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Narrative and new developments in social sciences

Introduction

This book is different from the majority of books on methodology in two respects. First, it does not focus exclusively on either quantitative or qualitative approaches to research, but instead aims to discuss recent developments in social research methods across the quantitative/qualitative divide. Second, while it aims to give practical guidance on the techniques for carrying out research, and therefore focuses on methods, it also explores current theoretical, methodological, and epistemological debates that (should) underlie the practice of research.

As the title indicates, the theme unifying the book is the use of narrative in social research. While the influence of narrative on *qualitative* research over the past twenty years is readily apparent from the contents pages of leading journals, the suggestion that *quantitative* techniques, such as the multivariate analysis of survey data, can also be understood as having elements of narrative is rather more unconventional. However, as will be discussed in the chapters that follow, the growing availability of longitudinal data, coupled with an appreciation of their value for understanding social processes, means that statistical models increasingly have a temporal or chronological dimension that gives them a certain narrative quality. In addition, debates about causality raise questions about how we should best interpret the results of multivariate models and once again the use of narrative as a sensitizing concept can be helpful here. Finally, recent work on the nature of the self, which destabilizes the concept of the individual as having a fixed, immutable, identity, has led to theoretical interest in the idea that people might be thought of as having what has been called a 'narrative identity'. While this body of writing has had an impact on the way that some researchers approach the collection and analysis of *qualitative* data, there is as yet very little acknowledgement of the implications of this for research based on the analysis of *quantitative* data. A more ambitious aim of this book is therefore to begin a consideration of the implications of views about ontology for the way that

the results of quantitative research should be interpreted and written up and for how qualitative and quantitative techniques might be combined.

One of the dilemmas inherent in writing a book such as this is that while the aim is to bridge the gap between qualitative and quantitative research, and to suggest that there are as many differences within the two approaches as there are between them, the distinction is such a well-established one that it is difficult not to perpetuate rather than disrupt the dichotomy. For example, the first part of this book consists of two chapters on the collection and analysis of qualitative data followed by two chapters on the collection and analysis of quantitative data. The structure here therefore seems to mirror, rather than question, the conventional understanding that there are two distinct approaches to investigating the social world. In practical terms, however, this division can be helpful. It is straightforward to distinguish between (a) research that uses a standardized set of questions with a large sample of individuals and which therefore generates data that can be coded and expressed in numerical form, i.e. quantitative research, and (b) research that adopts a less structured set of questions, allows the respondent to set the agenda within the parameters of the topic under investigation, and generates rich textual or observational data, i.e. qualitative research. The method of collecting data and the type of data that are collected are closely linked, and the quantitative/qualitative distinction is a useful shorthand for describing these two rather different approaches. However, the distinction becomes blurred once the issue of analysis is introduced. As will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 5, it is possible to analyse qualitative data using quantitative techniques that result in numeric or statistical summaries and it is conversely possible to use detailed survey data to build up case histories of individuals and to present these in a narrative form. In practice, of course, relatively few researchers use quantitative approaches for the analysis of qualitative data, and it is even more rare for quantitative data to be analysed using a more qualitative case-based approach. It is much more usual to see quantitative evidence analysed and summarized using statistics while qualitative evidence is commonly interpreted and presented as text or rich description. It is for this reason that the distinction between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research has become so firmly established, with the majority of researchers seeing themselves as belonging to one or other group. The aim of this book is therefore not to be so radical as to suggest that the practical distinction between qualitative and quantitative approaches is redundant, but rather to examine in more detail what the foundations of this distinction really are. Although introductory undergraduate texts tend to equate quantitative methods with a scientific or 'positivist' approach and qualitative methods with an interpretative or hermeneutic approach, it is more complicated than this. As books on the philosophy of the social sciences make clear, for a time positivism became almost synonymous with survey research. However, the social survey is in fact a practical device developed for pragmatic reasons and therefore 'has no necessary identification with the ideals, aspirations or requirements of positivism.' (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997).

At a more practical level, some authors have suggested that while quantitative methods present a relatively static understanding of society, qualitative methods

allow for a focus on process. In addition, qualitative research is frequently described as providing more comprehensive or fine-grained information than quantitative research. However, as will be discussed more fully in Chapters 4 and 5, the growing availability of quantitative longitudinal datasets means that it is increasingly possible to address questions about social process and social change using quantitative methods. When data are collected every few years using a structured face-to-face interview lasting ninety minutes or more, and respondents are followed from birth to middle age (e.g. in the National Study of Health and Development), the level of detail contained in longitudinal quantitative studies rivals that of many qualitative projects.

The aim of this chapter is to provide the foundations for the rest of the book. It therefore starts by providing a discussion of the concept of narrative with particular attention to the elements of narrative that have made it a recurring theme within qualitative approaches to research over the past two decades. Issues about causality and temporality are briefly introduced here but will be developed further in the chapters which follow. The next section of this chapter will provide a basic discussion of some of the key elements of narrative and will highlight the widespread use of narrative across a wide range of substantive fields. The final section of this introductory chapter will then provide an overview of the organization of the rest of the book.

Definitions of narrative

What is narrative? What are its defining features and which of its attributes explain its appeal to social scientists? Why, in short, should we be interested in narrative? There is obviously a long *literary* tradition of studying the art of narrative, which focuses on conventions of literary style, and the development and use of different genres as well as examining the creativity of individual narrators. However, as will be demonstrated below, in recent years there has been a great deal of interest in the concept of narrative and its application across the human and social sciences (Abbott, 1990; 1992a; Finnegan, 1992; Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997; Mishler, 1995; Riessman, 1993; Somers, 1994). There is therefore a growing literature on the possible definitions of narrative, as well as on the controversies and analytic approaches that attach to them (Riessman, 1993).

To begin by summarizing the defining elements of narrative, which will be elaborated below, a narrative can be understood to organize a sequence of events into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole. In this way a narrative conveys the meaning of events. A useful definition of narrative is thus offered by Hinchman and Hinchman who propose that:

> Narratives (stories) in the human sciences should be defined provisionally as discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it. (1997: xvi)

This definition provides a helpful framework for the current discussion because it stresses three key features of narratives. First, that they are *chronological* (they are representations of sequences of events), second, that they are *meaningful*, and third, that they are inherently *social* in that they are produced for a specific audience. As will be demonstrated below, it is these key features that underpin the importance of narrative within sociology. First, there is a growing recognition among sociologists of the importance of the temporal dimension for understanding the inter-relation between individual lives and social contexts. The paradigmatic example of this is the growing body of work around the concept of the 'Life Course', insti-gated by Glen Elder in the United States in the mid-1970s (Elder, 1974; Giele and Elder, 1998). In Britain the past twenty years have seen an increased appreciation and availability of sources of longitudinal data such as the British Household Panel Study, the Youth Cohort Studies, and the British Birth Cohort Studies. These have been referred to by the Economic and Social Research Council as the 'jewels in the crown' of British social science research resources. The development of statis-tical modelling techniques such as quantitative event history analysis makes it increasingly possible to exploit the chronological nature of these longitudinal data. Some authors have argued that event history modelling should increasingly become part of the standard repertoire of any sociologist prepared to countenance using quantitative techniques (Hutchison, 1988). This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5. Sociologists, and social scientists more broadly, are therefore increas-ingly attending to the temporal qualities of social life (Adam, 1990; 1995). Second, there is a long humanist tradition within sociology which stresses the importance of attempting to understand the meaning of behaviour and experiences from the perspective of the individuals involved. In this context narrative can perhaps be understood as a device which facilitates empathy since it provides a form of com-munication in which an individual can externalize his or her feelings and indicate which elements of those experiences are most significant. Third, sociological research is clearly carried out within a social context. In the past two decades, there has been a growing awareness of the role of the interviewer in helping to construct, and not just to collect, biographical information from interviewees (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Maynard, 1994; Stanley and Wise, 1983; 1993). The ways in which an interest in narrative has influenced interviewing practices will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. Attention to the narrative qualities of research material therefore serves as an important reminder that this material cannot be understood without acknowl-edgement of the audience or audiences for whom it has been produced.

It is these three facets of narrative, namely its temporal, meaningful, and social elements, that will structure the first half of this chapter. Although for the pur-poses of discussion, it is helpful to treat these elements separately, it is also impor-tant to be aware that they are perhaps not strictly separable. In particular, the meaning of events within a narrative derives both from their temporal ordering and from the social context in which the narrative is recounted. This will be dis-cussed in more detail later in this chapter. Before examining what is meant by nar-rative in more detail, however, it is useful to highlight the growing interest that

has been shown in narrative by researchers interested in a wide range of different substantive fields across the social sciences.

Narrative and social research

The explicit interest in narrative in the social sciences can perhaps be traced back to the early 1980s. In 1981, Daniel Bertaux's edited collection *Biography and Society* began with a manifesto for the importance of attention to stories in sociology. In his introductory chapter, 'From the life history approach to the transformation of sociological practice', Bertaux pointed out that while there is a great deal of lay interest in reading history, there is much less enthusiasm among the public for works of sociology. He attributed this to the dry presentational style of much sociological work and suggested that more attention should be given to individual stories both as evidence in sociology and as a means of presenting insights about the social world. On the other side of the Atlantic, in the United States, Elliot Mishler's book *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative*, published in 1986 emphasized the need to listen to individuals' stories in the context of qualitative interviewing and cautioned researchers to take care not to suppress such stories. This has become a much cited book, and has clearly been influential in shaping the practice of interviewing for many qualitative researchers.

If the beginnings of an interest in narrative can be traced back to the 1980s, this trend really gathered momentum in the early 1990s. The journal *Narrative and Life History* (now published as *Narrative Inquiry*) was launched in the United States in 1991, and a series of edited collections on *The Narrative Study of Lives* (Josselson and Lieblich, 1993) was started in 1993 and has been published regularly ever since. The publication, in 1993, of Riessman's short text on narrative analysis, in the long-running Sage series on qualitative research methods, can also be seen as a milestone in establishing narrative as part of the methodological toolkit for qualitative researchers.

Over the past two decades, the awareness of the importance of narrative among qualitative researchers has spread through a wide range of different substantive areas. For example, in the sociology of health there has been a focus on lay perspectives on disease and patients' own experiences of ill health. In particular for those suffering from chronic disease, the idea of an 'illness career' has been a useful analytic tool and this can be readily expressed in the form of a narrative. Researchers such as Kleinman (1988), Charmaz (1991), Kelly and Dickinson (1997), and Williams (1997) have therefore written about the impact of chronic ill health on individuals' sense of identity, while Faircloth (1999) and Crossley (1999) have used narrative in the context of researching specific conditions such as AIDS and epilepsy. Narrative has also surfaced in the literature on health behaviour and health education, e.g. in the work of Williamson (1989), Moffat and Johnson (2001), and Workman (2001).

Another major discipline that has begun to use narrative as a methodological tool is criminology. The importance of examining individual lives holistically in

order to understand more about patterns of reoffending and desistance from
crime can be seem most clearly in the work of Sampson and Laub (1993), who
adopt a life course approach and have followed up the longitudinal study of delin-
quent young men begun by Glueck and Glueck in 1930. Work that discusses nar-
rative more explicitly in this field includes a qualitative study on the fear of crime
carried out by Hollway and Jefferson (2000).

In the sociology of the family and relationships, Riessman's book *Divorce Talk*,
published in 1990, stands out as one of the key texts that helped promote an inter-
est in the use of narrative. The approach she used to collect and analyse the mate-
rial she collected will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3. In Britain,
Day-Sclater (1998a; 1998b) has also used a narrative approach to analyse bio-
graphical interview material about individuals' experiences of divorce. In the
related area of sexuality, Plummer's 1995 book *Telling Sexual Stories* makes use of
narrative as an analytic device to understand changing attitudes to sexuality in
modern society. In contrast to the work of Riessman and Day-Sclater, however,
Plummer's focus is less on the experiences of individuals and more on narratives
within a broader societal context.

The sociology of education, too, includes examples of researchers who have
made a great deal of use of narrative in their research. For example, in Britain,
Cortazzi (1991) has used narrative in his research on the experiences of primary
school teachers and Smith (1996) emphasizes that she was interested in listening
to women's stories in interviews about their experiences of returning to educa-
tion as mature students in order to understand more about the support or barri-
ers presented by their husbands and partners. In North America too, those in the
field of education have found the use of narrative very fruitful in their research
(Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Connelly and Clandinin, 1999).

There is not space here to give a thorough or comprehensive review of the
ways that narrative has been used by social scientists, but the aim has been to high-
light the broad range of subject areas that are amenable to a narrative approach.
Some of the common themes that run through research that pays attention to
narrative in respondents' accounts are:

1 An interest in people's lived experiences and an appreciation of the temporal
   nature of that experience.
2 A desire to empower research participants and allow them to contribute to deter-
   mining what are the most salient themes in an area of research.
3 An interest in process and change over time.
4 An interest in the self and representations of the self.
5 An awareness that the researcher him- or herself is also a narrator.

As will be seen from the multitude of further examples employed throughout the
book, there is virtually no area within social research where narrative has not been
discussed. All of the examples provided above fall within the broad field of soci-
ology and the emphasis throughout the book will be on the use of narrative in
sociology. However, much of the material presented here will also be of use and

interest to other social scientists including geographers, anthropologists, historians, and psychologists. It is important to stress that narrative crosses the usual disciplinary boundaries and has been taken up as a useful analytic tool by researchers with very diverse backgrounds.

Understanding narrative form

Having established a basic definition of narrative and demonstrated its widespread use in the social sciences, particularly by qualitative researchers, over the past two decades, it is now necessary to provide a slightly more detailed discussion of some of the definitional elements of narrative. In particular, as was highlighted by Hinchman and Hinchman's characterization of narrative above, the temporal, meaningful, and social aspects of narrative will be explored.

Temporality and causality within narrative

Perhaps the simplest definition of narrative, and one that has been traced back to Aristotle in his *Poetics*, is that a narrative is a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end (Chatman, 1978; Leitch, 1986; Martin, 1986). Temporality is certainly widely accepted as a key feature of narrative form. In a frequently cited and influential paper, Labov and Waletzky (1967)[1] stated that narrative provides a 'method of recapitulating past experiences by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events that actually occurred' (p. 12). It is this placing of events in a sequence which is therefore considered by many to be the defining feature of narrative. The term narrative is sometimes used more loosely by social scientists to refer to any extended prose; however, within this book, it is the more restricted definition of narrative as *chronology* that will be used.

Intimately linked with the temporal qualities of narrative is the notion of plot. An important feature of narrative is that rearranging the narrative clauses, or the events within a narrative, typically results in a change of meaning (Franzosi, 1998a; Labov, 1972). Stories rely on the presumption that time has a uni-linear direction moving from past to present to future. The plot within a narrative therefore relates events to each other by linking a prior choice or happening to a subsequent event (Polkinghorne, 1995). A story also normally involves a change in situations. Events in a story usually disrupt an initial state of equilibrium or represent a change in fortunes for the main characters. A plot has therefore been described by some analysts as being formed from a combination of temporal succession and causality. A frequently cited example here is E.M. Forster's argument that 'The king died and then the queen died' is merely a 'chronicle', whereas 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' is a plot because it includes an explicit *causal* link between the two events in the sequence (Forster, 1963 [1927]). However, as Chatman has argued, even without an explicit causal link being made between the events in a narrative, readers will tend to read causality into a sequence of events recounted as a narrative. Events are 'linked to each other as cause to effect, effects in turn

causing other effects, until the final effect. And even if two events seem not obviously interrelated, we infer that they may be, on some larger principle that we will discover later' (Chatman, 1978: 46).

The idea that causality is a central element adding to the coherence of a narrative is an important one, particularly since, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6, narrative accounts and causal explanations have often been treated as opposing sides of a dichotomy (Abbott, 1992a; Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; Somers and Gibson, 1994). It is important to establish, therefore, that although causality has not been universally recognized as a necessary feature of narrative (in the way that temporality has been), nevertheless a narrative account does not preclude a causal understanding of the links between events (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983). In addition, it is useful to stress that an audience will routinely assume causal links between the events in a narrative even if these are not made explicit. If it is reported that event A was followed by event B it is a short step to assuming that, in the context of a narrative account, event B occurred *because of* event A. However, to argue that there are frequently causal links between the elements of a narrative is not to say that a narrative and a causal explanation are equivalent. The problem occurs because of the multiple ways in which the word 'cause' is used. The imputation of a causal link between two specific events in a narrative is clearly not the same as proposing a causal *law* such that the first event is both necessary and sufficient for the second event across a wide range of different contexts (Ricoeur, 1984). In other words, while a causal explanation suggests that a particular event will *invariably* be followed by a necessary outcome, a narrative provides an account of how one event followed another *under a specific set of circumstances*. However, to argue that this distinction implies an *opposition* between narrative and causality is mistaken. For example, consider the simple narrative sentence, 'Her fingers were numb with cold, she dropped the half-finished bottle of gin and it smashed on the pavement.' While this provides an account of a specific incident, our understanding of this minimal narrative is aided by our awareness of more universal causal laws such as the effects of cold on the body and the effect of gravity. This issue of the mutual dependence of narrative and causality will be returned to in Chapter 6 and discussed in the context of debates about the meaning of causality within the social sciences.

Evaluation and the meaning of narrative

As the discussion above has underlined, a key defining feature of narrative is its temporal dimension. It is the importance of the *chronology* of events within a narrative that distinguishes it from a description. However, as authors as diverse as the socio-linguist Polanyi (1985) and the historian White (1987) have emphasized, a successful narrative is more than just a sequence or chronicle of events. Indeed, Labov and Waletzky (1967, republished 1997) suggested that although a minimal narrative is composed of a sequence of actions such a narrative is 'abnormal: it may be considered as empty or pointless narrative' (Labov and Waletzky, 1997: 13). They described fully formed narratives as having six separate elements: the

abstract (a summary of the subject of the narrative); the orientation (time, place, situation, participants); the complicating action (what actually happened); the evaluation (the meaning and significance of the action); the resolution (what finally happened); and lastly the coda, which returns the perspective to the present. Labov and Waletzky (1997) argued that these structures are typically used by the teller to construct a story out of past experiences, and to make sense of those experiences both for him- or herself and for the audience. Although not all narratives necessarily include all of these six elements, at a minimum a narrative must include the complicating action, i.e. a temporal component, while it is the evaluation that has been highlighted as crucial for establishing the point or the meaning of the story.

A number of authors have argued that the evaluation is *socially* the most important component of the narrative (Linde, 1993; Polanyi, 1985). In a conversational setting, for example, the narrator must guard against the 'so what?' response to a story. This is accomplished by providing an adequate evaluation of the events that have been recounted (Polanyi, 1985). It is the evaluation that conveys to an audience how they are to understand the *meaning* of the events that constitute the narrative, and simultaneously indicates what type of response is required. The evaluation should not therefore be understood as simply provided by the narrator; rather the achievement of agreement on the evaluation of a narrative is the product of a process of negotiation. While the speaker can be understood as responsible for producing a narrative with an acceptable evaluation, the addressee or audience must collaborate by demonstrating that the evaluation has been understood.

Labov and Waletzky (1997) have suggested that the evaluation is typically placed between the complicating action and the resolution, and in this position creates an element of tension and suspense in a well-formed narrative, as the audience wait to hear 'what happened next'. However, subsequent writers have underlined that the structural analysis of narrative provided by Labov and Waletzky is in many respects too rigid. The evaluation may in some cases be explicit, and may be located prior to the resolution, but the expression of the evaluation within a narrative need not take this form. A narrator may communicate evaluative elements more implicitly. As Tannen (1980) has argued, not only do narratives make explicit evaluations of actions and characters but judgements can be communicated in more subtle ways as well. She suggested that lexical choice (i.e. the use of specific words) within the other components of the narrative is a clear example of this type of implicit evaluation. In addition, it could be argued that the very telling of a narrative represents an evaluative act. It suggests that certain events and decisions are reportable by virtue of their significance or their unusual or unexpected qualities. Obvious examples here would be stories about the death of a parent, or the birth of a child. Within modern culture, these events are understood to have an emotional significance for the individual that makes them worthy of recounting. Alternatively many conversational stories are centred upon a coincidence, which while relatively trivial is seen as sufficiently unexpected to make it interesting to relate.

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It is because the evaluation within a narrative provides an insight into how the narrator has chosen to interpret the events recounted that the evaluative elements of narratives can be of particular interest for sociologists. In particular there is a link here between an interest in these evaluative elements of narratives and a commitment to a humanist sociology which prioritizes 'understanding' or *Verstehen*. The inherently social nature of evaluation also takes us back to Plummer's suggestion in his book *Documents of Life* (Plummer, 1983) that individual stories and personal documents can potentially take us beyond the individual to an appreciation of that individual in society. This clearly leads to questions about how we might use the idea of narrative, and the work of socio-linguists such as Labov and Waletzky, Linde, and Tannen, to inform the techniques we use in the analysis of this type of material. These questions about how an explicit engagement with narrative might influence our methods of analysis will be explored in Chapter 3.

Narrative, audiences, and social contexts

The word narrative derives from the Indo-European root 'gna' which means both 'to know' and 'to tell' (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997). As White puts it, 'Narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate knowing into *telling*' (White, 1987: 1, my emphasis). Many authors with an interest in narrative have highlighted the importance of the context of this telling and the role of the listener in the construction of narratives (Bernstein, 1997; Gubrium and Holstein, 1994; Holmes, 1997; Mishler, 1986). Oral narratives presuppose an audience, or as Plummer puts it, 'stories can be seen as *joint actions*' (Plummer, 1995: 20). As was discussed above, the evaluative aspects of a narrative in particular can perhaps be understood as dependent on the agreement of the audience.

At the most basic level, an individual will need the 'conversational space' to tell a story to another person. The narrator needs at minimum the co-operation of a conversational partner. In friendly conversation, participants routinely take turns at talking. Conversation analysts have, of course, extensively studied the social negotiation of this turn taking in different contexts. However, when someone begins to tell a story this turn taking is disrupted, or suspended, for a time and the other conversational participants give the story-teller privileged access to the floor (Coates, 1996; Sacks, 1992). The listeners therefore immediately become active co-participants in the recounting of a narrative. In addition, any speaker in an interaction needs to decide how best to communicate their message, and in making this decision will attempt to take into account what the listener can reasonably be expected to know (Brown, 1995). For example, the choices that the speaker makes about how much detail to include in a narrative will carry a certain amount of risk with them. If the speaker provides too much detail the listener may become bored or will focus on aspects of the narrative that are not salient. Alternatively, if not enough detail is provided the listener may misunderstand what the speaker is trying to communicate.

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Listeners can be expected to participate in the telling of a narrative through non-verbal cues, short responses or back channel utterances such as 'right', or 'hmm', and by asking additional questions or making statements (Mishler, 1986). There is also evidence that the role of the listener should be understood as culturally variable (Holmes, 1997). In an analysis of narratives told by men and women in New Zealand, Holmes found that Pakeha listeners provided more explicit verbal encouragement during a narration and were also more likely to ask questions than Maori listeners (Holmes, 1997). She also found gender differences in the listeners' behaviour so that women were more likely than men to use strategies that explicitly expressed support for the narrator.

Of course the teller of a narrative will be influenced not only by the immediate listener, the person who is directly being addressed, but also by those who might overhear the conversation – on a train, at a party, or in a crowded pub, for example. In addition, within certain contexts the narrator may be influenced by imagined or possible future audiences (Bernstein, 1997). This is perhaps particularly likely to be true of tape-recorded research interviews. The very fact that the conversation is being recorded suggests that it will at least be listened to at some future time and may also be transcribed and parts of it translated into a written text.

Temporality and the meaning of narratives

So far this chapter has emphasized three key features of a narrative, namely that it has a temporal dimension, it is meaningful, and it is inherently social in that stories are produced for specific audiences. However, these three facets cannot be understood as wholly independent or as straightforwardly separable. For example, the meaning of a narrative will depend on the social context in which it is produced. As was discussed above, the evaluative elements of a narrative will require collaboration between the narrator and the audience. The evaluation emphasizes the point of the story and as such legitimates the act of narration as a social act. In particular, however, it is also important to stress the link between the temporal and meaningful dimensions of narratives. First, as was suggested above, the sequencing of events can lead to a particular reading of their meaning in relation to each other. If we are told that one event followed another this raises an expectation of causality in our minds, namely that the subsequent event was caused by the previous event. This is not to say that those events will invariably be linked in all situations, but rather that in a particular context (specified by the orientation of the narrative) later events can be read as dependent upon earlier ones. Second, the temporal dimension of a narrative can be understood as fundamental to establishing the meaning of events due to the way that narratives impose beginnings, middles, and ends on what might more accurately be understood as continuous streams of happenings. As several authors have emphasized, narrative depends not only on sequence or temporality but also on narrative closure (Chatman, 1978; Leitch, 1986; Ricoeur, 1984). Endings are critical for narratives because it is the ending that determines the meaning of the actions and events within the narrative. In other words, 'The audience wants to know not only what happens next but

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what this is all leading to, what it all means' (Leitch, 1986). Narratives impose meaning on events and experiences therefore, not only when they provide an explicit evaluation of those events and experiences, but also by the very act of structuring them into a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is the problem that Bearman et al. refer to as 'casing':

> Casing is a prerequisite for meaning, for only when we can provide a begin-
> ning and an end to a sequence of interrelated events can we understand
> the meaning of an event within the sequence and, by extension, the mean-
> ing of an event sequence as a whole. That narrative and meaning are the
> product of casing is hardly a new idea for historians. For social scientists,
> this insight has come harder. (1999: 503)

As Bearman et al. argue, the problem of analysing narrative accounts of historical occurrences (rather than focusing on fictional narratives) is that the meaning of an event is contingent on subsequent events. An historical narrative can never properly achieve closure therefore, since there is always the possibility that future events will change our interpretation of the meaning of events in the past.

The ability of narrative to render events meaningful, even without providing an explicit evaluation of those events, but simply by imposing beginnings and ends on what might otherwise be thought of as continuous sequences, has implications for the way that sociologists use data with a temporal dimension. As will be argued in more detail in Chapter 9, in relation to both qualitative and quantitative research, an appreciation of narrative structures should make us more reflexive about our own research practice, once we recognize the power of those structures to organize our understandings, interpretations, and representations of people's lives.

First-order and second-order narratives: the importance of narrative for sociologists

Having discussed the key features which can be understood as providing the defin-ing qualities of narratives in general, a conceptual distinction can usefully be made between 'first-order narratives' and 'second-order narratives' (Carr, 1997) or what might alternatively be termed 'ontological narratives' and 'representational narra-tives' (Somers and Gibson, 1994). First-order narratives can be defined as the sto-ries that individuals tell about themselves and their own experiences. First-order narratives occur spontaneously in everyday life during the course of normal inter-action. They would include the stories produced by a family around the dinner table in the evening, each member of the family recounting the significant events that had occurred during the day – at work or school perhaps. First-order narra-tives would also include personal testimonies produced in more formal settings. For example, in the context of a job interview or a self-help group, an individual may be expected to provide a coherent account of key biographical events. The special significance of these first-order narratives, as we shall see in Chapter 7, is that they

can be understood as in some senses constitutive of individual identities. This is why Somers and Gibson describe them as 'ontological narratives' (1994).

Distinct from these individual or personal first-order narratives, second-order narratives are the accounts we may construct as researchers to make sense of the social world, and of other people's experiences. These narratives are therefore methods of presenting social and historical knowledge. In addition, these second-order narratives do not necessarily focus on individuals. For example, Abbott's account of the formation of a profession might be defined as a second-order narrative (Abbott, 1988). However, within this book I am primarily concerned with the representation of individual lives in both qualitative and quantitative approaches to research. The second-order narratives I discuss in subsequent chapters will therefore mainly be concerned with individuals as the unit of analysis and might therefore be understood as a particular type of second-order narrative, namely a 'collective story' (Richardson, 1990). Richardson suggests that:

> The collective story displays an individual's story by narrativizing the experiences of the social category to which the individual belongs, rather than by telling the particular individual's story. ... Although the narrative is about a category of people, the individual response to the well-told collective story is 'That's my story. I am not alone.' (1990: 25–6)

While an interest in first-order narratives may perhaps be thought of as a preference for a certain type of qualitative evidence at the level of *method,* an interest in second-order narratives requires a decisive shift to the level of *methodology* or even epistemology. As will be discussed further in subsequent chapters, much of the information about the social world that is available to sociologists is likely to be in narrative form. It is important, therefore, as we incorporate this information into our analyses, to consider how and why it has been produced. An awareness of the narrative structures that are commonly used within a culture can be helpful to inform an analysis that goes beyond the ostensible content of an account; this will be discussed further in Chapter 3. In addition, once we start to become aware of, and pay closer analytic attention to, the narrative structures within empirical data, it becomes difficult to ignore them in our own work. Social science writing also depends on narrative structures and narrative devices. Researchers make selections, have opinions about what is significant and what is trivial, decide what to include and what to exclude, and determine the boundaries, or beginnings and endings, of their accounts.

Organization of the book

The book can broadly be divided into two parts. Following this introductory chapter, in Chapters 2 to 5, the focus is at the level of methods, in other words practical techniques for the collection and analysis of data. These chapters introduce recent developments in both quantitative and qualitative research by discussing

examples of empirical research from a wide range of sociological subject areas. These include the sociology of health and illness, criminology, the sociology of the family, the sociology of organizations, and the sociology of employment. The aim, however, is not to provide detailed instructions on how to conduct particular qualitative or quantitative analyses, but rather to provide broad guidelines and a conceptual account with suggestions for further reading. Although the chapters are organized in terms of two chapters on qualitative methods followed by two chapters on quantitative methods, the aim is to demonstrate that there is no single qualitative or quantitative approach to data collection and analysis and indeed that there are some innovative types of analysis based on an interest in narrative that start to blur the distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods.

Chapters 6 to 10 draw on the material in the first part of the book to move the discussion to the level of methodology, epistemology, and ontology. Two debates in particular will be explored which are of central importance to the philosophy of the social sciences. These are, first, the insights into causal mechanisms in the social world that can be provided by different approaches to research and, second, the ontological status of the subject or individual respondent in research. While these are arguably issues of practical relevance for anyone engaged with empirical research, much of the existing theoretical literature on these topics is rather abstract and abstruse. The aim here therefore is to give a more practically focused discussion with examples from existing research. The second half of the book will also provide a discussion of the politics and ethics of research as well as exploring notions of reflexivity in relation to quantitative as well as qualitative research. Once again these issues will be discussed specifically in relation to the material on narrative methods introduced in the first five chapters. Chapter 10 considers some of the possibilities for combining qualitative and quantitative research. Rather than arguing that they are necessarily complementary, or that they can be integrated unproblematically, this final chapter will suggest that it is the very tensions between the two approaches that make it important that they are both used in understanding aspects of social change.

One of the challenges of writing a book on methods and methodology that aims to engage with current debates relating to both qualitative and quantitative approaches is that the majority of readers will be more comfortable with either qualitative or quantitative methods. Some terms and concepts are therefore likely to be unfamiliar to different groups of readers. An explanation of the more technical vocabulary will therefore be found within the text. However, it is acknowledged that many readers will dip into specific sections of the book and for this reason a glossary is provided which aims to cover those terms that are most likely to be unfamiliar.

Following the introductory discussion of the key features of narrative in this chapter, the next chapter will focus more specifically on the way that narrative has informed recent developments in interviewing practice in social research. In particular it will outline the methodological literature that emphasizes the importance of allowing individuals to tell stories in the context of qualitative research interviews. As I will argue in more detail below, the relevance of a sociology informed by narrative hinges on the fact that while a narrative is inherently social, both in its practice or performance and in the cultural resources it relies upon to

be intelligible, it is simultaneously the unique and creative production of an individual actor. These dual facets of narrative also have important implications for using narrative to inform analysis and this will be discussed in Chapter 3. The themes that have been sketched here will therefore be elaborated in more detail in the chapters that follow. This is only the beginning of the story.

Summary

This chapter has introduced the concept of narrative in the context of social research. Three key features of narrative have been stressed. First, that it has a temporal or chronological dimension in that it provides a representation of a series of events or experiences rather than describing a state of affairs. Second, that it communicates the meaning of events or experiences through the use of evaluative statements and through the temporal configuration of events. Third, that there is an important social dimension to narrative: narratives are ubiquitous in society and are a popular form of communication. Narratives are usually told in a specific social context for a particular purpose. These defining elements of narrative will provide the foundations of the chapters that follow, which provide an exploration of how narrative can be understood to have informed some of the recent methodological advances in the social sciences.

It has also been suggested that although in many circumstances the *practical* distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is a useful one, some of the boundaries between the two approaches become less clear once we appreciate the rich detailed information that is increasingly being collected in the context of quantitative longitudinal studies such as the British Cohort Studies, the German Social and Economic Panel, or the Panel Study of Income Dynamics in the United States.

Further reading

Bertaux, D. (1981) 'From the life-history approach to the transformation of sociological practice', in D. Bertaux (ed.), *Biography and Society.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage. pp. 29–46.

Franzosi, R. (1998) 'Narrative analysis – or why (and how) sociologists should be interested in narrative', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24: 517–54.

Hinchman, L.P. and Hinchman, S.K. (1997) 'Introduction', in L.P. Hinchman and S.K. Hinchman (eds), *Memory, Identity, Community: The Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences*. New York: State University of New York. pp. xiii–xxxii.

Maines, D. (1993) 'Narrative's moment and sociology's phenomena: toward a narrative sociology', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 34: 17–38.

Exercise

1   Ask a friend to tell you a brief story about something interesting
     or frustrating that has happened to him or her over the past three
     months. Write down the main points and compare the structure of
     your friend's narrative with the typical structure identified by
     Labov and Waletzky and discussed above.

Notes

1   A discussion of the impact of this article formed the basis of a whole volume
     of the *Journal of Narrative and Life History* (Volume 7, 1997). The original
     Labov and Waletzky paper from 1967 was reprinted as the first paper in this
     1997 volume and the page numbers provided will refer to this later edition.