

# Discourses We Live By

Narratives of Educational  
and Social Endeavour

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# Narrative, Discourse, and Biography

An Introductory Story

*Marianne Høyen and Hazel R. Wright*

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## Who Writes About Whom?

Contributors to this book, who come from countries across Europe and sometimes further afield, share a common interest in narrative research about people's lives, thoughts and actions. Contributors have a common interest, too, in the education of adults and thus ongoing contact with those who are 'other' than themselves. This potentially enables their access to the lives, thoughts and practices of a wide and disparate range of social groupings, broadening the scope of research subjects and topics. As researchers, they encourage people to share their life stories and experiences in order to make better sense of the world in which they live; telling such stories sometimes triggers the urge to go out and change lives. Narrative research is an interactive process. It uses words, images, activities or artefacts to ask people — either individually or collectively within their social groupings — to examine, discuss, portray or otherwise make public their place in the world, their sense of belonging to and identity within the physical and cultural space they inhabit. The contributors come together in this publication to present their recent findings from explorations within specific contexts and perspectives. Prompted by our focus on 'narratives, discourses, biography', they analyse their work to find the factors that influence how people view their worlds,

the embedded values and practices that underpin the way people think and act (often without even realizing why); in short, the ‘discourses by which they live’.

Beyond these common interests, the contributors come from a range of backgrounds. They represent a number of different academic disciplines within the humanities and social sciences and professional practices, a range of countries and cultures. They span a broad spectrum of age, status and outlook, and differently employ a variety of research methods. This diversity itself supports our endeavour, as editors, to deploy the concept of discourse as a means to identify and challenge inequality and prejudice in everyday lives and to unpick the assumptions that serve to maintain an unthinking acceptance of the status quo. For, like Hall (2001, p. 72), we believe that discourse “‘rules in” certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write or conduct oneself’ while it “‘rules out”, limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it’. Yet the authors walk towards the book’s themes from different starting places, as the meanings that inhere to narrative, discourse and biography have mutated over time, and are interpreted in different ways depending on the cultural and disciplinary background of the scholar.

## Why and Where Our Story Starts

**W**e, Hazel and Marianne, the instigators and editors of this book, have in common a long-standing interest in narrative and life history research, and a shared sociological background. Given the opportunity to organize a conference within the field of adult education, we thought that an exploration of the discourses that shape people’s personal and collective worldviews would lead to some interesting findings and debates — which it did! At the conference, many new and interesting research processes and findings were presented, and we determined to put together a book that would take some of this material to a broader audience. To create a coherent publication, we developed an overall structure and contacted individuals (both conference presenters and other academic colleagues) and asked them to contribute research-based chapters to fit one of a set of themes.

We selected authors who explore a range of professional and personal situations to consider what shapes these contexts, ever mindful that the focus is on adults and their education whether formal, informal, non-formal or incidental (Foley, 1999). We sought to craft a book that, through its very authorship and content, would inject a diversity of ideas and approaches into the field. Our authors come from diverse backgrounds, different cultures, nations and political systems, and this represents a shift away from the often-dominant Anglocentric worldview. This diversity has a bearing, too, on the literatures to which authors make reference; some very few move easily between sources in different languages but many stay within their linguistic boundaries. We have asked for an English translation of titles where possible, as this is the language of publication. We observe also that there are different traditions in the way literature is used. In the English-speaking world there is a tendency to evidence every claim made, whereas in some other European cultures, new research is more narrowly embedded within core literature, creating another level of variance. Authors come from a range of academic disciplines that focus differently on theory, praxis, rhetoric and case work. They occupy different epistemological positions, are at different stages of their careers, and have varied prior experience of publication. We have welcomed all who had an interesting tale to share rather than cherry-picking those who could work most autonomously. We believe that it is important to include voices from the margins, and surely it is better to tell a story imperfectly than not at all. Like parenting (Winnicott, 1971) stories can be 'good enough'.

Some of our authors research alone or in partnership; others are part of significant collaborative ventures, on occasion limited in what they can write about outside official project reports and specified articles. They use a range of methodological approaches but for reasons of space this is rarely the focus of the chapters, as authors were asked to foreground discourse and narrative. We wanted just 'enough' detail of methods to demonstrate credibility (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 20) unless this was an important aspect of their work. Like Erben (1998, p. 4), we believe that 'too much emphasis on research techniques can limit an understanding of the connection between the method and purpose of the study'. However, we also acknowledge that this approach is still

contested and may raise questions of 'adequacy' or 'quality' for some (Roberts, 2002, p. 6).

In terms of analysis, interpretation may be loosely framed, with references to 'grounded' approaches that imply a 'general stance' (Roberts, 2002, p. 10) rather than a set of procedural steps. As Roberts states earlier (2002, p. 6): 'The study of biographical research rests on a view of individuals as creators of meanings which form the basis of their everyday lives' and, in our view, 'creators of meanings' cannot imply a search for a single truth. Creation is important and implies imaginative analysis. Seeking understanding, most authors go beyond just 'giving voice' to avoid the possibility that 'little is added to [...] perceptions of the world, which may in turn reflect dominant discourses' (Sparkes, 1994, p. 108).

Authors use verbal and visual media; they create texts, reflexive accounts, life histories and films. Some use formal structures to shape their telling; some embrace a more open multi-source approach; others choose an oral history approach, recognizing the idea that 'it might be possible to render oneself invisible or non-interfering [...] as mythical and certainly not desirable' (Bornat, 2008, p. 351). We believe that these differences add power to the tellings, for they suggest authenticity and challenge the reader to focus anew on each chapter.

In short, this is an edited, themed collection of twenty-eight research texts with an intriguing diversity of content and perspective. It is also a source book for narrative and education that shows some of the many things that can be done under the rubric of *Discourses We Live By*. Chapters are grouped and linked to create sections that have a degree of coherence, but the structures imposed on the book are deliberately fluid; at times a chapter may have as many links across sections as it does within its section — but we believe that the texts selected for inclusion fit within the frameworks we have chosen without significant dissonance. We are mindful that the texts are studies of real lives; many rely on life stories or histories, and life is messy and complicated. Yet, who would deny that the individual life has a shape and pattern that makes it both recognizable and unique, even as it runs parallel to others, sometimes intertwining with them? So, too, the chapters in this book.

However, we would like to be a little more helpful, by talking more generally about the key common aspects — narrative, discourse,

biography — and offering some shared understanding of what these terms mean within this book. In doing this, we recognize that ‘when we talk about sharing we implicitly or explicitly engage with a set of values’ (John, 2017, p. 4) and recognize that we cannot assume that all our authors subscribe to them in totality, or at all, or that they will be acceptable to the reader. We hope they will be.

## A Narrative on Narrative

The research data within the chapters was customarily collected through narratives (whether as interviews, art, film or other modalities, as justified by Barthes in 1977) and recounted in a narrative style. In doing this, our authors have made a choice; but within pre-literate societies, visual, physical and spoken narratives were often the only way to record and share the historical account, to impart important information or describe dramatic events, those planned and those that had already taken place. Witness the cave paintings, ritual dances and the sagas, ballads and legends that are traceable through to modern times. In a much-quoted paragraph, Barthes set out his claim that ‘narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself’ (1977, p. 79) for he saw it to be both universal and fundamental to human existence.

Rather than view this statement in isolation, we should note that it headed a chapter that dealt purely with the structural analysis of narrative, seeking the means to understand its commonalities and reach an abstract sense of what narrative is. Barthes delineated the breadth of narrative form to make the case that a deductive approach was essential, as was a focus on how narratives work, arguing that these together would enable a clarification of divergence and understanding of its diversity. Drawing on linguistic theory he then proposed a tentative ‘system of narrative’ that was both multi-layered and horizontally segmented to capture variety. However, his overall conclusion was that narrative must be divorced from representation, a point that may be contested but surely leaves space for creative interpretations and multiple means of dissemination within the field.

Despite the relevance of other modalities, language remains a central feature of much narrative research and our own experience, quite apart

from our pan-European interactions, has made us especially sensitive to the complexities of understanding what is being communicated across differences of time and place. Linguistic fluency, the ability to translate a story from one tongue to another, can be a taxing process but one that may be overcome by careful enunciation, changes of speed of delivery, efforts to translate key words or phrases into another language. Within a conference session, the presence of multi-lingual speakers who can actually paraphrase the content to suit a range of listeners' ears may help a little. In a book, we have to assume our readership in advance and hope that ideas travel. However significant, content constitutes only a part of the problem when communicating across cultural divides. We find the conceptual (mis)understandings when a simple label conceals a wealth of associated meanings more difficult to grasp and convey. Drawing purely on our own experience of working across the English and Danish cultures, we are constantly finding new terms and ideas that are difficult to explain to each other, and we give some examples here.

On one occasion Marianne was puzzled by an English colleague's talk of his working-class origins, as these seemed to imply a very different set of circumstances than the literal translation into Danish would suggest. Conversely, Hazel found it difficult to grasp that moving from Copenhagen to the provinces or vice versa was deemed a change that, to a Dane, required significant social adjustment. (We had asked a class of Masters students to identify someone who had experienced a significant life event and to interview this person for a practice assignment, and Hazel was astounded that for a number of the students this urban-rural transfer was deemed an important area to investigate.) Insignificant in a UK context, the shift from the capital to a rural area involves a degree of adaptation, even culture shock, in Denmark, where spatial divisions are more marked than class ones. These examples show that to understand a phenomenon might require a historical-epistemological analysis if one is really to grasp meanings within their cultural spheres (Bachelard, 1968/1940; Canguilhem, 1988/1968) but also that we need to view phenomena as constructs (Latour & Woolgar, 1986) to enable multiple interpretations and applications.

Within education itself, we have had similar debates around the different cultural interpretations of vocational education, and indeed of adult education itself. In the UK these terms convey different meanings.

Adult education has evolved from a long liberal tradition of provision for the workers, to stand for a form of non-compulsory education with a distinctive ethos. It usually caters for somewhat older students who are seeking a second chance to gain necessary qualifications in an attempt to move up a level or two, or across into another field (if vocational), or maybe wanting a new hobby or better social understanding (if not vocational). In Denmark, on the other hand, adult education refers to the teaching of lower-level practical skills suitable for the workplace: it is firmly vocational and sits in contrast to an academic education. Even more confusing is the British Further Education (FE) sector in which non-academic studies are grouped; the like of which does not exist in many European countries. We have also brushed up against other concepts that do not travel well. Hazel finds the Danish suffix *tøj* (and its German equivalent *zeug*) really hard to grasp. These words refer to something that extends the bodily ability to do a task by being 'present-at-hand'. Following Heidegger (1927), a tool such as a hammer is both a thing when it is lying on a table, but an 'interpretation' when held ready for use. A water mill makes visible an interpretation of a river as a force; a clock encapsulates an interpretation of time as mathematics. In Denmark the suffix '*tøj*' can be attached to a whole of range of actions to make composite nouns: *Stentøj* refers to ceramics fired into stone (or more accurately stoneware pottery in English) but a *legetøj* is a toy, or something to play with, yet *tøj* on its own stands for clothes. *Zeug*, often translated as 'stuff' (although 'thing' might be a closer equivalent) is similarly connectable to a range of other words. So, an aeroplane is a flying tool or thing, a *Flugzeug*. Similarly, *Feuerzeug* ('fire tool') is a lighter, a *Fahrzeug* (driving thing) is a vehicle, a *Werkzeug* a (work) tool.

There are significant discussions around narrative style that have some bearing on our book so, drawing on White's seminal article of 1984, they are briefly mentioned here. White (himself, drawing on the works of Mink and Ricœur to support his argument) sought to challenge the traditional historian to think beyond the atheoretical chronological text, the descriptive account that moves forward through a set of logical steps 'and then... and then... and then... and then...' (to paraphrase Mink). Instead, they might create coherent accounts that weave a range of modes together, cleaving neither to the literary tradition (poesis) nor the knowledge tradition (noesis) but inhering symbolization to achieve

a form of 'realism' that is neither representational nor factual but, perhaps, emotionally credible (as valued by Ricœur). This approach broadens the scope of narrative, allowing possibilities for emplotment (storying) and contextualization. Such arguments for variety leave a legacy from which this book benefits, as they sanction the use of a range of approaches supporting the diversity that we highly value.

White's article also provides a framework through which to recognize, and thereby to understand further, the innate diversity that emanates from the different cultural traditions the authors inhabit, for he sets out a sequence of four major influences on narrative thinking that shaped its theoretical development and acceptance over more than thirty years. Firstly, White identifies how Anglo-American analytical philosophers (like Dray, Gardiner, Mink) examined the epistemological status of narrativity. Secondly, he discusses the historians with a social science orientation (like the French *Annales* group comprising, for example, Braudel, Furet, Le Goff) who wished to free the historical tradition from such ideological methods of representation. Thirdly, he identifies those with a semiotic bent (like Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva), who, perhaps more tolerantly, accepted narrative as one 'code' among many, to be used when appropriate. And finally, he mentions philosophers of the hermeneutic tradition (like Gadamer and Ricœur), who see narrative as a means of structuring and foregrounding a consideration of time. To White these four 'strains' offer consecutive challenges to those holding traditional perspectives. To our authors, they represent a range of influences that, with a greater or lesser degree of consciousness, shape the way they construe the term 'narrative' and how they work within the field. To the editors, they leave the term narrative as one that is difficult to define should one want to so constrain it; narrative research characterized as a methodology with various forms, each of which develops its own sense of coherence and flow.

Yet we have a shared view of narrative, and like our colleague, José González Monteagudo (2011), this stems from the seminal works of Bruner, from his key writings of the mid-80s during the 'narrative turn' and his 'search for integration between different approaches' (*ibid.*, p. 299). Bruner made a determined effort to connect across disciplines and challenge simplistic approaches to the processing of information, recognizing the human capacity for continual transformation of both self

and society, and the role of stories as a means to create possible worlds and therefore possibilities for change (Bruner, 1986). Bruner recognized distinctive narrative (storied) and paradigmatic (logical) cognitive modes of construing reality and valued both. Some of the chapters in this book reflect Polkinghorne's (1995) suggestion that data collected in one tradition can be usefully subjected to the other: the story analysed for significance, the logical account (or collection of data) shaped into a single story. However, we are ever mindful of the arguments our colleague, Linden West, makes for avoiding 'fragmenting' the data. As he states, 'medium and message, narrative and experience, reality and representations, self and story, are not easily prized apart' (West, 1996, p. 10), hence our acceptance that the performing arts chapters adopt an open format that encourages the reader to make his/her own interpretations. Citing Lea (1995), West also claims that 'narrative structures [...] may themselves organize and give meaning to experience rather than being simply reflective of it' (West, 1996, p. 11). Narrative is a powerful medium.

Like Clandinin (2013, p. 11), we recognize that the term narrative can be applied in very different ways, to:

anything that uses, for example, stories as data, narrative as story as representational form, narrative as content analysis, narrative as structure, and so forth

but unlike her we are not trying to define, or especially focus on, a particular methodology, Narrative Inquiry. For the purposes of this book it is discourses and diversity that matter. Temporality, space and sociality are important but not constraining factors. Narrative need not be 'both the phenomenon under study and the methodology for its study' but it is 'how we understand human experience' (p. 216).

For similar reasons, the work represented here straddles distinctions between big and small stories (Baynham & Georgakopoulou, 2006) for many are collected through interviews and often the interview starts with a broad and open invitation to 'tell me about X', but few of the texts appearing in this volume represent a lengthy attempt to build a complete life history; even the long-term projects with which some authors are involved have a different focus. Chapters often describe episodes that could be labelled 'small stories' in the sense that they

appear or are constructed through ‘ordinary conversational exchanges’ (and sometimes from a talk-in-action perspective). However, as editors we would be unwilling to attribute either label to the chapters within this book, seeing such distinctions as potentially limiting, and perhaps as a continuation of Polkinghorne’s (1995) belief that storied data should be analysed into taxonomies and categories, while material with diverse origins should be shaped into a narrative explanation.

In our desire to support diversity this book avoids strong framings (Bernstein, 1971) and instead groups chapters within sections that loosely define boundaries. It includes chapters that embrace narratives in many ways and we believe that the experimental, the interdisciplinary, the not-quite-formulated and those projects that morph part way through are important. The chapters include the tidier retrospective accounts and the narratives that are ‘good enough’ — maybe because they discuss work-in-progress — but still offer valuable insights. When selecting contributions, we did not strive for perfection or a strong sense of direction when the processes were still developing, the author’s narratives still unfolding and taking shape; just clear communication and something interesting to say.

Thus, we see that narrative is a complex and creative force that changes over time and place and is capable of multiple styles of application, formation, interpretation and dissemination. Discourse, too, is a difficult term to pin down and define for those with that intention, so now it seems appropriate to consider why this is a core theme within the individual texts and the book as a whole.

## Why Discourse?

**I**t was our attempts to make sense of the linguistic complexities encountered that led us, through our mutual interest in sociology, to begin to question the ways of thinking that guide people’s actions as well as their thoughts and conversations; the embedded, often tacit rules that govern how humans act and understand other people’s actions; the rules by which they live. Such discourses develop insidiously within societies and social groups. Even when hidden, such discourses will work to maintain the status quo, creating subtle barriers to change, excluding those — often the newcomers — who do not know how matters ‘work’ and thereby transgress social norms and expectations.

Like narrative, the term discourse can be used in different ways and at different levels, depending on where and when it is encountered, and how specialist the usage. At a basic level, discourse can mean no more than 'speech'; the act of holding a conversation through which two people start a dialogue (although not limited to an engagement of two); the linking of language and practice (Fairclough, 1993; Foucault, 1970). But it has more sophisticated connotations, too, and these, too are commonly associated with Foucault. In his inaugural lecture of December 1970 at the Collège de France, Foucault spoke of a 'kind of gradation between different discourses' (p. 12), suggesting that as a concept it has multiple layers and also multiple iterations, for there are many things said in everyday interaction that are ephemeral, quickly forgotten by both speaker and listener but endlessly re-created in new contexts. Foucault argues that this hierarchy enables discourse to be both permanent and endlessly constructed, creating both an ordering framework and possibilities for change. Foucault believed that discourses are created through both exterior and interior processes. Exterior processes comprise systems of exclusion, and he named three: forbidden speech (what cannot be said); the division of madness (that represses the unwanted voice); and the will to truth (that determines what we can know and the practices whereby we create new knowledge). Foucault explains how, with the internal processes, discourse 'exercises its own control' (p. 12). These comprise: the principles of commentary (the interplay between influential texts that underpin our ways of thinking and acting and everyday conversation); of discipline (which specify methods, rules and definitions within a field); and rarefaction among speaking subjects (ways of limiting access to commentary and disciplinary power by, for example, specifying threshold qualifications that only a minority possess).

In the continual reconstruction of new discourses, the detail and context changes but the purposes are repeated, creating a sense of endless repetition of ideas that are never directly stated. It is this process, one he terms commentary, that:

gives us the opportunity to say something other than the text itself, but on condition that it is this text itself which is uttered, and in some ways finalised. (p. 13)

These are complex arguments, in themselves made clear only through statements that are somewhat paradoxical. In application at the local level they are made more difficult to discuss when the people in the room come from multiple backgrounds, disciplinary and cultural. For discourse is a term that has undergone change: as time passes, ideas travel. Ideas are formed, found, and adopted by others to meet their needs in ways that do not necessarily align with the intentions of earlier users. Meanings become more narrowly or more broadly focused, possibly even changed as a usage more appealing than the original becomes embedded. In effect, meanings can be adapted or duplicated (or both).

Concepts similarly undergo change. They emerge initially to enable discussion of specific phenomena within contemporary texts, and on further examination and application may be found to be insufficiently precise, perhaps ambiguous. When a concept moves into general written usage, it becomes detached from its origins, unfettered by the thinking of its original author. Made available to any reader (Ong, 1982) it gathers nuances as each one interprets it to fit with his or her personal cultural and disciplinary baggage. Occasionally, a reader will take up a concept and deliberately re-shape it for his or her individual purposes, which may be somewhat different than those intended by its creator. As knowledge grows, concepts may be appropriated to explain newly developing ideas, as happened with the concept of 'postmodernism' This was conceived in the French-speaking world by Lyotard (1984) but later taken up in America to explain visible trends in contemporary society, embellished to carry new meanings. In turn, this newly coined notion of postmodernism was fed back into European consciousness, and consequently connotes in more than one way (Sestoft, 1999).

Postmodern thinking challenged the beliefs of modernism; trust in the Grand Narrative that scientific progress would solve the world's problems, and as a result, eventually enable a more utopian society. The overturning of the Grand Narratives made space for what Lyotard termed 'small narratives', empowering assertions that multiple perspectives had validity and that plurality and complexity were acceptable, in a refutation of claims to access a single overarching universal truth. Thus, Lyotard's concept became a descriptor for an ongoing change that was

tearing apart the Western ideal of universality, making way for greater plurality, and (perhaps) to the hearing and valuing of a wider range of voices within society; the diversity valued here.

So now to consider our shared understanding of discourses within this book, and again we turn to Foucault to show how discourses can be controlling and exclusionary, and can lead to prejudice at individual and social levels, often operating tacitly. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) he explains that discourse is steeped in status and power: it is the frame for what it is possible even to think in a given period. To identify a discourse, analysis focuses on practices and ideas that demarcate and marginalize. As such, a discourse is a culturally constituted means of representing reality that is used to determine what it is possible to talk about and do within a society. Thus, discourses establish social 'norms' that then go unquestioned, perpetrating existing patterns of control and behaviour. Even, in contemporary society, people often conform to 'norms' accepting them as 'truths' rather than questioning their provenance, validity or applicability to different contexts.

In this book, authors seek to explore, and often to challenge these norms, through theorizing and/or through examining practice. The aim is to disrupt the 'one-world thinking' that can overwrite diversity, concealing how the 'universal' process of globalization affects us differently depending on our place in the world (Standing, 2016). So, the authors quite often (but not always) study disadvantaged and/or minority groups — such categories are often intersectional (Crenshaw, 2019) — and do so in a variety of contexts. They look within education itself or other professional caring contexts, or turn to those whom society marginalizes, such as migrant groups, ex-offenders, addicts, troublesome pupils, the elderly. When writing their chapters, we tasked our authors to question their own assumptions by examining the suppositions and frameworks that underpin their thinking and their practices: the discourses they live by. We asked them too — to use the words of the Danish anthropologist, Kirsten Hastrup (2012, p.ix) — to remember that individuals all live 'differently in the world'.

As editors, we also sought diversity. We sought chapters relating to discourses within an adult educational context, whatever the background of the researcher, to extend the disciplinary reach. In doing this, we accepted that the authors' decisions on what they would do and

how they would do it would differ, welcoming a diversity of approach. Within that variety, many would be collecting data using biographical methods, seeking the life stories of people who worked within the field they chose to investigate.

## Biography as a Means of Enquiry

The intention in this section is not to focus on how to implement biographical methods; rather to consider how biography relates to the theme of this book overall. The writing of biographies can be traced back to the late Middle Ages and is often considered a historical pursuit because it deals with the past (but only in relation to making an account of an individual's life). Traditionally, the formal biographer is seeking more than a chronological listing, and in the ways that he or she seeks to create an illusion of the life-as-lived must select what to include and exclude to craft a story, so placing the activity within the field of literature (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2017). Biography as a means of enquiry within qualitative research is undertaken at a much smaller scale, perhaps equating more to Tonkin's term 'representations of pastness' (1992, p. 2), but its use has grown exponentially, leading to what Bornat (2008, p. 343) describes as 'a vast and constantly changing and expanding ferment of creative work' across a range of disciplines. At its broadest scope the researcher wants to understand a person's life events, so he or she gathers sufficient information to create a timeline for this person and seeks, through conversation and gentle questioning, to understand their feelings and motivations, as well as 'what' they do 'when'. Increasingly 'individual life experience is generated, analysed and drawn on to explain the social world' (Bornat, 2008, p. 343). So, the researcher studies individuals who represent a specific grouping, and the research focuses more on how they think and feel and are involved in shared activities rather than excavating their entire life histories. But there is usually a desire to fit the findings into a broader frame; to understand how each persons' beliefs and actions are shaped by their prior experiences, their childhoods and schooling; perhaps by traumatic events that occurred in their pasts. In this case, biography is akin to personal history but it is more of a pen portrait than an entire volume.

This focus on the individual as a research 'subject' with a context and opinions belongs to the qualitative tradition, whereby the analysis is an interpretative one. That this is deemed acceptable as research stems from significant changes of paradigms within this field, particularly what is referred to as 'the biographic turn' by Rustin (2000) who sees this as a reaction to 'the prescriptive conceptions of scientific method' (p. 35). Like White before him, he identifies multiple sites of unrest through which this change was channelled: German and French philosophers, American Interactionists, and early pioneers (like Dilthey and Weber) within the new discipline of sociology. This biographical 'turn' required an ontological acceptance of the agentic individual but also an acceptance of inductive methods, a belief 'that biographies *make* society and are *not merely made by it*' (our emphasis) (Rustin, p. 46). Without refuting the reverse move from theory to real lives that is also present, Rustin clearly advocates the types of inductive approaches that are found within this book, making it clear that justification requires effort; description alone will not suffice:

What has to be demonstrated is that sociological theory can be developed from the study of individual cases, in contrast to the usual sociological practice by which individual lives are shown to have meaning by their framing within previously established sociological categories. (Rustin, p. 45)

However, in this book, the contributors are not primarily seeking new theory. Nor are they tasked to clarify the meaning of narrative, discourse or biography, terms that we acknowledge originated in other fields (linguistics, history and literature, for example); terms that are used in different ways and whose meanings converge, diverge and overlap at times.

In this book, our shared understanding of biographical research is a broad one, akin to Roberts' (2002, p. 1) explanation in his book of that name. The term is used:

to indicate various, often interrelated, approaches to the study of individuals. Biographical research is an exciting, stimulating and fast-moving field which seeks to understand the changing experiences and outlooks of individuals in their daily lives, what they see as important, and how to provide interpretations of the accounts they give of their past, present and future.

We concur with Roberts that biographical research is ‘intentionally interdisciplinary’ (p. 2), and often takes a pragmatic stance (p. 7) recognizing ‘that stories or accounts by individuals are central but that they are collected and used in different ways for different methodological and theoretical purposes’ (p. 8).

The purpose of this book is to excavate, examine and question assumptions that humans accept and respond to without asking why — the discourses that underpin our lives. This, too, requires work, but work with a different focus; and, inevitably, as with all inductive research, the outcomes are sometimes other than those intentionally sought, introducing a welcome degree of diversity. In focusing on discourse, many of the authors tend to look away from the literary narrative tradition (but some embrace it). Nor is narrative seen ‘primarily as a tool for meaning-making’ in both individual and group life: rather it is a communicatory device that can deal with ‘sociological questions about power, solidarity, equality and social change’ (Poletta et al., 2011, p. 113). Narratives tell a story and storying is a powerful communicative tool that can be strategically deployed; here, it is one that connects to individual biographies. Even the simplest story can influence public opinion. A diverse range of stories has the potential to be inclusive, encouraging diversity within the social sphere, and again reinforcing the importance that a work like this one should encompass a variety of themes and the voices of a breadth of groups and individuals from differing backgrounds, cultures and disciplines.

### Imposing a Structure on Diverse Elements

To understand diversity as something more than an assemblage of disparate entities their arrangement needs to be managed, particularly when the chosen form of communication is a book, a format that requires a sequential arrangement of distinctive texts.

It is for the Readers to decide how to approach their task but, as Editors, we felt that a description of the content — the themes addressed — might make it easier to choose whether to read from start to finish or select by chapter or thematic grouping. With a multi-voiced and multi-chaptered volume like this there is no simple linear progression we can impose, nor would we want to do this were it

possible. However, the book is crafted to provide a route through our collective offerings; to give the book a sense of flow and direction, an unevenly stitched and knotted narrative thread. To this end, our knots — the twenty-eight chapters that form the book — are strung in groups of four within seven sections that each take a specific stance towards discourses. In this way, we manage — and assiduously place — our diverse texts.

Mindful of the vital narrative thread, it is time to examine the stitches that determine it, so inevitably we now sew a straight seam through the fabric of the book, briefly considering each section in turn and outlining the commonality of purpose that governs the selection of its four constituent chapters. The book starts with texts that offer a broad sweep, the discourses we live ‘within’ as humankind; and next turns to discourses that shape the workplace, as many of the contributions (and indeed, their authors) straddle both academic and professional fields. In the book we then consider how professionals work to mediate (work through) or outwit (work around) constraining discourses, before turning to possible ways of exposing / exploring / revealing (sometimes repressed) diversity, and of empowering (supporting diversity among) marginalized groups. Finally, the texts consider internality as, in the last section authors reflect on their own relationships with their research topics and the conditions through which they encounter them.

### Section I. Discourses We Live Within: Frameworks that Structure

The discourses that frame and shape human lives — the big frames like truth and its telling, language and emotion, society and culture and the natural environment — are addressed in this section.

### Section II. Discourses We Work Within: Of the Workplace

Here the chapters address the discourses that shape the workplace from both academic and professional perspectives, considering the customs and boundaries that shape working life.

### Section III. Discourses We Work Through: Challenges to Overcome

These chapters examine socially embedded discourses that constrict lives, demonstrating ways in which individuals and/or professionals, while working within the system, can support better outcomes.

### Section IV. Discourses We Work Around: Managing Constraining Circumstances

Chapters here address how groups and individuals (with differing degrees of success) strive to expose, to circumvent, even 'outwit', constraining discourses, to achieve outcomes other than those commonly anticipated.

### Section V. Discourses that Explore or Reveal Diversity: Facing Choice and Change

The repression and achievement of diversity, and how individuals (both researched and researchers) find personal ways of exploring or challenging social norms, form the content of this section.

### Section VI. Discourses to Support Diversity: Projects that Empower

Chapters placed here address ways in which marginalized groups (represented collectively or individually) are empowered through support provided in a range of ways, some traditional others more radical in approach.

### Section VII. Discourses Through a Self-Reflexive Lens: Thoughts from Researchers

The chapters in this section draw on personal reflections to make sense of discourses in people's personal and professional worlds. This is a two-way process, and some researchers achieve new insights they can apply more broadly, others a better understanding, maybe confirmation, of their preferred ways of working.

Now Readers, the choices are yours. It is time to twist your own narrative threads.

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