



# **A ‘Nested Narratives’ Project: theoretical grounding and methodological implications**

Charles Kirschbaum

# A ‘Nested Narratives’ Project: theoretical grounding and methodological implications

“Being with you and not being with you is the only way I have to  
measure time.”  
— Jorge Luis Borges

## Abstract

Narratives have been conceptualized and approached in a variety of forms in the social sciences, including ‘narrative-as-explanations’ towards ‘narratives-as-ontologies’. At this paper I explore the extent that narratives are central for understanding the ‘projective agency’ and suggest that narratives as ontologies are nested and overlapped with public/institutional narratives. This review offers a set of ‘desiderata’ that are later taken on in order to assess current methodological approaches and analytical procedures, including how the ‘narrative as network’ project might be extended in order to help researchers to formalize nested narratives.

## 1. Introduction

‘Narratives’ have been identified as core bedrock in social sciences, but for different reasons and purposes. While a branch of social scientists see ‘narratives’ as a way of explanation (Danto, 1985; Abell, 2004, 2007), we may find scholars that think narratives as yielding access to actors’ subjectivity and personal accounts (Somers, 1994). Paralleling the ‘narrative-as-explanation’ trend, the ‘narrative network’ project has emerged with the intent of deploying social network analysis methods into historical analysis (e.g. Bearman, Moody, Faris, 2003). In parallel, the ‘narrative-as-ontologies’

project has gained a counterpart into social networks through the ‘relational sociology’ project (e.g. White, Godart & Corona, 2007; White, 2008).

While ‘formal’ approaches focus on representing ties and aggregating them into graphs, relational sociology is geared towards unearthing linguistic and narrative resources in establishing ties and identities (Somers, 1994; McLean, 2007; Wagner-Pacifi, 2010; Erikson, n.d.). A core assumption is that the ‘network narrative’ project relies on formal approaches to social networks, while its conception of agency is restricted to observed transformation of the world (Abell, 2004).

Within this paper, I suggest an expansion of the ‘network narrative’ project towards a ‘nested narrative’ approach. As exemplified by the work following the formalization of culture (Mohr, 1994; Mohr & Rawlings, 2010), social network tools might be applied to objects not restricted to social relations, including cultural practices. Following this logic, I suggest relaxing the assumption of ontological realism of events and causal clauses. If ‘narrative networks’ is able to expand its scope to cover more subjective material, it might be able to build bridges between different approaches to narratives in social science.

Throughout this paper, I briefly review the current mainstream social network analysis attempts to incorporate agency to social networks. I contrast this approach to the understanding of narrative and linguistic agency that encompasses phenomenological projectivity (Whitty, 2002; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Mische, 2009). This review yields the ‘desiderata’ that should serve as criteria to assessing the current ‘network narrative’ project. While I assume as valid the idea that full convergence between ‘formal’ and ‘relational’ approaches might not be attainable (Erikson, n.a.), I suggest that the ‘formal’ approach might still borrow a range of insights from the relational approach, specifically on the treatment of temporality. I

conclude the article drawing methodological implications and possible avenues in order to expand the ‘network narrative’ project.

## 2. Agency in Networks: beyond a ‘series of nows’

Early criticism to social network analysis focused on the static and deterministic fashion that structure seemed to explain behavior (Fine & Kleinman, 1983). Instead, scholars associated with Symbolic Interactionism were paying attention to the dynamic aspect underlying all relationships. For these authors, relationships are not ‘given’, but they are always revisited and negotiated; as a consequence, networks are intrinsically dynamic. Following this reasoning, recent reviews have criticized the understanding of ties as ‘fixed’, which wrongly assumes that respective narratives are crystallized:

“[P]ast and projected future experiences necessarily constitute a context which frames the interactors’ interpretations and (inter)actions. *Reducing relationships to numbers ignores this dynamic, evolving nature of the relationship*” (Crossley, 2010, italics in the original)

To be sure, recent mathematical<sup>1</sup> and statistic modeling has attempted to incorporate the longitudinal and dynamic aspects of social networks into models. For instance, Snijders (2011) reviews several approaches to longitudinal modeling, where “agency” is inferred from models. However, we may interrogate whether this restricted understanding of agency suffices in order to understand social action within networks. Such approach misses the phenomenological understanding of choice that cannot be reduced to agent-based modeling (Molina, 2010). We may discuss the underlying assumptions under these models. First, we may face a concern with the assumption that

---

<sup>1</sup> A burgeoning literature linking social networks and rational choice has emerged in sociology and economics (see for instance, Jackson, 2008), also open to attack from standard criticism to rational choice.

actors make their decisions of connecting (or disconnecting) in a synchronic way<sup>2</sup>. Second, we may suspect that the time unit is artificially imposed to social actors. To quote Ricoeur (1980), “[T]he ordinary representation of time as a linear series of ‘nows’” hides the true constitution of time (...). Actors might take in consideration past relationships and events, introducing a complex texture into the temporal assumptions<sup>3</sup> (akin to Abbott, 1992 criticism on narrative positivism)<sup>4</sup>.

### *Elided Observers within the SNA Canon*

While the mainstream social network analysis has taken networks to be ontologically real, the ‘cognitive’ paradigm has suggested that ‘ties’ are not equally perceived and that could explain the very actors’ centrality (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003). Researchers following this perspective’s methodology ask their interviewees to identify ties among alters. After collecting all individual mapping among alters, a consensus matrix is obtained, in a similar fashion to factor analysis. Based on the consensual answer, it is also possible to obtain the degree of accuracy actors have (Krackhardt, 1987). Accuracy, in turn, is then correlated to actors’ centrality. Given that one’s position in a network yields access to varying degrees of information (Carley, 1986; Burt, 2001), it is likely that accuracy and centrality be intimately connected.

It is worth noting that under this paradigm, individual differences in perception is subsumed under the idea of ‘accuracy’, which becomes something amenable to interpersonal ranking. Interestingly, it might be possible to connect this paradigm as a branching from the social network analysis mainstream, exactly when researchers

---

<sup>2</sup> But see Moody (2009) for a discussion on temporal resolution and aggregation. Depending on how time is aggregated, different structures might emerge.

<sup>3</sup> To be sure, scholars associated with ‘formal approaches’ might argue that questionnaire-based data collection is already built-in how social actors assess ties. Nevertheless, depending on how social actors understand the situation they are embedded, they might activate past ties in unforeseen ways.

<sup>4</sup> To be sure, extant literature has attempted to uncover how ‘past ties’ influence current behavior, introducing the concept of ‘network memory’ action (Soda, Usai & Zaheer, 2004). However, this approach assumes homogeneous behavior.

started asking whether they could trust their interviewees' responses (Romney, Weller & Batchelder, 1986). Nonetheless, the intuition stems from the field of 'cognitive anthropology', where disagreement around connections is taken as evidence of cultural variation (Romney & D'Andrade, 1964; D'Andrade, 1995). As a consequence, important individual variations in perception and observation get reduced to the 'accuracy metric'<sup>5</sup>.

### 3. Actor as observer and ambiguity

At this section, I want to recover the discussion on the "actor as observer". The initial intuition stems from Simmel's work on triads (Simmel, 1950). Formal approaches to social network analysis focuses mostly on Simmel's aprioristic approach to forms, which leads to the idea that meaning is secondary to form attainment (Erikson, n.a.). However, less attention is given to the phenomenological cues assumed in his writings. Specifically, Simmel problematizes the extent that the inclusion of a third-party to an original configuration of two people will necessarily lead to higher stability. In contrast, Simmel shows that the inclusion of a third person might be also a factor of instability. As a consequence, this configuration might either yield a much stabler one, or accelerate the original dyadic disruption. Berger and Luckmann (1966) attempted to achieve a fusion between Simmelian formalistic insights and Durkheim's 'social fact' concept. In a nutshell, one's action is always constrained by what one perceives that is going on in the observed triad; hence, what was before a local and private code, now it gains the status of public and convention-like institution<sup>6</sup>. From this perspective, one's

---

<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, scholars related with the 'prism paradigm' have advocated for an expansion of our understanding of social ties. Beyond being 'pumps' in delivering 'stuff' around, ties also work as 'prisms': relationships signal to third-parties individual status (Podolny, 2001). While this approach does include an audience, observers are effectively elided, as audience attention is reduced into aggregate status perception.

<sup>6</sup> We could speculate that the overall triadic stability is an outcome of the ongoing tension between self and the observed triad. This intuition might be found in Sartre's *No Exit*, and Lacan's writings.

action is not only geared towards “other individuals’ actions” (the general social action formula), but towards what one interprets relationships among alters.

We may relax Berger and Luckmann’s grounding on social facts assumption, in order to include the idea that observers might be aware that alters are engaged in the observed interactions might entail strategic and ambiguous actions. For observers, the inclusion of ambiguity leads to the burden of making sense of what is going on, in order to properly act towards the observed dyad<sup>7</sup>.

Leifer (1991) provides an empirical example on how observers of chess matches might differ in skills, depending on their ability to understand ambiguous action, and the extent that players are able to uncouple local to global action (“robust action”)<sup>8</sup>.

Fligstein (1997) extends the idea of ‘robust action’ in order to understand how embedded social actors are able to act strategically within organizational fields.

To be sure, ambiguous action is not always needed, available or desirable. Powerful actors might prefer the reproduction of current patterns, while relatively disadvantaged actors might pursue more oblique lines of action, in order to stay “under the radar”. Yet, less powerful actors might be required to act in a non-ambiguous way. Further, ambiguous action might just leave open the slot for an opposing party to fix its meaning<sup>9</sup>. Further, while ambiguity might be important at certain stages, it might be reduced in order to solidify new identities and ties (Smilde, 2005).

In contrast with the non-reflexive conception of human agency depicted above (section 2), reflexive agency is conceived as the capacity of ‘choosing otherwise’, to take one’s own actions as material for reflection and based on that, devising projects for the future (Blumer, 1966; Giddens, 1986; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998):

---

<sup>7</sup> This might be read as a shift from a Durkheimian towards a Jamesian assumption.

<sup>8</sup> See also Padgett & Ansell, 1993, for an application of this concept within multivocal networks.

<sup>9</sup> Gibson (2000).

“[A]gency is a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment).” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998:963).

Individuals must interpret what is going on in their concrete situations in order to effectively participate (McLean, 2007). Because interpretation might be semantically open, conversely we find opportunity for ambiguity. Further, given the projective side of human agency, we may assume that individuals are enabled to reenact past and future events and review the connections between them.

We may shift from the individual agency towards the group level and question how these levels are connected. To be sure, ‘social action’ imposes a degree of coordination among interactants (Schutz, 1975). As a matter of fact, the intersection between the personal and the universal (chronological) temporalities were at the core of Schutz’ and Ricoeur’s (1984) concerns. While these two authors are mostly interested in the phenomenological understanding of time against a universal temporality, I focus on a ‘field’ level, given its intrinsic relational features (Martin, 2003).

Bourdieu offers a possible connection between ‘field’ and ‘temporality’. In the spirit of McLean (2007), I am bracketing all ‘deterministic’, ‘topological’ features of Bourdieu’s sociology, while devoting most of my attention to his conceptions of agency as ‘improvisational’ and ‘ambiguous’. From this perspective, I give less attention to bold statements that Bourdieu offers on how habitus synchronizes all participants in a field. Having said that, findings like the gift exchange within the Kabyle are remarkable examples on how practices would differ from more structuralist approaches on how



interactions are driven by rules (e.g. Moody, 2009). Instead, Bourdieu places ambiguity and time discontinuity within one's action. To that extent, and akin to Leifer, skillful actors are not 'good norm followers', but able to handle practical inconsistencies deploying ambiguous actions, which have direct impact on their action temporality.

It might be possible to establish a macro narrative on how the field evolution and the individual trajectories are interwoven (Bourdieu, 1993). But this connection doesn't turn the individual agency into an epiphenomenal feature of the field functioning. Instead, Bourdieu tries to establish different levels are autonomous and yet in synchrony. His empirical evidences are grounded on both skillful actors and remarkable failures. In order to provide an analogy to skillful social actors, Bourdieu brings the idea of a 'tennis player' who is able to synchronize her body movements to be able to hit the ball in the best instant, not 'too late', and not 'too soon' (while norm followers might not be able to do the same). In contrast, he brings examples of actors who were not so skillful. For instance, an artist from the countryside that attempts to achieve success in Paris:

“If, from the outset, without any shilly-shallying, he had sought to render [the audience] with that holy roughness of touch which distinguishes the early manner of the master painters, perhaps he would have made a place for himself among the most sparkling young writers of his generation.”

(Bourdieu, 1993, p. 69-70)

My interest in reproducing this passage is that it allows me to selectively borrow elements from Bourdieu into a 'nested narratives' project. For Bourdieu, examples like this constitute the proof that not all social actors are skillful, in order to be 'in sync'

with the field. With that, he escapes the charge that individuals are just ‘hard-wired’ into the field dynamics. But I believe these examples regrettably play a minor role in Bourdieu’s drama. As we observe in this passage, we find the analyst’s ‘what if’ account that deviates from standard history accounts. Remaining letters by León Cladel (the artist) could reveal regrets, doubts or sheer resoluteness in trying to make it in Paris.

In other words, it is exactly because Bourdieu conceives actors’ *habitus* to be homologous to the field that they end up believing faithfully in the game. In contrast, it should be exactly the less fortunate actors’ narratives, those whose bets were frustrated, that we should be able to get most reflexivity around the field’s established account. Their ‘projective agency capabilities’ are constrained by other actors and dominant accounts, to the extent that they are forced to change their projects (and perhaps their overall projectivity) as events and contingencies lead them to ‘stop’, ‘go’, ‘wait’, and ‘return’<sup>10</sup>. To be sure, hegemonic accounts and narratives become important ways of arraying events; as byproducts, they also generate implied ‘pecking orders’ as they project the trajectories of those dominant actors to all other individuals in the field. Again following Bourdieu, if the history of a field is constituted by its ‘struggles’, then the alternative narratives to the dominant one should bring the footprints of counterfactual thinking. But how these less fortunate actors’ narratives are nested under the hegemonic narrative becomes a central concern<sup>11</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> Compare to Schutz’s and Ricoeur’s accounts on personal time. Time calculation permits one to develop a sense of ‘wasting time’, etc. Here, I am shifting this idea to a relational perspective: one ‘waste time with someone’, or ‘wait for someone to let him go’ and so on. Instead of focusing on the whole existential spell spanning from birth to death (the Heideggerian origins of both Schutz and Ricoeur), here I focus on those spells stretched and shortened due to interactions.

<sup>11</sup> To be sure, this approach is quite common in the humanities, especially in literature.

In the next section, I will attempt to explore a range of conceptions of narratives, in order to gather analytic tools to articulate group/domain/field accounts to individual accounts.

#### 4. Narratives as Explanation: assumptions and implications

We may identify two dimensions in the ‘narrative-as-explanation’ project: a correspondence between narrative and causal explanation (hence, linked to philosophy of social science), and a correspondence between narrative and causal claims (hence, linked to philosophy of language).

Abell (2004) depicts a model for narratives as explanation, where, inter alia, causal relations are binary (hence, non-ambiguous and necessary). Further, events are well bounded, actors and actions mapped, and the temporal sequence is acyclic. We may find counterparts in the philosophy of language. Following a Labovian inspiration, a narrative might be decomposed in unambiguous sequences of clauses (Labov & Waletzky, 1997). Further, the communication that states the causal connection between events might be regulated in order to prevent erroneous ‘implicatures’ (Grice, 1975).

On several grounds this model might be extended. Borrowing from the reflexive/projective idea of agency depicted above, we may reinstate the causal connections depicted in a narrative. First, while we may assume, following Abell (2004), that clauses are binary (events are causally linked or they are not), we may entertain the possibility of varying degrees of uncertainty<sup>12</sup>. Instead of a putative causal clause, we would obtain ‘fuzzy’ relationships between events (Bonneuil, 2010)<sup>13</sup>.

Second, as seen above, individuals might be led to revisit past events in order to reflect on their present and future. The implication is that individuals might vary in how

---

<sup>12</sup> Akin to a pragmatic intuition.

<sup>13</sup> For a vivid example, see Joe Sacco (2009) *Footnotes in Gaza*. The author attempts to reconstruct a period in Palestine’s history, but fails to triangulate among conflicting accounts. Rather than trying to sweep away the contradictions, Sacco chooses to depict them together with his own frustrations.

‘branched’ their past accounts and future projects might be (Mische, 2009). We may find a parallel discussion in the humanities, as historians discuss the extent that the past might be better understood and probed in the extent that counterfactual events and sequences are constructed (Ferguson, 2000). The implication is that narratives might contain ‘virtual’ events and ‘virtual’ connections that would be considered as ‘error’ to Abell. Under the situation that one is not willing or able to ascertain things with certainty, more nuanced modalities than sheer ‘necessity’ might be established (Bybee, Perkins, Pagliuca, 1994).

## 5. Narratives as Performances

In the previous section, I focused on narratives as explanatory devices. However, narratives are deployed within social interactions for performative purposes. ‘Relational Sociology’ scholars have insisted that through narratives individuals attempt to ‘make’ themselves, by presenting themselves in a specific fashion towards an audience (Katovich, 1987; McLean, 2007). For that purpose, this effort includes attempts to gear ongoing interactions’ framing and keying. In addition, as seen above in section 3, individuals might intentionally engage in ambiguous action. This strategic intent gains expression in narrative construction<sup>14</sup>. For instance, narrators might prefer to use passive voice in order to obfuscate agency and prevent premature accountability (Duranti, 2004). Temporal cuing (Mische, 2003) might be used in order to compartmentalize the present self from the past self.

Narratives are produced, shared, contested and accepted. The establishment of identities is intimately connected with the construction and support of narratives (Somers, 1994). Social groups that are unable to suggest their narratives face stronger

---

<sup>14</sup> To be sure, ambiguous action is not necessarily restricted to verbal communication, as we observe at Leifer’s findings.

obstacles to establish their identities. In tandem, we should expect that narratives that attain a more ‘objective’ status are more likely to be linked to hegemonic groups. As a consequence, the exercise of power takes place within the resources some groups have in establishing a narrative as true (Somers, 1994; Godart & White, 2010; Krinsky, 2010). Conversely, attempts to sustain narratives that do not conform to hegemonic objective requirements lead their supporters as deviants, or deluded (Boltanski, 2011).

In parallel, non-hegemonic actors may sustain personal and subjective understandings of narratives (Somers, 1994). In contrast to Labov, we may envision an approach to narratives that take in full consideration the interviewee’s subjectivity and her conscious construction of imaginary and virtual realities (Riessman, 1993; Ezzy, 1998). In opposition to given objectified public narratives, actors might be willing to create and sustain identities in a tentative way (Somers, 1994; Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). In order to achieve that, personal accounts might be purposively provisional. As a consequence, we may find the usage of ambiguous causal links (‘careful speech’), and personal narratives are nested within broad public/institutionalized accounts, as new identities emerge within the intestices of existing established ones (Feldman, 1979; Schiffrin, 1993).

In spite of power asymmetries, hegemonic narratives are not the only accessible narratives. First, social millieus<sup>15</sup> are composed by shared, partially overlapped, and partially contested narratives, yielding a ‘narrative-set’ (White, 2008). Further, we may identify variations across analytical levels, when we observe how personal narratives are related to public narratives.

Finally, we should take in account the narrative as embedded in more complex relationships: the narrator, her target, and the enacted third-party audience. Symbolic

---

<sup>15</sup> Or netdoms, if conceived as narrative sets.

Interactionism has traditionally focused on how dyads negotiate identities through narrative and discursive resources (e.g. Katovich, 1987), in spite of a recurring call for introducing network embeddedness into negotiated orders (Fine & Kleinman, 1983). However, we may take the Meadean model and understand dialogue as always being embedded in at least ‘triads’ (akin to the discussion of ‘self-as-embedded-in-triads’ at section 3). Third parties might be explicitly mentioned (Schiffrin, 1993; McLean, 2007), or implicitly enacted while a dialogue unfolds (McFarland, 2001; Mische, 2006).

## 6. Appreciation of Extant Literature on Narrative Network

In this section I will recover extant literature on “narrative networks” in order to assess it under the light of the desirable features identified throughout this paper. To be fair to this approach, its original intent is to provide quantitative and formal tools to historians. As a consequence, its promoters embrace a point of view that history is ultimately about objective facts and sequences. My purpose is to assess whether and under which conditions would be possible to transpose this approach to the ‘nested narratives’ project suggested above.

Akin to the ‘narrative-as-explanation model’ described above (section 4), this approach to narratives translates ‘causal clauses’ into ‘ties’ following a Labovian inspiration (Labov, 1972). Examples include Moody, Faris, Bearman, 1999; Boje, 2001; Bearman & Stovel, 2000; Bearman, Moody, Faris, 2003; Smith, 2007. In similar lines, Roberto Franzosi has developed several pieces on both theory and empirical approaches to formalized narratives (for instance, Franzosi & Mohr, 1997; Franzosi, 2010).

**Ties connecting events:** As explored above, we may envision the representation of ties not only as certain causal relations, but to capture different degrees of certainty,

but also different modes beyond ‘necessity’<sup>16</sup>. In the similar way that social network analysis has progressed towards exploring multivocal relationships among nodes, events could be related in multivocal sequencing.

**Actual, Virtual and Inferred events.** Both Bearman and associates and Smith works explore the extent that events are shared or not across social groups. Partial overlap within distinct accounts is an important finding in order to show that even the most radical opposing party must share with its enemy some common ground in order to establish its narrative as true. Yet, the current approach focuses on interviewees’ accounts on well bounded and defined past events.

As we saw above, long-term and projective narratives, as well as reenactment of past experiences might produce virtual events and counterfactual situations that would not be included as ‘actual events’<sup>17</sup>.

**Casing and Closure.** Moody, Faris & Bearman (1999) suggest that a group of events and causal sequences achieves the status of case when future events cannot disturb its internal structure. This could be fairly translated to the following wording: ‘a good case is a dead case’. If new events lead to retrospectively trigger new causal links, past events emerge as relevant and gain new meanings. Interestingly, this idea dialogues closely with Ricoeur’s criticism to positivist narrativity (Ricoeur, 1980). Ricoeur shows that casing a narrative is a subjective effort that involves enacting its end. But while Moody and his associates look for ‘dead cases’, Ricoeur is attempting to locate its lively dimension, intimately linked to human agency.

---

<sup>16</sup> Although in a more recent work Abell (2007) has introduced varying degrees of belief, modality is still fixed in necessary causal belief.

<sup>17</sup> The extant approach depends on somewhat converging accounts that are, at the best scenario, amenable to aggregation through coding. Alternative approaches could suggest inferred events that would explain loose and ambiguous event boundaries (see Abbott, 1992) I have in mind the analytical approach deployed by mathematical biologists when trying to establish events not directly observed (see Bryant & Moulton, 2004).

**Observer modeling.** While several approaches have elided individual or group perceptions by aggregating responses (e.g. Bearman, Moody & Faris, 2003). It is worth noting that Bearman and his associates identified those different respondents would ‘block future’ at distinct events, possibly hint that these respondents were at different positions in social structure. My intent here is to explore this insight, suggesting that the way narratives are nested allow us to have a novel access to individual’s positioning.

More recent works have tried to identify the extent that different groups perceive accounts in distinct ways (Smith, 2007). I present two lines of possible future developments. First, analyses could try to establish links between ‘public’ and ‘ontological’ narratives, trying to show (following the extant literature) how events overlap, and the alternative causal links that connect personal and public accounts.

Further, following the idea of projective agency, individuals’ accounts could be classified under a typology of tense modality applied to critical events. For instance, Smith’s mapping could identify the individuals that are prone to explore counterfactual events, rather than sticking to past-future tragedies.

## 7. Methodological Implications

In this section, I explore some methodological implications stemming from the theoretical discussion and the illustrative example above. This is separated in two parts: *data collection*, where I discuss how an extended ‘narrative network’ project might inform scholars conducting narrative interviews, and *aggregation and analysis*, where I discuss the analytical implications of formalizing projected narratives.

### Data Collection

Several recent works have taken naturalistic approaches (e.g. Gibson, 2005) or non-intrusive methods like archival analysis (McLean, 2007; Fuhse & Mützel, 2011; Gibson, 2011. See Fuhse, 2009 for a discussion). Yet, we may still question ourselves if



ethnographic approaches would be able to yield materials that might advance the ‘narrative network’ project. In contrast, I believe mixed methods might still be considered in order to cover material that varies in publicity<sup>18</sup>.

Following Salvini, we may ask ourselves if data collection that permeates the narrative network project doesn’t suffer the same limitations suffered by mainstream social network analysis. In other words: if the interviewer leads the interviewee to disclose ‘objective’ facts and ‘true’ causal clauses, he might be artificially establishing a Gricean world. Inter alia, strategic usage of ambiguity would be unattainable. Interviewee might do her best job to reduce ambiguity as much as possible from her account, risking reproducing the tacitly expected public narrative<sup>19</sup>. But that would be different from what is presented to a significant interactant in her lifeworld.

To be sure, just collecting general ‘life stories’ might not bring enough material for connecting personal accounts into public narratives. In the case of dominant actors, events might be arrayed in a logical and teleological sequence. Conversely, less successful actors might have learned institutional ways of organizing their events, emphasizing a certain plot, while deleting those episodes that implicate their identities (Cain, 1991). For both reasons, we should entertain some suspicion on self-accounts (Bourdieu, 1986)<sup>20</sup>.

---

<sup>18</sup> Shift towards non-intrusive approaches is justified on several grounds. First, there is an understanding that the interviewer might introduce a bias that is hard to take into account. Second, ultimately the non-observability of actors’ meanings yield inferring actors’ motives as futile. I believe a defense of interviews might be done, on the grounds that interviews might still bring access to materials not accessible by direct observation (Billig, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> This echoes Uprichard (2011) call for ‘narratives of the future’; but while the author seems to be focused on illuminating the possible futures, I am more interested in understanding the projective agent vis-a-vis the public narrative embedding.

<sup>20</sup> Readers might take Bourdieu’s rejection of personal accounts as a frontal attack to the Ricoeurian approach to identity (see Truc, 2011 for a discussion). Ricoeur’s defenders argue that Bourdieu’s approach is reductionist, for it focuses solely on objective features of *habitus* formation. In this paper, I bypass this discussion for two reasons. As stated before, I selected only some insights from Bourdieu. It could be argued that my social space resembles more a ‘netdom’ than a ‘field’, in the extent that I focus on narrative-sets rather than Bourdieu’s traditional framework (capitals-position-habitus-disposition-practice). But further, I am ultimately interested in a multilevel treatment of narratives.

Mixed approaches, combining both observation of public interaction and ethnographic interviews are able to cover the range of public and ontological narratives (e.g. Becker, 1998; Somers, 1994; Mische, 2006).

**The challenge from archival methods.** Several studies within the ‘narrative network’ project are based on archival methods, not intended or amenable for building narrative networks. For instance, Bearman and Stovel (2000) data relies on a competition promoted in 1934 to collect the ‘best’ nazi life stories, while Bearman, Mood and Faris (2003) data is based on Myrdal’s narrated lives stories, which were intended for publication. To be sure, the authors of both studies disclose the caveats underlying the data limitations, but mostly with the interest in showing the expected bias on ‘event robustness’. However, we may suspect whether the narratives generated through this kind of data collection lead to narratives that tend to eliminate doubt, ambiguity and counterfactuals. As a consequence, we may envision alternative ‘narrative interviews’ that allow for a broader range of sequencing of actual and virtual events.

**Alternative Strategies for Narrative Interview.** In contrast to the archive-centered approach, researchers could experiment with interviews that intentionally let the interviewee to explore counterfactual action courses (Swidler, 2001; Mordhorst, 2008). Further, narrative interviews could borrow from ‘survey experiments’ the intentional manipulation of the audience. If the enacted third-party audience is likely to affect one’s behavior, it might be manipulated through vignette construction in order to explore how individuals would present different accounts, depending on whom they believe are observing them (Barley, 1986).

## Analytical Implications

Within this section, I offer some tentative insights on the analytical implications that could emerge from a ‘nested narrative’ approach. A first glance will be dedicated to representing ‘nested narratives’, as a formal structure. Second, I will hint on how the materials collected could collaborate with other research interests.

**Representing Nested Narratives.** The idea of ‘nested narratives’ has a counterpart with the field of ‘narrative psychology’ (Gergen & Gergen, 1983), and literature (H. P. Abbott, 2008). But in these two disciplines, the nested feature of narratives lacks a clause formalization that is available in linguistics.

A ‘nested narrative’ project might be able to depict how ‘public’ and ‘ontologic’ accounts are linked not only by ‘overlapped’ events, but by clauses that indicate vertical relations, suggesting cross-affiliation. The “lattice” approach (Mische & Pattison, 2000) might be extended to incorporate temporality and distinct clause modalities.

To be sure, the suggested model would bring a much complexity in constructing articulated affiliation and one-mode matrices. For instance, in the short statement “While Z was in the room, X said to Y that in the future they would break their alliance with A”. This brings the third-party audience (Z), the dyad in dialogue (X→Y), and an affiliation event placed in the future (Alliance among X, Y and B). At the same time we have several mechanisms cited along this paper: the third-party as audience, dyadic negotiation, long-term narratives displacing ties to an ambiguous point in the future, ambiguous clause, and talking in the place of omitted third-person.

**Casing.** We may envision what would be the implications of an extended formal network narrative approach. The trivial extensions are easy to foresee. For instance, ‘alternative paths’ and ‘virtual events’ would be added to the graphical depiction of collective accounts. It might be possible to hypothesize that the most critical events and

paths will be likely to have ‘virtual’ counterparts. Following Moody and his associates approach to ‘casing’, additional counterfactual ties would possibly change how researchers understand cases.

**Implications for Social Network Analysis.** We may be tempted to draw direct implication to the mainstream social network analysis. Following the realist ontology approach to social networks, one might attempt to reconstruct longitudinal one-mode networks from the aggregated accounts. Beyond this avenue, it might be possible to map possible future connections including, but beyond the projection of past dyads.

To be sure, modeling social network analysis from aggregated data of projected narratives might be cumbersome or just not feasible<sup>21</sup>. Further, while actual observed networks might be closer to ‘social action’, just projected ties might gives us intuition on actors goals, but that doesn’t mean that we would know how to aggregate them to resemble what would be the real interaction<sup>22</sup>.

**Modeling Observers.** Perhaps most relevant would be to model the observers themselves, towards an attempt to represent projective agency based on past and future projected ties. Some possible questions include: to what extent are past relations reproduced into projected narratives? In what extent chaining ties to future events solve current unbalanced triads? Or conversely, how observers vary in the way they perceive unbalanced triads? To what extent certain individuals and groups are more likely to revisit the past and branch out the future possibilities, including bridging unconnected groups (Mische, 2009; Pachucki & Breiger, 2010)? Specifically, how the insertion or deletion of virtual past events and possible causal connections are related to future projects (Abell, 2004)? To what extent observers are willing to conform or break with

---

<sup>21</sup> Given that homogeneity across respondents might not be achieved

<sup>22</sup> To quote Schutz: “the imagining self does not transform the outer world” (Schutz, 1975). As a consequence, in the next section I shift towards modeling the observer, shifting the level of analysis from the aggregate to the individual narratives.

public accounts? To what extent the revisited events are shared with the public narrative, or contained solely in the personal account?

Observers might be abstracted from the observed network, in an analogous way that actors might be abstracted from their social circles. Individuals might be understood intersections of social circles (Breiger ,1974). But ‘social circles’, as ties embedded in narratives, are always temporally located and subject to tense modality. As a consequence, we could also think self as intersection of temporalities. This is a simple extension of Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) intuition on agency. While their explanans for time orientation was possibly biological, I suggest here that the projected narratives and their respective virtual events and possible ties are the nuts and bolts of a projective self. The concrete deletion of individuals (death, war, crime, etc.) might lead observers to review their projections. Future oriented agency might be concretely grounded on specific others, but it might be transferrable to new individuals.

## **8. Conclusion**

Throughout this paper I presented radically different orientations towards narratives, in order to present a view of ‘nested narratives’. As a consequence, that led me to evaluate some methodological approaches to narratives, under a wide range of possibilities.

While ‘narratives-as-explanation’ focuses on formalization and neutral historical account, ‘narratives-as-performances’ focuses on the role narrative play at constituting identities and ties. I suggest that the ‘narrative network’ tools might be expanded and adapted in order to help social scientists to bridge these two approaches, I espoused a view that the public and the ontological narratives might be seen as nested. Further, the set of connections and events might include virtual facts and counterfactual accounts.

Narrative nestedness and counterfactual account might be a productive way of understanding individuals' positioning in a field.

Following this set of assumptions, I ventured into assessing extant literature's methodological materials, and suggest inchoate ideas for data collection and analysis, whose value might be related to the ample opportunities ahead.

## References

- Abbott, A. (1992). From causes to events. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 20(4), 428.
- Abbott, H. P. (2008). *The Cambridge introduction to narrative*. Cambridge University Press.
- Abell, P. (2004). Narrative Explanation: an alternative to variable-centered explanation. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 30, 287–310.
- Abell, P. (2007). Narratives, Bayesian narratives and narrative actions. *Sociologica*, 1(3), 0–0.
- Aspers, P. (2010). Relational Ontology Being and Order out of Heidegger's Socioontology. *Relationale Soziologie*, 257–272.
- Barley, S. R. (1986). Technology as an occasion for structuring: Evidence from observations of CT scanners and the social order of radiology departments. *Administrative science quarterly*, 78–108.
- Bearman, P. S., & Stovel, K. (2000). Becoming a Nazi: A model for narrative networks. *Poetics*, 27(2), 69–90.
- Bearman, P., Moody, J., & Faris, R. (2003). Networks and history. *Complexity*, 8, 61–71.
- Becker, H. S. (1998). *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think about Your Research While You're Doing It*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

- Billig, M. (1991). *Talking of the royal family*. Routledge.
- Blumer, H. (1966). Sociological implications of the thought of George Herbert Mead. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 71(5), 535–544.
- Boje, D. M. (2001). Story Network Analysis. In *Narrative Methods for Organizational & Communication Research*. Sage Publications Limited.
- Boltanski, L. (2011). *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*. Polity.
- Bonneuil, N. (2010). The Mathematics of Time in History. *History and Theory*, 49(4), 28–46.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). L'illusion biographique. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 62(1), 69–72.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). The Field of Cultural Production (pp. 29-73). N.Y.: Columbia Univ. Press.
- Breiger, R. L. (1974). The Duality of Persons and Groups. *Social Forces*, 53, 181–190.
- Bryant, D., & Moulton, V. (2004). Neighbor-net: an agglomerative method for the construction of phylogenetic networks. *Molecular biology and evolution*, 21(2), 255–265.
- Burt, R. (2001). Bandwidth and echo: Trust, information, and gossip in social networks.
- Bybee, J., Perkins, R., & Pagliuca, W. (1994). *The evolution of grammar: Tense, aspect, and modality in the languages of the world*. University of Chicago Press.
- Cain, C. (2009). Personal Stories: Identity acquisition and self-understanding in Alcoholics Anonymous. *Ethos*, 19(2), 210–253.
- Carley, K. (1986). Knowledge acquisition as a social phenomenon. *Instructional Science*, 14(3), 381–438.
- Crossley, N. (2009). The man whose web expanded: Network dynamics in Manchester's post/punk music scene 1976-1980. *Poetics*, 37, 24–49.

- Crossley, N. (2010). The Social World of the Network. Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Elements in Social Network Analysis. *Sociologica*, 4(1), 0–0.
- D'Andrade, R. G. (1995). *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Danto, A. C. (1985). *Narration and knowledge: Including the integral text of analytical philosophy of history*. Columbia University Press.
- Duranti, A. (2004). Agency in language. *A companion to linguistic anthropology*, 451–73.
- Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What is Agency. *Am. J. Sociology*, 103, 962–1023.
- Erikson, E. (n.a.). *Formalist and Relationalist Theory in Social Network Analysis*.
- Ezzy, D. (1998). Theorizing Narrative Identity: Symbolic Interactionism and Hermeneutics. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 39(2), 239–252.
- Feldman, S. D. (1979). Nested identities. *Studies in symbolic interaction*, 2, 399–418.
- Ferguson, N. (2000). *Virtual history: Alternatives and counterfactuals*. Basic Books (AZ).
- Fine, G. A., & Kleinman, S. (1983). Network and Meaning: an interactionist approach to structure. *Symbolic Interaction*, 6(1), 97–110.
- Fligstein, N. (1997). Social skill and institutional theory. *The American Behavioral Scientist*, 40, 397–405.
- Franzosi, R. P. (2010). Sociology, narrative, and the quality versus quantity debate (Goethe versus Newton): Can computer-assisted story grammars help us understand the rise of Italian fascism (1919–1922)? *Theory and Society*, 39(6), 593–629.
- Franzosi, R., & Mohr, J. W. (1997). New directions in formalization and historical analysis. *Theory and Society*, 26(2), 133–160.
- Fuhse, J. (2009). Die kommunikative Konstruktion von Akteuren in Netzwerken. *Soziale Systeme*, 15(2), 288–316.



- Fuhse, J., & Mützel, S. (2011). Tackling connections, structure, and meaning in networks: quantitative and qualitative methods in sociological network research. *Quality & Quantity*, 1–23.
- Gergen, K. J., & Gergen, M. M. (1983). Narratives of the self. *Studies in social identity*, 254–273.
- Gibson, D. R. (2000). Seizing the moment: The problem of conversational agency. *Sociological Theory*, 18(3), 368–382.
- Gibson, D. R. (2005). Taking Turns and Talking Ties: Networks and Conversational Interaction. *American Journal of Sociology*, 110(6), 1561–1597.
- Gibson, D. R. (2011). Speaking of the Future: Contentious Narration During the Cuban Missile Crisis. *Qualitative sociology*, 34(4), 503–522.
- Giddens, A. (1986). *The constitution of society : outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Godart, F. C., & White, H. C. (2010). Switchings under uncertainty: The coming and becoming of meanings. *Poetics*.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. 1975, 41–58.
- Ibarra, H. (1999). Provisional selves: Experimenting with image and identity in professional adaptation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(4), 764–791.
- Ibarra, H., & Barbulescu, R. (2010). Identity as narrative: Prevalence, effectiveness, and consequences of narrative identity work in macro work role transitions. *Academy of Management Review*, 35(1), 135–154.
- Jackson, M. O. (2008). *Social and economic networks*. Princeton Univ Pr.
- Katovich, M. A. (1987). Identity, Time, and Situated Activity: An Interactions Analysis of Dyadic Transactions. *Symbolic Interaction*, 10(2), 187–208.
- Kilduff, M., & Tsai, W. (2003). *Social networks and organizations*. SAGE.

- Krackhardt, D. (1987). Cognitive Social Structures. *Social Networks*, 9, 109–134.
- Krinsky, J. (2010). Dynamics of hegemony: Mapping mechanisms of cultural and political power in the debates over workfare in New York City, 1993–1999. *Poetics*, 38(6), 625–648.
- Labov, W., & Waletzky, J. (1997). Narrative analysis: Oral versions of personal experience.
- Leifer, E. M. (1991). *Actors as observers: A theory of skill in social relationships*. Garland New York.
- Martin, J. L. (2003). What Is Field Theory? *American Journal of Sociology*, 109, 1-49.
- McFarland, D. A. (2001). Student resistance: How the formal and informal organization of classrooms facilitate everyday forms of student defiance. *American Journal of Sociology*, 612–678.
- McLean, P. D. (2007). *The art of the network: strategic interaction and patronage in Renaissance Florence*. Duke University Press Books.
- Mische, A. (2003). Cross-talk in movements: Reconceiving the culture-network link. *Social movements and networks: Relational approaches to collective action*, 258–80.
- Mische, A. (2006). *Partisan Publics: Contention and Mediation across Brazilian Youth Activist Networks*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mische, A. (2009). Projects and Possibilities: Researching Futures in Action. *Sociological Forum*, 24(3), 694–704.
- Mische, A., & Pattison, P. (2000). Composing a civic arena: Publics, projects, and social settings. *Poetics*, 27(2), 163–194.
- Molina, J. L. (2010). Comment on Nick Crossley/4. *Sociologica*, 4(1), 0–0.
- Mohr, J. W. (1994). Soldiers, mothers, tramps and others: Discourse roles in the 1907 New York City charity directory. *Poetics*, 22, 327–57.

- Mohr, J. W., & Rawlings, C. (2010). Formal Models of Culture. *A Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, edited by J. Hall, L. Grindstaff, and M. Lo. London: Routledge, 118–128.
- Moody, J. (2009). Network Dynamics. In P. Hedström & P. Bearman (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*. OUP Oxford.
- Moody, J., Faris, R., & Bearman, P. S. (1999). Blocking the future: New solutions for old problems in historical social science. *Social Science History*, 23(4), 501–533.
- Mordhorst, M. (2008). From counterfactual history to counter-narrative history. *Management & Organizational History*, 3(1), 5.
- Pachucki, M., Pendergrass, S., & Lamont, M. (2007). Boundary processes: Recent theoretical developments and new contributions. *Poetics*, 35, 331–351.
- Pachucki, M. A., & Breiger, R. L. (2010). Cultural Holes: Beyond Relationality in Social Networks and Culture doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.012809.102615. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 36, 205–224.
- Padgett, J. F., & Ansell, C. K. (1993). Robust Action and the Rise of the Medici. *American Journal of Sociology*, 98, 1259–1319.
- Podolny, J. M. (2001). Networks as the Pipes and Prisms of the Market. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107, 33–60.
- Ricoeur, P. (1980). Narrative time. *Critical Inquiry*, 169–190.
- Ricoeur, P. (1984). *Time and Narrative*. (K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, Trans.) (Vol. 3). Chicago.
- Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Romney, A. K., & D' Andrade, R. G. (1964). Cognitive aspects of English kin terms. *American Anthropologist*, 66(3), 146–170.
- Romney, A. K., Weller, S. C., & Batchelder, W. H. (1986). Culture as Consensus: A Theory of Culture and Informant Accuracy. *American Anthropologist*, 88, 313–338.

- Sacco, J. (2009). *Footnotes in Gaza: A Graphic Novel*. Metropolitan Books.
- Salvini, A. (2010). Symbolic Interactionism and Social Network Analysis: An Uncertain Encounter. *Symbolic Interaction*, 33(3), 364–388.
- Schiffrin, D. (1993). Speaking for another. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Framing in Discourse* (pp. 231–255).
- Schutz, A. (1975). *On phenomenology and social relations : selected writings*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
- Simmel, G. (1950). *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: Free Press.
- Smilde, D. (2005). A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of Conversion to Venezuelan Evangelicalism: How Networks Matterl. *ajs*, 111(3), 757–96.
- Smith, T. (2007). Narrative boundaries and the dynamics of ethnic conflict and conciliation. *Poetics*, 35, 22–46.
- Snijders, T. A. B. (2011). Statistical Models for Social Networks. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 37(1), 131–153.
- Soda, G., Usai, A., & Zaheer, A. (2004). Network memory: The influence of past and current networks on performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47, 893–906.
- Somers, M. R. (1994). The Narrative Constitution of Identity: a relational and network approach. *Theory and Society*, 23, 605–649.
- Swidler, A. (2001). *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Truc, G. (2011). Narrative Identity against Biographical Illusion: The Shift in Sociology from Bourdieu to Ricœur. *Études Ricoeuriennes/Ricoeur Studies*, 2(1), 150–167.
- Uprichard, E. (2011). Narratives of the Future: Complexity, Time and Temporality. *The SAGE Handbook of Innovation in Social Research Methods*, 103.
- Wagner-Pacifici, R. (2010). Theorizing the restlessness of events. *American journal of sociology*, 115(5), 1351–1386.

White, H. C., Godart, F. C., & Corona, V. P. (2007). Mobilizing identities: Uncertainty and control in strategy. *Theory Culture and Society*, 24(7/8), 181.

White, H. C. (2008). *Identity and control: how social formations emerge* (2nd ed.).

Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Whitty, M. (2002). Possible selves: An exploration of the utility of a narrative approach.

*Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, 2(3), 211–228.