

Czarniawska, B. (2004). **Narratives in Social Science Research. Introducing Qualitative Methods.** London: Sage Publications.

Reviewed by: *Helle Spindler*, Ph.D. fellow, Department of Psychology, Aarhus University

As a novice in the field of qualitative research and with a growing interest in narratives, I gathered this was an excellent opportunity to become enlightened. Little did I know, how much I did not know, and how much knowledge was already there.

The history of narratives in social science research is concisely introduced in the first chapter, which continues by arguing the case for narratives as a legitimate and valuable field of interest to researchers. A lot is achieved in a very short time, and although informative a lot of prior knowledge is required to follow the line of argument. The suggestions for further reading are to a large extent a requirement if one wants to truly understand what is being communicated. In that respect, this book is not just introducing qualitative research, but expects the reader to have some prior knowledge relating to this field.

The following chapter goes into the development of narratives, how are they made, what distinguishes them from other types of text. More importantly, the chapter introduces the concept of employment, a way of illustrating the underlying genre and structure of each narrative. This part of the book is interesting because it describes how we as human beings communicate through the use of narratives, and how the narrative can be identified in a much wider perspective than novels and stories. Having gained our new employment perspective we are ready to go and look for narratives in a variety of places. To aid us in our endeavour Barbara Czarniawska uses a lot of examples from her own research in order to illustrate the process of employment, i.e. the making of a narrative. She continues this technique in the following chapters, when introducing other concepts and ideas. These examples work very well in terms of illustrating something that can be very complex. For the novice reader they make the text come alive and they assist in narrating the theory. Furthermore the examples also serve the purpose of enabling the reader to tie theoretical methodology to empirical practice, by bridging the gap between theoretical discourse and empirical reality.

Equipped with knowledge of narratives, their history, function, and structure we are now ready to collect our narratives. To support the understanding of this process the book sets up challenges for the reader, in that each chapter is followed by exercises designed to illustrate the concepts and processes described. Having read about the background and how to collect narratives the reader is invited to use his or her own stories, or material from the media to practice identifying narratives. To some extent these exercises transcend the book and teach

you the actual practice of working with narratives, which is a strength throughout the book. Using one's own examples rather than some given by the author supports a learning process, which is aimed at teaching empirical practice and not just theoretical methodology. The suggestions for further reading along with the exercises define this book as an educational textbook, rather than a textbook per se. In itself this book does not cover all there is to know, but it may serve as a text that creates a theoretical and practical link between literature, empirical practice, and other sources of information relating to narratives in social science.

After having collected narratives the next step, of course, is to read and more importantly analyse the narratives you have identified. This part of the book is dense and difficult to read, since each chapter is limited in space, but tries to describe the implications of various large and complex traditions within a few paragraphs. Although it is possible to follow the line of argument, prior knowledge or additional reading will definitely be an advantage. This aside, this section is also the most interesting, as it outlines how differently a text can be read, what roles the different aspects of the hermeneutic triad, explication, explanation and exploration, play, and how differently they can be construed in the various traditions. Again, the use of examples makes an excellent addition to denseness of the text, illustrating the different layers of a narrative and how that influences the message that comes across. Reading this book brings new awareness concerning the influence of scientific traditions on the text produced that in turn may bring new insight to the reading of familiar text, something that is also suggested in the exercises. In that respect the whole book is a challenge to the reader, in that nothing is sacred, no text, no "theoretical bible" or valued theory can any longer be considered neutral. Everything, even scientific text is narrated and influenced by the theoretical stance of the author.

This is in fact the focus of the last part of the book, which argues that social science can be written and read with narration in mind. Regardless of what subject area, what kind of a social scientist you are, you will be narrating your own story, when communicating your findings, theoretical stance and anything else. As social scientists, we often tend to use the passive academic style of writing, and maybe even of talking, but regardless of the style of communication we use, we are, according to Czarniawska, narrating that which we communicate. Although, we like to think of science as neutral, that is simply not the case, or rather, once we begin to analyse and write about our field of science, we narrate it and bring our own theoretical understanding to bear on it as we write our story.

This perspective on the social science also requires a word of warning, which of course is also incorporated at the end of the book, namely that awareness of narration carries responsibility. This responsibility is related to how we use the narrative form in the way that we convey our message. Although both fictional and factual stories may be distributed in the narrative form, their phenomenological resemblance, make it difficult to ascertain what is fact and what is fiction. In terms of science this distinction becomes even more important since our expectations of a scientific account is that it is based on facts, i.e. factual narratives, and not fictional ones.

So what is the consequence of all this talk of narratives? Do we need to incorporate a new paradigm or method? Not according to Czarniawska. She claims that the narrative approach designates a new way of looking at our field of research, but not necessarily a change of our theoretical perspective. Borrowing from Richard Rorty (1992) she uses the term “inspired reading” to designate what narratives and narrative reading may bring to our scientific practice. In fact, she extends the implications using the term “inspired writing”. Both inspired reading and inspired writing may be seen as a challenge to a large number of social scientists, but also to a new generation of social scientists, who cannot just copy well-known techniques and practices, but who needs to incorporate new ways and ideals of reading and writing.

Considering the fact that Czarniawska tries to convey the message that narratives are a form of communication, this is not immediately present in the book. Considering the central role of communication that is imminent when working with narratives it is surprising that the author has not considered her audience, students of social sciences, more thoroughly. Although academic tradition does not favour easy-to-read text per se, this does not relieve you of the obligation to assist your reader and keep him/her interested. The author urges her readers to consider the narrative form when communicating their own research findings, but the narrative form and the ease of reading seems not to have been on the top of the agenda, when this book was written. If you want your message across, you sometimes need to “nurse” your audience through the difficult beginnings until they comprehend what you want to say before you go on, and therefore you need to create a narrative around your message that is continuously engaging and interesting to your reader. Otherwise this introductory text runs the risk of only addressing those who are already knowledgeable in this tradition, and therefore only seeks to widen their already extensive knowledge. That is, the book tries to do too much in too little space, which leaves the reader with a sense of urgency and lack of cohesion. In 157 pages Czarniawska tries to cover what narratives are, how they can be identified, read, and used in social science research. As part of the literature for a course in qualitative method, going into depth and detail, where Czarniawska is more superficial, and with room for discussion of the text and the exercises carried out, the book may serve its purpose, but I do not think it can achieve this goal by itself. One may suspect Czarniawska of having written the textbook that links the remaining literature she herself uses when teaching qualitative methods focusing on narratives.

Having said all this, I do find myself enlightened after reading the book, and my interest in qualitative methods, and narratives in particular have not diminished. Rather my desire and motivation for exploring this area further has been nourished and the book has provided me with a selection of various other books worthwhile of my attention. To quote the poet Piet Hein “Knowing what thou knowest not is in a sense omniscience”. In other words, the book paves the road for my further readings.

Another message that caught my eye was that using narration as a perspective on human life enables us to try and explain the lawlessness of the social sciences, and why we cannot use prediction in the same way as the natural sciences. In our aim for scientific rigour we continuously turn to the methods of the natural sciences. However, in that endeavour we may

be doing our field of research a big disavour. Finishing on that note, I will leave you with the word of Czarniawska:

“The narrative structure of human life requires unpredictability and this is, paradoxically, why the alleged failure of the social sciences (namely, their failure to formulate laws and consequently the failure to predict) is in fact their greatest achievement.”

Rorty, R. (1992) The pragmatist's progress. In U. Eco. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 89-108.