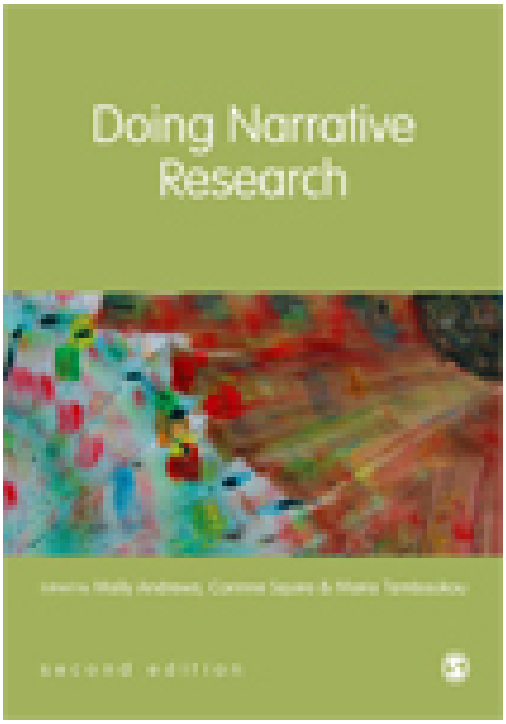

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Narratives of Events: Labovian Narrative Analysis and its Limitations

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This chapter introduces the seminal work on personal experience narratives by sociolinguists William Labov and Joshua Waletzky. In the first part of the chapter, Labov's model of the structure of the personal experience narrative is presented, his method of analysis is described and its advantages explored. In the second part, some limitations of the Labovian approach are identified and discussed.

The Labovian Approach

Now over 40 years old, the influential work of Labov (1972) and Labov and Waletsky (1967) has become paradigmatic in the field of personal narrative research. Labov's model of the structure of the personal experience narrative has provided the starting point for a wide range of studies that utilize narrative, and the merits and limitations of the model continue to be debated.[1]

Labov's work on narrative is but a small part of his highly influential socio-linguistic work on the varieties of English. In his book *Language in the Inner City* (1972), Labov presented a developed version of his model of the structure of the personal narrative. However, the most important aspect of the book was not this model, but rather Labov's groundbreaking scholarship, which argued that black English vernacular (BEV) should be recognized as a language in its own right, rather than as an incorrect or stunted version of standard English. His defence of BEV was fully supported by his analysis of BEV speech data, which showed that BEV speakers were just as skilful, expressive and effective in their use of language as any other speech community. As part of the data analyses, Labov focused on stories told by young, male BEV speakers, and it was from this data that he formulated his model of the personal experience narrative.

Labov and his colleagues provided us with a method that produces structural analyses of specific oral personal experience narratives. Within Langellier's (1989) classification of different approaches to the personal narrative, the Labovian approach is part of the category that treats personal narrative as story text, as distinct from approaches which understand personal narrative as storytelling performance, conversational interaction, social process or political praxis. In Mishler's (1995) typology of narrative-analytic models, the Labovian

model is a subclass of the general category focused on reference and temporal order, as distinct from those focused on textual coherence and structure, or narrative functions. Mishler also presents Labov's model as the exemplar of approaches that see narrative as ‘recapitulating the told in the telling’ (1995: 92), rather than as ‘reconstructing the told in the telling’ or ‘making a telling from the told’.

These two contextualizations of the Labovian approach within the field of personal narrative research highlight its fundamental premise and key characteristic. It understands the personal narrative primarily as a text, and that text's function is to represent past events in the form of a story, as expressed in Labov's description of the oral personal experience narrative:

> one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred.
>
> (Labov, 1972: 359)

We can see, therefore, that the Labovian approach is event-centred, in that it defines narrative in terms of the representation of events. It is also text-centred, in that it embodies an understanding of the personal experience narrative as a text and takes little account of context.

This focus on events, and the premise that narrative's primary function is the recapitulation of events, is widespread in definitions of narrative from different academic fields. Consider, for example, Genette's characterization, in linguistics, of an:

> oral or written narrative statement that undertakes to tell of an event or events.
>
> (Genette, 1980: 25)

Onega and Landa's definition, within literary criticism, is that:

> a narrative is the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way.
>
> (Onega and Landa, 1996: 3)

Within narratology, Toolan's account of narrative is of:

> a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events.

(Toolan, 1988: 7)

Later in this chapter I will discuss how approaching oral personal experience narratives as though they are primarily about events, rather than experience, gives rise to a range of theoretical, methodological and interpretational problems.

Analysing Transcripts Using the Labovian Approach

Using Labov's criterion for what constitutes a minimal narrative, ‘a sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered’ (Labov 1972: 360), and his analytic method, narratives can be extracted from other language data, and parsed into numbered clauses. Each clause can then be assigned to one element of Labov's six-part model: abstract (A), orientation (O), complicating action (CA), result (R), evaluation (E), coda (C). The following ‘Lift Story’ example of a personal experience narrative is presented and analysed according to the Labovian method.

This story is an ‘ideal type’; while the experience happened, the transcript is not taken from a spoken narrative but rather acts as a demonstration text for Labov's method.

The Lift Story

1 Did I ever tell you	A
2 about the time I was stuck in a lift?	A
3 Well, it was about five years ago	O
4 when I was working in London	O
5 I was the last one to leave the office late on a Friday night	CA
6 and the lift just stopped between the eighth and seventh floors	CA

7 I was terrified, terrified	E
8 I mean I really panicked	E
9 I thought there was no one else in the building	E
10 and I would be stuck there until Monday morning	E
11 It really was the most awful feeling	E
12 anyway I frantically pushed the alarm button for about ten minutes	CA
13 which seemed like hours	E
14 Then I heard someone calling	CA
15 and then suddenly the lift started moving down	CA
16 and vibrating and rattling and sort of juddering	CA
17 I screamed ‘GET ME OUT OF HERE’	CA/E
18 I thought the lift was going to plunge down into the basement	E
19 and then suddenly the doors opened in between two floors	CA
20 and the caretaker was there	CA
21 and he helped me climb out	CA
22 I was free at last!	R
23 I burst into tears	CA/E
24 I was so relieved	E
25 there is no way	C
26 I ever get into a lift on my own now	C

27 so that's why	C
28 I've just climbed ten floors	C
29 to get to your flat	C

Labov recommends the ‘question method’ for the categorization of clauses. This is based on the idea that a narrative can be understood as a series of answers to the underlying questions that all narratives address. The clauses within a narrative thus function to answer different questions:

30 Abstract – what is the story about?
31 Orientation – who, when, where?
32 Complicating action – then what happened?
33 Evaluation – so what?
34 Result – what finally happened?

The sixth element, the Coda, functions to sign off the narrative as it returns to the present time of the telling, to hand the ‘floor’ over to the hearer(s). Rather than answering a question, it ‘*puts off* a question’, signalling that questions 3 and 4 are no longer relevant' (Labov, 1972: 370, emphasis in the original).

Abstract

This is optional; depending on the context in which the story is told, narrators may or may not provide a summary of the story to come. For example, the question ‘Did I ever tell you about the time I got stuck in a lift?’ (lines 1–2), provides a summary of the story to come and is also a bid for an extended speaking turn. It provides a clear indication to the listener that if they give a negative response to the question, they are implicitly agreeing to listen to a story. In an interview situation, where an interviewer asks a question in order to elicit a narrative, the question itself may be seen to constitute the abstract, negating the need for the narrator to produce one. For example, Labov and his researchers used the question, ‘Have you ever been in danger of death?’ to elicit personal experience narratives from young, black American males; the resultant narratives made up the primary data-corpus used by Labov and Waletsky to develop their model. In response to the question, an interviewee might respond ‘Yes, this kid once tried to stab me’ (Abstract) or might go straight into the story ‘Yes, it was about five years ago when I was at a party and … (Orientation). The abstract, if it is present, will be at, or very near, the beginning because its main functions are to introduce the story and,

depending on the context, to make a bid for the floor.

Orientation

Orientation clauses, in a personal experience narrative, function to answer the questions ‘who is the story about?’, ‘when did it happen?’, ‘where did it happen?’, thereby providing a setting in which the events of the story will be told. For example, ‘Well, it was about five years ago when I was working in London’ (lines 3–4). Although orientation clauses usually occur early in the narrative text, it is not uncommon for narrators to insert extra background information at later points.

Complicating Action

Sometimes referred to as the ‘skeleton plot’ (Mishler, 1986: 237) or the ‘spine’ of the narrative (Linde, 1993: 68), the complicating action clauses relate the events of the story and typically follow a ‘then, and then’ structure which gives a linear representation of time and permits an open-ended series of events to be related. The series can be added to, indefinitely, as if in response to ‘and then what happened?’ as long as the events are related in chronological order. For example, ‘and then suddenly the doors opened in between two floors and the caretaker was there and he helped me climb out’ (lines 19–21). Any deviation from chronological order must be accompanied by explanatory clauses which clearly indicate the actual order of events, for example, ‘But before that happened …’.

Evaluation

Labov describes evaluation as ‘perhaps the most important element in addition to the basic narrative clause’ and one which has been neglected by other accounts of narrative (1972: 366). It is evaluation that, in Labov's terms, mediates the crucial ‘point’ of the story, thereby justifying its telling, and it reveals the narrator's perspective on the events being told. The ‘so what?’ question, with which a story without a point could be dismissed as not worthy of telling, is preemptively answered by the inclusion of evaluation clauses that tell the listener what the point is by conveying the narrator's experience of the events at the time they took place and his or her feelings about the experience at the time of the telling.

Labov (1972) identifies three main types of evaluation: external, embedded and evaluative action:

> **External evaluation** is overt. The narrator stops the complicating action, stands outside the story and tells the listener what the point is, for example 'It really was the most awful feeling' (line 11).
>
> **Embedded evaluation** preserves the dramatic continuity of the story as the narrator tells how she/he felt at the time, for example, 'I was terrified, terrified' (line 7) and 'I was so relieved' (line 24).
>
> **Evaluative action** stays firmly within the story by reporting actions that reveal emotions without the use of speech, for example 'I burst into tears' (line 23).

Labov further categorizes the evaluative elements in a narrative text into different types of device. These include:

> **Intensifiers**, which include expressive phonology [I screamed 'GET ME OUT OF HERE' (line 17)]; quantifiers [the *most* awful feeling (line 11)]; and repetition [I was terrified, terrified (line 7)].
>
> **Comparators**, which compare what did occur to what did not, but might have done. For example, 'I thought there was no one else in the building and I would be stuck there until Monday morning' (lines 9–10) and 'I thought the lift was going to plunge down into the basement' (line 18).
>
> **Explicatives**, which often involve causality and explain why something happened. For example, 'I burst into tears [because] I was so relieved' (lines 23–24).

In Labov's and Waletzky's original (1967) model, evaluation was regarded as a discrete element occurring at one place in the narrative text. In Labov's later (1972) model, evaluation is described as spreading like a wave through the narrative and as having the ability to permeate all the other elements. Here, the status of evaluation was elevated from an element to a 'secondary structure which is concentrated in the evaluation section but may be found in various forms throughout the narrative' (Labov, 1972: 369). Riessman (1993: 21) refers to evaluation as 'the soul of the narrative', expressing both the point of the story and, crucially, how the narrator wants to be understood.

Result

The result, or resolution, tells the listener how the story ends. For example, ‘I was free at last!’ (line 22).

Coda

If present, the coda occurs at the end of the narrative when the narrator returns to the present time of the narration, clearly indicating that the story is over. For example, ‘there is no way I ever get into a lift on my own now so that's why I've just climbed ten floors to get to your flat’ (lines 25–29). The coda links the past world of the story to the present world of the storytelling and functions to ‘sign off’ the narrative and offer the floor to the listener.

Researchers who present their data following Labov's method and model typically extract narratives from the full transcript of an interview, number and categorize each clause according to elements of the model, and then present a ‘core narrative’ which leaves out evaluation and anything else that does not fit into the categories of Abstract, Orientation, Complicating action and Resolution – for example, interactions between teller and listener, descriptions and asides.

Mishler (1986: 237) provides a good example of the presentation of data according to a conventional Labovian approach whereby a ‘core narrative’ is presented which has been extracted from the complete transcript of a narrative produced in an interview. In Mishler's example, the core narrative is entitled ‘Yet we always *did* what we had to do some*how* we did it’, which is the analyst's interpretation of the main point of the story. Mishler explains that this is a radically reduced version of the full transcript and only consists of key sections of the Orientation, the Abstract, the Complicating action and the Resolution. This ‘skeleton plot’ is understood to be referential, rather than evaluative, that is, it represents ‘what happened’ without any of the narrator's evaluation. The evaluation clauses which mediate the ‘point’ of the narrative are excluded from ‘the core narrative’ and then re-introduced into the analysis in order to examine the narrator's perspective on the ‘bare bones’ of what actually happened. In this way, a clear distinction is maintained between the referential and the evaluative functions of the narrative.

Advantages of the Labovian Approach

The Labovian approach utilizes a detailed and rigorous method for the analysis of personal experience narratives, and can provide an excellent starting point for analysing transcripts of talk produced in a variety of different contexts. First, Labov's definitional criteria can be used to identify some important narratives within the transcript. Second, the application of the model reveals the specific structure of individual narratives and allows comparison. Third, a Labovian analysis of the linguistic features that encode various types of evaluation enables the analyst to examine the perspective of the narrator on the events recounted. Fourth, the approach is particularly suited to some specific forms of data and research.

Identifying and Understanding Event Narratives

While event narratives are not always told, and some speakers produce them rather rarely, they can be very prominent parts of interview material, particularly, as Labov mentions, around situations of ‘sex, death and moral injury’. The Labo-vian approach facilitates the identification and analysis of event narratives, which are often very striking aspects of narrative data. But in so doing, it rules out of its field of interest many other kinds of talk which might be commonly classified by both speakers and hearers as ‘stories’ – stories about events that did not happen directly to the speaker, that happened more than once, that may happen in the future or that might have happened, for instance – and that use imperfect or conditional tenses that do not fit with Labov's focus on past tense narrative clauses. I shall return to this problem later.

Comparing Narratives

Labov's systematic approach to the identification and interpretation of evaluation in personal experience narratives also provides researchers with the means to produce detailed comparative analyses of evaluation across a sample of narratives. Such analyses might compare: the amount of evaluation; the type of evaluation; different narrators' evaluations of the same event; changes in event narratives within a single interview as the interview progresses or as different events are addressed (Bell, 1988); changes in evaluation over time in narratives of the same experience produced by the same narrator; differences in evaluation in narratives of the same event told by people at different times or in different circumstances; evaluation in narratives of the same experience told to different people. For example, Ferrara (1994) uses a Labovian analysis of nar-

ratives produced in a therapeutic context to show that two narratives produced by one narrator at different times can be categorized as ‘retellings’ because although they relate different *events*, they include the same type of evaluation and therefore convey the same type of *experience* and function in the same way within the narrator's life story.

The Narrator's Perspective

As is now widely recognized by narrative researchers across many different disciplines, whatever else a personal narrative is – oral history, dinner party anecdote, legal testimony, response to an interview question – the list of possibilities is endless – it is also and *always* a narration of the self. In personal narration, a particular personal, social, cultural, political identity is claimed by narrators and, as Mishler (1986: 243) says, ‘everything said functions to express, confirm and validate the claimed identity’. Indeed, many identity theorists now conceptualize personal identity as the accumulation of stories we tell about ourselves, and dialogic approaches to the self and to narrative are brought together in many different ways in order to theorize their complex interrelationship.[2]

Labov's work on evaluation provides analysts with useful, and useable, tools for undertaking a systematic textual analysis that can generate an interpretation of the perspective, and the claimed identity, of a narrator. We can appreciate, therefore, that although the Labovian approach is text-centred, or ‘surface-oriented’ (Gülich & Quasthoff, 1987: 174), the concepts and analytic tools it provides can take the analyst below the surface of the text, as long as the link between the linguistic description and the interpretation is strictly maintained.

Finding or Eliciting Personal Narratives

Finally, the Labovian approach to the analysis of personal experience narratives has significant implications for the way in which data is produced. Labov focuses on the personal narrative as a monologue that straightforwardly represents past events in a story. He isolates it from its surrounding text and pays little attention to the context of the narration. The ‘ideal’ data for a Labovian analysis are therefore most likely to be produced by recording stories produced ‘naturally’, in non-research situations, without the story-eliciting and constructing context of an interview; or at the least, by interviews within which the interviewer has a minimal role, the variables of the interview context are in some way controlled and the narrator ‘sticks to the point’ (a rare oc-

currence, in my experience). Yet clearly, this might not be the first, or most appropriate, choice of data production for many research projects.

Some theoretical and methodological problems have started to emerge from this consideration of the benefits of the Labovian approach, indicating that its usefulness may be more limited than its widespread application would suggest. Researchers have discussed the problems with the approach over decades. A useful compendium of papers that both appreciate and criticize the approach was published in 1997 in Volume 7 of the *Journal of Narrative and Life History* (now *Narrative Inquiry*), including contributions from Labov (1997) himself, Mishler and Riessman. The next two sections discuss the problems of the Labovian approach as they affect narrative research generally.

Some Theoretical Problems with the Labovian Approach

Looking again at the example from Mishler (1986: 237) as described above, it quickly becomes clear that it is the Labovian method and model that has determined what the ‘core narrative’ is. This narrative is then taken to be a representation of ‘what actually happened’: an objective reality is being assumed when this ‘reality’ has been constructed by the method. Mishler (1995: 94–5) discusses the way in which Labov later moved away from the definition of narrative as ‘the construction of an objective event sequence’ (Labov, 1982: 232) and focused on sequences of speech acts and actions which mediate social status relationships between speakers within the narrative. But as Mishler notes, this later version of the Labovian approach still relies on ‘an assumed correspondence between the temporal orderings of speech acts and the sequence of social moves in the negotiation of status relationships’ (Mishler, 1995: 95). The Labovian method, as applied by Mishler, of reducing transcripts to a ‘core’ narrative is still used today as narrative analysis is taken up across an ever wider range of academic fields (see, for example, Davies, 2011; Hemsley et al., 2011). It is a method that may well make long transcripts more manageable, and the application of Labov's model ‘neater’, but there are a number of reasons why it is problematic to prioritize the narration of events over the narration of experience.

Within a strictly Labovian analysis, there is no allowance made for the inevitably *partial and constructed* nature of any account of personal experience. This has significant implications for the distinction Labov makes between referential (narrative) clauses, which report the sequence of events, and evaluative clauses, which tell how the narrator feels about what happened and mediate the point of the story. For many narrative ana-

lysts, this distinction is hard to maintain.

The attempt to match narrative clauses to events and to maintain a strict distinction between referential clauses and evaluative clauses is often problematic. As Culler (1981) points out, any clause may be present because it fulfils the evaluative rather than the referential function. In other words, a clause that appears to be a simple narrative clause referring to an event is not necessarily present in the text just because it is what happened – for all narration is highly selective – but may have been selected for inclusion because it supports the point of the narrative. Its primary function may, therefore, be evaluative rather than referential. Labov himself notes that the evaluative function may well override the referential function: 'the narratives themselves may serve only as a framework for the evaluation' (Labov, 1972: 371). What this means is that the narrator's *experience* of the event, their perspective on what happened, determines how the story is told and which events are selected for inclusion (see Patterson's (2002) analysis and discussion of 'liminal zone' stories for evidence that personal experience narratives are primarily about experience rather than events). An event-centric approach, which assumes the primacy of events, fails, therefore, to appreciate the essential creativity of the act of telling a story of personal experience, which involves *reconstructing* the past for the purposes of the present telling. This touches on a deep philosophical issue concerning the relationship between life and story, and readers who wish to delve into this further can take up the suggestions for further reading provided at the end of the chapter.

For now, it is interesting to note the way in which this issue comes to the fore in Mishler's (1986) discussion of his interpretation of the 'yet we always did what we had to do' narrative. In the light of a narrative produced by the interviewee's wife, in which she talks about her husband's alcoholism, erratic job history and their marital conflict, Mishler had to modify his interpretation of the story the interviewee had told him, within which all these issues were entirely absent. Here we see that the 'yet we always did what we had to do' story tells us far more about the narrator's claimed identity in this interview context than it tells us about past events in the narrator's life – and the same would have to be said of the wife's narrative. As the Personal Narratives Group (1989) explain, narratives do not 'reveal the past', neither are they 'open to proof', but through interpretation they *do* reveal truths about narrators' experiences and how they want to be understood. This is a very valuable insight into the nature of the personal experience narrative and an important reason to promote an experiential rather than an event-centric understanding of personal narration.

Other critiques of the theoretical premises of the Labovian approach have highlighted its specificity in terms of culture and gender. As previously discussed, a Labovian approach extracts narrative sequences from the

rest of the talk by means of definitional criteria, which determines what constitutes a minimal narrative, ‘a sequence of two clauses which are *temporally ordered*’ (Labov, 1972: 360). These will be past tense clauses because narrative is defined as ‘one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred’ (Labov, 1972: 359). Polanyi (1979: 208) points out that this is a culturally-specific conceptualization of narrative, noting that non-Indo–European stories may be structured so that later actions, states or events precede earlier ones. In addition, some narrative traditions organize stories around place, or around the hierarchy of ranks of the characters or their relationship to the speaker, rather than around time.

A further, and very disturbing, claim by critics of Labov's model, is that, due to the inferred correlation of *competence* with fully-formed evaluative narrative syntax and because of the success of the model, it ‘has functioned normatively to set the standard against which other personal narratives are measured’ (Langellier, 1989: 248–9). According to this argument, a ‘good’ narrative is one that fits neatly into Labov's model, and it may be inferred that those that do not fit have been produced by less than competent storytellers. In fact, this is far too simplistic an interpretation of Labov's work and his notion of competency. He did not promote any generalized judgement about ‘good’ or ‘bad’ narratives but rather presented a detailed, sociolinguistic account of the differences he observed in narrative production between people of different classes and ethnicities. He also specifically argued against equations of ‘competence’ with large amounts of evaluation, especially external evaluation. ‘Competence’, in this context, refers to the ability to command the attention of an audience. Labov stated that middle-class speakers tend to overuse external evaluation and syntactic elaboration, which is detrimental to audience interest, whereas embedded evaluation successfully dramatizes personal narration. He concluded, therefore, that stories told by working-class speakers demonstrated a higher level of competence than those of middle-class speakers (Labov, 1972: 396). In addition, Labov firmly refuted the idea, prevalent at the time, that black speakers were linguistically, and intellectually, undeveloped, ‘behind or backward’, and claimed that they may be more competent storytellers than white speakers of the same age and class. Labov was not simply correlating syntactic complexity with competence, therefore, but these kinds of interpretations have been an occasional, and regrettable, outcome of the widespread application of the model.

Langellier and Peterson (1992) also criticize the Labovian approach on the grounds of its specificity in terms of gender. Their research, and that of others they review, shows that there are significant differences between stories told by men and stories told by women. For this reason, they claim that the approach developed by Labov, which was based on the study of men's narration, fails adequately to address the subtle interaction-

al intricacy of women's personal narratives. Langellier and Peterson (1992: 173) coin the term ‘spinstorying’ in order to convey the way in which ‘stories are tellable because they are drawn from the fiber of women's experiences’, and to suggest a spiralling interaction between conversation and story and story and conversation, as women collaboratively weave stories of a shared reality. These stories do not prioritize the telling of discrete events or centre on a ‘point’ that exists before or outside of the interaction, but neither are they ‘pointless’. The ‘point’ of the telling develops dynamically in interaction as ‘when women act as audience, they speak […] and, when women speak, they act as audience’ (Langellier and Peterson, 1992: 174; see also Leung 2009). Consequently, to define narrative in terms of the recounting of specific past time events would be to miss the point that what matters to some narrators, the ‘point’ of their narrative, is to share their experiences with others, not to impart information about some historical event. Langellier and Peterson are particularly interested in women sharing their stories in groups but many of their observations are relevant to the research interview context. An important methodological question about the role of the researcher arises from their observation that only by entering ‘the realm of spinstorying as collaborators’ can researchers adequately understand women's storytelling (1992: 177).

To summarize the points I have made in this section, there is much to be gained by the judicious use of a Labovian approach, but if one takes a strictly Labovian approach to some types of data then much will be lost. Focusing solely on chronologically ordered past tense clauses, analysing them in isolation from the rest of the transcript, and taking no account of the context in which the narrative was produced, can only produce an overly simplistic, reductive analysis and interpretation. If used in isolation, therefore, a standard, linear model of narrative structure, confining itself to the relationships between clauses in sections of text which conform to a restrictive event-centric definition of narrative, will count as ‘non-narrative’ much that is fundamental to personal narration, perhaps especially women's personal narration, and may also serve to perpetuate an inadequate theory and an inflexible approach.[3]

Some Methodological Problems with the Labovian Approach

One of the first problems I encountered when trying to use the Labovian method and model to analyse transcripts of interviews with people talking about their traumatic experiences, was that my data did not seem to

conform to the structure that the model was designed to analyse. What was even more disturbing was that, according to Labov's definition of a minimal narrative as ‘a sequence of two clauses which are *temporally ordered*’ (Labov, 1972: 360), the vast majority of the transcripts were not narrative. For example, here is Janice talking about herself in the immediate aftermath of the death of her teenage daughter in a car accident:

1. and of course I wasn't sleeping I was just you know in this
2. manic rush I don't know I was writing stuff down and going
3. through pictures I don't know I just I was just trying to make
4. sense of it I just couldn't sleep and erm as I suppose looking
5. back on it probably being like that I was trying to just block it
6. out …

(Janice, 17: 881–9)[4]

The clauses which make up this extract are not chronologically ordered and do not correspond to discrete events. Therefore they do not count as narrative according to Labov's definition of narrative. There is no doubt, however, that Janice *was* telling me about her personal experience. Given that the main aim of my research was to investigate the relationship between the narration of the personal experience of trauma and the process of coping, or not coping, with that experience, it was crucial for me to be able to include this type of text in my narrative analysis.

Polanyi (1985) came up against the same methodological problem when using the Labovian approach to try to locate narratives within the full text of an interview. She describes this as ‘a seemingly insurmountable problem for analysts’ (1985: 183). In Polanyi's ‘The Robbery’ story, containing over 300 clauses, she could only identify eight narrative clauses, in Labov's terms. The problem is, then, how narrative is defined. Polanyi concludes that while Labov's model is:

> *successful in part because* … [it indicates] *the classical development of the plot in conversational stories* … [it is not] *ultimately very helpful* … [as] *the clauses that one finds in the transcripts of taped stories hardly ever correspond to this ordering.*
>
> (Polanyi, 1985: 193–4)

Polanyi develops Labov's work in interesting ways. She extends his limited ‘narrative clause = event’ formulation to include *state clauses* in conversational narratives which represent states of affairs that persist over

time, in contrast to *event clauses* which represent one unique, discrete happening (Polanyi, 1985: 191).[5] Extending the range of the types of clause that 'counted' as narrative meant that many more sections of my transcripts could now be classified as narrative, including the extract from the interview with Janice, above, where states of 'not sleeping' and 'writing stuff down' are narrated using past participle verb inflections to encode experiences that persisted over time.

The limitations of Labov's definitional criteria were also recognized by Riessman (1993: 44) when she encountered a transcript of a personal narrative that 'felt' like a narrative but resisted analysis in terms of his model. She found, as I did, that Labov's theory and model is inadequate for 'subjective experiences, events that extend over time and even extend into the present … [as such narratives are] as much about affective "actions", things the narrator feels and says to herself as … about "what happened" in a more objective sense' (Riessman, 1993: 51–2). Riessman found that using Gee's (1991) poetic structural approach to narrative and analysing this text in terms of stanzas and themes was far more appropriate and rewarding.

Riessman (1993) offers a reconceptualization of narrative which allows for the inclusion of the narration of ongoing or enduring states of being, or of present, future or hypothetical experience, by using the term 'narrative' in two ways. First, the entire response of the interviewee is a narrative if it has sequential, thematic and structural coherence, according to Gee's (1991) approach. Second, embedded in this 'overarching narrative' there may be narrative segments which meet Labov's more limited criteria.

Using this approach, Riessman was able to identify a tension in the structure of the particular narrative she was analysing 'between the real and the wished for, the story and the dream' which, Riessman believes, enabled her to 'come close to seeing into [the narrator's] subjective experience – what life "means" to her at the moment of telling' (Riessman, 1993: 52). This insight was achieved through the identification of a contradiction between two narrative segments in the transcript, one representing reality and one representing a dream of how the narrator would like life to be. These are embedded in a series of stanzas that convey the ongoing conditions of the narrator's life and the way she experiences, and endures, them (Riessman, 1993: 45–52).

This notion of imagined experience, and its juxtaposition in a narrative with past and present experience, was crucial to the development of my understanding of the relationship between narration and coping in the aftermath of trauma. My data contained past, present, future and hypothetical narratives, densely interwoven. Through my analyses of imaginary, or hypothetical, narratives of what the traumatic event might have been ('comparators', in Labov's terms, which may offer worse, better or just different outcomes) I came to understand that these 'narrative imaginings' were as crucial an aspect of the process of narration and coping, as

were the narratives of the actual past events (Patterson, 2002).

In addition, the realm of the imaginary is an important aspect of the interactive context in which traumatic experience is narrated. At the very moment when a narrator says ‘you cannot imagine what it is like’ or ‘you can never know what it feels like’, the listener is *invited to imagine*, to enter into a realm of experience which is not their own but neither is it any longer only the speaker's. Such invitations to imagine often herald a ‘narrative proper’, in Labov's terms, as the speaker provides a specific example from their past experience in order to help the listener to imagine what it would be like to share the narrator's subjective experience. As Montgomery (2010: 205) discovered through his Labovian analysis of personal experience narratives of the 2005 London bombings, such narratives have a dual focus: to tell what happened, but more importantly to ‘tell us *what it felt like as it happened*’ (emphasis in the original).

Gail's ‘shabby man’ story is a good example of such a narrative and this is analysed in the next section in order to highlight a further methodological problem with the Labovian approach.

This problem relates to the inherent tendency in the Labovian approach to decontextualize narratives by treating them as self-contained monologues which have an autonomous existence. The talk surrounding them, their textual context and the interactional context within which they are produced, are disregarded or treated as secondary, ‘add-on’ features. In order to illustrate the problems of such an approach, let us see what a basic Labovian analysis can reveal about Gail's ‘shabby man’ story. This story is told by Gail to a psychotherapist in the context of a one hour interview within which Gail talks about her experiences in the aftermath of being seriously sexually and physically assaulted by an intruder in her home:

The Shabby Man Story

1 there was an incident actually a few weeks ago	A/O
2 girl from next door (.)	O
3 we were walking the dog	O
4 and there was a man	O

5 who was sitting (.) erm (.)	O
6 drinking a bottle of wine or sherry or something	O
7 looking very er (.) well down (.) dirty and shabby	O
8 but he had that look (.)	O
9 and he watched (.)	CA
10 as we passed very intensely (.)	CA
11 now if I hadn't been with my mother-in-law	E
12 I would have been absolutely (.) scared out of my mind	E
13 but because she was there you know	E
14 I felt OK (.) just about (.)	R
15 she was worried'.	R

(Gail, 16: 813–23)

Underlining – emphasis

(.) – clearly discernible pause

Although the ‘plot’ here is minimal, ‘and he watched as we passed’ (lines 9–10), this is a narrative, according to Labov's definitional criteria for identifying a minimal narrative, ‘a sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered’ (1972: 360).

The evaluation in this narrative is concentrated in the following section:

> 11 now if I hadn't been with my mother-in-law
> 12 I would have been absolutely (.) scared out of my mind
> 13 but because she was there you know

This is external evaluation as the narrator stands outside the story and tells the listener what the point of the

story is. A number of Labovian evaluative devices are used: now – intensifer (expressive phonology)

if I hadn't been with my mother-in-law I would have been absolutely (.) scared out of my mind – comparator (something that could have happened, but didn't)

absolutely – intensifier (quantifier)

but because – explicative (invoking causality)

The narrative also contains embedded evaluation, ‘but he had that look’ (line 8). The use of the adversative conjunction ‘but’ here functions to indicate that the preceding description of the man:

1. who was sitting (.) erm (.)
2. drinking a bottle of wine or sherry or something
3. looking very er (.) well down (.) dirty and shabby

is not as significant to the point of the story as him having ‘that look’ (line 8) is. However, the phrase ‘that look’ can only be understood by reference back to the talk between Gail and the psychotherapist which immediately precedes this past tense narration:

1. G: but men I don't know er (.) if they look
2. intimidating (.) men have a I think it's called the hungry look
3. [P smiles] you know some men (.) just just look have a look
4. P: mm
5. G: which yes it's frightening
6. P: right
7. G: it's a very intense look
8. P: right so there's something about certain people
9. G: yes
10. P: you find (.) anxiety provoking
11. G: yes if I'm on my own if I'm not on my own then it doesn't
12. concern me (.)

(Gail, 15: 790–809)

Taking a strictly Labovian approach, this present tense, eventless dialogic sequence would be excluded from the analysis; it would be seen as extraneous talk. However, it is clear that the point of the narrative that fol-

lows is deeply embedded in this talk. The overriding point of the shabby man story has nothing to do with the specific past events of that day and everything to do with how Gail feels now (at the time of the interview), how she experiences the ongoing effects of what happened to her in the past, and how she is choosing to convey that experience to her interlocutor.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have drawn attention to the event-centricity of the Labovian approach and suggested that an experiential approach not only 'fits' many narratives better, but will also enable researchers to produce richer, more comprehensive analyses and interpretations of the full range of forms that personal experience narratives can take. In other words, I am arguing that it makes no sense to treat the complexity and subtlety of the narration of experience as though it *should* have an orderly, complete structure by reducing it to the one type of text that conforms to the paradigmatic model.

Given that many of the limitations of the Labovian approach arise from its event-centric definition of narrative and the implications this has for identifying narratives, there are many ways in which narrative analysts can utilize the valuable aspects of Labov's work by using more inclusive definitional criteria. I formulated an experiential definition of the oral personal experience narrative for use with my data corpus of narratives of traumatic experience:

> *texts which bring stories of personal experience into being by means of the first person oral narration of past, present, future or imaginary experience.*
>
> (Patterson, 2000: 128)

This definition is broad enough to include all aspects of personal experience narration without being so broad as to suggest that everything anyone says may be counted as narrative. One is then free to apply the full Labovian model and method to those sections of transcripts that conform to the Labovian definitional criteria, but also to use Labovian tools and concepts as appropriate throughout. In my view, the necessary linguistic concepts and tools needed for performing systematic analyses are thin on the ground of narrative research so it is important that we make appropriate use of those that are available to us, as well as developing new ones.

Notes

1 See, for example, Attanucci (1993); Bell (1988); Ferrara (1994); Harris (2001); Koven (2002); Montgomery (2010); Özyıldırım (2009); Peterson and McCabe (1983); Polanyi (1981); Riessman (1990).

2 See Bakhtin (1981); Hermans (1996); Kerby (1991); Plummer (1995); Ricoeur (1991); Rosenwald and Ochberg (1993); Sampson (1993); Sarbin (1986); Widdershoven (1994).

3 The theoretical problems and limitations of the Labovian approach, when used in isolation, are discussed by a number of theorists who seek ways of incorporating the very valuable insights of Labov's work into a more holistic approach to data. See, for example, Agar and Hobbs (1982); De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2008); Ferrara (1994); Koven (2002); McLeod (1997); Mishler (1986); Ochs (1994); Polyani (1979); Riessman (1993).

4 Unless referenced otherwise, all extracts in this chapter are taken from a data-corpus of personal experience narratives of trauma compiled by the author. All names and identifying features have been changed. Full details of the methodological and ethical issues concerning this data can be found in Patterson (2000).

5 Polanyi's ‘state clauses’ are similar to Riessman's concept of ‘habitual narratives’ (Riessman 1993: 18–19), but Riessman uses ‘habitual’ at the level of the narrative whereas Polanyi identifies recurring states at the level of the clause.

Further Reading

- Langellier, K. M. (1989) and Mishler, E. G. (1995) are recommended to researchers as articles that can help to clarify which approach, or understanding of narrative, underpins one's own research.
- Readers who are interested in the philosophical issue of the relationship between life and story will find that Bal (1985), Mitchell (1981), Ricoeur (1981, 1984) and Widdershoven (1994) are all very useful texts. See also Patterson's (2002) analysis and discussion of ‘liminal zone’ stories for evidence that personal experience narratives are primarily about experience rather than events.
- From Labov's own work, his 1967 paper with Waletsky, his book *Language in the Inner City* (1972) and his more recent (1*997)* paper in *The Journal of Narrative and Life History*, now *Narrative Inquiry*, are good places to start. More recent papers can be found on his website. The 1*997* Labov-dedicat-

ed volume of *The Journal of Narrative and Life History* is a very useful initial resource.

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