

## **SPECIAL ISSUE: MULTIPLICITY AND COMMONALITY IN NARRATIVE INTERPRETATION**

### **What's in the Frame? A Commentary on Five Narrative Analyses of a Single Text**

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Gabriela Spector-Mersel (2014a) positions this undertaking as a continuation of the *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis* (Wertz et al., 2012) project and it is an extremely valuable and welcome extension. When I wrote the “Narrative Research” portions for the *Five Ways* analysis, I was aware of the impossibility of adequately presenting narrative inquiry as a unitary endeavor with homogeneity of approach and analytic strategy, differentiated from other qualitative approaches. Indeed, I was at pains to distinguish narrative analysis from phenomenology, discourse analysis, grounded theory, or intuitive analysis (the other four “ways”), in that I believe that narrative researchers often incorporate all these strategies in their toolboxes. Therefore, having this demonstration of the diverse ways in which narrative researchers can approach the same text broadens and deepens our view of what narrativists actually *do* and how the mode of analysis responds to different questions that researchers might bring to a single narrative text.

I take the title of this commentary from what is to me a main theme in Amos’ text—that of falling “out of the frame”—and his experiences both in and out of a frame of his own construction. As I read these five analyses, what is most striking is what the analysts put in their various frames for observation and understanding. These five highly skilled narrative researchers offer us a demonstration of interpretive approaches that can be used to interrogate and elucidate a text and it is striking how each analyst “frames” the text in different ways; each of their lenses selects aspects of the text to place in the foreground of the

frame, backgrounding (but not necessarily ignoring) aspects that others place in sharper focus. Each approaches the text with an eye to different aspects of it and although there are similarities in the general outlines of their conclusions, the emphases and interpretive scaffolding differ.

Just as there are many ways to “read” a poem, there are many stances narrativists may take as they approach a text. As Spector-Mersel (2014a) says in her Introduction, “narrative interpretation is... *a way of looking* at narrative data” (p. 2). Customarily, the viewpoint of the interpreter is determined by the research question the researcher brings to the work. In the social sciences, we analyze narratives in order to understand more deeply and more extensively some conceptual question. The particular narrative is chosen as an instance of whatever phenomena we wish to scrutinize. As we see in this project, each writer fashions a question in a unique way (sometimes more explicitly, sometimes only implicitly) and goes about focusing on this aspect of the narrative with well-crafted procedures of analysis.

Narrative texts are useful in responding to particular research questions constructed as investigations into processes—i.e., *how* questions. What we analyze as narrative researchers and how we do so must derive from the nature of our conceptual research question. In this project, that research question is left somewhat unclear and the researchers are left free to simply exhibit their techniques of reading and analysis and to discuss what sorts of findings they might unearth from these modes of analysis.

The Amos text itself (see Appendix) is quite sparse—60 lines of Amos’s first response to a request to narrate his life story and the text under consideration here seems to me to constitute what Labov and Waletzky (1967) would consider an “abstract and orientation” to the story, a story which is never really told. It is devoid of what Clifford Geertz (1973) would call “thick description.” Amia Lieblich (2014) comments on the absence of stories in this narrative, stories with complicating action and evaluation. Rivka Tuval-Mashiach (2014) points out that Amos’s narrative is condensed, factual, and descriptive. And Irit Kupferberg (2014) notes that the narrative is relatively lacking in the metaphors that form the heart of her plan of inquiry.

As in most interview studies, interviewees are likely to lead with a *précis* that sketches the major points and then await the response of the interviewer before proceeding (see Josselson, 2013). Indeed, Amos is explicit about this at the end of the interview where he asks the interviewer, “What else do you want to hear?” Amos is aware that he has

simply outlined the major events in his (public, observable) life and that much is left to disclose. In a comprehensive research study, there would indeed be follow-up interest that would unpack, extend, amplify, and augment this narrative, depending on how the interviewer responded to the abstract.

Although it appears that “Tell me your life story” was the prompt for the interview, it is important to note that Amos was also told before the interview that he was chosen for a study about “the identity and experiences of elderly Sabra men who are assisted by foreign homecare workers.” As Spector-Mersel (2014a) says in her Introduction, Amos’ text represents “one possible version of . . . his life” (p. 10). It is, therefore, centrally important to understand the implicit and explicit context of the request for narration that produced this particular version. In this case, Amos has, before the interview itself, been construed by the researcher (Spector-Mersel, 2014a) as an object of interest because he is thought to be “a Sabra” and known to be “assisted by a foreign homecare worker.” (That he takes up only the first part of this construction in his initial narration is itself of interest.)

All of the writers in this project are very aware of the importance of taking account of the relationship between Amos and the interviewer. This constitutes the context in which Amos produces his “life story”—and creates his expectations of who he is talking to and for what purpose he is constructing a narrative. The exceptional importance of attending to the relational frame of the interview is underscored by the somewhat different understandings the writers in this issue have of what this framing might have meant to Amos. Tuval-Mashiach (2014), for example, understood that the focus of the study had been communicated as “experiences with foreign homecare workers” and expresses surprise that he says so little about his homecare worker when he had been told that that was the intent of the study. Spector-Mersel(2014b) and Tuval-Mashiach make much of Amos’s being a “Sabra.” Even though he never uses that word in his interview, he had been told that this is why he was selected for this interview. I wonder about his wife’s presence during the interview. How did that come about? And how did her presence effect what Amos chooses to tell?

As the writers here point out, Amos is constructing a list of his activities that constituted his most public self, a self which is obliterated, except in memory, by his stroke. In this overview, Amos offers few stories (beyond the “facts”), and no detail whatever about his inner or private self. In a narrative research project, one would investigate at some

length and depth the actual stories behind these “facts” and inquire about what Amos has actually been experiencing over these 15 years outside of the public realm. But this is a text offered for demonstration purposes and what is striking is the range and depth of understandings that can be gleaned from it from these various approaches.

To their credit, these writers all show how much interpretation can be gleaned even from a skeletal text. They all go beyond a surface reading and show what is encoded in the text. Above all, this project demonstrates how the multilayeredness of narratives opens diverse potential pathways for analysis. These authors have demonstrated differing lenses, stances, and ways of framing the text, each fostering a distinct and valuable reading, each discovering their own truths.

### **The Text and the Frame**

One important distinction among these various readings relates to how much the analysts stay within the text or move outside it. For some, the frame is placed tightly around the text itself. For others, the text is lodged inside a particularized border that seems relevant to the researcher. The discourse analysts (Perez & Tobin, 2014; Kupferberg, 2014) put their border firmly around the text and discipline themselves to stay within it while the others border the text with outside contexts—to try to lodge it in the culture, variously conceived (Tuval-Mashiach, 2014; Spector-Mersel, 2014b) or to provide a personal response to its possible meanings (Lieblich, 2014).

In Lieblich’s empathic, reflective reading, the text is small, framed inside a large border of Lieblich’s personal response. We learn, in her analysis, almost as much about her as we do about Amos, and therefore have an interpretation of what such a text might mean to this unique reader who is analyzing both form and context, but within a frame of “the heart.” Lieblich’s reading stands, then, as an exercise in reflexivity, something that, in part, underlies any thematic interpretive reading. In Spector-Mersel’s approach, the text is a bit larger in the frame, but very much bordered by Spector-Mersel’s interest in and knowledge about “the Sabra.” She interprets much of what Amos has to say within this context, filling in the frame for the reader with historical detail and cultural ethos. In Tuval-Mashiach’s reading, the text has multiple borders, each specifying a particular context in which it can be understood—the intersubjective, the social and the available cultural metanarratives (the stories that can be told or are commonly told in a particular culture). Like

Spector-Mersel, Tuval-Mashiach attempts to link the text to the contexts in which it was produced and the contexts in which the life as narrated was lived (as she understands these contexts). In Perez and & Tobin's interpretation, the text fills most of the frame, with a close linguistic reading, but there is acknowledgement that there may be extra-linguistic social messages implied by the linguistic features of the text. Kupferberg has the text fully framed, reading the words for metaphors and linguistic signs that reveal how the narrator positions himself in relation to others in his life and in relation to time. Thus, reading these analyses is a bit like using the "enlarge" feature on the computer—they differ in how much the text is in close-up and fills the frame versus how much there is dialogue between the text and the frame itself.

These different readings offer different overall "color" to the picture that emerges. All of the analysts note and work with the "before and after the stroke" division in Amos' narrative, but make different meanings of it. While Kupferberg and Perez & Tobin stress the resilience in Amos' depiction, Spector-Mersel (2014b) and Lieblich view his narrative as a "tragic" one, while Tuval-Mashiach sees the story as both tragic and agentic. Indeed, we don't know what Amos is doing with his intact mind. That part of the story isn't missing—it just hasn't yet been invited.

Some interpreters bring particular questions to the text and look for signs of what is of interest to them but unexplored in the narrative. Working from the frame into the text, Tuval-Mashiach and Spector-Mersel (2014b) wonder about the construction of masculinity and attempt to find Amos's construction of masculinity in the text (although he doesn't speak directly about this). Kupferberg points out that one could also bring questions related to illness narratives to Amos's text, also a possible context for Perez & Tobin. Tuval-Mashiach wonders if this could also be a narrative of aging, thus joining Lieblich's contextualization of this narrative as involving the realm of memory and its loss to time.

One must keep in mind, as Spector-Mersel (2014a) says, that these are readings of a *text*, more specifically a life story text, but they are not analyses of a person. People create narratives for an occasion and these narratives are chosen from among a plethora of narratives that might have been fashioned. The relationship between person and text continues to be a thorny problem within psychology, texts being indicative of some truth about a person, but not fixed or static truths. There will always remain gaps between the meanings of experience (the participant's understanding

of his or her life) and the authority of expertise (the researcher's interpretive analysis of that life). Spector-Mersel (2014a) is to be commended for telling us who the various interpreters are in terms of their social location and their primary interests, for this is yet another important context of interpretation. The meanings we derive from a text are not always already there in the participant, but rather represent interpretations that we hope will illuminate some research question we bring to our study. In this demonstration, we have experts showing us how to do this analysis and reconstruction with intelligence, thoughtfulness, respect, and care. They work in very different ways, all of value and all illuminating, and demonstrate that narrative research can indeed be done with very different lenses and different styles of portraiture.

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### Appendix: Amos's Story\*

1 I was born in Poland. I came at the age of two. I came -- (they)<sup>1</sup>  
 2 **brought** me. We at the first stage, because my **mother's** family  
 3 mainly, were in *Balfur*,<sup>2</sup> so we came to *Balfur* for a few years. After  
 4 that we moved to *Tel Aviv*. In *Tel Aviv* I was...I studied at the *Beit*  
 5 *Chinuch*, the *A. D. Gordon Beit Chinuch*, and after that at *Chadash*<sup>3</sup>  
 6 High School – continuation. And...secondary school. And I was a  
 7 member of the *Machanot Olim*.<sup>4</sup> For a long time. Within **this**  
 8 framework I was sent to the *Palmach*.<sup>5</sup> Because then we had reached  
 9 the point that all *Hachshara*<sup>6</sup> provided a quota for the *Palmach*. It  
 10 was still before (they) had recruited all the *Hachsharas*. And I was in  
 11 the *Palmach*, from the year... '42...no...don't remember, '42. I was  
 12 in...2<sup>nd</sup> Company. After that we moved over to the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion  
 13 [suppressed weeping]. After that in the Negev Brigade. I was...in the  
 14 beginning a squad commander, after that a platoon commander, and  
 15 after that...an officer in the Brigade, and... That's how I drifted  
 16 through the army and I finished as a Lieutenant-Colonel. And...that  
 17 was already within the territorial defense. And in the territorial  
 18 defense I met her. [His wife: *Not like that, you met me in a radio*  
 19 *course. You were an instructor and I was a trainee.*] Okay. And  
 20 when I was released from the army I came to *Gev*. Since then I have  
 21 been at *Gev*. In various roles. Community coordinator, treasurer,  
 22 and...after that I went...to work in the movement. In the UKM.<sup>7</sup> I  
 23 was...in the UKM for six years. Coordinator of the Health  
 24 Committee. I was...and after that back to *Gev*, I worked for a few  
 25 years in agriculture. After that, (they) assigned me -- (they) assigned,  
 26 I took on the task of establishing a factory, and I established the  
 27 factory called "*Gevit*." A paper products factory. And I managed it  
 28 up until I retired, actually. **Half-retired**. I had already wanted to be  
 29 replaced. And it so happened that **today** the factory... When I  
 30 established the factory it was...a bit of a problem in *Gev*. It was a big  
 31 investment, and (they) weren't used to that. And...in the beginning it  
 32 limped along a bit. And then (they) actually began...to run after me.  
 33 Why did you create this white elephant and why that... In the end  
 34 that factory **today**, is the only thing that supports *Gev*. A lot for  
 35 production, a lot... That's it, until...I got a **zbeng**.<sup>8</sup> A stroke. Since  
 36 then I'm bound to the chair and... **The lucky thing** is that...as  
 37 opposed to others, and I say as opposed, because I came out with an  
 38 **intact** mind. It bothers me quite a bit these days. Meaning...the shift  
 39 between **disability** and activity, it creates a problem for me,  
 40 sometimes I...I think that I [suppressed weeping] am healthy today,

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\* Transcription and notes: Spector-Mersel (2014a).

41 in (my) thinking. (I) read books, read the newspaper, read...  
 42 television. So when I think that I'm **healthy**, and I try... **to do**  
 43 accordingly, **physically** – doesn't work. For instance getting out of  
 44 bed, beforehand I got up by myself. Now I don't get up by myself. In  
 45 walking I'm completely limited. And...and...these days I go back  
 46 and forth between thinking that I'm healthy and **the future**, that I'm  
 47 limited. And that's it, it's already...15 years. Essentially sitting in the  
 48 chair. And that's a **long** time. Very long. And along with that I  
 49 have...a Filipino aide. He really does help me a lot. And this is how I  
 50 go through my life. I don't have much more than that now. I  
 51 was...when I was active, I was a member of the political party  
 52 center, the council. I was...pretty active in the UKM, I was in a  
 53 position, I was a **working** man – in agriculture, I was in the  
 54 community, community coordinator, I was treasurer. That's my life.  
 55 Always in public affairs. Until I got sick. I got sick, so it took me out  
 56 of the...frame. I stopped going to the (kibbutz communal) dining  
 57 room – now there isn't a dining room anymore. (I) don't listen to the  
 58 (kibbutz assembly) meetings, no activity. I was limited, mostly the  
 59 walking limited me. And...that's that. About myself. What else do  
 60 you want to hear? Interesting?

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**TRANSCRIPTION NOTES:**

“-” signifies a break in the discourse and shift in tone, as if the teller is correcting himself

“-” signifies a break in the discourse, generally continuing in the same tone but without a pause that would warrant a comma

**Boldface** signifies stronger emphasis in pitch

<sup>1</sup> In colloquial Hebrew, the third-person masculine plural verb form (“they sent me”) is commonly used to send a passive message that defocuses the agent; either because it is unknown or irrelevant, or contrarily, obvious and primary. When “they” (or any other pronoun) is in parentheses, it signifies that the pronoun itself is not used with the related verb.

<sup>2</sup> A cooperative Zionist settlement established in the 1920s.

<sup>3</sup> Both are well-known schools identified with the Zionist settlement.

<sup>4</sup> A Zionist youth movement.

<sup>5</sup> Literally, the acronym for “strike force,” the *Palmach* was the elite fighting force of the *Haganah*, the underground army of the pre-state Jewish settlement under the British Mandate in Palestine.

<sup>6</sup> Under the British Mandate in Palestine, youth group movements that were mobilized toward agricultural settlement would go out to kibbutzim for a training period.

<sup>7</sup> Abbreviation for *United Kibbutzim Movement*, the umbrella organization of all the kibbutzim.

<sup>8</sup> Yiddish for “a bang.”