NARRATIVE WORKS
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

Guest Editors' Introduction: Narrative on the Move

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In 2010, we initiated the Netherlands Network for Narrative Research (NNN), because we wanted to provide a platform for the broad range of Dutch researchers and practitioners who were hitherto scattered among all sorts of disciplines but who shared an interest in narrative. We felt a network would make visible the magnitude and multifacetedness of the academic and professional body of narrative expertise in the Netherlands and that this would enable a nascent narrative tradition to grow and flourish.

This special issue is a collection of eight papers presented at the first symposium on Narrative Research organized by the NNN and the University for Humanist Studies (Utrecht, The Netherlands), in March 2011. The aim of the symposium was to sketch, and perhaps broaden, the horizon for narrative research in two ways. First, we wanted to bring together narrative researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds in the social sciences and from different geographical locations (The Netherlands, France, the United Kingdom, and Finland). Second, we wanted to bring the Dutch network in contact with other networks or centres of narrative research in Europe, such as the Centre for Narrative Research in London and the Nordic Network of Narrative Studies. We looked for diversity and we found it at the symposium. Based on the resulting diversity of approaches in the papers, we construct in this editorial a dynamic, multi-voiced narrative of the field of narrative inquiry based on the contributions of the authors. Diversity notwithstanding, we also presuppose a common theme to connect the contributions: *narrative on the move*. This theme directs our attention to the question of whether narrative inquiry is moving, and if so, in what direction. We notice three types of movements: in theory, in time, and in

the quality criteria of "real-life" narratives. Our construction of the narrative of *narrative on the move* is based on three questions:

1. Which basic assumptions of narrative inquiry are challenged by the authors of this special issue (their perception of the past)?
2. Which are the new assumptions they hold implicitly or explicitly (their present)?
3. Which assumptions are left untouched or remain implicit?

Below, we summarize which assumptions the authors challenge and with which assumptions they replace them. Based on the new and untouched assumptions, we conclude with an outline for the development of a research agenda for the future of narrative inquiry.

Movements in Theory

The first three contributions, by Matti Hyvärinen, Brian Schiff, and Floor Basten, draw primarily on theory to substantiate a particular (set of) assumption(s) in narrative inquiry.

In his contribution, Matti Hyvärinen builds on previous work as he continues to counter the assumption that narrative can easily and uncritically travel from one discipline to another. In the present paper, he critically addresses a second assumption: the celebratory status of narrative. This, he claims, all too often results in the loose borrowing of concepts from the field of literary studies and a thoughtless application of its narrative concepts to the analysis of sociological data. Alternatively, Hyvärinen emphasizes that an understanding of the diversity of historical and disciplinary trajectories advances narrative theorizing. In particular, he argues that social scientific narrative inquiry can benefit from a more thorough theoretical framework. Implicit assumptions in his paper seem to be that all narrative researchers can and want to use advanced narrative theory and, moreover, that a multiplicity of narrative concepts is good.

Brian Schiff's contribution can be situated within the more general shift in narrative inquiry that goes from narrative as product to narrating as process, as he draws our attention to the functions of narrative and revisits a structural approach. Concurring with Hyvärinen's earlier work, Schiff sees narrative as an imprecise metaphor that needs some precision. His contribution to this greater precision is the argument that the primary function of narrative is *making present*, which he defines

as a variety of showing meaning in time and space. Schiff's contribution affirms the importance of narrative as the primary way of making meaning. Without narrative (re)configuration, there is no making present and no meaning. This assumption could be challenged in future research by unpacking the counter-claims mentioned by Schiff (such as the issue of absence of meaning) and by identifying additional ones (as, for example, Mark Freeman did in his keynote speech at Narrative Matters 2012). *Making present* suggests a performance and expressive action. Following this new assumption formulated by Schiff, questions arise regarding *how,* by narrating, we manage to establish sociality in terms of collaborative meaning-making.

Floor Basten challenges the assumption that community building or sociality automatically takes place simply by sharing stories. In her critique of the often unsupported celebratory status of narrative, which she shares with Hyvärinen, she also challenges the assumptions that social change processes start by collecting unique individual stories, and that the uniqueness of human experience is the primary starting point of narrative analysis. Instead, she argues that the dyad should be privileged as primary unit of social analysis and change. Basten turns to the natural sciences in order to substantiate narrative inquiry as she signals an apparent need to legitimize it in the eyes of policy makers. She draws her conclusions on the dyad as starting point from the reading of the works of Maturana and Varela and other biologists, where she also finds the suggestion that pattern recognition in the human species is only possible due to our narrative capacity. What remains hidden in her argumentation for a biological underpinning of our narrative capacity for patterning is that there might be other ways of establishing patterns than through narrative.

Movements in Time

The contributions by Corinne Squire and Anneke Sools both counteract the retrospective tendency in narrative inquiry by emphasizing the future as a domain interesting for its own sake. Both authors discuss normative and ethical issues that arise when engaging with future imagination, but propose different routes when doing so. Sools and Squire concur that pluriformity in narrative and openness toward the future are good. However, in the different research contexts in which they operate (analysis of existing data versus collaborative artistic inquiry), they diverge on the role researchers play: actively tracing implicit changes

toward better lives, versus facilitating participants to articulate desired change themselves in the course of a creative project.

Corinne Squire challenges the assumption "that narratives work progressively, to improve and adapt, or conservatively, to consolidate, maintain or at times evade, but in any case in a normative way." She argues that narratives do something more important as they register the particularity of difference, dissidence, and the hard-to-understand. Narratives "can be understood as moral appeals from the future" rather than as merely disruptive or fragmented. In her article, a new norm emerges, one of pluriformity and openness, particularly openness to the gift of the future (a concept derived from Derrida). Her position does not entail a relativistic stance in which anything goes, because, she writes, our responses to narratives as gift from the future "matter to us." A new norm of pluriformity, flexibility, and openness emerges. In anticipation of this new assumption, one might question whether there are any instances in which (and for whom) pluriformity and openness are not good. And how do we know the difference?

Anneke Sools challenges two related assumptions: that research participants should always be approached a priori as to a large extent vulnerable and in need of researcher protection; and that the only ethical way of doing narrative analysis of future possibilities is by remaining within the frame of reference of participants. From a resilience perspective, she instead argues for a different (complementary) ethics, one in which participants and their stories can or even should be approached as resilient, with strengths and capacity. However, seeing resilience in stories is not necessarily self-evident to either participant or researcher. Researchers who are in these cases unwilling to abandon the search for how to optimize life all together, can opt for prospective reflection on the stories of participants. A new assumption emerges, namely that ethical narrative research requires a reflexive stance aimed at identifying emerging future possibilities without, however, imposing an external normative framework. The new assumption of Sools raises questions such as when and how vulnerability and resilience should be negotiated in a research setting. What are the ethical and methodological implications when the distinction between analysis and intervention becomes blurred?

Movements in Qualities

The contributions of Gerben Westerhof and Ernst Bohlmeijer, Karin Willemse, and Alexander Maas all discuss formal qualities of (real-life) narratives. Theirs can be regarded as a debate about coherence as the first authors stress its importance for narrative therapy and the latter two condone its absence in narrative reasoning.

The article by Gerben Westerhof and Ernst Bohlmeijer can be considered an anti-postmodern argument as it warns against a too easy dismissal of the criterion of coherence. From the perspective of mental health, fragmentation and lack of coherence can indeed be harmful, they argue, based on a thorough review of the literature. Westerhof and Bohlmeijer represent a move towards establishing an empirical basis for how narrative works and the work it does, in particular to promote mental health. They bring a quantitative approach into the arena and provide empirical evidence for the necessity of coherence in mental health. We view their contribution as a move away from the privileging of qualitative analysis and idiosyncratic studies to creating space in narrative inquiry for quantitative effect-studies. In broadening the methodological, perhaps indeed even the paradigmatic scope, they are able to provide us with empirical evidence for claims regarding one particular function of narrative: that it promotes health. What remains untouched in this article is the possibility that fragmentation and lack of coherence might be good for mental health. Another question might be: when are quantitative and qualitative approaches indeed complementary, and when are they not?

In contrast, Karin Willemse addresses the dominant, western expectation that representations should be coherent (i.e. comprehensible for westerners) and that the subsequent task for narrative researchers is to provide texts that are, first of all, understandable to other western academic audiences. As an alternative, she suggests that a one-sided view of coherence should be opened up to a more inclusive concept of coherence. This inclusive concept allows for congruence among time, place, and story, and defines coherence more from the perspective of participants, yet still in a way understandable to western academics. The researcher then serves as an intermediary between the story world of non-western participants and western audiences. With this move, multiple elements are analysed as the orally produced narrative is subjected to an additional analysis of time and place. What Willemse leaves untouched is whether there can even be a different type of authorship if we want to accommodate western academic audiences and, more importantly,

whether we should always want to accommodate western academic audiences. In sum, for Willemse, coherence and the bounded self remain the norm, even if they are defined differently and more openly.

Alexander Maas explores how the connective function of narrative and storytelling is automatically accomplished. Unlike Basten, he approaches this issue from the perspective of relationships between researcher and researched. As he argues, organizational change agents (i.e., narrative researchers) can facilitate change by using literary means such as connective writing. He applies the writing technique of novelist George Eliot to a collaborative writing effort, and argues that the act of writing in itself generates the sought-after change. Maas seems to suggest that the researcher as change agent has a paradoxical task. He or she is to be engaged with the organization, as suggested in the relational stance; but as a storyteller, he or she is also restricted to the role of facilitator and to not actively engaging with the organizational narrative. The researcher is scholarly, omniscient, and therefore capable of providing an overall view that the organization members lack. As a mere archivist, he remains an outsider to the change process, in which a role reversal takes place (i.e., the organization members become the change agents). The implicit assumption seems to be that the researcher can, and perhaps even should, hold a non-normative position in order for the role reversal to take place. Questions that arise are if and how such a neutral overview on the part of the researcher is possible; whether all organization members are capable of connective writing; and how dissenting voices are incorporated into the overall narrative.

Conclusions and Discussion

In this final section, we revisit some of the new assumptions the authors put forward and discuss some of their silent assumptions. We also attempt to construct a narrative of where narrative inquiry is going when the set of assumptions is widened, and where possible tensions between assumptions arise.

We would position Hyvärinen's article as a proposed move from under-theorized, implicit, and vague uses of narrative to the formulation of an explicit narrative theoretical framework. The contributions of Sools (subjunctivizing strategies analysis) and Maas (connective writing) provide concrete examples of how literary means could be used to advance social scientific narrative research. Schiff seems to agree with Hyvärinen's positive evaluation of pluriformity of concepts and of a more

precise use of the concept "narrative," but also reflects on the risks of a too broad concept that encompasses everything. Both his and Hyvärinen's contributions favour theorizing as a vehicle to substantiate narrative inquiry, but specific to Schiff's move towards function is his proposal to test the validity of concepts in terms of the pragmatics of narrative. While his article stays within the realm of theory, a next step is to empirically test how narratives work and what work they do, as, for example, Westerhof and Bohlmeijer do in their contribution. Basten tries to bridge the gap between theory and practice in a different way. Her input from biology can be considered an attempt to provide scientific credibility by turning to the natural sciences rather than communicating the added value of the literary sciences.

All these authors seem to anticipate a need to boost the scientific status of narrative inquiry, but depending on the audiences they anticipate, they emphasise either theoretical versus empirical substantiation, or alliance with the natural sciences, the social sciences, or the humanities. Both movements could be considered signs of the maturation of the discipline, but they could result in tensions within the discipline. What to do, for instance, with a growing sophistication on the part of the analyst and the status of narrative as a part of everyday life? What is the risk of exaggeration when our analytical tools become so fine-grained that a single utterance can be interpreted in many ways, but when, at the same time, the participant is not involved in the analysis? In other words, who owns narratives and consequent meanings, and what does this mean for the emancipatory potential of voice?

Sools, Squire, Maas, and Willemse, each in distinct ways, revisit and complicate this topic, which has been discussed widely in narrative inquiry. Sools, Willemse, and Maas argue for the active role of the researcher: Sools, by employing advanced literary means to make explicit traces of future possibilities implicit in conversations; Willemse, by taking an intermediary role to integrate and communicate meanings previously unnoticed by Western audiences; and Maas, by using the researcher's omniscient view to facilitate the construction of an organizational narrative. Squire and Maas direct attention to narrative as a medium of change: Squire, by redefining narratives as moral appeals from the future; and Maas, by turning to connective writing.

Taken together, then, we conclude that narrative is indeed on the move, in the sense that the authors develop new, more inclusive assumptions for narrative inquiry. The result is both an expansion and a specification of existing social scientific narrative research regarding

paradigmatic approach, methodology, and ethical stance. The challenge we see for the future of narrative inquiry is how to accommodate the evolution of an increasingly pluriform, inclusive, and specialised field, and at the same time not to obscure important differences and disagreements. Reflecting on this future path, a metaphor suggested itself to us.

Narrative is an adolescent, eager to find its way into a world not yet fully known to it and therefore all the more appealing. Some tend to take up the role of the concerned parent. Is Narrative even ready to go on the move? No, they say, our Narrative still needs some luggage and a passport; we need to equip it with better concepts, better theories, more legitimacy. Others are more *laissez-faire* and see Narrative go out the door without interfering, not necessarily in a loveless way, but more carefree than their concerned counterparts. Narrative is good, and they trust others will see it, too. Narrative is an individual and when left alone, it will evolve by itself. As any good parent knows, however, the answer is always somewhere in the middle between authority and freedom.

In this editorial, we set out to construct a narrative on *narrative on the move* based on the contributions of the authors. Having done so, we want to conclude with our own "parental advice" to Narrative. In a more authoritative tone, we are unwilling to let it go unless it bridges the gap between theory and everyday storytelling practices, and considers the manifold ways of doing so. To be clear, our position does not entail a dichotomy between theory and practice, if only because "there is *nothing more practical than a good theory*" (Lewin, 1952, p.169). In addition, and in a more inviting tone, we are looking forward to discussing and negotiating our stand, and are not afraid to nuance or reconsider it, given sound argumentation. We hope this special issue is a step that will open up for critical scrutiny and fruitful discussion not only where narrative inquiry *is* going, but also where it *should* be going.

References

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