

Doing narrative ethnography: methods and research design

My reasoning behind focusing on narratives as both the object and method of inquiry should be clear from the previous considerations around ontology. To sum up: “Stories are dynamic, changeable, never the same. Yet they convey something about what we believe to be stable in the world. They say something about us as individuals, cultural creatures, historical beings. They shape our actions and are at the same time what is left when the action is gone.” (http://patternwhichconnects.com/GIST/Diary_2/Entries/2012/1/19_17.01.12.html) Borrowing from ant’s approach of ‘following the actor’ perhaps I could say I am ‘tracing or following the narrative’. This section sets out which parts of the literature on narratives I draw on, followed by a justification and rationale for combining narrative enquiry with an ethnographic approach. Finally, I set outline my research design and set out a framework for doing my fieldwork.

1. Narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry has a long and varied history which cut across disciplines including psychology, anthropology, sociology, literary studies and cultural theory. Commentators speak of a ‘narrative turn’ within the social sciences over the last couple of decades with a stronger focus on narratives and performances as well as increased use of qualitative methods (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006). However, this by no means implies that there is a unified approach to studying and analysing narratives. Definitions differ with varying degrees of emphasis on the role, function and context of stories. However, similar ‘ingredients’ of narratives appear across most definitions, here summarised by Kohler Riessman (2008):

“... a speaker connects events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away from the story. Events perceived by the speaker as important are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience” (p. 3)

In short, there is a speaker and an audience and between these actors a sequence of events are communicated which create some kind of shared (even if perceived differently) space in which meaning emerges. Very briefly put, narratives are usually of events which happen on a micro (local) or macro (regional/global) scale (or both). Such events can be analysed in terms of their duration, magnitude or size, and the account of these events can themselves be analysed according to their thematics, structures, and inherent ideas. These elements of narrative analyses can be approached in different ways.

I’ve discussed the ontological foundations for examining narratives in the previous section. I have also touched on the different types of narrative analysis and their histories/theoretical starting points in the research description which was presented at the upgrade meeting. The figure below summarises some of the major dividing lines within narrative research, showing longstanding differences within the field as well as some newer alternatives which try to circumvent what is in effect similar to agency-structure dichotomies in social science.

Facet	Longstanding dichotomies		Alternatives
Analytical focus	Events – recounting of particular past events	Experience – analyses general or imagined phenomena	Co-construction – interested in the social patterns and functioning of stories
Audience	Narratives say something about individual thought or emotion	Social production of narratives by the audience	Narratives follow larger patterns of social and cultural story-telling
Agency	Stories express personal identity and agency	Individual agency does not operate through narrative	Social roles are performed in narratives
Language	Underlying cognitive structures or social functioning of narrative	Focus on meanings and social positioning of language	Narratives reveal social positioning as discourses
	Data contains stable or unified narratives of experience	Language is non-transparent and stable data is not produced	
Time	Time as it is experienced	Chronological time	Non-temporal sequencing

Figure 1. Overview of approaches in narrative research. Based on Squire et al. 2008

(Note that the columns are not prescriptive so that research which takes a certain stance on one facet of narratives does not automatically prescribe to all the other standpoints in the same column.)

As I currently see my position, I take an approach which mainly fall within the 'alternatives' column. This clearly creates a link with the literature on performance which is actually an approach to narrative research in it's own right. Here, I agree with Atkinson and Delamont (2006):

Narratives are produced and performed in accordance with socially shared conventions, they are embedded in social encounters, they are part and parcel of everyday work; they are amongst the ways in which social organizations and institutions are constituted; they are productive of individual and collective identities; they are constituent features of rituals and ceremonies; they express authority and expertise; they display rhetorical and other aesthetic skills. (p. xxi)

From this it should be clear that narrative inquiry is an ideal methodological approach for studying grassroots innovations. As Squire (2008) puts it: “[s]tories operate within 'interpretive communities' of speakers and hearers that are political as well as cultural actors. They build collective identities that can lead, albeit slowly and discontinuously, to cultural shifts and political change” (p. 55). In this way narratives are well situated to study identities which are transformative and in some way storied.

I also draw on Jerome Bruner's constructivist approach to narrative which holds that “the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with them become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future” (p. 114). However this does not imply that narratives are static entities, on the contrary they depend on the situation, moment and place, or as Schegloff (1997) puts it: “We cannot know what distinctive features of structure or interactional enactment they [story types] occasion” (p. 46). This means the narrative research has to pay careful attention to context (and ask questions like: Why is a story told? When is it told? Where is it told? What is the position of the storyteller? Has the narrative been told before? Is it political?) But while narratives are dynamic they also have cross-cutting features. E.g., Landmann (forthcoming) sets out four levels of analysis that need to be considered in a narrative:

- 1) the linear level (relating to the sequential nature of story telling and the basic structure of the narrative);
- 2) the relational level (what the story reveals about relationships between storyteller and audience);
- 3) the emotional level (conveying feelings and subjective understandings of an event);
- 4) the analytical level (where the social scientist reflects on the collected material).

Recognising that there are such levels involved in narrative inquiry while also acknowledging that the story is never twice the same avoids getting into an epistemological tangle about truth claims. The issue is rather an interpretive problematic and I concur with Bruner that narratives organise experience and memory (he sets out ten features of this view of narrative in *The narrative construction of reality*, 1991).

This position says that both people's self-perceptions and the empirical world are inherently interpretive. Setting out a description of what a narrative sociology might look like David Maines (1993) describes the foundational assumption thus: “whether an account is regarded as valid is a function of the social contexts and conventions that the members of those contexts use to construct validity as a criterion for truth claims” (p. 133). (Note the overlap with co-productionist approaches here.) Seeking information or data for research purposes clearly frames the encounter in which a narrative is told in a specific way – both imposing limits and opening possibilities. Further, as Maines explains, this data is already interpreted by the narrator and the inquiry is therefore interpretive by nature. Maines discusses how to best interpret and manipulate this kind of data by considering the level of closure that is imposed on the data in the research design. His conclusion is that by imposing closure in data – both by 'filtering out' information as done in quantitative approaches using questionnaires and by framing qualitative questions too narrowly – the researcher risks denying research subjects their status as biographically-embedded, self-narrating persons. Thus, “the researcher is put into a position of having to speculate about the phenomena being studied” (p. 128) because the phenomena are not directly observed and reinforce ideologies which justify “the production and use of research instruments thought to be neutral and the norm of researcher detachment” (p. 129) onto the subject matter.

I follow Maines' endeavour to avoid imposing such closure on narratives. (This also sits well with the approach that takes to sociology.) It is worth quoting Maines at length here:

“A narrative sociology would minimize such speculation by respecting the complexity of human relations and group life. That respect would begin with the recognition of multiple realities that are rendered meaningful in personal and collective narratives. By locating data reduction after instead of during data collection, however, the researcher will be faced with an abundance of detail which typically contains contradictions. The virtue of this approach is that the researcher has access to the contradictions and thereby is on firmer empirical grounds than without them, but it increases

difficulties in drawing conclusions across cases" (p. 129).

This approach then opens up for a host of questions around the ways in which conclusions are drawn from potentially contradictory data and how this can inform wider research questions as well as the inherent power relations involved in the research. I will not go into depth on this here, suffice to say that I find Flyvbjergs phronetic approach to social science interesting in this regard (<http://flyvbjerg.plan.aau.dk/whatisphronetic.php>) and for now concur with Landmann (forthcoming) that narrative inquiry is apt as a phronetic approach to social science.

The methodological considerations that arise from using a narrative approach will be considered further in section 3. First it is necessary to explore what an open, descriptive account of narratives entails and how it is possible (if at all) to avoid imposing preconceived ideas on the field of observation. If it is true that *the method we really need is one that 'puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything'* how does this square with a narrative constructivism which holds that any researcher's experience is itself structured by personal narrative?

2. Ethnography

The answer is of course going to entail reflexive awareness of the researcher's own narrative. This is something that has always been topical in ethnographic studies and it is worth briefly stating how this research can be enhanced by ethnographic techniques. I should say that this section is not based on a full review of the ethnographic literature but rather on previous readings and personal experience during my masters thesis as well as the various PhD theses I have read, namely by Foye Hatton, Noel Longhurst and Tom Hargreaves (which are all largely compatible with my ontological premises). Insofar as most of my reading is secondary I obviously need to consolidate this section but for now this literature can help me finding an approach that is suitable for studying an entity like the Dark Mountain Project. Besides the issue of perspective, I seek here to find an appropriate approach to studying something where: 1) it is impossible to assume there is such a thing as 'one culture' within it's boundaries; 2) the boundaries themselves aren't clearly defined; 3) thus the 'field' in which I am an observer is impermanent and nowhere specific; 4) there is a clear need for flexibility and emergence; 5) I want to contribute to the project itself in the spirit of giving something back.

I borrow the entry point to ethnography from Foye who quotes Davies (1999) saying ethnography is a "research process based on fieldwork using a variety of (mainly qualitative) research techniques but including engagement in the lives of those being studied over an extended period of time" (p. 4-5). Together with Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) description of the qualitative researcher as 'a Bricoleur who prepares a representation from multiple fragments' used by Noel, this allows me to approach narrative analyses through active engagement while at the same time incorporating multiple sources of data and multiple ways of collecting it. Ensuring that I engage while at the same time I 'neither explain nor deduce anything' can come through my research *attitude* which I find converges with the spirit of grounded theory. Here it is possible to be 'in the field' with broader 'generative questions' in mind which allow me to link observations to my previous research while at the same time maintaining an open and unprejudiced mindset (Strauss, 1987). In this way, the fact that I am likely to influence what I research is not a problem in itself but part of the research process.

The question rather becomes finding a balance between acknowledging the researcher's influence and avoiding obsessing over it. Reflexivity seen in this way is about contextualising the research without allowing context to steal the scene. This, again, is helped through the use of different methods and multiple data sources. A reflexive approach to research also entails letting the multiple narratives that are bound to arise from the inquiry speak for themselves and avoid imposing a larger, single narrative on them. However, I also agree with Atkinson and Delamont (2006) that the work of the narrative researcher is not done one the data is collected. The point is, as Maines (1993) maintains, to wait with 'reducing' until after it has been collected. This agrees with Cook and Crang's (1995) stance that "ethnographers cannot take a naïve stance that what they are told is the absolute 'truth' ... rather, they/we are involved in the struggle to produce inter-subjective truths, to understand why so many versions of events are produced and recited" (p. 11). This is where the literature on participant observation can help ground an ethnographic examination of narratives.

As an in-depth ethnography of Brithdir Mawr Community using qualitative methods, Foye's thesis is particularly relevant. He uses Bryman's (2006) characterisation of participant observation as a starting point for his research. Participant observation in this perspective entails:

- 1) Understanding the world through the eyes of those being studied;
- 2) Description in the form of attention to detail;
- 3) Contextualising the research;
- 4) Viewing the research as part of the wider social processes in which it takes place;
- 5) A flexible research design which allows for emergence;
- 6) Avoiding early use of theories and concepts.

From the previous remarks it should be obvious that this sits well with my approach. Cook (1997) observes that participant observation usually takes place in three stages where the researcher “first gains access to a particular community, second lives and/or works among the people under study in order to take on their world views and ways of life and, third, travels back to the academy to make sense of this through writing up an account” (p. 128). Although the present study is not going to entail living in a situated community this applies to participant observation of the Dark Mountain Project as well – the fact that the 'community' is often virtual does not make any of the above mentioned principles any less relevant.

A further aspect that needs to be considered in taking an ethnographic approach is that I have to explicitly recognise the power relation involved in using techniques like qualitative interviewing and participant observation – especially as I seek also to contribute to the Dark Mountain Project. I think Tom's thesis is really clear on this and agree that “it is imperative to recognise that research methods have power effects and are complicit in the worlds they construct. Therefore it is vital that researchers are sensitive to this and, where possible, use their research to enable more voices to speak, thus providing the opportunity for new stories and ways of self- and world-making to emerge” (p. 78). In a way, I think this describes the core of my aspiration. This could be achieved by creating a kind of virtual reality for the reader to step into and explore herself – this is back to Flyvbjerg and his thoughts on case studies.

With these reflections on ethnography in mind I can now sum up which methods I think are appropriate to this study, how they might be implemented and provide an outline of my research design.

3. Methods and research design

So, the ambition is to create an in-depth case study without exerting 'epistemic violence' (Hulme 2010) by recognising that 'stories are completed in the reader' (Squire 2008). Focusing on how the Dark Mountain narrative is expressed and materialises in different actors' lives and projects requires that I follow the narratives across the different 'sites' I identified earlier (see Figure 2). A lot of this involves desk research, trawling what is available online and reading through the journal. Another aspect involves interacting with the online community both through the *ning* platform and by contacting bloggers and artists. Finally, there is participant observation which takes place through being an active part in the festival, social gatherings/discussions, setting up Dark Mountain Norwich and visiting other local chapters. In terms of Cook's (1997) three stages I am the transition between gaining access and actively participating.

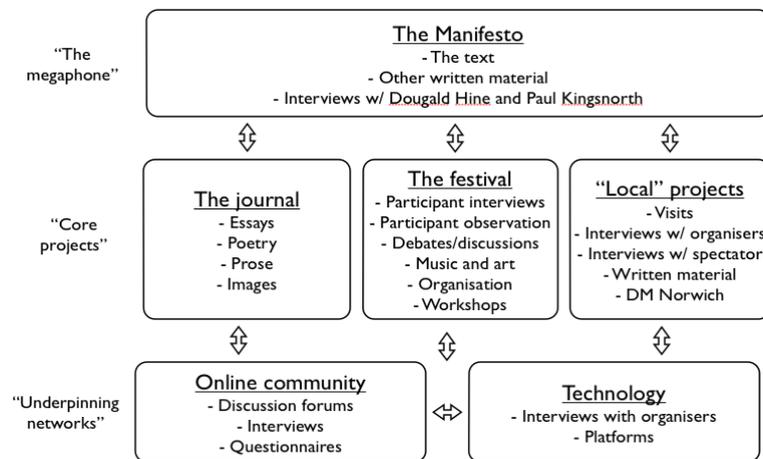


Figure 2: Overview of Dark Mountain narrative sites

Due to the fact that Dark Mountain is framed as a kind of 'conversational space' that allows people to experiment with alternative narratives, my population is actually that 'space' in itself whenever actors enter into it. And because this space is not defined or has definite boundaries, my sampling strategy has to be one of venturing into that space and see where the conversation takes me – hence the 'following the narrative' strategy (which is not so different from snow-balling). I already have a good idea of what this space looks like (Figure 2) and I can use this as a guide for taking me further into these different areas. My materials will therefore also be a mixture of oral, written, and visual texts, field notes, participant and researcher commentaries, cultural representations and whatever other records I come across. The eventual analysis which comes in the last stage of 'travelling back to the academy' will then have to reflect these types of materials and the ways in which I gathered them. This is where I can then build and bring in theory to help explain the data. Here, I think it will be crucial to attempt to 'include what is not included' by reflecting on discrepancies between stories about actions and the actions themselves.

The methods will mainly be qualitative and I will have to adopt a range of different interview

techniques depending on the form the conversation takes. I expect to do open qualitative interviews, written exchanges, as well as briefer and more structured interviews for capturing a wider sample population, e.g. at the festival. Each interview will be tailored to the interviewee but I will of course try to draw out cross-cutting themes, namely: 1) how does the person adopt the Dark Mountain narrative; 2) how it is expressed in that person's life; 3) how does the person think this relates to shifting worldviews; 4) what does an ecocentric worldview entail; 5) how does the person relate to the wider Dark Mountain community; and 6) what does it mean to be part of that community. As I have already had quite a few interactions with people around the Dark Mountain Project, I have a fairly good idea of the 'generative questions' that inform my field research but I will strive to let these questions be both open ended and open to refinement. I aim to tackle the issue of 'putting everything before us' in the open by maintaining as high a level of transparency as possible. I have found that my website is ideal for this purpose (and the research diary was set up on the basis of this ethos) as well as it serves a dual function of gaining access to actors and archiving material.

I expect that developing a rigorous practice for archiving material will be crucial for my approach to work because I will end up with a very large amount of data which can quickly become insurmountable. In fact, there may be a limit to how much data I can actually collect in each site and I may have to break off data collection in some areas once I feel the area is saturated. This also poses questions for the stage of analysis. It is conceivable that in-depth transcription, coding, and mapping of each interview may not be the best way for capturing the content of very large and varied samples. I am to strike a balance between providing detailed analysis of crucial elements of the narratives and drawing out inferences for generalisation across the whole population. The potential trade-off between specificity and generalisation is well recognised within the literature on narrative (see e.g. Landmann forthcoming) and I can draw on previous studies when it comes to making a judgement about where attention to detail needs to connect with awareness of the larger issues of my study. I don't think it will be possible to determine where this boundary lies before having gathered all the data and being engaged in the analysis.