

Thinking big with small stories in narrative and identity analysis

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Narrative research is frequently described as a rich and diverse enterprise, yet the kinds of narrative data that it bases itself on present a striking consensus: they are autobiographical in kind (i.e., about non-shared, personal experience, single past events). In this paper, I put forth a case for under-represented narrative data which I collectively call (following Bamberg 2004a, b; also Georgakopoulou & Bamberg, 2005) “small stories” (partly literally, partly metaphorically). My aim is to flesh small stories out, to urge for the sort of systematic research that will establish connections between their interactional features and their sites of engagement and finally to consider the implications of their inclusion in narrative research for identity analysis (as the main agenda of much of narrative research). I will thus propose small stories research as a “new” narrative turn that can provide a needed meeting point for narrative analysis and narrative inquiry. (*Small Stories, Narrative Analysis, Narrative Inquiry, Narrative and Identities*)

Small stories beyond the narrative canon

It is far from controversial (and the contributions to this Special Issue are no exception) to say that narrative remains an elusive, contested and indeterminate concept, variously used as an epistemology, a methodological perspective, an antidote to positivist research, a communication mode, a supra-genre, a text-type. More generally, as a way of making sense of the world, at times equated with experience, time, history and life itself; more modestly, as a specific kind of discourse with conventionalised textual features (see Georgakopoulou & Goutsos, 2000, pp. 64–68). It is nonetheless all too easy to underestimate the kinds of consensus that this richness and diversity tend to mask on what constitutes a story but also and importantly what constitutes a story worthy of analysis for the aim of tapping into human experience.

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My autobiographical journey to the stumbling blocks of certain orthodoxy within narrative approaches involved the transition I made from exploring questions of culture-specificity in prototypical narrative data in Greek (in the early '90s) to having to claim a place in narrative research for snippets of talk that flouted expectations of the canon. The latter I have come to call *small stories*, following Bamberg (2004a, b) who has worked with comparable data. By prototypical narrative, I mean personal, past experience stories of non-shared events. As I will show below, small stories on the other hand are employed as an umbrella-term that covers a gamut of under-represented narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell. These tellings are typically small when compared to the pages and pages of transcript of interview narratives. On a metaphorical level though, small stories is somewhat of an antidote formulation to a longstanding tradition of *big stories* (cf. "grand narratives", Lyotard, 1984): the term locates a level and even an aesthetic for the identification and analysis of narrative: the smallness of talk, where fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world (Hymes, 1996) can be easily missed out on by an analytical lens which only looks out for fully-fledged stories.

To return to my story of small stories, the prototypical narrative data I started out with (Georgakopoulou, 1997) had actually occurred in ordinary conversational contexts (where I was a participant-observer) and not elicited in research interviews. They still however resonated both with the influential Labovian (1972) paradigm and with the key-events research interview narratives. They were thus well met even if often seen by colleagues as exotic data: the point was that in many respects, be they in terms of how they were structured or of how they signalled their tellability, - both focal concerns at the time —, they could be viewed as tokens of a type, a case-study of how people in Greece in ordinary conversations get to tell personal past events experience studies. In this respect, they could easily be placed within the framework of contextual research, partly post-Labovian in spirit, partly drawing on ethnography of communication, which dominated the 80s and much of the 90s in sociocultural linguistic approaches to narrative. With hindsight, this kind of research feels as the second wave of narrative analysis: it had definitively moved from the study of narrative as text (first wave) to the study of narrative-in-context, but there was still something neat about the conceptualisation of both text and context: the former was still defined typologically and on the basis of abstract, formal criteria (minimal narrative definitions were undeniably influential); the latter was often seen as a surrounding frame, something to be contained and tamed by the analysis. Culture, community and comparable notions that informed the analysis of context (then often called variables) were still defined in somewhat homogenizing terms (for a critique, see chapters in Duranti & Goodwin, 1992), and certainly, the ideas of multiplicity, fragmentation and irreducible contingency that have now been embraced by sociolinguistics (e.g., Rampton, 2001) were far less mainstream.

The increasing realization from a number of conversational studies that things looked different on the ground, that the stories told there did not quite fit the bill, never resulted in a productive dialogue between two parallel traditions: somewhat

crudely speaking, the sociolinguistic, post-Labovian tradition on one hand, and the interactional paradigms on the other hand that — crucially- did not see themselves as doing *narrative analysis* but as doing *conversation analysis* that looks at narrative (if and when it occurs) as another format of telling. In this respect, Schegloff's aporia is understandable as voiced in the Special Issue of the then *Journal of Narrative & Life History* (1997) that reflected on thirty years of narrative analysis post-Labov: "it is striking to what degree features of the 1967 paper have remained characteristic of treatments of narrative" (1997, p. 101). Four years later, Ochs and Capps (2001) convincingly argued for a lingering bias in conventional narrative analysis for narratives with the following qualities: "A coherent temporal progression of events that may be reordered for rhetorical purposes and that is typically located in some past time and place. A plotline that encompasses a beginning, a middle, and an end, conveys a particular perspective and is designed for a particular audience who apprehend and shape its meaning" (p. 57).

In my view, the plea in Ochs' and Capps' important study for a departure from the narrative canon can be restated and emphasized anew as two questions that still beg systematic research:

1. The first concerns the types of small (sic non-canonical) stories and their interactional features, about which we still have fragmented information and from a small number of studies.¹ The lack of an inclusive and coherent paradigm for the analysis of 'non-canonical' storytelling is particularly acute in relation to narrative interview research (normally associated with narrative inquiry, as we will see below). There, any narrative data that depart from the aimed at eliciting "life story" tend to be dismissed (they are not stories), seen as analytic nuisance (e.g. as the result of bad interviewing) or subsumed under the focal concerns of the big story (e.g., taken to be instances of incoherent tellings, not yet incorporated into the big story). In the light of the above, we need to know if there is anything systematic about the contexts of occurrence of small stories other than that they frequent ordinary conversations. What are the types of social organisation and local contexts that warrant or equally prohibit small stories?

1. Conversation analytic studies (e.g., Goodwin, 1984; Jefferson, 1978; Sacks, 1974) have been instrumental in showing order and systematicity in storytelling in conversational contexts, particularly with regard to endpoints: how stories are introduced into and exited from ongoing talk. There is still however scope for a critical mass that will look into the emerging structure of stories, the part in between the story preface and the closing. In addition, the canon of personal experience stories of past events has undoubtedly formed the main data of these studies too. On the other hand, studies in the post-Labovian tradition (i.e., more or less broadly aligning with his model) tend to present conversational stories that depart from Labov's data as atypical. The proliferation of names here is suggestive of illegitimacy and other-ness: e.g., diffuse stories (Norricks, 2000), generic stories (Baynham, 2003) and arguably renders the narrative canon deceptively homogeneous.

2. The second question concerns the tools that are appropriate for the analysis of such stories. Documenting and scrutinizing small stories in diverse contexts is the first pressing step but it needs to be pursued further in terms of its consequences for mainstay analytic vocabulary in the area: is there a case for redefining or stretching it? Or is it simply inadequate for dealing with anything outside the canon in which case we need new concepts and a new *modus operandi*? Notably, Ochs and Capps (2001) follow up their departure from the narrative canon by revisiting the role and definition of what they refer to as “dimensions of narrativity” (e.g. tellability, tellership).

Last but not least in the tasks for small stories research is their consequentiality for narrative and identity research. Given that the narrative canon has mainly been used as a point of entry for the inquiry into the self, what implications would researching small stories have for the identity project? This question can be pursued as part of the recent re-situating of narrative analysis concerns within sociolinguistics from narratives-in-context to narrative-and-identities. To keep to the waves metaphor, this third wave is intimately linked with “the age of identity [which] is upon us”, as Bucholtz and Hall (2005, p. 608) suggest, not only with reference to sociolinguistics but also to human and social sciences approaches. Importantly, for narrative, it has come with an extra consideration: an increasingly apparent need for the two camps of narrative analysis and narrative inquiry that have more or less happily lived apart to work together and cross-talk. The latter, in Freeman’s terms (2003, p. 338), the expressivists (in my terms, the *narrative inquiry* scholars), use narrative as a means to an end (in my terms as a *method*) and on that basis their interest lies in the about, the what and the who of narrative: what stories tell us about the teller’s self. Freeman reserves a rather (unfavourably) biased term (the productivists) for the other camp, the *narrative analysts* (in my terms), those who prioritise the how of narrative tellings and for whom the study of narrative can be an end in itself. But he is right to point out that this distinction should not be seen as a dichotomy that obscures any intermittent positions. Here, I am extending this argument to claim that it is in effect the increasing importance of identity research for both “camps” that is calling for synergies as well as making boundaries less sharp. The point is that narrative analysts are increasingly having their say about the who and the what of narrative, through a reaffirmed belief in the importance of the communicative how for identity analysis (e.g., chapters in De Fina, Schiffrin & Bamberg, 2006): In other words, that it is in the details of talk (including storytelling) that identities can be inflected, reworked, and more or less variably and subtly invoked (see chapters in Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998).

The issues in this much needed synergy between narrative analysis and narrative inquiry regarding narrative and identities have got more to do with what is seen as narrative and as narrative data and less to do with questions of method, theories of self, and differences in analysis. While it is of course on the basis of the latter that the former are decided upon, prioritised, silenced or under-represented, it is also the case that specific narrative data feed back into specific assumptions about the self and specific analytical ways, as I will argue below.

Small stories in place

In my work, I have begun to tackle each of the above questions on the basis of small stories and through fine-grained analysis — charting their ways of telling and studying the identity work that their tellers engage in, while also re-thinking the mainstay analytic vocabulary (Georgakopoulou 2002, 2005a, 2006a, b, forthcoming). In the space of this paper, I will try to flesh out small stories and sketch a “grand vision” for them: as being part of the main agenda of narrative research and as being integrally connected with issues of self that matter to narrative research, be it of the narrative analysis or of the narrative inquiry kind.

The significance of small stories as talk-in-interaction and as social practice became apparent to me in the course of an ethnographic study of a group of female adolescents in a small town in Greece, which I embarked on in 1998. Small stories as the narrative data in the participants’ self-recorded conversations that resisted easy categorizations were part of socialization settings (cafés, parks, benches etc.) outside school that formed at that point in their lives crucial sites of subjectivity. As I have shown elsewhere (2003a), small stories were thus intimately linked with the town’s topography as socio-symbolic semiosis: they were social activities habitually associated with *sites of engagement* (Scollon & Scollon 2004, p 28) that is, socio-cultural spheres for semiotic activity in real time that come with differential degrees of regulation, accessibility, and participation, but also with expectations and norms about what is licensed or not. In this way, the small stories’ interactional features were both constituted by and constituting their sites of engagement as culturally shaped (and in this case, genderized and constraining) liminal spaces.

Small stories were mostly about very recent (‘this morning’, ‘last night’) events. I called these immediately reworked slices of life that arose out of a need to share with friends what had just happened ‘breaking news’: a term that aimed at capturing their dynamic and ongoing nature. Since then, my research has shown that breaking news are salient and powerful narrative meaning-making ways in mediated interactions too (e.g., on email, Georgakopoulou, 2004) or when the participants have a range of mediational tools (e.g., text-messaging) at their disposal alongside face-to-face communication. This is the case in the conversations of adolescents in the classroom and in the playground of a London comprehensive school that I am currently researching with colleagues.² A routine activity in the data involves small stories of very recent mediated interactions (mostly mobile phone calls, text messaging, and MSN) with people the participants are romantically interested in and/or hang out with outside school. Work-in-progress is bringing to the fore the social moments and the local economies of meaning that those small stories as narrative orientations to the world (Hymes, 1996) engender within the school as a site of engagement.

Another salient kind of small stories that has emerged in all three data-sets referred to above, involves projected (near future) events. In fact, I could go a step fur-

2. Project on Urban Classroom Culture and Interaction as part of the ESRC Identities and Social Action Programme, <http://www.identities.org.uk>

ther and claim that Prince's (1988) the 'disnarrated' is much more frequent, quantitatively speaking, and salient than the 'narrated' in the adolescents' data: the possible, the joint piecing together of future scenarios carries more social significance than the actual. At a time at which one's place and popularity in the peer-group and in the hetero-sexual market both matter enormously and are dynamically (re)shaped, stories become rehearsals for later action more than reconstructions of the past; they are more about imagining the future than about remembering the past (see Georgakopoulou, 2003b, pp. 75–91). In the data of the group of female adolescents, I have shown how these anticipated and imagined narratives routinely draw upon and embed in their tellings stories of shared past events, more or less elliptically reworked, as interpretative viewpoints (Georgakopoulou, 2005b): the past informs and shapes the future in ways that foreground the intertextual links of stories making them part of an interactional trajectory, showing up their natural histories as events that can be transposed from one context to another across time and space (Silverstein & Urban, 1996). More specifically, the ethnographic perspective on the data alerted me to the importance of such intertextual links and recontextualizations for the participants' own local rationalities and folk theories of narrative. Stories of shared events were frequently enmeshed in stories of projected events as condensed references: a punchline or a one-liner that formed an indexical link with previous tellings and events. Such references were still seen by the group as "stories" and were part of social practices that supported their role as narrative activities: they had been recorded in the Diary like book of the group's activities as lengthy and full-fledged stories and they had formed the basis for a collection of poems for internal consumption. Their trajectories involved a history of recontextualizations over time and transpositions not just in different kinds of events but also in different kinds of media.

With a small stories perspective in mind, it is not just tellings or retellings that form part of the analysis: refusals to tell or deferrals of telling are equally important in terms of how the participants orient to what is appropriate a story in a specific environment, what the norms for telling and tellability are.³

In short, there was a gamut of small stories in my data more or less connected with the narrative canon. Some of them fulfilled prototypical definitional criteria (e.g., temporal ordering of events) but still did not sit well with the canon (e.g., stories of projected events, given that the emphasis of the literature has undoubtedly been on past events). Others failed those criteria but, as the participants themselves oriented to what going on as a story, arguably rendered them superfluous if not problematic: not treating them as stories would miss out on their social consequentiality and disregard the participants' situated understandings (see Georgakopoulou, forthcoming, Chapter 1).

3. In the data of private email messages, stories were typically introduced on email and their full telling was deferred to a near future face-to-face interaction (see Georgakopoulou, 2004).

From small stories to tellers

As I have signalled above, small stories should be central to the intensification of a constructive dialogue between narrative inquiry and narrative analysis around issues of identity. The question of what is specific to narrative about constructions of self should be addressed on the basis that a full understanding presupposes an opening up of narrative research beyond the reductive confines of a single type of narrative with the aim of documenting the richness and diversity of narrative genres. This requires a decisive shift from “what does narrative tell us about constructions of self?” to “how do we *do self* (and *other*) in narrative genres in a variety of sites of engagement?” In the context of a longstanding privileging of a certain kind of subjectivity, a certain kind of self and a certain type of narrative data through which to explore self, this shift can be seen as a new narrative turn, one that does not prioritise a unified, coherent, autonomous, reflected upon⁴ and rehearsed self within a restrictive view of narrative as “a version of life given as a particular moment as expressing the given story as consistent and sequencing experience as lived” (Roberts, 2004, p. 270; cf. Parker 2003, pp. 301–315). Instead, one that allows for, indeed sees the need for a scrutiny of fleeting, contingent, fragmented and multiple selves, “deriving their definition through relations with others, [...] becoming on the boundaries of self and other” (De Peuter, 1998, p. 32) in narrative tellings in situ. I have argued elsewhere (Georgakopoulou, 2006a) that this new narrative turn, one that I see as inextricably bound up with small stories research has to be methodologically grounded and analytically associated with the following three paradigm shifts:

- a. Latest practice-based theories of genre that link ways of speaking with the production of social life, seeing genre as a “primary means for dealing with recurrent social exigencies ... a routinized vehicle for encoding and expressing particular orders of knowledge and experience” (Bauman, 2004, p. 6; also see Hanks, 1996).
- b. A view of identities-in-interaction (for an overview see Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), that is, as locally accomplished categories, jointly drafted, contested/contestable, performed (as opposed to “real”; cf. Bamberg, 1997, Coupland, 2003), open to revision and refashioning and not easily isolatable but in interrelation (co-articulated) with other social actions (cf. Androutsopoulos & Georgakopoulou, 2003).
- c. A late modern theorizing (e.g., Appadurai, 1996, Harvey, 1989) of the micro-, of small, unofficial, fragmented and/or non-hegemonic social practices as crucial sites of subjectivity.

Space limitations do not allow me to expand on each of these three strands that can

4. A common misunderstanding in this respect involves equating reflection with distance from events and seeing small stories as lacking in it. Within this paper's approach, reflection cannot be seen outside the co-construction that actual contexts of storytelling involve and it is again on the intersection between tellings and sites of engagement, that is, what stories actually do where they are told, that we should be seeking to establish processes of reflection/reflexivity rather than in inherent properties of events or stories

provide an overarching framework of coherence for small stories. On the basis of this framework though, small stories research can offer a way out of celebratory, idealizing and essentializing accounts that have tended to see narratives as authentic and uncontaminated accounts of self (cf. Atkinson & Delamont, 2006). The study of narrative is by now a well-established area that can afford to reach out to under-represented stories as well as viewing all stories as social practices amidst others (in relationship or tension with them, not inherently better or worse) that are equally observable, analysable and researcher-researched accountable. Small stories in this respect can enable the shift from the precious lived and told to the messier business of living and telling.

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