



Plot and storyline analysis of personal identity narratives

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<a> ABSTRACT

The chapter introduces plot and storyline analysis as a fruitful method to examine narratives of personal identity in and around organizations, drawing on published empirical research. It firstly situates the method in a discussion of the narrative construction of identity before outlining some key principles of narrative analysis. By examining plot and storyline, context and audience, and the use of language and metaphor of two illustrative personal identity narratives, the chapter explains how nuanced insights into research participants' identity work can be gleaned. The chapter concludes with a critical evaluation of the method before proposing three practical steps for researchers new to narrative analysis.

<a> KEY WORDS

Identity work, narrative analysis, organizational change, personal identities, qualitative interviews, social constructionism

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<a> INTRODUCTION

If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if *I* want to know *myself*, to gain insights into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story [emphasis original].
(McAdams, 1993, p. 11)

Much identity research in management and organization studies is based on the premise that identities are socially constructed through narratives (Carniawska, 1998), addressing questions such as ‘who am I’, ‘who are we’, and ‘who are you’ (Kenny et al., 2011). Narratives thus shape the way in which people conceive of themselves as individuals, professionals, and members of particular social groups or organizations in and through social interaction (Brown, 2015). Narratives enable people to construct themselves as a particular human being throughout time – past, present, and future – with the plot (the connection between events) providing a sense of coherence throughout one’s life (Elliott, 2006). The way in which the plot progresses (the storyline, Browning, 1991) signals how identities change over time. Hence, researchers interested in studying identities do well to get to know their research participants’ stories to understand who they are in a particular context through the narratives they tell (McAdams, 1993). Attempting to collect and analyze people’s stories (or narratives), then, is a logical step for scholars interested in studying identities in and around organizations.

In this chapter, I will introduce the narrative approach to identity analysis focusing on plot and storyline that I took in my study of organizational change and learning (Reissner, 2008). Analysis of plot and storyline provides a framework in which people’s personal identity narratives can be meaningfully examined, as I will illustrate below. Specifically, I will show how I have used concepts such as plot and storyline, together with considerations of context, audience, language, and metaphor to inform the conclusions drawn in Reissner (2010). By ‘walking’ the reader ‘through’ the practical steps taken in the original analysis, I seek to elucidate the benefits of narrative analysis for the study of personal identities in and around organizations.

This chapter is structured as follows. Next, I will outline the theoretical foundations and underpinning assumptions of a narrative construction of identity, followed by an introduction to narrative analysis as a research method. Then, I will briefly introduce the research from which the chapter derives before demonstrating how I analyzed the plot and storyline of two illustrative identity narratives, how I interpreted my findings, and what questions remained. Finally, I will critically evaluate the use of plot and storyline analysis to examine personal identity narratives and provide recommendations for readers who are new to this method.

<a> NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

The assumption that people construct their identity, or sense of self, through narrative is well established in the field of psychology. Bruner (1990), for example, argues that the main feature of

narrative is sequentiality, that is, the ‘unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings’ (p. 43). This unique sequence of events is also known as plot – ‘how and in what order the reader [or listener] becomes aware of what happened’ (Bruner, 1986, p. 19) and how, throughout their lives, people interpret how such events affect who they are (Fisher, 1989). The plot not only gives events a temporal order in terms of what happened first, second, third, etc., but also establishes implicit causal connections between these events (Bruner, 1986). Forster (1962, p. 62) famously distinguishes between the following two sentences: (A) ‘The king died, then the queen died’, and (B) ‘The king died, then the queen died of grief’. He argues that (A) is *not* a narrative because there is no causal connection – explicit or implicit – between the king’s and the queen’s deaths. In contrast, (B) is a narrative because the words ‘of grief’ establish a causal connection between both their deaths.

Sequentiality in narratives is also assumed to connect one’s beginning (birth) with one’s end (death) through an ongoing, yet not necessarily continuous, account of who someone is and what one does. In other words, narratives help people to make sense of their ‘scattered and often confusing experiences’ (McAdam, 1993, p. 11) and to manage the tension between stability (‘who I am’) and change (‘who I could / want / ought to be’) (Elliott, 2006). This, in turn, allows them simultaneously to be anchored in the past and to change and develop in the present and for the future. Identity narratives are thus multiple and fluid (Weick, 1995), incorporating different facets of who a person portrays themselves to be at different times, in different situations, and to different audiences. In this respect, in and through identity narratives people can connect current actions and future expectations, comment on their ability to control their actions to achieve a desired outcome, reflect on feeling valued, and generate self-worth (Sommer & Baumeister, 1998).

Narratives further help people to explore different scenarios (Polkinghorne, 1988), including scenarios of who they could or should be as a person, professional, or member of an organization. This ability to (re)construct one’s identity has also been framed in terms of the interpretive process of identity work, defined as ‘people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). Polkinghorne (1988) argues that this process involves incorporating new experiences into one’s identity narrative to enable people to understand the event and continue to construct the ongoing narrative of their lives. I posit that such agency to reconsider one’s identity is particularly pertinent in situations in which people are expected to change (e.g. career progression), or in which they are required to respond to new circumstances such as organizational change.

In summary, narratives have been considered to play a fundamental part in the construction of identities. By being able to integrate new events into existing meaning systems (Polkinghorne, 1988), narratives enable people to combine both stability and change, uniqueness and sameness, and structure and agency (Brown, 2019) in a single account. Listening to and recording people’s narratives will thus allow researchers interested in identity to understand which of a person’s multiple and fluid identities is reported or enacted in a particular situation. Key concepts of narrative analysis, such as plot and storyline, will help such interpretations as discussed next.

<a> NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Before discussing some of the key concepts of narrative analysis, I will explore briefly what I am concerned with in this chapter. One of my frustrations is that the terms ‘narrative’, ‘story’, and ‘storytelling’ are overused in scholarly discourses. While a text, picture, or object can *tell* a story, these artefacts are *not* stories themselves. Let us start with the term ‘narrative’, which can be defined as a story or account of events or experiences, with storytelling referring to the act of recounting such an account. In this chapter, I will use the terms ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ interchangeably, although other authors distinguish between them. Narratives can be fully formed with a beginning, a middle, and an end, as typically found in the literature and also in rehearsed anecdotes in spoken language; they have been called ‘big stories’ (Bamberg, 2006) or ‘linear-plot stories’ (Boje, 2006). However, narratives can also be more tentative, improvised, and fluid as part of everyday communication called ‘small stories’ (Bamberg, 2006), ‘ante-narrative’ (Boje, 2001), or ‘conversational narrative’ (Norrick, 2010).

Readers new to narrative research may wonder how to go about collecting appropriate data. Since humans are regarded as storytellers by nature (Fisher, 1989), narratives in both their ‘big’ and ‘small’ varieties abound in social interaction, texts, and research interviews. Czarniawska (1998, p. 29), for instance, argues that so-called ‘narrative interviews [...] become a natural development in serial interviewing, which usually starts with a thematically focused interview’. As I will show below, a narrative (such as about a person’s identity) might be told as part of a longer answer to an at first glance unrelated question. Generally, I find asking relatively open questions, such as ‘could you please tell me about...’ helpful to ‘elicit’ narratives. Also, follow-up questions, such as ‘could you please give me an example of...’, can encourage research participants to ‘tell a story’. Important here is the recognition that ‘both the structure (the plot) and the main concepts (metaphors) are chosen by the interlocutor’ (ibid.), that is the research participant, providing rich material for analysis, interpretation, and theorizing as discussed below.

Narrative analysis, then, is ‘the systematic examination of narratives and analyses of other verbal and nonverbal expressions according to narrative qualities, elements, and dynamics of narrative use’ (Daiute, 2014, p. 272). These qualities, elements, and dynamics not only include plot, temporality, and causality between events (Bruner, 1986), as well as identity work and meaning (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) as discussed above but also audiences and social contexts (Elliott, 2006). Narratives require an audience, which can include the self (for example, when trying to make sense of oneself as implied in the opening quote), important others (for instance, when presenting oneself as a leader to a promotions committee), or researchers interested in studying identity, its formation, or change. Similarly, narratives are situated in a particular social and/or organizational context as different identities are evoked or challenged in different situations. For example, a manager may emphasize an identity of ‘supportive people person’ in interaction with their staff, enact a ‘strong leadership’ identity when dealing with misbehaviour at work, and portray themselves as an eloquent ‘person of world’ when interacting with important external stakeholders.

Hence, narrative analysis enables scholars through the narratives told in interviews or texts, and/or the stories overheard in observations to examine the potential meanings that are communicated or contested to a particular audience at a particular time in a particular context, and for a particular purpose. As Squire et al. (2008, p. 1) argue, ‘most often, perhaps, we frame our research in terms of narrative because we believe that by doing so we are able to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change’. In identity research, these meanings can relate to, firstly, how people talk about their experiences and the effects thereof on who they are / could be / ought to be as a person, professional, or member of a social group or organization. Secondly, these meanings can relate to how people position themselves as a particular person in a particular context. This can be fruitfully observed in studies of organizational change as people may portray themselves as hero or victim, winner or loser (e.g. Reissner, 2010), two examples of which I will explore further below. Thirdly, these meanings can also relate to how important others (e.g. employers, managers) seek to shape one’s identity (Gabriel, 2008) through perceptions and actions that enable or constrain who a person could or wants to be. For example, employers may provide leadership training with a view to turning an ‘ordinary’ employee into a ‘leader’, thereby affecting the candidates’ identity.

There are many approaches to narrative analysis, including dialogical, ethnographic, contextual, and embodied (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) approaches, holistic and categorical analysis of both content and form (Lieblich et al., 1998), and even quantitative approaches (Elliott, 2006). In my research, I have found it useful to focus on the key features of narrative – plot and storyline. According to Bruner (1986), the plot and its inherent temporal and causal relationships is what characterizes a narrative in comparison to a non-narrative text, which has been powerfully expressed by Czarniawska (2004) as the ‘and, and, and’ connections. Identifying the plot can help researchers to understand what a narrative is about and how it progresses. The latter has been called ‘storyline’ (Browning, 1991) and encompasses positive developments (ascending storyline), negative developments (descending storyline), or not much change to the situation reported in the narrative (plateau storyline). The storyline can thus give insights into whether a person’s identity is reported to have been strengthened, challenged, or maintained in the given situation (see Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

In addition, I have found Gubrium & Holstein’s (2009) notion of narrative reality helpful to understand the interplay between the content of a narrative (the ‘what’) and the way in which it is presented (the ‘how’) to enable more fine-grained analysis and interpretation. The ‘what’ of narrative reality can be examined further through the plot (Bruner 1986) as well as the characters and their symbolic roles and values (Daiute, 2014). The ‘how’ of narrative reality can be examined further through storyline (Browning, 1991), genre (such as tragedy or comedy, see Gabriel 2000), or metaphor (figure of speech with symbolic meanings, see Czarniawska, 1998). Gubrium and Holstein (2009) argue that several cycles of examining the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of narrative reality will enable deep and sophisticated understanding of narratives. While it is relatively straightforward to apply these concepts to ‘big stories’, it is more challenging to do so in relation to more fragmented ‘small stories’. To understand the content, form, and morale of a narrative, researchers may need to fill gaps

through their knowledge of the social context, while also accepting that their interpretations of such accounts may remain but tentative.

<a> RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The research from which Reissner (2010) and this chapter derive was a comparative study of organizational change and learning that involved three manufacturing firms that had gone through major change. I interviewed 30 managers and employees from each organization to learn more about the change programme and its effects on the organization and its members, using what Czarniawska (1998) calls ‘narrative interviews’. The interview questions were largely open-ended to encourage research participants to tell their stories of organizational change and learning. While the interviews also included questions about the research participants’ age band, job title, educational background, and length of service in the respective organization, I did not ask specifically about their personal situation (marital status, children etc.) but only included these details in my interpretation when mentioned in the interview account (see Silverman, 2017).

Moreover, I was given access to internal documents and an opportunity to spend time in the three organizations to have informal conversations with staff and observe both spaces and people, which I captured in fieldnotes. This engagement with the organizations and their members helped me to understand the social and organizational contexts in which the interview accounts were situated and enabled, I would argue, more meaningful interpretation of the more fragmented accounts in particular. While an analysis of organizational texts and my fieldnotes is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will refer to them when situating the narratives in their wider context as part of my analysis and interpretation provided below.

The interview data were analyzed with a focus on the macro (how wider socio-economic changes affected the organization), the meso (how people narrated these organizational changes), and the micro (how these changes impacted people personally) (Reissner, 2008). When considering the micro level of analysis, I noticed specific instances in which research participants spoke about how the change programme affected their identity as a person in terms of self-worth as well as their identity as a professional in terms of their career prospects and value to the organization. These instances were typically constructed as narratives in which people compared their position and prospects before and after the change programme. In all three case organizations, some research participants portrayed themselves as winners, others as losers, depending on whether their hopes and expectations for the future had been met or disappointed (Reissner, 2010). In the practical examples below, I will use the narratives from Adam and William, both from the case of a South African steelmaker I call Steel Corp because of their contrasting narrative features¹.

In preparation for the analysis, I familiarized myself with the data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts against the background of my research questions, in this context a focus on accounts of

¹ An analysis with excerpts from the other two case organizations can be found in Reissner (2008; 2010) for readers wishing to learn more about the study and its findings.

personal identity. As part of this process, I identified the key issues that research participants spoke about before selecting data excerpts in narrative form (both in terms of ‘big’ and ‘small’ stories, see Bamberg, 2006) and subjecting them to more detailed analysis using plot and storyline as discussed next.

<a> ANALYZING NARRATIVES OF PERSONAL IDENTITIES: TWO PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

In this section, I will discuss two illustrative examples of personal identity narratives to explain how I analyzed them. The first narrative was given by Adam, who at the time of data collection was a plant manager at Steel Corp. It was part of a longer conversation in which he talked about his time at the organization. When asked about his first impression of working at Steel Corp., Adam gave the following answer:

I never thought I would survive at Steel Corp, personally. It's coming from the South African background, not the company per se. [...] Steel Corp is a purely Afrikaans-dominated company. So probably [the perception was that] a black guy is inferior and useless and not going to survive. Firstly, I never thought of being at any stage a senior operator because the policies of the past were of such a nature that there was job reservation. At certain colour lines, your prospects would end – that was it. That's why I studied immediately. Firstly, [...] because I had my own personal ambitions I know that I didn't work at the furnaces till I die. [...] With the little finance I get I have to start and look into what I want. [...] And as the system changes and things are changing, I was almost the first black operator, the first black supervisor and the first black manager [...] which is a signal of a lot of change. When the change came through, your ideas also changed. I mean you influence the system and the system influences you in return. And I happened to find Steel Corp home. Here I am sitting thirteen and a half years! [...] I won't leave Steel Corp for any other place. [...] If you were looking at the whole organisation structure, it used to have a couple of layers before. And when you were looking into the structure you thought "I'll never become a general manager". But I think my perception has changed now to "why not"? I know what's required for becoming a general manager. [...] As the de-layering takes place you see that "oh, from my position to the general manager it's only three positions left." So the longer I'm here, the more experience I acquire and the more I deliver results [...], the chances are there. So when you pace up with the changes you will definitely have an opportunity. (Reissner, 2010, p. 292)

While a certain disconnect between the focus of the question (his first impression of the company) and the content of this excerpt is apparent, the narrative can be summarized as being about a man who achieved career development against the odds. It starts off at a time when his skin colour would limit his employment prospects, a situation that he did not want to accept and therefore invested in his education. He worked hard and eventually his contribution and achievements were recognized, and he was promoted repeatedly to a fairly senior position with prospects to become general manager of the organization.

The social context in which this account was constructed is central to understanding the narrative. As analysts or readers, we need to know that the case study was situated in post-Apartheid South Africa during a time of rapid socio-political change. The Employment Equity Act came into force in 1998 to ensure equality and fair treatment of all employees, regardless of their ethnicity. The effects on people's employment prospects following a period of profound change at Steel Corp. became apparent at the time of data collection in 2002. As argued in more detail in Reissner (2008), in Steel Corp. this meant that promising employees from the previously disadvantaged black and coloured ethnic groups would be fast-tracked into higher positions, while most members of the previously advantaged white minority were facing demotion or redundancy. Over the course of the change programme, more than 50% of Steel Corp. employees (the vast majority being white males) were either made redundant or forced to retire at the age of 50, and in some cases in their forties, with little or no job prospects elsewhere as other organizations faced comparable pressures to rebalance the demographic profile of their staff.

The plot of Adam's narrative is structured chronologically and follows the typical story structure of beginning (*'I never thought I would survive at Steel Corp.'*), middle (*'I was almost the first black operator, the first black supervisor and the first black manager'*), and end (*'I happened to find Steel Corp home'* and *'from my position to the general manager it's only three positions left'*). The causality is two-fold: Adam attributes his career progression to his *'personal ambitions'* and his part-time studies, while recognizing the removal of structural barriers in Steel Corp. as an enabling factor. The storyline of Adam's account is ascending (Browning, 1991) in that he reports initially facing a bleak future at the furnaces but through his ambition, hard work, and the abolition of structural barriers achieved career progression. Adam's narrative is that of a success story, which is also implied by his language. As Browning (1991) argues, such narratives have energy and are driven by the central character, in this case Adam himself. Throughout the narrative, he emphasizes his role as a herald of new times by stating that *'I was almost the first black operator, the first black supervisor and the first black manager'* repeating the word 'first' three times. Elsewhere in the interview he commented that he was regarded as a role model by other black staff members who were equally talented and ambitious, and keen to achieve equal career progression.

Of course, analysts and readers need to be mindful of the audience for this account. Adam's narrative was co-constructed with me as researcher during a research interview². This means that the interview account cannot tell us what *really* happened but how Adam wanted to be seen by the audience (the researcher and the readers of any subsequent research reports) in an attempt of impression management (see Alvesson, 2011). He positioned himself first and foremost as a successful manager by emphasizing his agency: *'I studied immediately'*, *'I had my personal ambitions'*, *'I have to look at [...] what I want'*. Adam also highlighted his career trajectory in comparison to his peers (*'I was almost the first black operator, the first black supervisor and the first black manager'*) as well as his loyalty to the organization (*'I happened to find Steel Corp home. Here I am sitting thirteen and a half years!'*), highlighting his value to Steel Corp.

² See Holstein and Gubrium (1995) for details about the co-construction of research interviews.

So what does this tell us about Adam's identity as reported in this narrative? Within the inherent constraints of research interviews, Adam explains how his identity changed from that of a lowly furnace worker to a valued plant manager with potential to become the organization's general manager in the future. At the beginning, he stated that due to his skin colour his value as a person and as a Steel Corp. employee was limited in the socio-political context of Apartheid South Africa (*'a black guy is inferior and useless and not going to survive'*). This is then juxtaposed with what appears to be a quick succession of promotions which no longer fitted the way in which others saw him – as *'inferior'*, *'useless'*, and *'not going to survive'*. Rather, Adam now positions himself as an experienced and skilled manager who rose up the ranks with realistic potential to make it to the very top (*'I think my perception has changed now to "why not"?'*). Yet, he also emphasized that his identity had not really changed – that he had always trusted in his skill and abilities and known his self-worth and value when highlighting his drive and ambition. This narrative thus shows how stability and change in relation to a person's identity (what they report to be *'really like'*) can be skilfully interwoven.

The second illustrative example by William provides a contrasting narrative in many ways. It follows an explanation that he was demoted from a managerial to an administrative position as a result of large-scale restructuring. When asked about whether as a training professional he was attached to one of the many of Steel Corp. plants, William explained that he was based at the organization's generic training department. As part of this explanation, he said:

All that's in my office [now] is a computer and a printer, and there's email and a telephone and things like that. So when I've presented the training I also take pictures from the [participants]. When I come back to the office, then I start processing the [training] licences because the photo must be on there, the ID must be there. That is now what's happening: you must do multitasking. There's no typist any more and ... you have all the details, you must do [the licence] yourself. You cannot ask the photography department to take a picture, to load it down onto your computer, to copy and paste it, to make it to the size you want and to put it on the licence. And that's why I say, if you can't keep up with the change, then you're going to fall off the bus. (Reissner, 2010, p. 293).

You may have noticed that here, too, there is a certain disconnect between the question about where William's job role was situated and his answer, which was part of a longer explanation of his work post-restructuring. The narrative told in this excerpt is about a man who lost privileges at work and had to get used to an enhanced portfolio of tasks. It recalls a time when the man had access to typists and photographers to produce training licences but emphasizes what the job involves *'now'* – him having to do everything himself. It is a terse and fragmented account in which the reader requires some understanding of the context in which the narrative is situated. In addition to the socio-political context of post-Apartheid South Africa, the Employment Equity Act, and the associated organizational changes in Steel Corp. outlined above, analysts need to know that racial discrimination was firmly embedded in the organization. In particular, the white minority working in managerial and

administrative positions had privileges, status, and support, such as the typist and photographer that William mentioned, from which they derived value as a person and professional. In other words, not only was William affected by the Employment Equity Act (hence his demotion from manager to 'ordinary' training professional) but his support system was removed as part of the restructuring, and consequently his job role grew and his personal value as a Steel Corp. employee diminished.

The plot of William's narrative is more difficult to analyze as he sandwiches the past between the present rather than giving the account chronologically. He starts off with a description of the equipment in his office (*'All that's in my office [now] is a computer and a printer, and there's email and a telephone and things like that.'*) before explaining what his work entails (*'So when I've presented the training I also take pictures from the [participants]. When I come back to the office, then I start processing the [training] licences because the photo must be on there, the ID must be there. That is now what's happening: you must do multitasking'*). He then explains that he used to have a typist and photographer (*'There's no typist any more and ... you have all the details, you must do [the licence] yourself. You cannot ask the photography department to take a picture, to load it down onto your computer, to copy and paste it, to make it to the size you want and to put it on the licence.'*) who used to produce the training licences for him. William ends the narrative with a statement that suggests his concerns for the future (*'And that's why I say, if you can't keep up with the change, then you're going to fall off the bus.'*). Causality is but implicit in this narrative: the way in which William constructs this account contrasts the 'then' and the 'now' with the connection between the two – the effects of large-scale socio-political and organizational change – not explicitly stated.

William's narrative has a descending storyline (Browning, 1991), referring to a time when work was easy for him as his role was supported by others but emphasizes that he was now required to do '*multi-tasking*'. He alludes to a time when he was a valued manager with privileges that stood for status. Through the demotion and the loss of privileges, his prospects at Steel Corp. are now limited. According to Browning (1991), narratives with a descending storyline are tragic accounts with decline being marked by a sudden loss that leads to further uncontrollable events in a downward spiral. The metaphor 'falling off the bus' used at the end of this interview excerpt suggests that William is feeling out of control. At the time of data collection, I was told in many informal conversations that, realistically, William's days at Steel Corp. were counted and his prospects of finding work elsewhere minimal simply because of his ethnicity, gender, and age – white, male, over 50. As with Adam's account, William's narrative was co-constructed with me as a researcher and therefore cannot tell what 'really' happened. It does suggest, however, that William is mourning the loss of the 'good old days' when he had status and felt valued, whereas now he is feeling under pressure to deliver what is expected from him.

So what does this tell us about identity? In this narrative, William gives a glimpse into how his identity changed from a privileged and valued manager to an ordinary employee who not only has to take on more tasks to do his job but who also feels under pressure to remain in employment. His account implies that he is the victim of external circumstances, unable to exercise agency, and feeling out of

control. Understanding the socio-political and organizational context is paramount here because of what William does not mention explicitly. In this respect, ‘that which is not said is as important as that which is said’ (Mazzei, 2003, p. 361 citing Giroux, 1988, p. 4) as it can signify something that research participants feel unable to express, for example because it is politically incorrect. Off the record, I had many conversations with white Steel Corp. staff who suggested that so-called ‘employment equity candidates’ from the previously disadvantaged black and coloured ethnic groups were not as well qualified and diligent as themselves – a legacy of a racially divided past and no longer socially acceptable to be voiced on record.

In terms of how he constructed this account, William could have told this narrative in chronological order (as Adam did), explicating what his job entailed prior to the changes and what it entails now. He could have highlighted the structural barriers that have led to his demotion and loss of status. However, William focuses on the present and only hints at the past. I can but speculate why William chose to present his ‘victim’ narrative in this way. Was this because I am also white and may therefore have been perceived as a bit of an ally, understanding between the lines what he meant? Was he weary about whether the data could get back to his employer and concerned about getting into trouble by spelling things out, therefore keeping his account ambiguous? Was it too painful for William to explicitly juxtapose past and present because it would have highlighted his reduced value to the organization? Or was he keen despite his situation to give me an impression of him as a capable professional?

<a> CRITICAL EVALUATION

The two illustrative examples discussed above have been chosen deliberately to include one fully formed and one more fragmented narrative and also to include differences in plot and storyline. However, no causal relationship between plot and structure is sought to be implied, that is, that accounts of success are typically told as fully formed narratives and accounts of decline as fragmented. Of course, it is possible that narratives of success such as Adam’s have been rehearsed and told many times to different audiences, aiding their telling in traditional story format of beginning, middle, and end (see also Reissner & Pagan, 2013). Similarly, it is possible that narratives of decline such as William’s may be told in a more tentative manner because they will be more difficult to tell in a face-saving manner. Rather, I chose these two practical examples to explore some of the potential differences in personal identity narratives that researchers may encounter in their data.

Before critically evaluating plot and storyline analysis as introduced above, I want to briefly comment on the fact that the two narratives were part of a longer answer to an at first glance unrelated question. In none of the interviews did I ask research participants about their identity; yet, many times they referred who they were / are / could be. This implies that collecting narratives of personal identity in research interviews might be more straightforward than readers new to this approach might expect (see also Czarniawska, 2004). By using largely open-ended interview questions about people’s experiences, researchers can ‘elicit’ personal identity narratives both ‘big’ and ‘small’ (Bamberg, 2006). As such, there is no need to learn a specific interviewing technique, although reflexive

engagement with one's interviewing practice and commitment to continually developing it further might be beneficial³.

In terms of the analysis itself, you will have realized that narratives with a chronological structure are easier to examine because, metaphorically speaking, the listener / reader is 'talked through' the events step by step, as shown in Adam's account. In contrast, more fragmented narratives, such as William's account, may need to be rephrased by the analyst to trace the order in which events happened as I have done above. This will help researchers to understand what happened when, what causality is stated or implied, and what gaps there may be. The implication for research design is that deeper engagement with the context of the study and/or group(s) of research participants (for example as part of a case study) can aid this filling of gaps as each interview, conversation, and observation will add to the 'mosaic' of the research context. While I have sought to make sense of William's narrative, the limitations of searching for meaning in the content and structure of his account have been reflected in the questions posed at the end of the previous section.

Hence, narrative analysis does not enable identification of a single, 'true' identity. While Czarniawska (1998, p. 28) posits that narratives 'relate actual, not generalized, events ... or hypothetical events ... [and] come near to ... direct observation', they are situated in the specific research context and therefore do not 'reflect' a single, 'true' reality (Edwards, 1996). Indeed, narrative analysis is typically employed in social constructionist research (Brown, 2019), which assumes that knowledge and meaning are generated in and through social interaction and the stories that people tell. The insights gleaned from narratives thus are contextual, providing but glimpses into often multiple and fluid identities (Weick, 1995). Researchers, therefore, should not draw conclusions about who a person is outside of the specific context of the research interview or observation (Silverman, 2017).

Rather, the strength of narrative analysis lies in examining how people report who they (think they) are or, rather, who they wish to be seen as (Czarniawska, 1997) at different times, in different contexts, and through different symbolic roles (Gabriel, 2008). Hence, personal identity narratives are a social construction of a particular identity that research participants communicate either to a researcher in an interview, as in my study, or to an organizational audience as part of a meeting that may be observed for research purposes. Paying attention to what people say and how they construct a narrative can help researchers to interrogate their data from different angles and construct new and/or further potential meanings (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Daiute, 2014). I have used plot and storyline, context and audience, and the use of language and metaphor to analyze the two narratives above to underpin the conclusions drawn in Reissner (2010).

An emphasis on the narrative features of plot and storyline distinguishes narrative analysis from other discursive approaches, which might examine the reproduction of social inequalities (critical discourse analysis), the impact of power regimes on the self (Foucauldian discourse analysis), or the

³ Reissner (2018) posits that critical engagement with one's interviewing practice can aid researcher reflexivity. The paper provides a summary of reflective, ethnographic, relational, conversation analytic, and visual-textual approaches to advancing researcher reflexivity.

achievement of social or ideological actions (interpretative discourse analysis). The decision of which approach to use will depend on the specific focus of a study. However, since these approaches are underpinned by similar onto-epistemological assumptions, it is possible to analyze a qualitative dataset by using more than one method in a comparative manner⁴.

<a> RECOMMENDATIONS

To conclude this chapter, I wish to make three recommendations for readers new to narrative analysis, informed by my learning and development as a researcher over the years.

Firstly, I would encourage you to engage with the different definitions and conceptualizations of narrative, story, and storytelling in management and organization studies as well as the wider social sciences to better understand the nuances between these concepts that I have deliberately glossed over in this chapter so as not to overcomplicate the subject matter. I would specifically recommend the seminal work by Boje (1991), Czarniawska (1997), and Gabriel (2000) as well as subsequent articles to develop your understanding of what is meant by narrative, story, and storytelling, and whether and how to distinguish between them in your research. While this might take some time, a thorough understanding of these concepts will provide you with a strong foundation for the use of narrative analysis as a research method to study identities in and around organizations.

Secondly, I would encourage you to explore and, where appropriate, experiment with, different approaches to narrative analysis in the light of your research question, research design, and underpinning onto-epistemological position. I would specifically recommend the seminal texts by Lieblich et al. (1998), Elliott (2006), Riessman (2008), Holstein and Gubrium (2012) as well as articles published in relevant methodological journals⁵. You may want to experiment with applying different approaches to narrative analysis to get a hands-on understanding of their respective benefits and limitations before deciding on one or the other. It is possible that only a combination of techniques from different approaches to narrative analysis does justice to your study and dataset, which might lead to a novel approach to narrative analysis and subsequently to methodological innovation that Lê and Schmid (2022) have recently called for in the context of qualitative research more generally.

Thirdly, I would encourage you embrace the multiplicity and fluidity of narratives (Weick, 1995) of personal identities and the diverse interpretations they invite. It can, of course, be challenging for narrative researchers to convince reviewers and editors of the rigour of their work when there is no single, ‘true’ conclusion about who a person ‘really’ is, which appears to be widely expected in a publishing landscape that values quality criteria grounded in positivistic paradigms (Cassell & Symon, 2015). However, given that the purpose of research is to challenge existing and/or construct

⁴ Cassell and Bishop (2019) provide a powerful account of the insights gleaned through different compatible methods of data analysis, which inspire the use of different narrative approaches to the analysis of personal identity narratives.

⁵ In organization research, these journals include, in alphabetical order, *Organizational Research Methods*, *Qualitative Research in Organization and Management*, and the methodology sections of *British Journal of Management* and *European Management Review*. In the wider social sciences, journals worth considering include, again in alphabetical order, *Narrative Inquiry*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, and *Qualitative Research*.

new knowledge, trying to find out who a person 'really' is might actually limit the further development of identity research in and around organizations.

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