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Narrating the Self

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Narrating the Self

Abstract
Telling a story about oneself can sometimes transform that self. Sitting with friends and describing recent experiences, a narrator often reinforces and sometimes re-creates what sort of person he or she is. Sitting with a therapist and narrating their life’s experiences, clients can sometimes realize who they are and who they want to be. Noting such transformative acts of narration, many have proposed that autobiographical stories do more than describe a preexisting self. Sometimes narrators can change who they are, in part, by telling stories about themselves.

Comments
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NARRATIVES IN ACTION

A Strategy for Research and Analysis

Stanton Wortham

foreword by Kenneth J. Gergen
Narratives in Action

A STRATEGY FOR RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

STANTON WORTHAM

Foreword by Kenneth J. Gergen

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Contents

Foreword by Kenneth J. Gergen vii
Acknowledgments ix
Introduction xi

1. Narrating the Self 1
   Jane 1
   The Representational Power of Autobiographical Narrative 5
   The Interactional Power of Autobiographical Narrative 7
   Enacting the Self 9
   Interrelations between Representation and Enactment 13
   Analyzing Narrative Discourse 14

2. A Dialogic Approach to Discourse 17
   Monologic and Dialogic Approaches to Language Use 18
   An Actual Encounter 24
   Mediation 35
   Voicing 38
   Emergence 40
   Chunking: Poetic Structure 44

3. Dialogue, Mediation, and Emergence in Narrative 47
   A Sample Narrative 48
   Mediation 57
   Emergence 59
   Two Bakhtinian Concepts 62

4. Dialogic Analysis of an Autobiographical Narrative 76
   Overview of Jane's Life 76
   Jane Enacts Her Passive Voice 81
Jane Enacts the Transition from Passive to Active 101
Jane Enacts Her Assertive Voice 119

5. Narrative Self-Construction and the Nature of the Self 136
   The Stable Psychological Self 138
   The Narrated Self 140
   The Dialogic Self 144
   The Enacted Self 149
   The Multilayered Self 153

6. Implications 157
   Studying Interactional Positioning in Other Contexts 158
   A Dialogic Approach 160

Notes 163
References 171
Index 179
About the Author 185
Foreword

Deliberations on the nature and significance of narrative now sweep across the intellectual landscape. Literary theorists join linguists, phenomenologists, hermeneuticists, legal theorists, feminist scholars, theologians, therapists, gerontologists, developmental psychologists, social workers, and others in viewing narrative as a pivotal feature of the meaning-making process. Narrative is not only a chief means by which the individual self is defined, but it also exerts a formative influence on our understanding of the world about us. Yet the vast share of this work also concurs in its presumption that narrative structures primarily serve a representational function: They function so as to portray, reveal, or illuminate self or surrounds. The relationship of primary interest is that holding between the narrative and the subject matter to be narrated. Herein lies the primary epistemological drama of recent years: the portraying device absorbs and obliterates that which is ostensibly portrayed. In contrast, precious little attention has been directed to the relationship between the narrating agent and the audience to which the narrative is directed. It is precisely at this point that the present volume enters the dialogue.

Stanton Wortham turns our attention to narratives in action. Through the sophisticated lens of linguistic pragmatics, Wortham invites us to see the function of narrative within the unfolding relationships among people. Narratives not only define the narrator, but the relationship between the narrator and his or her audience. Most fascinating in the present analysis, however, is the line that Wortham draws between the representational and the pragmatic function of narration. With keen sensitivity, Wortham enables us to see ways in which narrative content may parallel the performance of the telling. The narrator may subtly enact characters portrayed in the story being told. In these conjunctions of stories told and stories lived, the narrator creates and embodies a self for the listener.

The possibility that one is essentially thrust into being during the narrative telling is of substantial importance, both theoretically and practically. From Wortham’s perspective the narrative is no longer a
private possession of the individual; nor is it simply a pawn to the preceding narratives to which one has been exposed. Rather, narratives are best understood in terms of a Bakhtinian dialogic. They are utterances that acquire their significance in the relationship between narrator and audience. On the practical level we also see how narrative tellings might function therapeutically. As narrative enactments define both the teller and the audience, they may also reveal characteristic patterns of reverberating significance. And with the exploration of alternative tellings, the door is open to the creation of new forms of being.

These are exciting ideas and represent a significant entry into contemporary dialogues on narrative. They now invite exploration into such issues as the significance of discrepancies between stories told and lived, the relationship among narrations of self to disparate audiences, and the active part played by the audience in the shaping of the narrator's identity. Wortham's story is thus to be prized as a contribution that both reveals and simultaneously leaves us in keen anticipation of the next.

Kenneth J. Gergen
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Introduction

Telling a story about oneself can sometimes transform that self. Sitting with friends and describing recent experiences, a narrator often reinforces and sometimes re-creates what sort of person he or she is. Sitting with a therapist and narrating their life’s experiences, clients can sometimes realize who they are and who they want to be. Noting such transformative acts of narration, many have proposed that autobiographical stories do more than describe a preexisting self. Sometimes narrators can change who they are, in part, by telling stories about themselves.

But how does this narrative self-construction happen? Most explanations rely on the representational function of autobiographical discourse: That is, most accounts claim that an autobiographical narrative can shape the self of the narrator by describing him or her as a particular type of person. When talking with friends, therapists, or other audiences, autobiographical narrators represent themselves as particular sorts of people—as people who engage in characteristic activities and relate to others in characteristic ways. By describing past events in which she overcomes exploitation and takes control of her life, for instance, a narrator can reinforce or even create a more active, assertive self. If this narrator had, instead, consistently represented herself as passive and victimized in telling her story, she might have become a more passive, victimized person.

Although this representational account of narrative self-construction may be plausible, it is nevertheless incomplete. Autobiographical narratives also have interactional functions: That is, autobiographical narrators act like particular types of people while they tell their stories, and they relate to their audiences in characteristic ways as they tell those stories. In this book I show in detail how narrator and audience can position themselves interactionally through the telling of an autobiographical narrative. While representing herself as overcoming exploitation, for instance, a narrator might also act active and assertive with respect to the audience in the storytelling event. I argue that this kind of interactional positioning helps explain how autobiographical nar-
ration can partly construct the self. While telling their stories, autobiographical narrators often enact a characteristic type of self, and through such performances they can become that type of self.

In the following chapters I develop a systematic account of how narrative speech can simultaneously represent the self and position the narrator interactionally. Speech, in general, and autobiographical speech, in particular, contain types of linguistic constructions that systematically carry information about the interactional positions of the speaker and the audience. I draw on and extend concepts developed by the philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, in order to provide a detailed account of how autobiographical narrative discourse positions people "dialogically" with respect to others' "voices." In the process, I show the empirical utility of often-cited but slippery Bakhtinian concepts.

Scholars and practitioners in psychology, women's studies, education, anthropology, and cultural studies are becoming increasingly interested in a dialogic approach to the human sciences. According to such an approach, the meaning that experience has for people cannot be understood if people are considered to be isolated individuals. Instead, one must study how social, cultural, and relational contexts play a central role in producing the meaningfulness of experience. The social constructionist critique in recent years has made it clear that such a relational approach to the human sciences is needed (K. Gergen, 1994, 1997; Shotter, 1993a, 1993b). This book provides, in empirical detail, one vision of what a constructionist approach might look like in practice. Drawing on Bakhtin, I provide a systematic account of how relational context is, in fact, crucial to the transformative power of autobiographical narrative.

This book makes two primary contributions, one conceptual and one methodological. First, it offers a detailed account of how narrative self-construction happens. I argue that the self can be partly constructed through the interrelationship of represented content and enacted positioning in autobiographical narrative, as narrators enact characteristic interactional positions while telling their stories. This account of narrative self-construction involves both a thorough account of narrative discourse and an extensive discussion of the self. Second, the book offers a systematic methodological approach to analyzing narrative discourse. I give a detailed, concrete description of how narrative discourse can simultaneously represent the self and accomplish interactional positioning. The methodological approach is explained with detailed analyses of several different types of discourse—an extended autobiographical narrative (Chapter 4), a classroom discussion (Chapter 2), and a television newscast (Chapter 3).
Introduction

The book is written for two types of audiences: academic audiences interested in narrative self-construction and in the representational and interactional functions of narrative discourse, and professional psychologists and educators interested in autobiographical narrative and self-identity. By providing a specific account of how autobiographical narrators use language both to represent the self and to enact interactional positions, the book can contribute to anthropological, educational, linguistic, and psychological accounts of narrative and self. For practitioners in education and psychology with applied interests in narrative and self, the book provides examples of detailed analysis that will be useful for conceptualizing everyday work with clients and their stories, even though most practitioners will only occasionally do that sort of analysis themselves.

Readers may notice one irony in the book. While my account focuses on the relational context within which autobiographical stories are told, my own analytic voice maintains scientific distance throughout the book. My intent is to provide a set of analytic tools for studying interactional positioning in narrative performances, including complex emotional and relational patterns. I hope that this sort of work can support a more human, relationally embedded account of discourse in narratives, classrooms, and elsewhere—as opposed to accounts focused solely on rational action and the cognitive content of talk. Thus I am working against purely cognitive, objectivist approaches to human nature.

Nonetheless, some advocates of a reflexive or relational social science would argue that my scientific stance undermines the dialogic approach I advocate in the book—that the analysis should, instead, be as much about my role in the research process as about the subject (e.g., Bloom, 1998). I agree that we can benefit from research that pushes dialogicality into the research process itself (e.g., Lather, 1991). But we can also gain conceptual clarity and methodological rigor from research that backgrounds the researcher's voice and studies relational and emotional patterns systematically. This book provides such clarity and rigor for studying the process of narrative self-construction. I hope that such a systematic approach will yield information useful to people who are ultimately interested in understanding, celebrating, or intervening in relational and emotional patterns. Such an approach may also provide legitimacy for the ongoing project of making the human sciences more humane (i.e., less focused on rational economic actors and purely cognitive minds).

Chapter I presents the central argument—that the self can be partly constructed in autobiographical narrative because of interrelationships
between the representations of self and the interactional positioning that narrators accomplish through their stories. Chapters 2 and 3 present a systematic account of how narrative discourse can position narrators interactionally and how the interactional and representational functions of autobiographical narrative can interrelate. Chapter 2 provides conceptual and methodological tools for a dialogic approach to speech in general, by defining the central concepts of *dialogue*, *mediation*, and *emergence* and by applying these concepts to an extended example. Chapter 3 applies these tools to narrative discourse and extends Bakhtin's account of narrative, developing a more precise dialogic approach to narrative discourse.

Chapters 4 and 5 apply this dialogic approach to narrative discourse, analyzing an extended autobiographical narrative and exploring the process of narrative self-construction. Chapter 4 applies the tools developed in Chapters 2 and 3 to analyze an extended autobiographical narrative, and Chapter 5 develops a dialogic theory of self that can account for the interactional patterns found in the narrative. Chapter 5 thus completes the argument that the systematic conceptual and methodological tools developed in this book illuminate how the self can be partly constructed by interactional positioning in autobiographical narration. Chapter 6 considers how these tools, and the more precise dialogic approach they facilitate, can illuminate other important issues in the human sciences.
Narratives in Action
CHAPTER 1

Narrating the Self

How can we explain autobiographical narratives' power to transform or construct the self? Almost all answers to this question have relied on the representational power of narrative discourse. Autobiographical narrators represent themselves in recognizable story lines. A narrator might, for instance, represent herself as moving from passive victim to agent of social change. By representing herself as an agent, the narrator might come to think of herself as, and ultimately come to act like, a more active and assertive person. Depending on how it is articulated, this representational account of self-construction in autobiographical narrative can be plausible. But a solely representational account ignores how autobiographical narratives position the narrator in an ongoing dialogue with other speakers. Narrative discourse functions not only to represent characters and events but also to establish relationships between the narrator and the audience in the interactional event of storytelling. This book describes how autobiographical narratives can partly create the narrator's self by interactionally positioning the narrator in salient ways with respect to others.

This chapter has three goals: (1) to make plausible the notion that the self might get partly constructed in autobiographical narrative; (2) to argue that any full account of self-construction in autobiographical narrative must attend to the interactional positioning accomplished in narrative discourse; and (3) to describe how any analysis of self-construction in autobiographical narrative will require precise methodological tools for studying narrative discourse. I begin with a discussion of an excerpt from one autobiographical narrative in order to illustrate how narrative can contribute to self-transformation.

JANE

The narrative introduced here, and analyzed in detail in Chapter 4, was told by a woman whom I will call Jane. She was interviewed in the early 1990s when she was 57 years old. Jane had responded to an
ad requesting adult subjects for a psychological study. The interviewer was a female graduate student training to be a clinical psychologist, and the interview took place in a research lab at a university psychology department. The autobiographical narrative was the first component of the interview, and lasted about 50 minutes. In those 50 minutes, the interviewer prompted Jane only with the request that she tell the story of her life as if it were a novel divided into chapters.

Jane begins with the setting for her story: her mother was a writer, an Armenian American; her father was a businessman, and Episcopalian; her maternal grandparents disapproved of the marriage from the start, and it ended in divorce when Jane was 7. After the divorce her mother needed to work full-time and did not know what to do with her child. For some reason she consulted with a local administrator and went along with his recommendation to send Jane to a boarding school. Jane refers to this chapter in her life as “the institutionalization of a human being.” She was ostracized because of her Armenian background. She was beaten and humiliated by the staff at the school. She spent 5 “horrendous” years there, seeing her mother only occasionally. Jane still vividly recalls the happy day on which she left this school, much as a prisoner might recall the moment of leaving jail after serving a long sentence.

Her mother took Jane out of the boarding school in order to return to her parents’ home in Louisville. After a brief time in which Jane had trouble adjusting to her grandparents’ Armenian neighborhood, Jane’s mother decided to “institutionalize” her again. Her mother again took advice from someone, but she apparently did not realize the nature of the institution, because Jane was sent to a boarding school for “delinquents” and “street people.” There she was beaten up, her belongings were stolen, and she was made miserable. At age 16, she ran away from the school and “blackmailed” her mother by calling home and refusing to tell her mother where she was until her mother promised not to send her back to the school.

Her mother acquiesced, and Jane moved with her mother into an apartment near her grandparents. This was a more pleasant period for Jane than the two institutionalizations, but there were still problems. They lived in a predominantly Armenian neighborhood where Jane was ostracized because she was considered Episcopalian. The schools were good, but district boundaries dictated that she had to attend a lower-class high school where she again felt out of place. She did well in school nonetheless, and despite a lack of encouragement from her mother and grandparents—who expected young women simply to get married—
she went on to college afterward. But after a year she dropped out and went to work. In her early 20s, Jane had what she describes as an “affair” with a man from her neighborhood, and she got pregnant. Because of her relatives’ discomfort with the prospect of single parenthood, she decided to give the child up for adoption. So when her son was born, she brought him to an orphanage in downtown Louisville. In the following excerpt from the interview transcript, Jane describes her experience at the orphanage.²

I was being heavily pressured by, society, my own thoughts, by Robert [the baby’s father], by my mother, to give the child up. (pause) on the night of April 5, I went into labor, went into the hospital, and at two o’clock in the morning on April 6, 1956, I gave birth to a, beautiful baby boy. (pause) while I was in the hospital, I called, again by recommendation the city orphanage. (pause) at the time, there was a shortage on good white babies. (pause)

and a very vile woman at the city orphanage, agreed to take my baby until I could make a decision. So I took my, my darling Kenny (pause) um (pause) (crying) (voice quivering) to the orphanage on Thirteenth Street (pause) and left him there for two weeks. (pause) two of the hardest weeks of my life. (long pause) and when the two weeks were up (pause) I went down there, and this horrendous person had these papers out for me to sign. she had a family all lined up. (pause) There was a (pause) there was a shortage of, like I say, in those days (pause) a nice good white baby was a, short coming, a good healthy baby. (Sniff) She handed me the pen (pause) and I couldn’t do it. (pause) I said, “bring me my baby.” (pause)

I want you to know this woman yelled at me (pause) and tried to guilt-trip me. she said, “how dare you do this to me! I made place for your baby. I helped you out. you have to sign these papers!” I said, “I don’t have to do anything of the sort. I want my child!” and at first she refused me. And I said, “I want my baby.” And she practically threw a temper tantrum right there in the office of the orphanage, and was screaming at me because she had made room for my baby and she wanted my baby. they brought, my darling baby to me, who had (pause) his skin on his feet and his legs was totally scaled (pause) I think they left him alone for two weeks.
This represents a pivotal moment in Jane’s life story. Note the parallel between this event and her mother’s decision to institutionalize her as a child. Jane herself points to this parallel early in the excerpt (line 6), when she says “again by recommendation”—which points back to the man who recommended boarding school for Jane herself at age 7. At the orphanage in Louisville Jane finds herself about to do to her son what her mother did to her. Will she, like her mother, allow her own life to run along the lines recommended by others? Or will she break out of this pattern?

Jane the narrator skillfully represents her experience at the orphanage, in a way that answers these questions. In this orphanage episode she represents herself as changing from a passive victim to an active, assertive woman. The first segment of the excerpt (lines 1–7) describes the events leading up to the orphanage episode. The second segment (lines 8–18) describes her passively acquiescing to the recommendations made by society. Here she is a victim of Robert’s neglect, of society’s prejudices against single mothers, and of the orphanage woman’s desire for her baby. In the third segment (lines 19–28), however, Jane breaks out of the passivity that characterized her mother’s life. She asserts her rights and takes on the responsibility of caring for her son.

Note that Jane herself, while telling this story, also recovers her composure at the same point that she describes how she took control at the orphanage. Throughout the first two segments, she pauses often, her voice breaks, and she even cries at one point. But in the third segment she speaks much more fluently. These cues, and others described in the more extensive analysis of this narrative given in Chapter 4, indicate that in this event of autobiographical narration she does more than describe apparently transformative events. While describing her transformation from passive to active at the orphanage, Jane herself enacts an analogous shift in her projected relationship with the interviewer. Thus, while telling her narrative, she shifts from being passive and vulnerable to being active and assertive in the storytelling event itself. As documented in Chapter 4, she changes her interactional position with respect to the interviewer, from being rather passive and asking for the interviewer’s sympathy early in the interview to actively asserting how she in fact has more life experience than the naive interviewer.

This excerpt from Jane’s autobiographical narrative represents a pivotal moment in her life and captures a central theme of that life, her development from passivity to agency. The act of narrating this event also seems to allow Jane herself, in the interview, to recover a sense of control. As described in much more detail in Chapter 4, the
narrative not only represents a central unifying theme of her life but also helps her recover an active, assertive position in her interaction with the interviewer.

This short excerpt by itself illustrates how Jane's autobiographical narrative might have the power partly to construct or transform her self. By narrating herself with this story of triumph and transformation, either on a few pivotal occasions or many times, Jane might become a more active, assertive woman. By telling this triumphant story of her life, she might come to understand herself—and to act in her relations with others—as an active, assertive woman. But, if this were to happen, how could we explain the narrative's transformative power? Would the representation of herself as active and assertive be central to constructing Jane's self? Or would her enactment of an active, assertive role in her interaction with the interviewer be crucial? Or could the representation and the enactment interrelate in some way so as to shape Jane's self?

THE REPRESENTATIONAL POWER
OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE

The predominant explanation for autobiographical narratives' power cites their representational functions. Telling the story of his or her life gives the narrator an opportunity to redirect that life when the narrator tells a coherent story that foregrounds a certain perspective or direction (Anderson, 1997; Cohler, 1988; Kerby, 1991; M. White & Epston, 1990). The portion of Jane's autobiographical narrative presented and summarized above, for instance, foregrounds her agency and her triumph over adversity. According to the predominant explanation, it is her representation of herself as triumphant that might transform Jane's self. As described in detail in Chapter 4, her life could be represented in more than one way. She has triumphed over serious adversity, but she has also experienced decline or regression. An autobiographical narrative can have power by foregrounding one particular description, despite other possibilities. Note that this explanation for autobiographical narratives' power need not rely on one pivotal telling of the story. The same story can be repeated on many occasions, in order to reinforce a particular sense of oneself. In Jane's case, for instance, it might well be that she has on many occasions used this triumphant construal of her life to encourage herself to be active and assertive in everyday life. In some cases, a single telling of an autobiographical narrative can be truly transformative, but more often a nar-
rator constructs himself or herself through repeated tellings of similar autobiographical narratives.

In the predominant view, then, Jane's autobiographical narrative has the power partly to construct her self because it represents her as an active, assertive woman who has triumphed over adversity. When an autobiographical representation becomes compelling enough, the narrator sometimes acts in accordance with the characteristics foregrounded in the narrative. Jane's narrative might provide an example of this when her own demeanor in the interview becomes more controlled and assertive as she tells the story of her triumph at the orphanage. Jane's enactment of the transformation from passive to active, in her interaction with the interviewer, might show that Jane has been transformed sufficiently so as to act like her new self.

This representational explanation of autobiographical narratives' power has been advanced in several fields. Anderson (1997), Cohler (1988), M. White and Epston (1990), and other clinicians have presented autobiographical narrative as a therapeutic tool. Therapy, they argue, involves the reshaping of a patient's life story so as to foreground a more healthful direction. The Personal Narratives Group (1989), Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992), Zuss (1997), and others have argued that autobiographical narratives provide a powerful vehicle for resisting oppressive social orders. People can construct their life stories against the grain of accepted patterns, to overcome oppression and to foreground alternative directions for their own and others' lives. Cain (1991), Stromberg (1993), and others have described how life stories can play a central role in the development of religious identity. People can tell the stories of their lives, often by highlighting a conversion experience, so as to foreground their faith and their relation to a religious community. Finally, Cohen (1996), Witherell and Noddings (1991), and others have argued that autobiographical narratives' power can be used to improve education as well. In telling stories about themselves, teachers and students can foreground more educationally promising characteristics and free themselves from less productive story lines.

Despite various differences, work in all these disciplines relies primarily on a representational explanation for narrative self-construction: Autobiographical narratives redirect lives by representationally foregrounding more productive characteristics and by inspiring people to enact those more productive characteristics. But how exactly do autobiographical narratives do this foregrounding? Gergen and Gergen (1983), Polkinghorne (1988), and others explain foregrounding in terms of emplotment: An autobiographical narrative selects some from among the many events of a life and places them in a sequence that leads to-
ward an ending or resolution. The orphanage episode, for example, shows Jane facing adversity and then triumphing over it. Because the story moves toward and ends with her triumph, Jane emerges from this version of her narrative looking assertive and mature. As described in Chapter 4, the story could have presented Jane moving in a less triumphant direction and regressing to her earlier passivity. This more tragic plot would have foregrounded different characteristics and relationships for Jane, and it might have constructed a different kind of self for her.

THE INTERACTIONAL POWER
OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE

Work in many fields argues that people can construct and sometimes transform themselves by telling coherent autobiographical narratives that representationally foreground certain characteristics—and by subsequently acting in terms of the characteristics thus foregrounded. Although this representational, plot-based explanation remains popular, it oversimplifies the process of narrative self-construction. Two important modifications have recently been suggested. The first comes from feminist and postmodern theorists who challenge a univocal model of the self. Some feminists have argued that men tend to emphasize (and perhaps experience) idealized, harmonious, universalist descriptions of human life—that are appropriately described in epic form—while women experience life as more fragmented and particularistic (e.g., Bloom, 1998; M. Gergen, 1994; Jelinek, 1980). The universalist, masculinized self is presented as heroic or otherwise idealized; it is more likely to compete against others than build relations with them; and it tends to manifest itself in a more systematic, orderly way. Stewart (1996) makes a similar argument about the experience of rural, working-class Americans in Appalachia—both women and men. She evokes the fragmented and particularistic character of their experience by describing the complex, divergent stories they tell about themselves. Bloom, M. Gergen, Jelinek, and Stewart argue that, at least for some people, the self should be conceived in terms of various contradictory and overlapping tendencies.

From this perspective, autobiographical narratives have power not because they foreground one coherent set of characteristics, but because they help narrators express and manage multiple, partly contradictory selves and experiences. Many feminist and postmodern theorists have argued that the genre of autobiographical narrative is well-suited to
represent the fragmented, contradictory character of the self (e.g., Davies, 1993; M. Gergen, 1994). Autobiographical narratives can present various past selves and diverse evaluations of these selves within the same story. Furthermore, many of these theorists argue that people should preserve the open, fragmented character of their selves (Stewart, 1996; Z. Suss, 1997). In doing so, they can resist universalizing narratives of the self that might obscure the experiences and perspectives of various groups, and they can increase their ability to grow past unforeseen challenges.

Seen in this light, Jane’s triumphant autobiographical narrative seems oversimplified. The detailed analysis in Chapter 4, however, shows that the narrative is in fact more complicated than the brief analysis in this chapter has indicated. Jane and other autobiographical narrators represent various aspects of themselves, and no one set of these necessarily captures all of their important characteristics. The predominant explanation for autobiographical narratives’ power must be amended to include the possibility that such narratives can foreground multiple selves and the possibility that multiplicity can be liberating.3

The predominant explanation for autobiographical narratives’ power also oversimplifies in a second way, by relying on representation—the fact that narrators describe themselves as particular kinds of people—as the key to self-construction. Like many feminists, Grumet (1987) wants to resist the objectification of self that a univocal autobiographical narrative can create. She argues that people should use the power of autobiographical narratives without allowing them to close off new possibilities. Thus she agrees with the first modification described above, that autobiographical narratives can and should create multiple possibilities for the self. Her explanation for how this might work relies on a pragmatic approach to the language used in autobiographical narrative. She argues that autobiographical narratives are not simply plots that representationally foreground certain characteristics of the narrators, but are also interactional events between narrators and audiences. Autobiographical narratives are open to revision and multiplicity because they are part of an ongoing negotiation between the narrator and the audience.

K. Gergen and Kaye (1992) and K. Gergen (1994) make a similar argument. In the predominant view, narrators first use the representational power of language to describe a particular version of themselves; then they act in accordance with this represented version. Gergen and Kaye argue that this account inappropriately privileges the representational function of language. They argue that a more adequate expla-
nation for the power of autobiographical narrative will cite the *interactional positioning* that autobiographical narrators and audiences accomplish while telling and discussing stories. The act of telling an autobiographical narrative is a performance that can position the narrator and audience in various ways. In Jane's narrative, for instance, when she describes a horrible experience and then cries and pauses, she positions herself as someone who has been victimized and could appropriately receive sympathy from the interviewer. Gergen and Kaye suggest that autobiographical narratives might have power because of how they position narrators interactionally, not just because narrative discourse represents certain characteristics of the narrator.

Grunet, and Gergen and Kaye sketch an alternative explanation for autobiographical narratives' power. Autobiographical narratives do more than represent events and characters; they also presuppose a certain version of the social world and position the narrator and audience with respect to that social world and with respect to each other. Thus, narratives not only represent states of affairs but also accomplish social actions, as I will describe in detail in Chapter 3. In the excerpt from her autobiographical narrative given above, Jane not only represents a triumphant version of herself but also comes to act as a more assertive person in the interactional event of storytelling. Perhaps autobiographical narratives foreground certain versions of a self in substantial part because of their power to position the narrator's self interactionally. Autobiographical narratives might construct or transform the self in part because, in telling the story, the narrator adopts a certain interactional position—and in acting like that kind of person becomes more like that kind of person. In other words, autobiographical narratives may give meaning and direction to narrators' lives and place them in characteristic relations with other people, not only as narrators represent themselves in characteristic ways but also as they enact characteristic positions while they tell their stories. Jane, for instance, might construct herself as an active, assertive woman in part because she enacts that role while she narrates her transition from passivity to activity at the orphanage.

**ENACTING THE SELF**

This view of narrative self-construction gains plausibility in light of recent work on how autobiographical narratives can position narrators interactionally. Telling a story about oneself can transform the interaction between narrator and audience in various ways. Harding
(1992), for instance, describes an autobiographical narrative in which a Baptist minister invites his audience (Harding herself) to step into and, as it were, complete his story. As part of Harding's ethnographic project, the minister had agreed to an interview in which they discussed the Bible and Baptist doctrine. Harding describes this interactional event as partly an interview conducted by her and partly an attempt by the minister to convert her. During this interview the minister tells the tragic story of how he accidentally killed his son. As Harding shows in her analysis of imagery and Bible references, this story takes the canonical form of two great biblical sacrifice stories—Abraham and Isaac, and God and Jesus.

Harding insightfully shows how the minister uses this story to set up a parallel between himself and the great biblical fathers who were willing to sacrifice their own sons. The minister alludes to three roles in the biblical sacrifice stories: for example, God sacrifices his son for the sake of humanity. He then describes the analogous event in which he himself accidentally killed his own son. This event contains only two of the three roles established in the biblical stories, however. For whom did the minister sacrifice his son? Harding argues that he did it for her. It was not planned in the same way as God's sacrifice of Jesus, of course, but in the interview situation itself the minister tells the story of killing his son in order to convert Harding. He thus turns the tragedy of killing his own son into a story of redemption. In telling the story of his tragedy and how Jesus helped him through it, he shows Harding the power of what Jesus has done in dying for all of us. In a sense, then, the minister's son died so that he could tell this story to Harding and offer redemption to her. Thus the minister's autobiographical narrative had the potential to transform Harding's identity and his relationship with her, if he had succeeded in positioning her as a convert.

Cain (1991) uncovers a similar interactional pattern in her study of autobiographical narratives used by Alcoholics Anonymous members. She describes how AA members cultivate a potential member over time and choose the right moment to tell the novice their own life stories. The AA members' life stories follow a set pattern: Before they joined AA, problem drinking damaged their lives, but they blamed others. When they first came to AA, they refused to acknowledge their problem and resisted the organization. Then continued drinking did serious damage to their lives. Finally, they "hit bottom" and recognized their own powerlessness in the face of their addiction. Since they accepted AA, they have managed to control their addiction and improve their lives.
The primary characters in such a typical story are the past alcoholic self who denied the problem and the present alcoholic self (the narrator) who takes responsibility for his problem. Cain insightfully analyzes the implications these stories have for the interaction between narrator and audience. In telling their autobiographical narratives, AA members position themselves as enlightened by their experiences of hitting bottom and by their acceptance of the AA message. In their interaction with new AA recruits, they offer their own lives as a model or icon for the developmental process that the novice could initiate in the storytelling interaction itself. That is, the AA member offers the event of telling his life story—the ongoing interaction between member and novice—as a pivotal point in the novice’s own life story. Just as someone stepped in and offered to help that AA member take responsibility for his addiction—an act that allowed the AA member to become enlightened and live an improved life—the AA member tells his life story at this moment in order to transform the novice’s life in an analogous way. The AA member thus hopes that the novice will step into the narrated life story, as it were, and will enact a transformation analogous to the one being narrated.

Both these cases illustrate how autobiographical narratives can transform relationships in the interaction between narrator and audience. Harding’s minister does more than describe the sacrifice of a son; he enacts the role of sacrificer in his interaction with Harding and makes a bid to transform his own and her own self. Had she accepted Jesus because of his story, he would have turned the death of his son into a sacrifice, himself into a sacrificer, and Harding into the beneficiary of the sacrifice. Just as Jane might be constructing herself by enacting the role of an active, assertive woman, Harding’s minister tries to construct himself by enacting the role of sacrificer. Similarly, Cain’s AA members do more than describe how they have controlled their alcoholism; they also enact the transformative moment in the novice’s own life story by telling their own. In the cases described by both Harding and Cain, ignoring the interactional positioning that can be accomplished through the narration would lead an analyst to miss the transformative potential of the narratives.

This sort of interactional positioning in autobiographical narrative supports an alternative to the predominant explanation for narrative self-construction. Autobiographical narrators might construct themselves in part as they position themselves in characteristic ways in events of storytelling. Jane might become less passive and more active in part as she positions herself that way in her interaction with the interviewer. In this alternative view, a self can emerge through the
interactional positions a narrator habitually takes. In Jane's case, if Jane regularly positions herself as active and assertive she can become active and assertive.

This interactional account of narrative self-construction coheres nicely with constructionist accounts of the self. Contemporary work in feminist theory (Butler, 1990; Flax, 1990; Joy, 1993), social psychology (K. Gergen, 1994, 1997), sociology (Gubrium & Holstein, 1994; Somers, 1994), and anthropology (Crapanzano, 1992; Csordas, 1994; Stewart, 1996) has converged on an account of the self as constructed by habitual positioning in everyday practice. All these accounts criticize "essentialist" theories of self—ones that present the self as a stable, coherent entity relatively impervious to context. Instead, these theorists offer what Butler (1990) calls a "performative" account of self. A self emerges as a person repeatedly adopts characteristic positions, with respect to others and within recognizable cultural patterns in everyday social action. Because the positioning that partly constitutes the self depends on social contexts that shift over time, and on the unpredictable counterpositioning of others, the self is an ongoing, open-ended, and often heterogeneous construction. As described in Chapter 5, such a performative account need not present the self as unreal (as "just" a construction), nor as hopelessly fragmented.

The convergence of theories in all these disciplines on a performative, constructionist account of self lends further support to the claim that interactional positioning in autobiographical narratives plays an important role in explaining their power to construct the self. Please note that I do not claim here, or in Chapter 5 to offer a definitive argument for a performative and against an essentialist account of self. Showing how the self gets interactionally positioned in autobiographical narrative cannot prove that no underlying self exists, although Chapter 5 provides reasons to be skeptical about underlying selves. I have two, more modest aims. First, this book illustrates and extends performative, constructionist accounts of self through detailed demonstrations of how interactional positioning happens in verbal practice. Performative accounts of self all name verbal practice as a central site for the interactional construction of self, but none adequately explains how language actually positions narrator and audience in interactional events of narration. Second, by documenting how autobiographical narrators can enact complex interactional events, this book offers a piece of evidence that any theory of narrative self-construction should explain. I suggest in Chapter 5 that performative theories of self can convincingly integrate such interactional patterns into a more complete account of narrative self-construction.
INTERRELATIONS BETWEEN REPRESENTATION AND ENACTMENT

Jane's autobiographical narrative contains two patterns, either of which might explain its power. Perhaps she constructs her self by representing herself as active and assertive. Or perhaps she constructs her self by acting active and assertive while telling her story. The choice between these two interpretations raises many venerable philosophical oppositions—between cognitive and performative, rational and practical, and so on. This book argues that, instead of becoming mired in such oppositions, an empirically adequate account of self-construction in autobiographical narrative must acknowledge that narrative discourse both represents the narrator's self and positions the narrator interactionally. Furthermore, I argue that autobiographical narratives' power often comes from complex relations across the represented and enacted worlds they create. The book describes how the representational and interactional functions of autobiographical narrative can interrelate so as partly to construct the self.

Any autobiographical narrative involves a doubling of roles for the narrator's self—the narrator has at least one role in the represented content of the story and one role in the ongoing interaction between narrator and audience. For instance, in telling a story about themselves the AA members represent a past, narrated self who was in denial about alcoholism. Their stories also represent the transition to a more responsible self, who is the narrator in the present. AA narrators evaluate their life trajectories as a development from denial and misery to responsibility and stability, and they position their present selves firmly on the side of responsibility and the AA program. In the interactional event of storytelling, the potential AA member occupies a position analogous to the narrator's past, irresponsible self. The AA narrator takes advantage of the doubling of roles in autobiographical narrative to offer his own redemption as a model for the development that the initiate might accomplish through AA, starting right now in the moment of storytelling. The transformative power of the story, then, involves an interrelation between the narrator as represented character and the narrator and audience as interactional participants. Only by representing themselves in certain ways can AA narrators invite potential members to step into and enact an analogous story of their own.

It turns out that the power of Harding's minister's story, Cain's AA narratives, and Jane's narrative depends on more than the doubling of roles. It also depends on parallelism across represented and enacted patterns in autobiographical narrative. Jane's autobiographical narra-
tive and those described by Harding (1992) and Cain (1991) involve a parallel between the set of roles represented by the autobiographical narrative and the set of roles enacted by narrator and audience. Jane's transition from passive and victimized to active and assertive at the orphanage parallels her shift from vulnerable to assertive in her relation with the interviewer. Similarly, the transition from irresponsible alcoholic to responsible AA member, facilitated by AA intervention, parallels the AA narrator offering himself as a model and a catalyst for the novice AA member's development. In some important respects, then, the content represented in these autobiographical narratives mirrors the interactional positioning made possible by those autobiographical narratives. As described in Chapter 4, the mirroring or parallelism in autobiographical narratives like Jane's can get much more intricate than what has been discussed so far.

In cases that involve such parallelism, we need not choose between the predominant representational explanation and the interactional explanation of autobiographical narratives' power. In such cases, the autobiographical narrative both provides a represented template and facilitates transformative interactional positioning. This yields a third account of narrative self-construction: the interrelations between representations of self and the interactional positioning accomplished while representing oneself can underlie autobiographical narratives' power. Autobiographical narrators can (re-)create their selves when they both represent and position themselves in analogous ways. Although not all autobiographical narratives involve a parallel between representation and enactment, many autobiographical narratives (and other types of discursive interaction) involve more extensive parallels between representation and enactment than one might expect (Wortham, 1994, 2001). This book focuses on complex parallelism, like that in Jane's narrative, in order to demonstrate how the interrelation between representation and enactment can facilitate narrative self-construction.

**ANALYZING NARRATIVE DISCOURSE**

In order to explain the construction of self in autobiographical narrative, then, one must analyze not only the separate representational and interactional functions of autobiography but also their interrelations. Such an account will require methodological as well as theoretical advances. Despite the proliferation of methods for narrative analysis, few offer empirically adequate analyses of how narratives position
narrators interactionally. Many analysts who study interactional positioning in autobiographical narrative ironically use methodologies that rely primarily on the representational functions of language. Although they can be useful in some contexts, I claim that such approaches cannot fully explain how interactional positioning gets accomplished through autobiographical narratives. Precise accounts of how autobiographical narratives partly construct the self require conceptual and methodological tools adequate to the task of analyzing the interactional positioning accomplished through narrative discourse.

Any interactional or pragmatic approach to language faces a basic question: How do the linguistic (and paralinguistic) cues in an autobiographical narrative position the narrator and audience interactionally? Cues in the utterances that compose an autobiographical narrative communicate various things, which together enable the autobiographical narrative to position the narrator and audience in types of relationships and events recognized within a given society. But how do such cues communicate what they do? Cain (1991) and Harding (1992) rely primarily on propositions, imagery, and allusions. Although these types of cues can be important, contemporary work has uncovered many other types of cues that speakers use to enact roles. As I will argue in Chapters 2 and 3, any analysis of interactional positioning in autobiographical narrative that does not go beyond propositions, imagery, and allusions will fail to capture how these narratives position narrators interactionally as they do.

A few analyses of autobiographical narrative have begun to attend more systematically to other kinds of cues. Gerhardt and Stinson (1994) study autobiographical narratives’ use of discourse markers to convey implicit evaluations. O’Connor (1994) traces the interactional presuppositions of personal pronouns in life stories. Hensel (1996), Ochs and Capps (1996), and Stromberg (1993) all attend, to some extent, to other sorts of cues in autobiographical narrative. But much of this work is, as Gerhardt and Stinson themselves say, “exploratory.” It indicates that other cues do seem to play an important role in signaling interactional positioning in autobiographical narratives, but this work offers no systematic account of what types of cues exist and how they might work. Furthermore, in the details of the analyses much of this work actually depends in large part on propositional cues, often under the rubric of studying “symbolic,” “thematic,” or “topical” patterns.

This book provides a more systematic approach to the interactional positioning accomplished through autobiographical narrative, by drawing on Bakhtin’s “dialogic” approach to language use and on contem-
porary work in linguistic anthropology. In order to fully understand how autobiographical narrators can construct themselves, one needs conceptual and methodological tools that can capture how language positions speakers interactionally and how this interactional positioning interrelates with the content represented in narrative discourse. Chapter 2 begins to develop these tools by introducing a dialogic approach to language use.