of which is about processes and actors: What are the social processes and who are the social actors involved in story making, storytelling, and story evaluation? While important, I will not dwell on these for the simple reason that questions about the processes and actors involved in authoring, telling, and evaluating stories pose no unique issues for social research and therefore are amendable to exploration via traditional research methodologies outlined in countless existing textbooks.

I will center attention on four other kinds of questions about the characteristics of stories themselves: Story meaning is derived from perceived story content, so what is story content? How are story meanings used in personal, organizational, and institutional spheres of social life? What are the relationships

among the meanings of stories produced on different stages of social life? What are the subjective and objective consequences of narrative productions of meaning? Reasons for targeting these questions about the contents, uses, and consequences of narrative meaning are philosophical, theoretical, and methodological: The importance of stories in social life relates to their meaning-making capacities; questions about meaning are philosophical and theoretical; such questions pose a variety of specific methodological issues for social research design and implementation that are not a central component of traditional canons of social research.

While I will include multiple examples of the kinds of questions researchers have asked about narrative, I am not offering an exhaustive catalogue of question types. On the contrary, I hope that readers will find inspiration in the questions asked by others and be led to asking new kinds of questions and empirically pursuing their answers in new types of ways. Further, while I am sorting questions into categories, I do so merely to organize my comments and do *not* offer these categories as a typology. It will be clear that many of the examples I use to demonstrate one type of question easily could be used to demonstrate another; questions asked by researchers often both combine and blur the categories I am using here. Again, I hope this encourages readers to think creatively about how to ask empirical questions about narrative productions of meaning.

QUESTIONS ABOUT SOCIAL PROCESSES AND SOCIAL ACTORS

There are many questions about narrative as the social *processes* of story making, storytelling, and story evaluating which involve different categories of social *actors*—those who author stories, tell them, and evaluate them for their interest, importance, and believability.

Story Authors and Story Making

First are questions about *story authors* and *story making*. For example, our current era is complex and characterized by disagreements of many varieties. This raises questions about stories produced by authors in different social categories:

How do the stories told by youths make sense of conflict in their everyday lives and how do their stories compare to media-driven stories of youths as uncontrollable and violent predators?

(Morrell et al. 2000)

Or by authors with different personal characteristics:

How do jury members with different racial and class characteristics construct racialized stories in death penalty cases?

(Fleury-Steiner 2002)

Questions also can be asked about how stories are created through the coordinated or uncoordinated work of multiple authors:

How were public images of “ethnic identities” formed through stories authored by professional heritage preservers, ethnic leaders, researchers, media, and ethnic organizations?

(Berbrier 2000)

And, there are questions about how *context* influences how authors write stories:

How are the self-stories of clients generated by organizational workers and routines in places such as support groups for abused women, human service agencies, and divorce proceedings?

(Holstein and Gubrium 2000)

Stories are created by people who sometimes act as individuals and sometimes as organizational or institutional actors. Appreciating the work of stories requires understanding the characteristics of story authors and the workings of story making.

Storytellers and Storytelling

While too often ignored by social researchers (Polletta et al. 2011), there are important questions about *storytellers* and *storytelling*. Storytelling, for example, is surrounded by cultural expectations influencing who can—and who cannot—tell stories. This leads to a variety of questions about stories told by people in particular social categories:

How are stories told by African-American women (Collins 1989), or survivors of rape, incest, and sexual assault (Alcoff and Gray 1993) silenced?

Likewise, social contexts determine the expectable or desirable contents of stories that *must* be told:

What kinds of stories must be told by asylum seekers wishing to be granted entry to the United States?

(Bohmer and Shuman 2018)

While the process of storytelling simultaneously is the process of *story distribution*, the current era adds complexity when stories are relayed endlessly through media of many varieties. Questions can be about how media processes shape stories:

How did UK press selection and presentation of knowledge construct the narrative of “managed migration” and the counternarrative of “immigration as chaotic and uncontrolled” in debates over access to labor markets for new European Union citizens?

(Balch and Balabanova 2011)

Or, about how authors work to distribute their own stories:

How do members of social policy advocacy groups use twitter to disseminate their preferred stories of nuclear energy?

(Gupta, Kuhika, and Wehde 2018)

Once authored, stories must be conveyed to audiences. Whether this is in poetry, prose, song, or dance, whether it is in person or through technology, there are multiple empirical questions about how and by whom stories are transmitted to audiences.

Story Audience and Story Evaluating

Story making and storytelling do not matter if there is no *audience*, those who encounter (hear, see, read) stories and evaluate the extent to which they are important and believable. Questions about audience evaluation are particularly significant in the current era characterized by so little agreement about meanings and moral evaluations. While it is a truism that the meanings and evaluations of *any* particular story depend upon characteristics of audiences doing this evaluation, how audiences with particular characteristics evaluate particular stories should *not* be merely assumed and rather should be treated as empirical questions to be investigated:

How do narratives of personal experience among members in a Midwestern comedy club shape their receptibility to the racial discourse in the stories told by standup comedians?

(DeCamp 2017)

How do narrative conventions and institutional imperatives of media produce the meaning of television news on the global level?

(Kavoori 1999)

In conclusion, stories are a social product in that people—as individuals or as organizational actors—within specific historical, cultural, and political contexts decide how to shape story scenes, characters, and events. Likewise, the perceived meanings, importance, and believability of stories is the social product of audience evaluation. Everything about the production, distribution, and evaluation of stories is social and therefore a legitimate and important topic of social research.

QUESTIONS ABOUT NARRATIVE MEANING

Stories are important because they are a meaning-making form of communication. This raises questions about the perceived contents, uses, and consequences of storied meaning.

Story Content

Because meaning is derived from perceived story content, research can focus directly on content. Such questions can be quite straightforward:

How do news articles from the Los Angeles Times about events on the U.S.-Mexican border construct a “Mexican Threat” narrative?

(Aguirre, Rodriguez, and Simmers 2011)

Explicit questions about story content also can attend to how particular cultural systems of meaning (symbolic or emotion codes) are contained in stories:

How does the therapeutic code organize the treatment of personal stories told on the Oprah Winfrey show?

(Illouz 2003)

Additionally, explicit questions about story content can compare the contents of stories produced by different social actors:

What are the key themes within and across the narratives of younger and older generations of non-binary people produced on blogs and internet forums?

(Yeadon-Lee 2016)

How do the stories told by perpetrators and non-perpetrators of intimate partner violence demonstrate how violence is incorporated into the cultural narrative of masculinity?

(James-Hawkins et al. 2019)

Or, they can be about how story content changes over time:

How has the narrative of obesity authored by the contemporary, mainstream media changed over time?

(Shugart 2011)

Story Use

While some research is explicitly centered on questions about story content, it is more common for questions about content to be *implicit* and to underlie other kinds of questions about stories. One of the most central of which is about how, in a world of constant change and profound moral disagreements, stories create meaning at all levels of social life.

Stories and Personal Meaning-making

A world characterized by constant change and lack of shared meaning makes it difficult to construct and maintain a solid sense of the meaning of self, others, objects, and experiences. There is ample empirical evidence that stories are a primary tool helping individuals to make meaning in such environments. Stories can offer guidelines for how to make sense of newly encountered events and people as well as events and people beyond personal experiences.¹

American observers have been most interested in exploring how individuals author *self-stories*. These stories featuring the self as the central character and personal experiences as the central plot can create a sense of personal meaning, particularly in times of trouble such as that created by:

Social disapproval from others:

How do drug users author stories about themselves in ways creating symbolic boundaries between them and other users evaluated as morally suspect?

(Copes et al. 2016)

Illness:

How do people with the contested illness of chronic fatigue syndrome construct stories of resistance?

(Sanchez 2020)

Personal trauma:

How do survivors of sexual abuse make and remake the meaning of their experiences over the course of their lives and at different stages of recovery?

(Harvey et al. 2000)

Self-stories also can be used to advance *public* goals:

How do celebrities explicitly present their own stories of health problems as ways to educate, to inspire, and to encourage social activism among the general public?

(Beck et al. 2014)

How do people seeking funding for medical procedures create their self-stories on GoFundMe in ways appealing to the lived experiences and moral assumptions of members of their own social network?

(Paulus and Roberts 2018)

Stories featuring the self as the primary character and experiences of the self as the primary action do a variety of work on both private and public stages of social life. Understanding how these stories are shaped and what purposes they serve are important topics for social research.

Stories and Organizational Meaning-making

Organizational narratives are authored and used by organizational participants to make sense of the organization and their experiences in it.

Considerable research has focused on social movement actors, such as how they use stories as a recruitment tool:

How do social movement organizations use narratives as a key resource for recruiting members and sustaining participation?

(Powell 2011)

Or, on how social movement actors use stories to make sense of disappointing experiences:

How did social activists working on changing Argentina's abortion laws turn to storytelling when their hopeful expectations were disappointed?

(Borland 2014)

Research also might attend to how stories can be used to frame public images of problems and their solutions:

How did undocumented youth activists use storytelling to reframe the debates around immigration reform and position themselves as the rightful leaders of a movement that had been adult citizen dominated?

(Cabaniss 2019)

Predictably, organizations author and promote dissimilar stories so there are questions about variations in stories authored by different organizations:

How do gun rights organizations and gun control organizations portray the victims of gun violence, particularly with respect to the race and age of victims?

(Merry 2018)

Additionally, stories can encourage alliances among like-minded others which can be a topic of empirical research:

How do stories encourage the emergence of informal networks of environmental activists interested in alternative agricultural methods?

(Ingram, Ingram, and Legano 2014)

Considerable research also demonstrates the importance of organizational narratives in a variety of social service organizations where stories provide workers with models for how to think about the characteristics,

problems, and needs of organizational clients which, in turn, can be used to justify organizational services, rules, and methods of service provision. Questions about organizational narratives in social services can be phrased very broadly:

How do socially circulating stories about the characteristics of people with substance use problems serve as a resource for welfare workers?

(Selseng 2017)

Or, they can be very specific:

How do nurses' narratives of 'trivial' patients justify guideline-violating gatekeeping to hospital emergency rooms?

(Johannessen 2014)

Research on stories in social service settings also can examine differences between the characteristics of stories expected by the organization and the stories told by their clients:

How do the characteristics of stories necessary to obtain a domestic violence restraining order differ from the characteristics of stories told by women victims seeking such protection?

(Emerson 1997)

And, research can examine the organizational work of shaping clients' stories into those preferred by the organization:

What kinds of stories of disabled children did discussion facilitators elicit and encourage in a support group for parents of disabled children?

(Barton 2007)

There are multiple questions about the contents and uses of stories written by and for organizational actors. Because these stories do meaning-making work they are an important topic for empirical research.

Stories and Institutional Meaning-making

Stories can be authored in *institutional* settings such as law, education, medicine, social work, and government. Empirical questions about the

meaning-making work of stories in such settings can be about the *content* of stories told in places such as courts and social policy hearings:

How do public narratives about teachers within the Norwegian national curriculum documents regulating teacher education construct teacher identities?

(Søreide 2007)

Questions also can examine narratives and the *process* of policy making:

How are narratives developed, codified, revised and diffused in policy debates and policy-making surrounding migration policy?

(Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten 2011)

Or, questions can center on how stories shape public opinion:

How did President George W. Bush manage the immigration issue by promoting stories that simultaneously contained the themes of exclusion and inclusion?

(Edwards and Herder 2012)

Questions also can be about how the meaning created by stories serves to justify law and social policy:

How did policymakers use stories from the Old Testament of the Christian Bible to motivate support for the Indian Removal Act of 1830?

(Keeton 2015)

How do the stories American Presidents tell about the necessity for war create the cultural foundations for justifying policies of war?

(Smith 2005)

Stories are woven throughout the institutional spheres of social life and do meaning-making work that shapes images of problems and their solutions, encourages particular constellations of public opinion, as well as justifies laws and policies. How stories work and the work stories do in institutional arenas are empirical questions for social research.

Stories and Cultural Meaning-making

Stories that circulate broadly through media of all varieties, speeches, textbooks, songs, advertising, and so on can be called cultural stories because

their pervasiveness shapes meaning at the most broad level of culture. Studies might ask about the contents of such broadly circulating stories:

How do stories from American and Japanese school textbooks display cultural values and characteristics?

(Imada 2012)

Or, studies might ask how cultural stories influence personal experience:

How do dominant cultural narratives about race influence the lived experiences of workplace racism and resistance among Black youth and young adults?

(Hasford 2016)

How do dominant cultural narratives about aging complicate the ascription of meaning to later life?

(Laceulle and Baars 2014)

I will continue discussing the work of cultural narratives in the next section.

QUESTIONS ABOUT REFLEXIVITY OF NARRATIVE MEANINGS

Although it is possible to *analytically* distinguish among narratives authored on different stages of social life, stories in actual use are fully reflexive which means stories told on one stage of social life both influence and are influenced by those told on other stages. Stories, in other words, can migrate from one social space to another and this leads to many important empirical questions.

The most common question about narrative migration is about relationships between stories widely circulating through media, speeches, documents, and so on (cultural narratives) and stories told by individuals. While cultural narratives are resources that can be used by individuals to craft their own stories, research can focus on *differences* between cultural stories and self-stories:

What explanatory models of illness do people use to tell stories of their own pain and suffering? How do individual stories differ from the most commonly circulating cultural stories?

(Garro 1994)

Questions driving research might examine how cultural narratives simultaneously are both accepted *and* challenged in self-stories:

How can an influential theory of “boys’ anti-school attitudes” be interpreted as a master narrative that is reproduced but also contradicted and subverted by students and teachers in local contexts?

(Jonsson 2014)

How do rural gays and lesbians engage with and modify cultural narratives that link gay and lesbian identities to urban spaces?

(Kazyak 2011)

Conversely, questions can be problem oriented and centered specifically on perceived *negative* consequences of culturally circulating stories:

How do teen moms distance their own stories from prevailing social/cultural stories about the problems of teen motherhood?

(Barcelos and Gubrium 2014)

How does the cultural story of the meanings and problems of opiate addiction as an incurable condition tend to encourage workers in drug treatment centers to view agency clients as chronic addicts?

(Järvinen and Andersen 2009)

Or, research can address how individuals use culturally circulating stories in ways leading to *beneficial* results:

How do women who were in prison draw from hegemonic cultural characters and storylines in order to resist the stigma associated with a felon identity and refashion and reaffirm their identities by aligning with conventionality?

(Ospal 2011)

Stories are authored, told, and evaluated on every stage of social life; those authored and told on one stage often migrate to other stages and are used for purposes other than those originally intended. This, of course, leads to multiple questions about the characteristics, uses, and consequences of such narrative migration.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES OF NARRATIVE MEANING

One central reason why social observers were slow to take up narrative as a topic of study were assumptions from popular reasoning that stories are a frivolous communication form and therefore only of entertainment value and not worthy of scientific attention. Yet given the extensive and ever-growing evidence that stories can have multiple and significant consequences for individuals, organizations, and culture, social researchers do well to explicitly address the question of the ways in which narrative meaning matters to real people in real time. A critical task for scholars of narrative continues to be that of establishing *why* the narrative communication form is worthy of attention. This requires demonstrating subjective and/or material *consequences* of narrative meaning-making.

Meaning Consequences as Research Topic

Understanding meaning consequences can be the *focus* of research. For example, researchers might ask:

How do stories of migrants shape policy debates in Europe?

(Borland 2014)

How do women's understandings of the "romantic narrative" promote their use of condoms for contraception but not for safe sex?

(Kirkman 1998)

How do political disinformation campaigns gain credibility by embedding themselves within central master narratives of national decline and rebirth?

(Levinger 2018)

Questions also might center on how *subjective* processes of meaning creation can lead to *material* consequences:

How do personal testimonies in town hall listening sessions for proposed amendments to the Americans with Disabilities Act reflect and affect the images of "who counts" as disabled and "what counts" as reasonable accommodations?

(Welch 2020)

Because narrative communication forms are pervasive and do so much work at every level of social life, empirical questions about their consequences can be framed more broadly. Researchers, for example, have explored how narrative figures into multiple dimensions of national and international *political conflicts* such as those between the stateless Karen people who have fought for political autonomy and independence from the Burmese government for over a half century:

How do future Karen leaders construct stories that deal with the challenges of forming the unity and legitimacy of a Karen identity?

(Kuroiwa and Verkuyten 2008)

Indeed, researchers might ask about relationships between narrative and the very *structure of social life*:

What do autobiographical stories of “awakenings” (such as religious conversion, embracing a new sexual orientation, recovered memories of childhood trauma) share in the way of narrative structure? What do these stories reveal about the structure of social life?

(DeGloma 2014)

Meaning Consequences as Research Finding

While consequences of narrative productions of meaning can be an explicit question leading research, it also is common for research questions to be about topics other than narrative consequences yet for research *findings* to strongly suggest the presence and importance of consequences. Consider, for example, the following research question:

What are relationships between the kinds of stories asylum seekers are required to tell to be granted entry to the United States and the kinds of stories they typically have the abilities to tell?

(Bohmer and Schuman 2018)

The findings of this project supported the conclusion that the organizational characteristics of “good stories,” those necessary to achieve asylum, are difficult—often impossible—for asylum seekers to tell. In consequence, asylum seekers often are simply unable to tell the kinds of stories that would gain them legal entry to the United States. The consequences are clear: Inability to tell the required story results in deportation from the United States.

Consider another example of how research not directly addressing consequences nonetheless can produce clear indications of effects of narrative productions of meaning:

How do paralegals guide Latina victims of domestic violence to tell the kinds of stories required for them to obtain legal protection?

(Trinch and Berk-Seligson 2002)

This research focused on the work of paralegal victim advocates who helped women shape their stories to meet organizational requirements. Findings empirically demonstrated how transforming women's personal stories into the organizational stories demanded by courts led women to obtain the court protection they desired. Again, the consequences of the meaning-making work of stories are clear and of practical importance: Organizational workers can assist clients in telling the right story, the story that will result in needed services.

In summary, there are important questions about story meaning regardless of who authors, tells, or evaluates stories, regardless of why or when or where stories are told: How is the content of a specific story or set of stories composed of particular systems of meaning (cultural and emotional codes)? What kinds of cognitive, emotional, and moral meanings do story contents produce? What are the characteristics of meanings evaluated as cognitively, emotionally, or morally persuasive—or as not persuasive—by particular audiences? In turn, answers to such questions are data to address a range of practical matters about what narrative meanings *do* for individuals, organizations, institutions, and culture; about whose interests these meanings serve; about how meanings are implicated in systems of social stratification, social order, and social change.

QUESTION TYPOLOGIES AND NARRATIVE RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

It should be clear from many of these examples that questions about narrative processes, contents, uses, relationships, and consequences often do *not* fit neatly into a typology of question types. Because this is centrally important for designing research I will offer two examples. Consider the following research question:

How do themes in children's books about Helen Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan, reflect and therefore perpetuate culturally circulating

stories about disability and, in so doing, ignore real-life complexity and misrepresent the diverse characteristics of real people who are disabled?

(Souza 2020)

Notice how this question *assumes* the research examines story content (story “themes”) in order to *compare* relationships among three types of narratives (those in culturally circulating stories about disability, those in children’s books, the self-stories told by people with disabilities). The question points to interests in *consequences*: Culturally circulating stories about disability as well as themes in children’s books misrepresent the diversity of actual experiences of those who are disabled. The conclusion of this research report developed the practical consequences of such misrepresentation.

A second example of how research questions guiding actual research do not fit neatly into specific categories is the following:

How do stories told by people experiencing disruption in their lives (such as divorce, unemployment, death of a significant other) draw from important cultural themes to help them reestablish order and continuity in their lives?

(Becker 1997)

This question again assumes examination of content (the stories told by people experiencing disruption) and explicitly asks how this content reflects cultural systems of meaning (“important cultural themes”). The question also is about how narratives are used (to help reestablish order and continuity).

My point is simple yet essential: While I sorted questions into categories for presentation purposes, given the pervasiveness of stories on all levels of social life, it is not surprising that there are innumerable important research questions with countless variations. This multidimensionality and complexity offer considerable opportunities for researchers to be creative in developing the questions leading their research.

THE CENTRALITY OF QUESTIONS ABOUT STORY CONTENT

While not wishing to diminish the importance of questions about the activities and the actors involved in the social processes surrounding authoring, telling, and evaluating stories, here I focused on questions surrounding narrative meaning for two reasons. First, questions about narrative social processes can be

adequately addressed using traditional social research techniques. Second, because our world increasingly is characterized by social, moral, and economic fragmentation, problems of meaning arise on all stages of social life. Therefore, the meaning-making capabilities of stories are of particular importance.

Chapters 1 and 2 have offered an outline for treating narrative as a topic of social research. I move now to guidelines for treating narrative as a method of social research.

NOTE

1. See, for example, Boltanski (1999) and D'Andrade (1995).

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