

Editorial

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Our recent special issue on the methodology of narration celebrated the first thirty years of *Narrative Inquiry*. One of our strengths from the beginning of the journal is its interdisciplinary representation. However, a few issues have also emerged of which we aim to address three matters here – which can all (to greater or lesser extents) be linked to the interdisciplinary orientation of the journal – and we then end this editorial with an answer to a somewhat practical question as an afterthought.

The first issue concerns the definition of narrative itself. In our view, *not all discourse is narrative*. In fact, overuse of the term narrative – lumping it in with other discourse genres such as argumentation and explanation – dilutes its meaning, as Reisigl (2020) points out, with the peril of the label ‘narrative’ becoming meaningless one day (Van De Mieroop, 2021). In this respect, we believe it is important to point to the many minimal definitions of narrative. Labov (1972, p.359–360) defined narrative as “one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred...A *minimal narrative* [i]s a sequence of two clauses which are *temporally ordered*.” In the first issue of the journal (then known as *Journal of Narrative and Life History*) McCabe (1991) offered a working definition of narrative that involved recounts of real or pretend memories of something that happened and therefore are often (but not always) in the past tense. McCabe noted that narratives often (but not always) contain a chronological sequence of events and that they are often (but not always) a kind of language. Self-evidently, we realize that in the three decades that the journal has now existed, not only life, but also language use has changed a lot. Especially with the rise of new media for communication – most notably, the online media – language users have made extensive and creative use of the many novel affordances of these media to craft and negotiate their narratives. Moreover, as narrative has increasingly gained attention from various academic disciplines, more and more researchers have an interest in working with narrative. Yet, we ask all authors to ask themselves whether they are dealing with discourse that meets one of the definitions described above. If the discourse does not meet this requirement, then authors

should consider either whether their article would not be better placed in another journal, or, alternatively, why they believe the article deals with narrative anyway. In the latter case, they should address this issue explicitly in their article and discuss why they feel their data is narrative or their analysis is specifically valuable for narrative analysis. In this case, we also ask authors to add these arguments to their letter to the editors. In this way, we can be open to all kinds of narratives, including novel forms that may emerge in the future, while at the same time guarding the scope of the journal as focused on 'narrative', rather than any form of discourse.

The second issue pertains to the journal's focus on narratives that tend to occur in real life, rather than on literary fiction. While it is hard to name a 'prototypical example' of such a 'real life narrative', it tends to be strongly related to how people use language to tell stories. These stories typically range from narratives emerging in mundane, everyday situations in real life as well as online environments to narratives elicited through research interviews or experimental designs. Yet, even this range does not cover all possibilities of data used in articles that are within the scope of the journal and this is of course related to the fact that what *is* and *is not* within the journal's scope depends heavily on the main research aims of the article. These, self-evidently, need to be narrative oriented. Again, this is a very broad indication of what is expected, but in general, researchers who aim to publish an article in *Narrative Inquiry* should be primarily geared to issues of narrative per se, rather than, say, the use of tenses in a literary narrative (appropriate to a linguistics journal) or what can be learnt about the author of a particular work of fiction (appropriate for a literary journal). This implies that studies on non-prototypical narratives, that nevertheless have a very narrative-oriented goal, may be considered to be within the scope of this journal, while studies on prototypical narratives for *Narrative Inquiry* – if such narratives exist at all – may be considered outside the scope of the journal, for instance when they have a solely topical focus in their research questions. The latter can roughly be paraphrased as aimed at learning something from the content of the narratives (the '*what*'), rather than from *how* stories are being narrated. Overall, this may still seem a bit vague, but in this respect, we refer to Justice Potter Stewart who said of obscenity that he knew it when he saw it. We would say similarly: it is easier to spot an article on fictional narrative that will appeal to readers of *Narrative Inquiry* – for example because it deals with an issue that is of relevance to all sorts of narratives – than it is to try to provide an airtight definition of the types of narratives and the kinds of research aims that fall within the scope of the journal.

A third issue deriving from interdisciplinary narrative work pertains to methodology. Sometimes, issues arise in relation to whether or not researchers should have estimated reliability for coding their narratives and what the impli-

cations are when they have not done so. The answer to this is that it all depends on the methodology researchers are using. If they are engaging in quantitative analyses of narratives, then reliability is essential. If they are offering a qualitative analysis, then reliability estimation is not necessary. In this respect, authors are encouraged to explicitly name their methodology of choice in their abstract and to further account for the implications of using a certain approach in a relevant section (e.g., 'method') in their article. As editors, we primarily rely upon reviewers who are pros in the methodologies of the articles they evaluate. In this way, we ensure that the journal covers a wide range of methods and approaches that should be able to make it through the reviewing process if the implementation of these methods meets the high academic standards necessary for a journal like *Narrative Inquiry*. Thus by not applying hard and fast requirements in terms of methodology, the journal will continue to illustrate the variety of approaches to a phenomenon as interesting as narrative and we believe that showing this plethora of perspectives is one of the main assets of the journal.

Finally, as a bit of an afterthought, we would like to answer a question we are often asked – one that is *not* related to interdisciplinary work – namely, how long an article should be. We are happy to say that regarding this matter there *is* a hard and fast rule, namely that the optimal length of a journal article that is submitted to *Narrative Inquiry* is 6000–8000 words. There is some leniency in this respect as well, especially when there are good reasons to send in a slightly lengthier article. An example of such a reason is when authors make use of data in a language other than English. If they not only show data excerpts, but also extensively discuss and analyze these in their article, then it tends to be crucial to also show the original language next to the English translation, which will of course have an understandable impact on the word count. In general, we believe that the proposed 6000–8000 word length for *Narrative Inquiry*-articles upon submission, which is quite similar to that of other journals, is sufficient to enable authors to present a coherently structured article that revolves around answering one or two central research questions in a sound enough way that it will convince the journal's readership, which we believe is what journals in general – and *Narrative Inquiry* in particular – are all about.

References

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