

Studying narratives

A review of the book *Analyzing narrative reality* by Jaber F. Gubrium & James A. Holstein (2009).

By Tom Strong



Tom Strong is a Professor and counsellor-educator at the University of Calgary who writes on the collaborative, critical and practical potentials of discursive approaches to psychotherapy. Author or co-author of over 70 articles and chapters, and co-author (with Andy Lock) of *Social constructionism: Sources and stirrings in theory and practice* (Cambridge University Press). His other books include *Furthering talk* (with David Paré), and the forthcoming *Discursive perspectives on therapeutic practice* (co-edited with Andy Lock for Oxford University Press). Tom's website is accessible at <http://www.ucalgary.ca/strongt>. Tom Strong can be contacted at: Dr. Tom Strong, Division of Applied Psychology, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta Canada T2N 1N4 or email: strongt@ucalgary.ca

If storytelling is a collaborative activity, how do we know who owns a story? (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 107)

Narrative therapy has always had an elder sibling in narrative research. The notion from the humanities that stories gave personal, social, and cultural meaning and organisation to people's lives is longstanding. But it was only in the 1960s that narrative analysis found its tributaries in a confluence of linguistics (for example, Labov & Waletzky, 1967) and literary theory (for example, Barthes, 1986). Later, as performance-focused anthropologists like Richard Bauman (1986) and conversation analysts, like Gail Jefferson (1978) brought their approaches to studying narrative, this area of scholarship seemed to teem with possibilities. In more recent times, distinct narrative research approaches have burgeoned to a point best exemplified by Jean Clandinin's (2007) massive (720 pages) edited tome, *The handbook of narrative inquiry*. So, it can be a relief to see seasoned qualitative researchers, like Gubrium & Holstein (2009), step into this sprawling diversity to pull out a coherent and useful narrative about studying narratives.

Before going any further, I need to acknowledge that narrative therapists tend to have finely attuned critical radar for words like 'reality' found in this book's title. They also have developed a considerable wariness for the truth claims made by researchers, and how such claims are used as warrant for questionable prescriptions. Relax, you will feel at home in the poststructuralist approach taken by these authors who have authored or edited many books that will resonate with postmodern readers (for example, Gubrium & Holstein, 2007). You may also find many ideas and practices that expand your sense of narrative therapy's pragmatics and possibilities. I will confess to poaching ideas for therapeutic practice for some time from qualitative research (for example, Strong, 2002), and Gubrium & Holstein's volume is a good place for you to consider starting a similar practice yourself.

Why would I suggest that a book intended for narrative researchers might prove a worthwhile read for narrative therapists? My short answer would be that both narrative researchers and narrative therapists have drawn on a common body of ideas to inform their respective, somewhat overlapping, approaches to practice. The overlap obviously comes with an interest in advancing the potentials of narrative as a means for understanding and action. My qualifier, 'somewhat' (that is, 'somewhat overlapping'), refers to some useful distinctions Gubrium & Holstein raise that I think can supplement what narrative therapists customarily bring to their interactions with clients and community groups. In the course of their book, readers gain a sense of how the narrative metaphor caught on across the social sciences, taking us to what contemporary narrative researchers now consider important elements of good narrative research.

I should first address the 'r' word in the book's title. Reality, as it is used here, is the social reality associated with what phenomenologists have long called 'the natural attitude'. By this, we are talking about the linguistically-enabled understandings people use in unquestioned ways (to varying degrees) to make their way through life. Our stories and the words they are composed of are stand-ins of varying effectiveness and suitability for how we make sense of our experiences and each other. Such narrative sense-making is acquired in and through encounters with others' stories and word usage. For Gubrium & Holstein, this extends to the shaping of personal stories from cultural and institutional stories. Narrative reality has no meaning beyond the varied social and cultural conversations in which such shaping occurs, and individuals are not merely ventriloquated by the stories around them either. There is no sense here that narrative researchers can objectively and ultimately adjudicate the correctness, veracity, suitability and so on of narratives for others. Instead, narrative reality is treated as the infinitely variable ways individuals and people-in-relationship make sense of their past, present and future experiences. The conversations from which such narratives are elicited offer data considered as real to narrative researchers as so-called objective measures used in 'hard sciences' such as biomedicine. What matters to Gubrium & Holstein, and why I thought I'd write this book review, relates to their emphasis on how researchers (and narrative therapists) occasion and co-compose, with research participants, the stories they treat as the real data they work with.

Late in their book, Gubrium & Holstein refer to a story's 'borders'. By this word, they are drawing attention to how any narrative's life must be considered in terms of the conversations that flow into and out of a narrative. Seen against the flux and flow of life's experience, narratives are abstractions from, and impositions on, such experience. So, they'd better be apt and useful narratives. Narratives are hardly ready-made; they are kept the same, modified, or discarded in conversations. Thus, one focus of Gubrium & Holstein's narrative researcher is on accounting for how narratives develop contextual and conversational lives from, not only the narrative environments in which they acquired their sense (their natural habitats so to speak),

but also from how the researcher's questions occasion or elicit participants' narratives. Narratives, in other words, cannot be studied apart from the conversations in which they find their meaning. Rest assured that meaning isn't something the narrative researcher determines apart from participants either. The 'borders' of narratives, as much as their content, can be, as Gregory Bateson (1980) would say, odd ways to punctuate reality. However, narratives are how people make sense of and organise what's real in their lives. The narrative researcher's job is to highlight these human constructions, including their own part in 'activating' them.

For me, the most interesting section of this accessible book was on 'narrative work'. Here Gubrium & Holstein write of how narratives are 'activated', how conversation, and particularly how questioning and listening, not only enable accessing narratives, but help them get 'talked into being and significance'. This is a perspective drawn from ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (for example, Heritage, 1984), one focused on what is accomplished in and through social interactions like research interviews. Not only are such participant narratives 'activated', however; in the activation a careful interviewer hears 'linkages' that the authors caution interviewers not to assume are from the private recesses of the participant's (or client's) mind. The challenge here is to link the narrative occasioned in the interview to the broader cultural and institutional stories informing it. In the sense described here, participant narratives are not simple either, as in a re-enactment or re-telling of these broader stories, as linkages in today's postmodern world are not just to one story, but to hybrids that draw on the multiple stories in which participants participate and make sense of their experiences. Further, the researcher effectively smuggles his or her own stories, via questions asked, into the narrative-in-the-making. This raises 'composition' concerns for our authors.

In 'narrative work', researcher and participants are composing narratives 'beyond the linkages in tow' (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, p. 75) that feature the agency of the storyteller. This reads a lot like narrative therapists' ethical concerns (for example, Weingarten, 1992) for whose story gets co-authored in the course of therapeutic dialogue. Considerable attention is given to the performance of research narratives for how they are enacted with participants holding the conversational floor, controlling their plotlines, while recognising that researcher questions and responses (right down to the nonverbals) play a role in a resulting narrative and its enactment. 'Collaboration' is unsurprisingly a chapter unto itself in the 'narrative work' section of the book and the authors remind us that we need to dispose of the 'individual ownership view of stories' (p. 104), and to instead orient to our role in any story's telling.

Gubrium and Holstein's last major section in the book is on 'narrative environments'. They remind us that all human contexts are story-making, story-retaining environments, and how diverse yet overlapping the stories taken up in these contexts can be – even, for example, within the same families. It is within such narrative environments that narratives accord status to those articulating and articulated by them. We are all implicated in and by the moral status and intentions bestowed on the actors within such narratives. Among the narratives finding attention in this book are families, cultures, jobs and organisations. Drawing from poststructuralist literary theorists, the authors even devote a chapter to 'intertextuality' to demonstrate how, in effect, all narratives draw from more than one interpretation or story for experience. Rich case examples to illustrate the points made are offered here and throughout the book.

The book closes with two potentially controversial chapters: 'What is a good story?' and 'Who is a good storyteller?' This was as close to prescriptions as the authors got. But what they prescribe will fit with most readers here: 1) document indigenous categories for what constitutes narrative adequacy (my translation: ask participants if your version of the story equals theirs, and let yourself be corrected), 2) the narratives derived from research must be

compelling or entertaining in ways true to participants, and 3) the narratives were useful in organising thoughts, feelings and planning, while providing a rich account of experience. The 'good storyteller' part tweaked my therapist radar. Participants are truthful and consistent, offering accounts that help shape the research narrative. In therapy, such truthfulness and consistency is sometimes a procedural development from a relationship in which clients learn to trust and appreciate their therapist's role as co-author.

Overall, this book offered the narrative therapist in me confirmation of the utility and ubiquity of narrative as an organiser of thought and behaviour. It also reminded me of some of my own discursively-oriented research into narrative therapy practice (Strong, 2008), wherein what Gubrium & Holstein described as co-composition, can be seen as an intricate conversational dance of therapist and client initiatives and responses to each other. It does not offer the kind of read one might get from the books or articles of key narrative therapy author-practitioners. But, that is where the book offers what Bateson (1980) requires for a kind of binocular vision, by juxtaposing one's normal reading of the narrative therapy literature with a researcher's view of doing good narrative work.

References

- Barthes, R. (1986). The death of the author. In R. Barthes (Ed.), *The rustle of language* (R. Howard, Trans.) (pp. 49–55). New York, NY: Hill and Wang. (Original published in 1968.)
- Bateson, G. (1980). *Mind and nature: A necessary unity*. New York, NY: Bantam.
- Bauman, R. (1986). *Story, performance, and event: Contextual studies of oral narrative*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Clandinin, D. J. (Ed.) (2007). *The handbook of narrative inquiry*. London, England: Sage.
- Gubrium, J., & Holstein, J. (Eds.) (2007). *The handbook of constructionist research*. New York, NY: Guilford.
- Gubrium, J., & Holstein, J. (2009). *Analyzing narrative reality*. London, England: Sage.
- Heritage, J. (1984). *Garfinkel and ethnomethodology*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- Jefferson, G. (1978). Sequential aspects of story telling in conversation. In J. N. Schenkein, (Ed.), *Studies in the organization of conversational interaction* (pp. 213–48). New York, NY: Academic Press:
- Labov, W., & Waletzky, J. (1967). Narrative analysis. In J. Helm (Ed.), *Essays on the verbal and visual arts* (pp. 12–44). Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Strong, T. (2002). Collaboration, meaning-making and therapy: what practitioners can learn from recent developments in qualitative research. Review of *The handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Counselling and psychotherapy research*, 2(3), 209–211.
[doi:10.1080/14733140212331384845](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733140212331384845)
- Strong, T. (2008). Externalising questions: A micro-analytic look at their use in narrative therapy. *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (3), 59–71.
- Weingarten, K. (1992). A consideration of intimate and non-intimate interactions in therapy. *Family Process*, 31(1), 45–59. [doi:10.1111/j.1545-5300.1992.00045.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.1992.00045.x)