Paper presented at *Narrative & Memory Conference*, University of Huddersfield, April, 2008.

Narrative Oriented Inquiry: A dynamic framework for good practice

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Abstract
Recently, (see Hiles & Čermák, 2008), we have proposed a psychological approach to narrative research that we call *Narrative Oriented Inquiry* (NOI). The focus of this approach is upon research with personal narratives, especially data collected from narrative interviews. The model of NOI stresses what we have called a "methodological approach," i.e. planning from the outset by formulating an appropriate research question, clarifying paradigm assumptions, and developing a distinctive approach to data analysis. Crucial to our approach to narrative data analysis is the distinction that needs to be made between *fabula* and *sjuzet*. The fabula is the basic outline of the events as they occurred (or might have occurred), while the sjuzet is the "way" in which the story is being told. We argue that it is the subtleties of the sjuzet that are especially important in understanding the way in which the teller of their story actively engages in their own meaning-making and identity positioning.

The Model of Narrative Oriented Inquiry (NOI)

In this paper, we set out the key features of our model (Figure 1). We see NOI as a psychological approach to narrative research, offering a dynamic framework for good practice. First and foremost, it is a model that explicitly strives towards *transparency, inclusivity* and a *critical pluralism* in the collection and interpretation of narrative data (Hiles & Čermák, 2007, 2008; Čermák, Hiles & Chrz, 2007). By stressing transparency (Hiles, 2008), we intend the methodology of our research to be clear, first to ourselves, as well as being as clear as possible to others. We intend the outcomes of our research to be generalisable and plausible, with our reflexivity fully spelled out. We describe NOI as a *"methodological approach"*, in that it involves planning narrative oriented research from the outset, i.e. formulating an appropriate research question, clarifying the paradigm assumptions and logic of inquiry, together with developing a distinctive, pluralistic and critical approach to data analysis.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative research might be motivated by any one of several different perspectives. For example, it is possible to approach narrative inquiry within a psychological framework that places emphasis upon one or more of the following:

(1) Narratives dominate human discourse, offering a major resource for providing accounts of events, as well as the social and cultural practices for the circulation of meanings;
(2) Narratives, however, do not just offer simple accounts of events, but highlight a human perspective and interpretation on those events, i.e. what *matters* to the particular individual (it is useful to think of stories as *"matterings",* see Hiles, 2007);
(3) Moreover, as Paul Ricoeur (1987) points out, this reflects an implicit *narrative intelligence* that is foundational to our engagement with life.

The first of these, involves what might be thought of as an ethnographic approach, emphasizing collecting narratives typifying particular discourses of interest. However, from a psychological perspective it is the second and third of these which have become the major focus of our interest, i.e. the way in which narrative thinking reflects a landscape of human concerns (cf. Bruner, 1990), as well as the role of a narrative intelligence in the individual's active construction of reality and identity.

The emphasis is therefore upon personal narratives, interviews, biographical research, "life-line method", etc. NOI explicitly adopts a logic of inquiry that is not concerned with making predictions, or testing hypotheses, but is exploratory, and data-driven. We stress the need to explicitly clarify our paradigm assumptions. We adopt a situated-occasioned action perspective, which incorporates Mishler's (1986) notion of a *joint construction of meaning*, as well as his proposal that narratives powerfully reflect a crucial means of knowledge production (Mishler, 1995). We also subscribe to Emerson & Frosh's (2004, p. 131) idea that "personal narratives, typically emerging around people's experiences of breaches between ideal and real, self and society, may have special importance for the narrator as well as for critical research."

We therefore regard the individual as actively engaged in processes of meaning-making, organization and agency, that involve a creative tension between the subject positions emanating from dominant social and cultural discourses, and their celebration, but more often, begrudging acceptance, contestation and subversion by the self-construction of *identity positions* (Hiles, 2007).

A Third Cognitive Revolution

> "*. . . we might be so bold as to suggest that, following on from the discursive turn which has been called the second cognitive revolution, that narrative psychology might represent a third cognitive revolution."*
>
> Hiles & Čermák (2008, p. 152)

In our original outline of NOI, we argued that if the "discursive turn" in psychology is recognized as the second cognitive revolution in psychology, then narrative might represent a *third cognitive revolution.* From our perspective, narrative offers a powerful mode of thinking that helps the individual make sense of their being-in-the-world. Telling a story involves giving an account of a series of events combined with a narrative intelligence that interprets those events in terms of human concerns, human values and

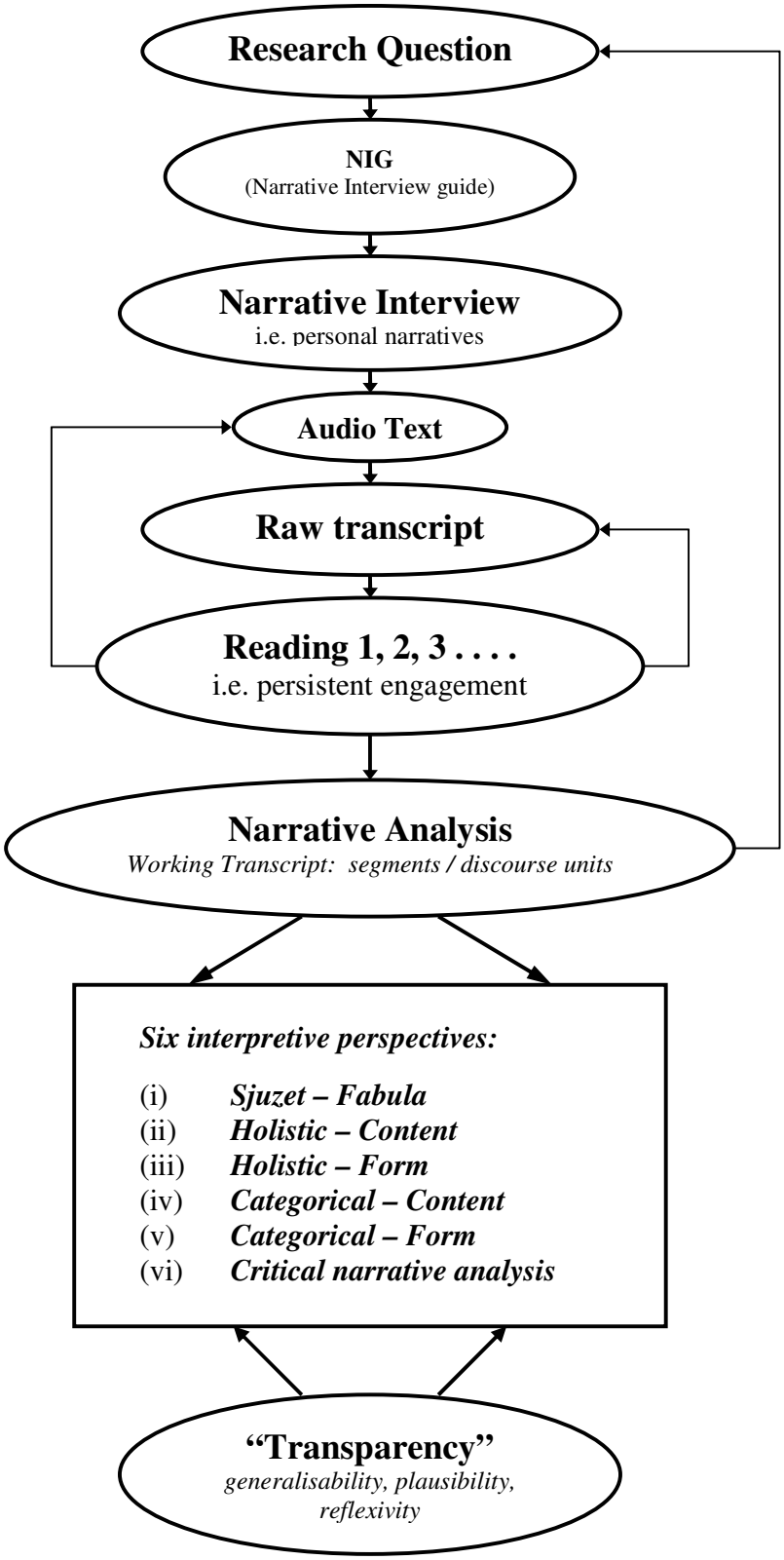

Figure 1: Model of NOI (Hiles & Čermák, 2008)

human significance. In this respect, narrative draws upon unconscious meanings and motivations, and narrative utilizes a range of cognitive skills drawing upon a range of cultural and discursive resources to create a sense of self and sense of agency. Such that, what emerges for the individual is an ability to subtly position themself in relation to the events being recounted.

For psychology, this becomes something much more than a simple "narrative turn", but entails the possibility of a *third* cognitive revolution, which will involve building much needed bridges across the human sciences, as well as within the discipline, offering a basis for integration between psychodynamic, cognitive, discursive, humanistic and even transpersonal approaches.

NOI – Data Analysis

It is worth stressing that using NOI to analyse narrative data is something that can be really enjoyable. The experience is that with the hard slog of transcription over, you first stare at the text wondering how to make sense of it (as an example, see Table 1). Then, using the "tools" of NOI, everything can quickly begin to fall into place. Insight into the core themes of the narrative emerge – the subtleties of the telling become clearer – deeper critical issues emerge. The focus here will be on the crucial first stage in analysis, which uses the distinction between *sjuzet* and *fabula* (Herman & Vervaeck, 2001).

NOI offers a methodological approach, stressing that narrative inquiry begins with research design (see Figure 1). The clarification of the research question for the inquiry is the important first step. Strategies for collecting data are then chosen. If interviewing participants is involved, then this might take the form of a semi-structured, or narrative style of interviewing. In these cases, a Narrative Interview Guide (*NIG*) is drawn up. However, biographical and other methods may be just as appropriate. Data can be collected by audio-taping, or might be written. A raw transcript is then produced, much like in Table 1. The rule that is followed here is that the transcript should *not* be tidied up. The approach to analysis can then take several forms, but in our practice it usually involves reading through the raw transcript several times, returning to the tape-recording (if this is available) on occasions, and then selecting one or more particular sections for very careful analysis, using one of several analysis techniques. Six representative techniques feature in the model, although others are perfectly possible.

An example: Tania's Story

We will present here an example that uses a biographical approach using the "life-line method" (Čermák, 2004). It is data collected as part of a larger study, that was translated from Czech for use here. Identifiers have been changed to respect confidentiality.

Participants first draw a line with an arrow which represents their lives since birth to the present time. They are asked to mark and to name several important events of their lives on this line. Then they are asked to draw a longer line representing human life from beginning to end, and to mark a point where they are now in their lives, and then imagine

their future, i.e. how they wish to live through their lives, marking some events that they would like to happen in their lives. Finally, they are asked to write about their lives, using these instructions: "Now, looking at the sketch of your life that you have drawn, please write a story about your life. You can use your sketch as a starting point, or you can give an account about other events if you want. Write about your life please – how you remember it – but also how you imagine your life in your future."

The focus of this study was the following research question: "How is personal identity represented in the life story at the threshold of adulthood?" Since the study uses the life-line methodology, the *NIG, NI* and *audio text* are circumvented. What Tania wrote down becomes the *raw transcript*. An excerpt near the beginning of Tania's account is analysed here.

Narrative analysis – first steps

Analysis proceeds by first breaking the text down into numbered *segments*. Since narratives are basically a sequence of episodes, we define a segment as being roughly a self-contained episode, or "move", in the telling of the story. This is not foolproof, but is relatively straightforward and transparent. In our experience, this can be done, first with a quick read-through marking the segments, followed by a more careful read-through making adjustments. The result is illustrated on the left-hand side of Table 2.

Table 1: Tania's Story *(Woman, 19 years old, university student)*

Excerpt from Raw Transcript (written) - *Translated from Czech*

[. . .] At elementary school I realized that I have a quite big nose. For a girl it is rather a problem. Simply, I can't sparkle with wit or cleverness as guys do, but just and only by beauty. Gosh, I said to myself a hundred times. Moreover I grew up very tall, 178 cm. Not easy, but I don't mind now, so much. At the elementary school I already thought about studying at a film academy which seemed to me an interesting school and I felt that I would enjoy it. But Gymnasium was in front of me, so I played with this idea as something marginal. In the first year of study at the Gym, I met a couple of nice girls. We were a small group of friends at that time and most of them are my contemporary friends as well, people that I meet from time to time. In the second year of my study I started a completely new class as a stranger. I made friends there easily, maybe too much easily. But I paid dearly for it – I got the taste of boys' medicine. They made fun of me, it was on the verge of bullying. I had great psychic troubles. I was depressed. I was treated by a psychologist. Until now I hope that I am not mad but they are. In the psychologist's room I ran up against the next problem. I curse my big nose, horrible feelings. I am a creature, monster, I am not going to school, taking Neurol, I don't want to live, because nobody wants me anyway. The rest of girls have boys, but not me. I am not a worthwhile human being. Fuck off! I want to shout. This memory is still vivid. Everything smoothed then, by itself. The idea of plastic surgery kept me afloat. Finally it was dropped but it is still open. Exams, and then university. Hm. Thanks to less pressure at school, I started to look around myself. I realized displeasures concerning my family background. My father is a terribly aggressive man, an angry type. I don't want to keep fearing memories when he shouts coarsely at me, then we don't speak to each other for several months. My mammy gives in absolutely to everything. I have to force her to talk about everything. She is reserved, without emotions, and she sticks up for father. I want to move as soon as possible. And I also quarrel with my sister. I can't behave decently at home. Many lines were crossed. I need my own life. What was previous, is disgusting. [. . .]

Table 2: *Tania's Story Analysed*

Working Transcript – organized into segments with sjuzet underlined

[. .]

5. At elementary school I realized that I have a quite big nose. For a girl it is rather a problem. Simply, I can't sparkle with wit or cleverness as guys do, but just and only by beauty.
6. Gosh, I said to myself a hundred times. Moreover I grew up very tall, 178 cm. Not easy, but I don't mind now, so much.
7. At the elementary school I already thought about studying at a film academy which seemed to me an interesting school and I felt that I would enjoy it.
8. But Gymnasium was in front of me, so I played with this idea as something marginal.
9. In the first year of study at the Gym, I met a couple of nice girls. We were a small group of friends at that time and most of them are my contemporary friends as well, people that I meet from time to time.
10. In the second year of my study I started a completely new class as a stranger. I made friends there easily, maybe too much easily.
11. But I paid dearly for it – I got the taste of boys' medicine. They made fun of me, it was on the verge of bullying.
12. I had great psychic troubles. I was depressed. I was treated by a psychologist.
13. Until now I hope that I am not mad but they are. In the psychologist's room I ran up against the next problem.
14. I curse my big nose, horrible feelings. I am a creature, monster, I am not going to school, taking Neurol, I don't want to live, because nobody wants me anyway. The rest of girls have boys, but not me. I am not a worthwhile human being.
15. Fuck off! I want to shout.
16. This memory is still vivid.
17. Everything smoothed then, by itself. The idea of plastic surgery kept me afloat. Finally it was dropped but it is still open.
18. Exams, and then university. Hm. Thanks to less pressure at school, I started to look around myself. I realized displeasures concerning my family background.
19. My father is a terribly aggressive man, an angry type. I don't want to keep fearing memories when he shouts coarsely at me, then we don't speak to each other for several months.
20. My mammy gives in absolutely to everything. I have to force her to talk about everything. She is reserved, without emotions, and she sticks up for father.
21. I want to move as soon as possible.
22. And I also quarrel with my sister. I can't behave decently at home. Many lines were crossed.
23. I need my own life. What was previous, is disgusting.

● *Notes/Comments*

●Fab1
Evaluation1 / IP-1

I don't mind now – reflection

[Why film school?!?]

But, *so* – plot, argument

●Fab2 / Setting2
and most ... – commentary, relating to the present

Complication2 – new class
maybe.. - reflection
Evaluation2
IP-2 - *But.. medicine.. bullying..* comment/reflection/emphasis
●Fab3 / Setting3

Evaluation3
Complication3 [***Enactment of rage*** – switch to present tense – this is both *fabula* (how she felt then) and *sjuzet* (her enactment now in the situated action of the telling)] **IP-3**
Fuck off – [she shouts now, but could not then]

Finally/but..

●Fab4 / Setting4
Hm – situated action reflection
Thanks to.. - commentary
Complication4

absolutely, *have to* – emphasis

Evaluation4 - *I want..*
Eval. – *I can't..*
Eval. – *Many lines crossed*
Coda / IP-4 - *I need my own life* [the ***key*** identity position]

Table 3: Coding Notation

For a girl . . – Sjuzet is underlined
* - Labov & Waletzky (Abstract, Setting, Complication, Evaluation, Result, Coda)
[. . !] – omissions, identifiers removed, comments, etc.
●**Fab1** – Start of Fabula 1, etc.
IP-1 – Identity Position 1, etc.
a hundred times – shading (highlighting) for word/phrase that functions in both fabula and sjuzet

Key:

IP-1 – not having beauty
IP-2 – acceptance vs. rejection
IP-3 – not a worthwhile human being
IP-4 – a life of my own

The text is arranged down the left-hand side of each page with a very wide margin to the right where notes and comments can be made. It is this that we call the *working transcript*, upon which narrative analysis can take one or more approaches. NOI outlines six basic strategies, the first being required before using any of the other five.

(i) Sjuzet - Fabula

The next stage of the analysis we claim to be crucial. This involves breaking down the text into its two basic, underlying and inter-related components: into *sjuzet* and *fabula*. After this stage further narrative analysis using a variety of strategies can be taken up.

The distinction between sjuzet and fabula, stems from literary theory, but has most usefully been defined as the distinction between the *unbounded* and *bounded* parts of the narrative by Herman & Vervaeck (2001, p.46). They point out that the sjuzet, which comprises the unbounded parts of the text, can be changed (within reason) without effecting the basic story. The sjuzet is therefore that part which is concerned with the situated-occasioned action of the *telling* of the story, together with emphasis, commentary, reflections, etc. The sjuzet is the "way" in which the story is being told.

In contrast, the fabula is the basic outline of the events as they occurred (or might have occurred). The fabula is described as bounded, because changes in it (even details) will change the story being told. One of the tests for identifying the fabula is that, if it is read through ignoring the sjuzet, then it will "read" as a coherent but rather "flat" or dull story. This separation of sjuzet and fabula is fairly straightforward, but since they do functionally overlap, there can be the odd problem. However, the tension between sjuzet and fabula is insightful in itself.

The convention that we use is to underline the sjuzet (see Table 2). Where a word or phrase functions both in the sjuzet and fabula we highlight it. This is often the case with metaphors and exaggeration. Table 3 clarifies the coding notation being used, which in practice can be more elaborate, but is limited here by considerations for publication.

Our claim is that this first step in analysis provides the groundwork for any further narrative analysis that is to be taken up. We have found that the subtleties of the *sjuzet* are

especially important in understanding the way in which the individual creates an identity position, by actively engaging in their own meaning-making (Hiles, 2007). In addition, the fabula, especially in the case of biographical data, usually can be broken down into a sequence of events or episodes being related. In the excerpt from Tania's story, we have identified these as *Fab1, Fab2, Fab3* and *Fab4*, each a self-contained story in its own right. In doing this, we find the insights of the functional approach of Labov & Waletsky (1967) helpful. They distinguish two functions of narrative: (1) *referential* and *evaluative*, which more or less correspond to fabula and sjuzet respectively in our approach. Labov & Waletsky break down narrative structure into six components: abstract (orientation), setting, complication, evaluation, result (resolution) and coda, not all of which have to be explicit. The use of this coding to identify each fabula/episode in Tania's story is given in the right-hand margin of Table 2.

The final crucial feature of NOI stems from our arguement that a story cannot simply be reduced to a set of themes. Narrative analysis differs from discourse analysis and thematic analysis in that there we must do justice to the story as a whole, as well as the elements that make it up. Also, we want to include in our analysis close attention to the situated-occasioned action context of the *telling*, together with a critical analysis of how the *teller* positions themselves with respect to what is being *told*. To this end we have adopted into NOI, techniques for narrative analysis developed by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber (1998) – see (ii) to (v) below; together with the approach of Emerson & Frosh (2004) – see (vi) below. Because of the limitations of space here, these can be only briefly outlined.

(ii) Holistic–Content
This is the first of the approaches proposed by Lieblich et al, and involves exploring links across Tania's story, linking specific content to the story as a whole, e.g. *disgust – with physical appearance, bullying, father, mother, self – and disgust with life.*

(iii) Holistic–Form
This approach focuses upon the form of the story, the plot that is threading through Fab1 to Fab4, e.g. *rejection after rejection; punctuated by notions of escape, or possible escape: film school, Neurol, [suicide], surgery, a move away; needing "my own life".*

(iv) Categorical–Content
Another approach focuses upon self-contained areas of content, e.g. *school, gym, bullying, psychologist, university, parents, home.*

(v) Categorical–Form
This involves a very careful analysis of the sjuzet. The striking thing here is how Labov & Waletsky's categories of evaluation and coda in particular directly map onto the sjuzet. Psychologically we find this the most enthralling part of the analysis, and this will feed directly into the sixth approach below, e.g. *situated-occasioned action, emphasis, commentary, reflections, enactment, resolve, narrative identity and identity positioning.*

(vi) Critical analysis
The issue here is: "What sort of narrative account of her life is Tania constructing for herself?" and, "How does she position herself with respect to her sense of self in the

context of the series of events that she recounts?" We have extended the work of Emerson & Frosh by developing an approach which stresses that narrative identity is built around what is often a series of inter-related *identity positions* (Hiles, 2007). In the analysis, four different identity positions are coded. One crucial identity position that Tania adopts (i.e. *IP3*) is with respect to her feeling that she is not a worthwhile human being, and her inner rage towards the way she has been treated, as well as her feelings of psychic disturbance. This is powerfully demonstrated in her crucial *enactment* of this rage [Seg. 14]. In her writing, Tania switches to the present tense – this has been highlighted in Table 2, since it functions as both *fabula* (how she felt then) and *sjuzet* (her enactment in the situated action of the telling).

Conclusion

Narrative research tends to foreground the *told*. But what is told cannot be completely separated from the *telling* – how it is told. There are so very many ways in which a telling can proceed. Indeed, behind the told, and the telling, is the *teller*, who positions themselves towards the told, in the nuances and choices made in the telling, and actively engages in constructing a narrative identity.

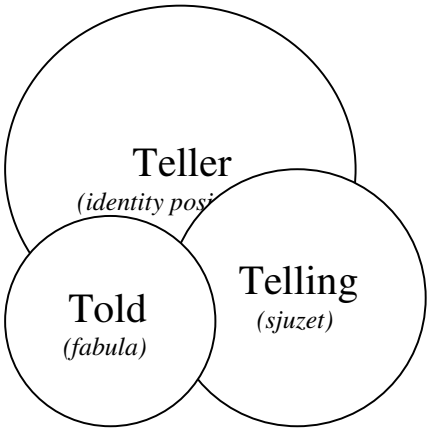

Figure 2: The teller, the telling and the told

In Figure 2 we have tried to characterize what is going on. In narrative inquiry, what is being *told* is often foregrounded. But the told is always inter-related with its particular *telling*, just one of several possible ways of telling. Always, in the background is the *teller*, who is constructing their identity position(s) in the choices they make, of what is to be told, and how this is to be realised in the telling.

Again, we stress that a story cannot be reduced to a set of themes. Moreover, it is the subtleties of the sjuzet that are especially important in understanding the way in which an individual creates personal meaning. We have used Tania's story to demonstrate NOI in action, especially the crucial part played by the *sjuzet* in understanding narrative identity.

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