

Title: “Doing” Narratology: Drawing on Literary Theory for Structural Analysis of Narratives

Abstract: This methodology paper explores adopting narratological approaches from literary theory to help understand the structure of narratives. Narratology is the study of how stories are built and developed conceptually. This is in contrast to other narrative methods that analyze themes or linguistic structures in narrative data. While stories can be structured and interpreted in various ways, we look specifically at how emotionally charged occurrences give rise to conceptual “chunks” of student stories and can be used to understand larger emergent patterns in those stories. We use this method to analyze data collected during a larger study on emotions felt by engineering students; for this paper, one interview transcript analyzed using this narratological method will be presented.

Objective: The purpose of this paper is to introduce a novel method of analysis for narrative inquiry. While many primers on narrative inquiry suggest that the method owes its beginnings to narratology (e.g. Holley & Colyar, 2009; Reissman, 2008; Mitchell & Egudo, 2003), very few of them describe how or why narratology contributed to narrative research methods. Mitchell and Egudo (2003) suggest that narratology helped to develop a kind of structural analysis within narrative inquiry. However, many attribute structural analysis within narrative inquiry to the linguist William Labov (1972), who used an analysis of syntactic structures to interpret inner city speech. Many studies that claim a structural analysis of narrative data do not actually examine story structures, per se, but linguistic structures within participants’ narratives (Heinen, 2009; Hogan, 2011), and Heinen (2009) suggests that the term narratology has been loosely used outside the domain of literary studies.

We seek to reconceptualize the structural analysis of narrative inquiry by moving away from linguistic analysis. Instead, we introduce a form of structural analysis that examines ways that stories are structured in a broader sense; we transition from looking at syntactic structures towards a narratological method of analysis, where we move away from analyzing words and phrases to analyzing incidents and events to see how they contribute to the trajectory of the overall narrative. We then understand these events through traditional narratological structures in an effort to better understand how each story, though different in content, may have similarities in plot structure, character development, difficulties faced/overcome, and goals attained. To give direction to our analysis and help define discreet structures within stories, we examine how affect drives the plots of students’ respective narratives; major events in the student stories can be understood and constructed through changes in emotional valence and activation.

Perspectives: We draw primarily from a cognitive framework to justify narratological function in narrative interview data. Indeed, cognitive narratology itself is a developing field, defined as “the study of mind-relevant aspects of storytelling practices, wherever—and by whatever means—those practices occur” (Herman, 2007, p. 307). According to Sommer (2009), cognitive narratology suggests that there are certain structures within stories that follow particular narrative schemata and are activated by textual cues. Thus, after hearing a series of stories and developing a prototype of various forms of narrative (Olson, 2011), individuals have an innate ability to follow similar structural conventions as they develop narratives of their own. While the cues for activating these schemata might differ across cultures (Reissman, 2008; Labov, 1972), it has been suggested that overarching structural themes cross cultural borders (Daiute, 2014; Herman, 2009). This “border crossing” is particularly true of the felt

emotions that accompany stories of success (goal attainment), failure (setback from goals), and isolation from family (Hogan, 2011; McAdams, 1996). We view emotions as extensions of and contributors to cognitive processes, contributing to decision-making and overall disposition (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007; Schuman & Scherer, 2008). Because of this link between emotion and cognition, storytellers can express and evoke emotions in readers/listeners by drawing on the cognitive forms and schemata that exist within narrative storytelling. As Herman (2007) explains: “Everyday storytelling as well as literary narratives use and in some cases thematize emotion terms and concepts; for example, spy thrillers and romance novels are recognizable as such because of the way they link particular kinds of emotions to recurrent narrative scenarios” (p. 322).

Despite the positivistic leanings of a cognitive framework, we also situate ourselves in a constructionist paradigm. We are looking specifically at the emotional structure of stories, however it is possible to understand stories as structured around different themes or events. The lens of emotion provides one way to understand how and why stories are structured to elicit a particular effect. Many other ways of understanding story structure exist. This lens of emotion also helps us to construct participant stories in a way that is *accessible to us*—it does not necessarily reflect the reality or exigency of the story as it occurred to the participant. As we interpret participants’ narratives, we are also constructing the reality of that narrative as we integrate it into our own, broader way of understanding the world (Bakhtin, 1982).

Data Sources: The data used for this methodology paper is the transcript of one narrative interview and is included to illustrate the proposed method of structurally analyzing narratives. In the larger study, narrative interviews were conducted with 21 engineering students at a southeastern university (see Author, 2015 for more about the larger project). During the narrative interviews, the participants were initially asked “tell me your story and how you got to where you are today?” This broad type of question was chosen so that students had as much freedom to discuss their personal stories as possible, thus eliciting lengthy narratives (Riessman, 2008). Follow up questions were unstructured, and arose based on student input and individual narrative rather than a script. Generally, follow up questions asked students to elaborate on a particular topic (e.g. “You mentioned X. Could you say more about X?”) Interviews lasted from half an hour to two hours in length.

Methods: For this version of structural analysis, we propose breaking narrative data into structural “chunks.” In many versions of structural analysis, particularly those that draw upon Labov (1972), this chunking is performed on a micro-level; it generally examines individual words or sentence structures to determine how lines of text contribute to the overall narrative in question. We propose looking at structures from a macro-perspective, by breaking stories into events as defined by Hogan (2011). An event is an “incident” and its surrounding contexts. In this case, an incident refers to a participant’s report or implication of a heightened state of emotion. For instance, if a participant reports feeling frustration or anger (the incident), the event becomes the immediate contexts that led to that incident (e.g. being verbally harassed) and the preceding contexts or events (e.g. participant stormed off). These events come together and structure the larger narrative. We then examine the events, exploring why participants would opt to include these events and what these events contribute to the larger narrative. To answer these questions, we thematically analyze and categorize the events using McAdams’s (1996) life story model and Hogan’s (2011) methods for analyzing emotional events in literature. The former

describes seven categories common to most forms of narrative, providing structure as we analyze data; the latter describes ways that emotions underlie all story structures. Narratology operates under the premise that “certain underlying narrative structures remain constant, despite the apparently endless diversity of story forms and content” (Pradl, 1984). Our analysis and categorization is based on the underlying structures that begin to appear in the narratives themselves and appear consistently throughout different narratives. Because the most basic story structure involves the pursuit of goals (Herman, 2013; Hogan, 2011) we analyze emotional events in terms of their impact on student’s goal pursuit, and compare how the events of one story may arise from similar or different contexts and have similar or different effects on their achievement of goals.

Results: After an in depth analysis of one narrative interview transcript, we find that this method is useful for crafting a narrative, categorizing events that occur in multiple narratives, and developing broad conclusions. It makes the data generally more accessible because it relies on a universal cognitive script or schema. In the analysis, we find that a driving theme of the story is curiosity. Curiosity begins the journey because it leads to self-imposed problems and solution seeking. While the student gives specific examples of his curiosity and the solutions that he found, the concept of curiosity is familiar to all of us—further, the concept of a “journey” or desire for goal attainment is common in many stories, both personal and literary. Another trope that arose was the concept of an alluring offer or position threatening goal attainment. Specifically, the student was offered a job (particularly alluring due to his family situation), which would force him to defer his goal of higher education. Again, most humans can relate to this kind of experience; while the *kind* of allure and goal might be different, the idea of being tempted into giving up one’s goals is universal.

Significance: This approach to analyzing narrative data is important for two primary reasons. First, it opens a dialogue between two disciplines. Literature is largely insular as a discipline and is often seen as having little bearing on other disciplines (Heinen, 2009). This study allows for advances in literary theory to have bearing on social research and data interpretation.

Second, this narratological method allows us to consider the rhetoric behind narratives. Considering goals, emotions, and overall story structure, we may examine why a participant may have chosen to disclose a particular event or order certain plot elements in a particular way. By examining the trajectory of multiple stories, we may begin to see that while the *content* of events differs among narratives, the *kinds* of events that happen to individuals and the emotions that they feel going into or as a result of these events follow a distinct pattern. This method thus allows for greater generalizability of narrative data interpretation.

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