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Narratives and Everyday Life

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Contributions in this Special Edition reflect on the epistemological and methodological practice of using narratives to understand individual and social reality from a sociological standpoint. They all reveal dimensions of the same concrete reality: contemporary society of Central South Africa. We invite readers to engage with individual articles, each of which provide a brief episode—a vignette—in a larger reality. We also invite you to engage with the entire collection, through which a more detailed and clearer picture of the larger reality will emerge.

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This Special Edition follows on the one that appeared in the January 2017 edition of this journal (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/volume40.php). As with the previous Special Edition, each article in this issue opens a window on everyday life in Central South Africa. Except for two, the articles originated from research in the program *The Narrative Study of Lives*, situated in the Department of Sociology at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa. These windows on reality display the capacity of the narrative as a methodological tool in qualitative research to open up better understandings of everyday experience. The articles also reflect on the epistemological journey towards unwrapping and breaking open of meaning. Narratives are one of many tools available to sociologists in their quest to understand and interpret meaning. But, when it comes to deep understanding, narratives are particularly effective in opening up more intricate levels of meaning associated with emotions, feelings, and subjective experiences.

Storytelling

Humans live in storytelling societies. If you want to know somebody, then you must know that person's story. Likewise, if you want to know a particular group, you need to know at least the most import-

ant stories told within and about that group. When we share our stories with other groups and cultures, we get to know more about each other. The more we know about other groups, the less likely we will be to hold unjustified stereotypes and to spread untruths. So, through our stories, we discover what is true and what is meaningful in our life and also what is likely to be true and meaningful in the lives of others.

We pass our stories on from one generation to another. And in this process, we add to our ever-growing narrative repertoire: our reflections of, and on, the overall reality in which we live. As sociologists, we are particularly interested in the social role and functioning of these stories: how they are told, the ways in which they are received or read, the role they perform in the broader social context, how they change, and how they fit into bigger processes related to the living together of people. Our interest in the social role of stories takes us, in the first instance, directly to the individual. Narratives display the goals, intentions, motivations, and after-effects of individual reflection, experience, and action. In the second instance, narratives can also unwrap elements of wider social order—of large-scale social, political, and structural trends and disruptions. Ultimately, narratives help us to understand what is going on in society.

The analytical point of departure for any understanding of society should be people and the ways in which individuals experience social reality. The very essence of the concept "society" is the living together of people within a specific context. As sociologists, we seek to understand how people live together with other people. We also seek to reveal which elements in society constitute obstacles to living together—or even make it impossible. We have to acknowledge the presence of a multiplicity of relevance and meaning structures, and to achieve this we need to listen to various—often divergent—accounts. The stories of individuals often differ because their experiences, circumstances, and lifeworlds differ. Underlying our understanding of the meaning that people attribute to their lifeworld is the assumption that such meaning is accessible to others. The mutual accessibility of meaning provides a crucial starting point for understanding of narratives, and via narratives.

Our search to understand our social reality—as well as the social reality of others—coincides with the assumption that underneath the visible structures of the human world there is a hidden, invisible structure of interests, forces, and trends waiting to be uncovered. We can be brought closer to viable interpretations and understandings of these factors via the narrative study of lives and via the everyday experiences revealed to us by our research participants. The methodological implications of such interpretations and understandings are that sociological concepts can never become models or representations of reality to which meaning is attributed from the outside. The constitution of meaning takes place by means of uncovering the typifications that are already inherent in the situation. The aim of our narrative sociological interpretation is to break open and to clarify, as plainly as possible, the meanings already present in situations and in experiences. To realize this aim, one needs to first identify the meanings and, thereafter, relate them to other meanings and meaning structures. In this

way, our narrative analysis can lead to the creation of a meaning framework.

Understanding through Qualitative Research

We already noted that as social researchers we direct our efforts towards one major aim: to understand the world in which we live. In order to do so, we must decipher the meanings, the motives, and intentions of people, as well as the effects of their actions on social life. In their introduction to *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2011:3-4), Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln elaborate on these issues. They point out that the aim of qualitative research is to increase our understanding of social reality through the use of materials—such as accounts of personal experience, introspection, the lifestory, interviews, artifacts, and texts—via which we can describe and understand routine, as well as exceptional moments and meanings in people's lives. John Creswell (2013:44) shares the desire to unwrap exceptional moments and meanings when he talks about being "sensitive to the people and places under study," to generating "complex descriptions and interpretations of the problem," and to uncovering the "meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem." Most readers will agree that qualitative data should lead to rich descriptions, fruitful explanations, and new interpretations. We trust that this second Special Edition will achieve these aspirations.

Understanding through Narratives

Few methods of data collection capture context, meaning, experience, subjectivity, the lifeworld, reflexivity, and action as effectively as narrative studies. When people tell coherent and meaningful stories embedded in a particular context, they reveal to us, as researchers, insights into our own, as well as other people's experiences. Narratives provide accounts of how particular phenomena came to be what they are, how those phenomena take on different meanings in different contexts, and how individuals do/perform/constitute social life.

> A narrative captures the importance of context, the meaningfulness of human experience, thought and speech within time and place; it provides opportunity to understand implicit, as well as explicit rationales for action within a holistic framework…the narrative approach is seeking comprehensiveness of understanding within the individual case. [Bazeley 2013:342]

In *The Narrative Study of Lives* program—from which the articles in this Special Edition originate—we mostly analyze narratives from several participants in order to access multiple meanings attached to a particular issue. Gathering stories from several people about the same phenomenon is in keeping with the notion that "narrative understanding is a dynamic process, and narrative meaning accrues by degrees" (Popova 2015:n.p.). The unfolding of perspectives and events is usually constructed by our narrators over multiple interviews. Multiple narrative sessions create a mosaic in which individual elements can be pieced together to reconstruct singular scenarios, as well as to constitute a whole picture. Seldom is it possible to assemble a picture of the "full reality" in one session. Sometimes our hermeneutic journey towards understanding—our

reconstructions of other people's constructions—involves fewer narrators, but in most of the articles in this Special Edition, we explore the lifeworlds of several narrators. It is only in one article, *Deconstructing My Library, Unwrapping My Lifeworld*, that the focus is autobiographical and on the lifeworld of a single narrator.

The very essence of lifestory research—especially in as far as narrative inquiry, life history, and oral history are concerned—is that it provides an epistemological key to a wide scope of knowledge of everyday reality, of local and indigenous knowledges, of cultural transmission and community engagement. Lifestory data can, however, never simply be accepted as "unmediated representations of social realities," as Atkinson and Delamont (2009:316) caution. For this reason, all the articles in this Special Edition attempt to execute a double reading in which research participants' narratives are read against the background of the empirical reality in which they are embedded. Like all researchers, those in the program of *The Narrative Study of Lives* must always engage in a reflexive process to question how narrative realities relate to historical truths, and how they are logically consistent with other understandings of social reality. Ken Plummer (2001:2) agrees with this view when he contextualizes the use of narratives as:

> getting close to living human beings, accurately yet imaginatively picking up the way they express their understandings of the world around them, perhaps providing an analysis of such expressions, presenting them in interesting ways and being self-critically aware of the immense difficulties such tasks bring.

John Spradley's (1979:34) classic statement on why narrative research offers such great potential to understanding the lifeworld of people echoes our aim for this Special Edition's collection of articles:

> I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them.

Narrating the Everyday

The emphasis on understanding, meaningful interpretation, lived experience, and the constitution of the lifeworld inevitably positions the narrative study of lives as a micro-sociological perspective with a strong focus on the micro-processes composing social reality. What do *individuals* say, do, and think in the everyday sequences of events and experiences? And how do their perspectives and actions coincide with the wider interactions and expressions of meaning underlying social reality? In this regard, we find an important guideline in Randall Collins' (in Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981:83) remark that empirical reality must be regarded as residing in direct experience. Collins regards "the encounter" as the basic micro-unit of analysis: it is a "shared conversational reality" at the basis of all social interaction, negotiation, and exchange.

Narrating the everyday implies that such an empirical and objective reality exists. But, this objective reality, as exemplified by empirical, describable, and sometimes visible phenomena, cannot only be analyzed as structural facts. The objective reality of

urbanization, for instance, is far more than a statistical construct or "hard fact." Urbanization embodies an endless chain of personal experiences—"ritual interaction chains" as Collins (1981:985) terms them—as well as forms of interaction, bargaining agreements, resistance, and compliance. Urbanization also exists as a collective noun for individual action, individual constitution of meaning, and individual experience. The rich nuances of this can only be captured by means of a series of coding and hermeneutic procedures.

We understand something of urbanization if we ground this phenomenon in its constituent micro-elements. The narrative study of urbanization allows for such a micro-sociological translation strategy. By listening to the accounts of individuals, we focus on their everyday reality and the contextual situatedness of their experience. Recurrent accounts, repeated symbolic expressions, and shared meanings can tell us about the context within which interaction takes place. All articles in this Special Edition are similarly situated in the sociology of everyday life and point to the ritual interaction chains linking personal experiences to larger social phenomena.

Challenges of Narratives

It is clear that if we are interested in revealing human meanings and motives, interpretive, qualitative methodology provides the key to understanding how people perceive and experience their lifeworlds. But, our very point of departure—to comprehend the world in which we live—constitutes an epistemological problem: people are endowed with consciousness and they see, interpret, experience, and act in the world in terms of a vast range of subjectively and intersubjectively constituted meanings. When people actively construct and co-construct their own social reality, fluid and multiple perspectives of the world emerge: there is no single truth. This compels us to (re)assess and (re)interpret our sociological enterprise. So, it is through continuous oscillation between hypothesis formulation and revision that we move towards understanding.

As inductive researchers, we focus in an interpretive-constructivist way on the specific details of what people tell us, and then we use these specifics as a basis for building our understanding of their lifeworlds. We depend on the openness of the research participants and their willingness and ability to articulate experiences, recount events, and offer explanations and opinions. Experience shows that no matter how well researchers set up the in-depth interview and create a conversational partnership in which the interviewee participates fully and can talk openly, the very nature of memory poses a hermeneutical challenge.

Memory is a person's capacity to recall or summon up information stored in his or her mind. Remembering is a mental act of "thinking of things in their absence" (Warnock in Misztal 2003:9). All articles in this Special Edition focus on mental recall; and in addition, some focus on more *embodied* aspects of remembering. There is a strong emphasis on the content of memory. However, we are equally interested in processes of re-membering, in other words, in the memory experience. To remember information, events, and experiences is a complex—and notoriously fallible—process. This is partly because memory is

not an exclusively individual and objective act. Even the most personal accounts and memories transcend our subjective experience of them and are shared and mediated by others around us (Zerubavel 1997:81). As Barbara Misztal (2003:6) remarks, our memory is always "of an intersubjective past, of a past time lived in relation to other people." Thus, memory is almost always "intersubjectively constituted": an idea on which we focused and published more specifically elsewhere (cf. Coetzee and Rau 2009).

Memory is by definition "the leap across time from the then of happening to the now of recall" (Frisch 1990:22). This implies a triangulation between the experiences of the past, the set of circumstances within which these experiences occur, and the way in which the individual reflects on these experiences. The latter includes the influence of the narrator's present circumstances. Although memories become adapted in these processes, there will always be a nucleus of aspects that remain the same. As Paul Connerton (1989:23) points out, the habitual aspect of recall serves to entrench ways of reflecting on and narrating personal societal experiences, and ensures—to some extent—a containment, coherence, and continuity of meaning.

From this it follows that the way in which we and our research participants remember experiences from the past will depend on the nature of these experiences. For instance, several narratives in this Special Edition originate from lifestory research projects that explore trauma narratives. Traumatic experiences leave a negative memory. Whether it is sustained exposure to trauma—such as long-term experience of physical disability or a life lived with HIV—or whether we are exposed to a brief moment of numbing shock, the effects are likely to be similar: a negative disturbance in the way we think back to that part of our past. Another issue needs to be kept in mind when we analyze memory. According to Kai Erikson (1994:231), instances of shared experiences can create a community: "trauma shared can serve as a source of community in the same way that the common languages and common cultural backgrounds can. There is a spiritual kinship there, a sense of identity." He concludes: "Indeed, it can happen that otherwise unconnected persons who share a traumatic experience seek one another out and develop a form of fellowship on the strength of that common tie" (Erikson 1994:232). So, Erikson shifts the notion of trauma experience from an individualized context towards a collective one. But, the shift from an individualized context towards a collective one is not necessarily restricted to the experience and recall of trauma. All shared experiences—also pleasant ones—can transcend the individual to become collective experiences. The result of this is that personal memory often obtains collective or cultural dimensions. And when individual experiences become part of a collective consciousness—they become institutionalized (see: Alexander 2004:8). While individuals do the remembering, their remembering often arises out of shared social contexts and motifs.

The halo effect is a bias that arises when research participants "give socially approved responses as an interaction strategy characterized by responding in normatively correct and conformist ways and generally trying to present a good face" (Ross and Mirowsky 1983:529-530). We do not deny that, to some extent, this form of bias occurred in data collection for the various projects featured in this Special Edition, but we are of the opinion that the narratives presented

are not unduly influenced by it. In the case of all the projects featured here, researchers took great care to establish, over time, a high level of trust and rapport with their participants. One of the key emphases during the various and many seminars, debriefings, and supervision feedback sessions in which all researchers partook was to reiterate and remind one another of the importance of establishing an optimum environment for meaningful encounters with research participants.

Understanding the South African Context through the Narrative Study of Lives

It is now a quarter of a century since South Africa transformed itself from being an apartheid prison and arch-pariah to a widely acclaimed example of the potential for a "new humanity." Few countries were as reviled by the international community as the apartheid state formed by the National Party of South Africa when it came into power in 1948. Institutionalized and legally enshrined racism enforced a culture of separation and isolation. A person's race determined where he/she could live, who he/she could marry, and what education, medical care, occupation, social services, legal protection, and property rights he/she would be entitled to. In the wider context of the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 09, 1989 and the approach of the end of the Cold War, South Africa negotiated a new dispensation under the leadership of Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Klerk. In April 1994, our first democratic elections took place and South Africa was finally free.

Although technically free and democratically constituted, the remnants and shadows of South Africa's past did not miraculously disappear with the dawn of the new dispensation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a body similar to a court of law where testimony could be heard, was set up shortly after the end of apartheid in 1994. Anybody who felt themselves to have been a victim of the violence perpetrated during the apartheid years could come forward, tell their stories, and be heard at the TRC. Perpetrators of apartheid's violence and crimes could also give testimony and apply for amnesty from prosecution. The formal hearings of this Commission began on April 15, 1996 (South African History Online 2017).

The TRC was an important part of the transition to full democracy in South Africa. It was also a major turning point in the South African awareness of the power of narratives to establish parameters for the living together of people and for striving towards a better society. The TRC was set up in terms of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No. 34 of 1995. The number of cases brought in front of the TRC gives an indication of the scope of the narratives heard by the Commission. Out of 7112 petitions, as many as 5392 people were formally refused amnesty, whereas 849 were granted amnesty. Several applications were withdrawn. Many of the hearings of the TRC were aired on public television channels and most newspapers covered the events extensively.

In many ways the work of the TRC can be seen as groundbreaking in terms of providing an official forum for victims, as well as perpetrators to have their stories heard. Many witnesses who gave testimony about secret and immoral acts committed by the

apartheid government of South Africa would not have come out into the open if it was not for the protection provided by the laws governing this process. In turn, many of the crimes committed by liberation forces would also have stayed undisclosed.

South Africa is now a country with a constitution lauded as one of the most enlightened in the world. Yet it remains a country marred by inequality and inequity. This second Special Edition on the narrative study of lives features many stories from Central South Africa that illustrate inequalities and inequities that persist in the country's post-democratic era. In her introduction to the comprehensive coverage on lifestory research in the SAGE publication, "Benchmarks in Social Research Methods," Barbara Harrison (2009:XXIII-XXIX) points out a number of factors that heralded a growth in narrative research. These include an awareness of the role that oral history and narrative accounts can play in contributing towards a democratization of knowledge: How do we remember and experience the past? How are injustices of the past still part of our lives in the present? How do we deal with transition and trauma? How do we experience, and celebrate, cultural diversity and everyday aspects of our identities? Some of the narratives in this Special Edition address these questions directly.

Documents of life from our pre-democratic dispensation rarely incorporated the voices of the majority of South Africa's people. The apartheid regime suppressed their voices by relegating entire racial groups to the economic and cultural margins of society. Through political exclusion their experiences were hidden from most historical accounts and their views seldom played a role in representations and reconstructions of reality. In step with new horizons and freedoms, everyday discourses on issues that reflect everyday life as explored by us in the program *The Narrative Study of Lives* contribute to greater inclusivity, and provide more opportunities for political and cultural participation and self-expression.

One cannot deal with the contributions of increased political democratization in South Africa following the regime transition of 1994 and the growth of the awareness of the power of public testimonies during the sessions of the TRC without referring to the influence of feminist thinking in South Africa. Feminist scholarship at South African universities and research bodies played a major role in sensitizing society to take action against hegemonic, male-dominated practices and ways of thinking. Contributions in this Special Edition such as the articles on narratives of cosmetic surgery, and on the experiences of physical disability emphasize gender issues.

Life histories allow us to learn about people and the way that they live (Rubin and Rubin 2005:8). We pass on our stories—our histories—from one generation to another. And in this process, we add to our ever-growing narrative repertoire: our reflections of, and on, the overall reality in which we live. The contributions in this Special Edition—together with those appearing in *Qualitative Sociology Review* (QSR) of January 2017 Volume XIII Issue 1—provide broad brushstrokes of life in Central South Africa. The voices and the stories in the articles reach into and open out deeper levels in the experience of "ordinary people." In doing so, the articles uncover new understandings of our histories and our evolving social world.

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