Narrative methods: an overview of my approach

This note is a summary of some of the main theoretical and methodological points from the literature on narratives that I use in the study, and as such is intended to provide an overview of narrative analysis as a mode of research. With reference to the initial analysis and the first interviews I've done, I then show how I employ narrative methods in the study.

1) Narrative inquiry and methods
Because narratives order characters in space and time and presents a format for examining character transformations it enables social research to inquire about the construction of subjectivity in depth. The sequential development of a narrator's experience and position reveal her identity and gives an insight in to the speaker's lifeworld. Taking narrative as a starting point for social inquiry and focussing on the social role of stories in grassroots movements is a way of finding out more about how situated narration enable (or disable) new perspectives on and actions in the world. I have previously explored this in both the research proposal and notes for supervision discussions. Here, I focus on the methodological implications for researching narratives.

In *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* Catherine Kohler Riessman (2008) sets out three levels of inquiry and analysis in narrative research:

1) stories told by research participants;
2) interpretive accounts by investigator (narrative of narrative);
3) reader's reconstruction (narrative of narrative of narrative).

This broadly corresponds to the three stages of 1) fieldwork; 2) analysis, and 3) write up. However, there is interpretation and reconstruction going on all the time and this heuristic is only useful insofar as it helps me think about *who* is doing the narrating and interpreting. At the moment, my focus is very much on the first level and to some degree the second. It is clear that I have to be very straight up about my own narrative, and this has to come to the fore from the beginning. Here, my research diary, blog, discussion notes, pilot analyses and fieldwork notes are key to log my understanding and personal narrative.

Kohler Riessman delineates four main methodological approach which cut across different types of narrative research:

1) Thematic analysis where content is the exclusive focus (minimal focus on how the narrative is spoken/written). This form of analysis is close to grounded theory but keeps the story intact and often uses prior theoretical concepts. Thematic meanings and understanding the 'point' of the narrative are emphasised over language and form. Narratives are often situated in their macro context while the local context is neglected.

2) Structural analysis. In addition to analysing content, structural approaches pay attention to narrative form and attempts to draw out the underlying meanings inherent communicative acts. Structure can refer to genre, a larger storyline, or linguistic form and often entails great attention to details of speech in order to understand how the narrative is composed. This focus on how content is organised can generate insights beyond what is simply 'said' in a narrative.

3) Dialogic/performance analysis. Here, questions around who narrates, when and why come the fore. Seeing narrative as dialogically produced and performed, dialogic/performance analysis views stories as social artefacts which say as much about society/culture as it does about a person/group. These analytic approaches are a hybrid of different traditions that emphasise the interactional nature of social reality.

4) Visual narrative analysis. These approaches integrate words and images (photos, paintings, video, collage, etc.) in examining how individual and collective identities are composed and performed visually. Riessman suggests that three sites for analysis needs to be incorporated into visual narrative analysis: the story of the production of the image, the image itself and how it can be read.

Each of these approaches imply different attitudes towards and epistemological assumptions about interviewing techniques, the role of the transcript, validation and positionality. An important divide exists on the theoretical understanding of language and communication: does storytelling constitute the self (co-production) or does it reflect a preexisting self? I have outlined my ontological and epistemological position in previous notes about narrative/research design (see e.g. 'Research statement and research design' for supervision on 08.02.12), and situate myself within a co-productionist approach. This is important because

the two different approaches place different weight on the role of context and the speech act itself.

This, and the nature of the project, means that I expect mainly to be using dialogic/performance methods in analysing my data. My focus on the co-construction of the Dark Mountain narrative and the identification of my thesis as another 'site' of the narrative means that I have to acknowledge my own role by default. Coupled with an actor-network theory approach of following the actor I am already logging the development of my personal narrative and beginning to see the contours of how this fits within the wider narrative. I find the overlap with performativity theories (Butler, Goffman) really interesting and expect that this may be a fruitful line of inquiry. However, I expect also to use thematic analysis to some extent, and visual narrative analysis may also be appropriate. The main issue will be to balance the large amount of data I will have against in-depth analysis (which is why I am almost certain structural analysis is not appropriate).

The focus of my inquiry is on group narratives rather than individual biographies. I'm trying to understand and pinpoint the social role of the Dark Mountain Project: how does it mobilise, foster belonging, circulate and empower? To understand how I can investigate and analyse group narratives I have found *Considering Counter-Narratives – Narrating, resisting, making sense* by Bamberg and Andrews (eds) (2004) very helpful. Research on counter-narratives explores "how locally situated narrating practices are either forced to be complicit or able to open up territory to bring about … liberation and emancipation from [master narratives]" (Bamberg 2004, 361). Seeing 'Uncivilisation' as a counter-narrative in this way opens up for questions around how participants create a sense of self-identity that "maneuvers simultaneously in between being complicit and countering established narratives that give guidance to one's actions but at the same time constrain and delineate one's agency" (ibid, 363).

In analysing counter-narratives Bamberg suggests two questions have to be considered in depth: 1) where and how do counter-narratives emerge? And, 2) how are subjects positioned and how do they position themselves in their narration? The first question I have already dealt with in the research design and identification of different sites of the Dark Mountain narrative (see e.g. pilot analysis 06.03.12) and will elaborate further in the last section of this note. The second question pertains to how the data is arranged and analysed. Although at this at this stage it is not possible to foresee exactly what the data will look like once the fieldwork is done, it is useful to briefly consider what positioning means in terms of providing a framework for later analysis.

Drawing on Butler's work on performing identities, Bamberg uses the concept of a subject's 'positioning itself' as acts of sense- and identity-making through narration (there is another clear link with performativity here). This stands in contrast with the more deterministic view of 'being positioned' within a narrative where master narratives to some degree close off or bound agency. Positioning in the former sense takes the assumption that the intelligibility of a speech act arises situationally and interactively as a starting point. This means that the analytical point of departure becomes the speaker's characterisation of the world and event sequences. In the words of Bamberg (2004):

> "Here we attempt to spot descriptions and evaluations of the characters and analyze the time and space coordinates in the way that these relate to social categories and their action potential. From there we move into a closer analysis of the way these referential and representational aspects of story construction are assembled in their sequential arrangement among the participants of the conversation. The assumption that governs this step is that particular descriptions and evaluations are chosen for the interactive purpose of fending off and mitigating misinterpretations. The descriptions and evaluations rhetorically function to convey how speakers signal to their audience how they want to be understood" (367).

Positioning works at two levels: 1) one that deals with the content of the narrative; and, 2) one that deals with interaction between speaker and audience. I find this a useful way to approach the analysis because my research questions ask both *if* narratives open up for new ways of perceiving and acting (the content of the counter-narrative may/may not be seen to do this) and *how* this occurs (the process of identity formation might give clues to this). This means that my interviews will be analysed in quite some depth with special attention to each individual narrator's understanding and interaction with the Dark Mountain narrative. These findings can then be compared with other sources of data (participant observation/my own narrative, written material, art work, articles, talks, workshops, etc.) to look for inconsistencies or divergence.

This sits well with a dialogic/performance approach to analysing my data. The task as I see it will be to trace similarities and differences across the different narrative sites: uses of concepts, metaphors, particular terms and phrases, sayings, and imageries. All these will give clues as to what the 'counter-narrative' is (there is a lot of debate around the word 'counter' and I don't think it is the right word. The embodiment or performance of this narrative can then be contrasted with the wider dominant narratives that shape and structure our culture.

2) Employing narrative methods

In the research statement and research design prepared for the supervision on 08.02.12 I outlined the theoretical foundation for doing narrative ethnography and explained my approach as a commitment "to enhancing my skills in observation and description as well as maintaining an open frame of mind regarding causes and effects". This section explains how this has worked out in practice and what is means to say that I am using narrative methods.

I take six main points from Kohler Riessman in terms of what good narrative research entails (2008, 26):

- – Interpretation begins already during the interview.
- – Narrative interviewing is not a set of "techniques".
- – It requires attentive and engaged listening.
- – Pay attention to the setting of the interview.
- – This can forge greater communicative equality.
- – Don't reify transcripts.

There are two fundamental assumptions underlying the approach to narrative research that I follow. Kohler Riessman (2008) explains how 1) the researcher does not find narratives but participates in their creation; and that 2) "investigators don't have access to narrators' direct experience but only to their imitations thereof" (p. 22). This means that one of the main questions for me as a researcher becomes: how can I facilitate storytelling in interviews?

Kohler Riessman asserts that this aspect of narrative methods have more to do with developing a state of mind and a conversational sensitivity that is conducive to storytelling within the context of an interview situation: "The specific wording of a question is less important than the interviewer's emotional attentiveness and engagement and the degree of reciprocity in the conversation." (2008, 24). The 'style' of the interaction is thus crucial for the development of the interview. The 'set-up' and framing are equally important: "Narration, in other words, depends on expectations. If extended accounts are welcomed, some participants and interviewers collaboratively develop them, but if brief answers to discrete questions are expected, participants learn to keep their answers brief." (ibid., 25-6). This resonates with my experience doing the first interviews.

I went into the initial interviews having prepared a few questions and topics around which the interview could be organised. Having read a lot of the interviewees' writing in preparation, I was setting up the interaction as one of me exploring these writings in more depth which probably gave the interviewees confidence and a feeling of having expertise (most were face to face, some where via Skype). The interviews were also quite long (between 1.5-2 hours) so there was enough time to explore topics until we mutually felt we had done so sufficiently. As it turned it the 'interview' often turned into a mutual exploration of concepts. In reflecting on the process, I wrote:

> "Interview' almost seems like a misnomer because I felt that the interactions were much closer to a conversation insofar as this connote bi-directionality in the interaction. So, I will refer to the 'interview' as a conversation and the 'interviewee' as a narrator in order to convey the conversational quality of our interaction and highlight that 'the Dark Mountain narrative' is not singular but contains multiple viewpoints, interpretations and understandings." (Diary entry, 18.03.12)

It was interesting how I discovered that I had a role as a 'seeder' of concepts between the conversations. If I had not undertaken these interviews so close to each other I might not have discovered this. It really brought home Riessman's point about the researcher participating in the creation of the narrative she investigates:

> "What strikes me, sitting here looking back at these conversations, is how they interacted with each other, not only in my memory of them but also when they actually unfolded. Imagery or concepts that I had been discussing with one narrator would come up in conversation with others, partly because some concepts, like 'uncivilisation', are well established among mountaineers, but also because I brought with me different figures of speech across the conversations. In this way, it was a recursive process which was both exploratory and theory generating while it settled – and unsettled – meanings between us. This points to my role as a participant in the creation of the narratives rather than an external onlooker that 'discovered' the narrative through a set of predefined questions." (Diary entry, 18.03.12)

It was a big learning curve, and I came to recognise some of the methodological underpinnings only while or

after doing the interviews. I was delighted to find Riessman concurring with my intuitive approach of not trying to press a preconceived format into the interviews:

> "Creating possibilities in research interviews for extended narration requires investigators to give up control, which can generate anxiety. Although we have particular paths we want to cover related to the substantive and theoretical foci of our studies, narrative interviewing necessitates following participants down *their* trails. Giving up control of a fixed interview format - "methods" designed for "efficiency" - encourages greater equality (and uncertainty) in the conversation" (2008, 24).

After the conversations took place I transcribed them. This was a learning-by-doing exercise as well because I had to develop a consistent method for denoting different ways of speech, pauses, breaks and changes in topic. Overall, I felt there was a large reduction in meaning from turning recorded speech into text. Over the process I noted that:

– the meaning sometimes becomes obscured when the voice of the speaker disappears;
– the pace of the speech changes as it is read on the page;
– gestures and implied meanings rendered by body language or intonations are difficult to convey;
– it's impossible for the reader to know what is left out of the text; and,
– the power lies entirely with me to impose certain meanings on the text through extracting quotes and inserting them in analysis.

Having transcribed some of the interviews I was both impressed with the level of detail, the conversational quality and also slightly frustrated with the loss of meaning. This illustrated to me how "the transcript opens up questions about determining the boundaries of a narrative" and how this "analytic decision [determining where to set the boundaries] is important, for it shapes interpretation and illustrates once again how we participate in the construction of the narrative that we analyze." p. 41

As an experiment I decided to publish the first interview which I was particularly fond of on my blog and sent the transcript to the co-narrator to check and turned it into a more formal interview (http://bit.ly/H4XWzE). This was an extremely interesting process and added another layer of interpretive quality to the transcript. It is interesting that it is now possible for other people involved in the Dark Mountain Project to read, reflect and comment on how we interpret the narrative. This interview stands as an example of how I employ narrative methods in practice.

Reflecting on this first stage of my fieldwork it is clear that there is a large degree of spontaneity and emergence. This comes partly from my commitment to "maintaining an open frame of mind regarding causes and effects" and partly from the nature of the project. Following the narrative necessarily means preparedness to go where it takes me. Here, I have found an overlap with the way that the concept of 'improvisation' is used within Dark Mountain: "As a mode of being in the world and engaging in conversations about it, this implies openness to the unexpected, detachment from outcomes, attention to means, perceptiveness, honesty and patience. In this sense, the conversations I've had over the last couple of months have been markedly improvised and as a result I have learned not only a great deal about how different people engage with the Dark Mountain Project but also about a way of interacting where meanings and insights emerge in places I could never have foreseen or planned for" (research diary, 18.03.12).

Whether this is the right term or not – and I expect it may not be wise to confuse concepts I am using with concepts I am investigating – this points to something deeper about my practice as a narrative researcher as well as my cognitive and emotive mode of operation. It is clear that I learn best through doing. So, when asked "how are you going to analyse your data?" I relate to this through my present state and with my present skills. The best answer I can give to that question is one based on my theoretical understanding of how this should be done and my experience from already doing analysis. But I also know that when it comes to sitting with all the data in NVIVO, pdfs, books, websites, notebooks, etc., the way I actually go about doing the analysis will to some degree be spontaneous despite all the prior reading and theorising because to me the real moments of insight are emergent. This is really important methodologically. I can't give a precise account of how I am going to code my interviews thematically because I don't believe this makes sense *before* I get to do the coding.

I am aware that this approach means I have to be very careful in justifying what and how I do things. That's where the notes (diaries, supervision, fieldnotes, emails, blog) become instrumental for leaving a trace and remembering the sequence of my developing understanding. A structured, carefully thought out plan for my work process is equally important. This is where striking a balance between emergence/spontaneity vs. planning/bounding becomes essential. I want to emphasise that in no way does my way of working go against having a robust method or a structured analytic process.

I took eight questions with me to think about from the last supervision which I have grouped into five points. I try to answer these as precisely as possible here. With the previous discussion in mind, hopefully this explains why I am doing what I am doing and how I envision the next stages of the research will unfold.

Analysis
How am I doing analysis?
- I pay attention to narrative at three levels: stories told by research participants, my own interpretive account (narrative of narrative), and the reader's reconstruction (narrative of narrative of narrative). Currently I am engrossed mostly in the first level although I am also engaged in my own interpretive process.
- The 'unit of analysis' is therefore both the interviewee (narrator), myself, and thematic.
- I see narratives as co-constructed and analyse them as such. This means I primarily, though not exclusively, use dialogic/performative methods. This means I pay attention to both micro- and macro contexts in order to understand the narrator.
- I analyse the Dark Mountain narrative as a counter-narrative insofar as my focus is how the narrative opens up new perspectives and actions. This means that the analytical point is the speaker's characterisation of the world and event sequences.
- I thus pay attention *both* to content and to the speaker-audience relation.
- The thematic analysis is an emergent process where concepts, imageries, figures of speech will gradually stabilise as themes over the course of the research.

Bounding the fieldwork
How do I bound my fieldwork? Time, sampling, etc.
- I look for the Dark Mountain narrative in seven sites: the six previously defined in the research statement and my own thesis. These sites determine where I look for the narrative, who I approach for interviews, how much data I need.
- Each of the sites have different bars for saturation. I specify these in the table below.
- My sampling strategy is non-random. Following the narrative means making decisions on who to interview on the basis of my reading and how far into the narrative site I am.
- I am in the comfortable position that for many of the sites I already have a large amount of good quality data. At the same time it is quite straightforward what I need to do before I 'withdraw' from each site (e.g. go to the festival or read the journal), so time is not currently a constraining factor.

How do I balance depth of analysis vs. scope of data collection?
- This is related to how I determine at what point to stop collecting data and essentially comes down to my personal capacity to cope with the amount of data I can handle without loosing depth. My guess is that I am currently more or less striking a balance with enough room to take on a few more interviews if need be.
- My archiving system is helping in this regard as I can 'park' stuff and come back to them without loosing them out of sight.

Surprises
How do I deal with surprises and how are my thoughts on Dark Mountain changing?
- The approach of following the narrative is very flexible and the the great advantage is that I can incorporate new things fairly readily and easily into the research process. At the same time I am logging everything I do in my diaries and am able to pinpoint each stage when my personal narrative changes.

Research questions
How are my research questions changing?
- The overarching research question is the same and I expect it will continue to be so (it is quite broad). The sub-questions I have defined become refined as I go through the fieldwork. In the pilot analysis (06.03.12) I formulated six questions that needed further investigation in order to answer my overarching research question. I will continue to do this at every time I do more pilots (scheduled for April, July, October).

How do they inform my fieldwork?
- They inform my fieldwork in the way that they link theory, analysis and what I look for in each site. The process of refinement explained above also provide an opportunity to reflect on how my understanding of the research has changed. I see the research questions as a subconscious feeling or pre-formulated thought that I bring with me in the fieldwork. As explained in the research

statement, 08.02.12, I seek to avoid epistemic violence by imposing a prior theoretical frame on the phenomena I observe and the research questions provide a bridge to the theory rather than bringing the theory onto the stage in the fieldwork.

Justification and contribution

Why is an ethnography of Dark Mountain important?
– Because it provides crucial insight into the role of culture in transitions.

What does Dark Mountain tell us about broader theoretical concerns?
– In terms of transition: that MLP style thinking does not fit reality very well.
– In terms of grassroots innovation: that innovation is as much conceptual as it is material.