The Scope and Autonomy of Personal Narrative

Chris Ingraham[1]

Abstract
The work of Carol Berkenkotter and others who have expanded the realm of personal narrative studies over the past several decades would not have been possible without the pioneering efforts of those who first brought the study of narrative to nonliterary discourses. By revisiting what personal narratives were to these pioneers—working outward from William Labov in particular—this article considers how the early expansion of the field helps us to understand the far wider expansion of multimodal personal narrative today. In doing so, I suggest that understanding the notion of a personal narrative requires a twofold commitment to inquiry: first, about what makes it *narrative*; and second, about what makes it *personal*. These commitments hinge on two crucial junctures, what I call the problem of scope and the problem of autonomy. Framed as questions, the former asks, When does a narrative begin and end? The latter asks, Whose narrative is it? This recuperative essay shows that the heuristics of scope and autonomy can be useful ways to think about the ongoing complexities of personal narrative and its analysis.

Keywords
Labov, Berkenkotter, nonliterary, genre, stories, review essay

[1]North Carolina State University, Department of Communication, Raleigh, NC, USA

Corresponding Author:
Chris Ingraham, North Carolina State University, Department of Communication, Campus Box 8104, Winston Hall 220, NCSU Campus, Raleigh, NC 27695-810, USA.
Email: cingrah@ncsu.edu

Near the outset of *Patient Tales*, Carol Berkenkotter (2008) mentions in passing that "a few pioneers had begun to study narrative in nonliterary discourses and texts in the late 1960s and 1970s" (p. 6). It's the kind of ground-covering sentence common to literature reviews and historical contextualizing, and frankly of low consequence to the efflorescence of the remaining book. Yet it implies a key subtext through which Berkenkotter's project can be understood: Without the help of these pioneers, her own work would not have been possible. In light of Berkenkotter's many successes in multimodal genre and narrative studies, this article suggests that it may be worth revisiting those "pioneers" who, by first extending the study of narrative beyond the purview of merely the literary, made possible her own career of extending narrative studies even further. For it is clearly one of Berkenkotter's legacies to have shown how the study of narrative, and *personal* narrative particularly, can be productively applied to historical research in "obscure" genres and such associated professional realms as psychiatry and medicine.

If paying reverence to the pioneers who first opened the field was Berkenkotter's intention in *Patient Tales*, however, that is never borne out on the page. Of the two pioneers she cites—Labov and White—only White gets mentioned in that context again, albeit briefly, and readers are left to speculate (if they bother at all) about any more explicit connections between their groundbreaking work and Berkenkotter's own. This essay undertakes such speculation. Specifically, it endeavors a more lateral study of *personal narrative* and its expansion outside literary realms than what Berkenkotter, despite emphasizing the importance of such expansion, ever endeavors to make. In doing so, I argue that Labov's groundbreaking work in that subject, though hardly anything new, deserves renewed attention. The trail blazed by any pioneer may lead in unknown directions at the time of its blazing, yet retrospect allows us to see how that pioneering trail established a trajectory that research has followed, explicitly or not, ever since. My aim, then, is less to articulate key insights of Labov's work with Berkenkotter's own, than it is to revisit how Labov, and some others he has more expressly influenced, have cleared a way for personal narrative research today.

Why Study Personal Narrative?

One reason personal narrative is such an important aspect of written communication can be explained with a truism. People tell stories.[1] And not just novelists or screenwriters: We all tell them. At the dinner table, on the phone, in the classroom, at the gym. In everyday talk—and in writing—we tell stories that relate the quotidian events of our day, funny happenstances, major and minor scenes from our past. In short, all the ordinary and extraordinary

moments of our lives are eligible for expression through the vernacular sharing of personal narratives. This penchant and ability to tell our personal stories apparently begins in childhood, between the ages of 2 and 6, and stays with us throughout our lives (Cohler, 1982). Indeed, narrative is so ubiquitous and permanent in human interaction that scholars tend to heap value upon it like a bed piled with coats at a party. Damasio (1999), a neuroscientist, writes that "consciousness begins when brains acquire the power, the simple power I must add, of telling a story" (p. 10). The philosopher Ricoeur (1984) has suggested that no human practice other than storytelling better conveys how and why people have motivated intention to fulfill their desires and accomplish their goals. We are *storied selves*. From Fisher (1984), who has seen narrative as a grand paradigm of human communication, to Daiute and Lightfoot (2004), who have seen narrative discourse as that which organizes our lives, narrative is now thought to hold a central place in what it means to be human. As Johnstone (2001) explained, "The essence of humanness, long characterized as the tendency to make sense of the world through rationality, has come increasingly to be described as the tendency to tell stories, to make sense of the world through narrative" (p. 635). The personal narratives that people communicate about their own lives play an especially vital role in this sense making, and accordingly offer a subject of inquiry likely to illuminate how people express and navigate the subjective yet social experience of being alive.

For decades, however, academic interest in narrative was mostly the province of literary scholars. But studying only so-called literary stories written by artists using poetic license neglects the far greater incidence of personal and, often, mundane stories told by common folk in a vernacular voice. Studying *their* stories offers scholars the chance to give voice to an otherwise invisible group (Langellier, 1989). Historically, in fact, the personal timbre in the stories of ordinary people was one factor explaining the emergence of a research interest in narrative by fields throughout the social sciences. In the 1960s, when academics began challenging positivist thought and modernist master narratives, they took up smaller, local narratives as an alternative vehicle for understanding. At least in America, the burgeoning popularity of memoirs in literary popular culture, the politics of emancipation and self-expression among disempowered communities (people of color, women, etc.), and an increasingly therapeutic culture's tendency to encourage personal self-exploration all contributed to the "narrative turn" in the social sciences (Riessman, 2002). Langellier (2001) explained, "Embedded in the lives of the ordinary, the marginalized, and the muted, personal narrative responds to the disintegration of master narratives as people make sense of experience, claim identities, and 'get a life' by telling and writing their stories" (p. 700).

Where an interest exists to be more inclusive and accepting of difference, personal narratives offer a viable way to do so.

While the classroom is one place where personal narrative can play an important role to this end, particularly given what Peterson (1991) has called "the hegemony of the autobiographical essay in the college writing course" (p. 170), the importance of personal narrative goes well beyond the pedagogical aspects of composition studies—as it was one of Berkenkotter's major contributions to have shown. The thrall of personal narratives—what they are, why they're so prevalent in our world, what function they serve and for whom—has enticed the likes of literary scholars, linguists, sociologists, anthropologists, narratologists, semioticians, psychologists, neurologists, folklorists, rhetoricians, communication scholars, and others for decades. As a result, the very idea of "personal narrative" has today become attenuated. Different scholars use different operational and normative definitions, and such near-synonyms as "life story," "life history," "autobiography," "autoethnography," or "personal experience story" are used alongside "personal narrative" to such an extent that anymore it's difficult to say what a personal narrative is or is not. Inspired by an interest in Berkenkotter's extension of personal narrative and genre studies well beyond the English classroom, my aim is to synthesize some of the pioneering approaches to personal narrative across fields as a way ultimately to enrich how scholars of written communication might theorize personal narrative in their own increasingly diverse work.

Two questions thus guide what's to come. First, when we identify speech or writing as a personal narrative, what discursive features and scope distinguish it? Answering this question will draw us closer to a definition of the concept. Second, how do different definitions of personal narrative delimit what we are able to conclude about a personal narrative's role in identity work and sense making? Answering this question will help to formulate the theoretical framework motivating one's research, and begin to highlight the advantages and shortcomings of personal narrative analysis, broadly construed.

Structural Narratology and Labov's Sociolinguistics

In her 1989 literature review of personal narrative theory and research—still a standout among what few such reviews exist—Langellier argued that five theoretical positions offer distinct approaches to personal narrative: "personal narrative as story-text; personal narrative as storytelling performance; personal narrative as conversational interaction; personal narrative as social process; and personal narrative as political praxis" (p. 244). In the 25-plus years since her assessment, these five positions remain trenchant and in use by

scholars of different stripes. Rather than examine the theoretical and disciplinary allegiances that inform these positions toward personal narrative, however, in order to approach my two questions, I locate two junctures of division within the literature that mark important differences in what we take personal narrative to be and do. I call these the problem of *scope* and the problem of *autonomy*. How people side in these two junctures can tell us what a personal narrative is to them, and thus which assumptions underscore their use of the concept in their teaching, writing, or analytic research. In other words, I am less concerned here to arrive at different definitions of, or approaches to, personal narrative, than to isolate those factors that the literature bears out as most important for shaping the concept and its implications.

Before exploring the heuristic of scope and autonomy, in order to understand the distinctive features that mark personal narrative, it will be useful to think about narrative in general. One of the most important precedents for doing so comes from structuralist narratology. Structural narratologists study how stories hold together internally: with what structure, what patterns, what consistency. They share an interest in narrative texts as isolated artifacts, distinct from authorial intention or the circumstances that lead to a text's production. Such work yields insight into narrative's unique structural characteristics, as well as distinctive structural features that differentiate between narratives of varying genres or types. As we'll later see, it also has some limitations. But attempts to understand the structure of narrative first reached the West around midcentury, when Propp's important 1928 work, *Morphology of the Folktale*, was finally translated into English. For Propp, folktales shared a common "morphology"—a syntagmatic structure in which characters play the same functional roles and perform the same sequence of actions, merely in different iterations from tale to tale. Roughly: a character and situation are introduced; some prohibitive rule comes to restrict the hero or heroine; the rule gets broken, a villain enters the scene, and a negative consequence results. On and on. Propp's importance was thus in showing that this structural pattern is a universal feature of folktales and, by implication, suggesting that narratives *qua* narratives have a formal syntax, a kind of deep structural pattern that can help both distinguish narratives from other kinds of talk or writing, and distinguish between narratives of different types.

Propp was hardly alone among the influential structural narratologists. American linguist Chomsky's (1957) work on transformational grammar helped to suggest that language itself, across cultures, is structured by both deep and superficial common grammatical principles. The French anthropologist Lévi-Strauss (1955) also made important contributions to conceptualizing the structure of narratives. In particular, Lévi-Strauss considered narrative myths around the world and found that forms of human thought and the stories

we tell may vary superficially from culture to culture or region to region, but by and large a finite number of fundamental themes characterize all human thought and narrative. Canadian literary critic Frye (1957) argued that all plot-lines of all stories fall within four categories: comedy, tragedy, romance, and satire. Genette (1979) isolated structural features of narrative mood, instance, levels, and time in his methodology for interpreting literary narrative. Todorov (1975) described the structural characteristics of "la littérature fantastique" as a particular narrative genre invested in the relationship between the supernatural and reality. Barthes (1975), meanwhile, showed in "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative" that a deductive approach to narrative structure yields a linguistically valid model of the "countless forms of . . . international, transhistorical, transcultural" narrative in the world (p. 237). Synthesizing all this work, Polkinghorne (1987) suggested that the literary study of narrative today owes its possibility and shape to these and others whose contribution to narratology emerged from the regionally specific traditions of Russian formalism, North American new criticism, French structuralism, and German hermeneutics.

But the implications of narrative when conceived as a structured type of spoken or written communication soon spread beyond the interest of literary theorists and critics. Indeed, as I suggested at the outset of this article, Carol Berkenkotter seems to treat such an expansion of narrative studies as foundational for the very possibility of her work. As we've seen, she intimated as much in the opening of *Patient Tales* (2008, p. 6) when laying out that book's project; but she did so in a more recent (though related) article as well (Berkenkotter, 2011). There she wrote, "A number of factors seem to have converged to produce a climate of intellectual cross-pollination by the 1980s, although sociolinguists, such as Labov, had begun to study narrative in non-literary discourses and texts in the late 1960s and 1970s" (p. 3). So, yet again, there's Labov. Yet again, there's no elaboration. This isn't a fault, of course. She's engaged in a different argument, and her review of the literature on personal narrative is more interested in breadth than its origin (see Berkenkotter, 2010, pp. 3-5). While attending to sentences of such minor, almost tangential importance to her larger mission may then seem like a fool's errand—or at least a rather fastidious, academic one—I think doing so might teach us something. The reason is that, if Labov was at the forefront of the "intellectual cross-pollination" in narrative studies, and if such cross-pollination has been of such importance for Berkenkotter's work, as by all appearances it has, then inquiring about the lingering residues of Labov's early contribution to personal narrative might also disclose some secondary implications about the work of Berkenkotter and others who have thrived in this cross-pollinated intellectual environment.

Unquestionably, anyway, the major works of William Labov (Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Labov, 1972) signaled a landmark shift in how narratives were understood in the social sciences. Influenced by Propp's morphological or syntagmatic approach to the elements of a narrative's plot, Labov goes more micro still: considering individual clauses as part of narrative's intrinsic structure. It's this move further inside the sentence-level syntax of narrative structure that makes possible the work of those (communication scholars, for instance) who employ various methodologies to consider narratives as vital texts in the study of identity and sense making. Labov merits considerable attention not just because his work forms the basis for many contemporary definitions of narrative as a genre of spoken discourse, but because his theories can improve the understanding of personal narrative as a genre of written discourse as well. It's because of Labov, for instance, that those who buy into his program can, with more or less reliable consistency, identify narratives from their nonnarrative counterparts in speech or text—a useful tool for helping to think more reflectively about different kinds of writing and what broader implications they can have. Moreover, Labov's work has special relevance here because it emphasized *personal experience narratives* (PENs) in particular. (Berkenkotter [2010], for her part, and in another subtle gesture toward Labov's influence, calls them "narratives of personal experience.") If narrative, and different types of narrative, can be distinguished by their internal structures, as the narratologists claimed, then Labov's work in the context of PENs suggests that narratives about *personal experience* are either different from other kinds of narratives in fundamentally structural ways, or, that their personal quality is not the difference that makes them different. Recognizing the distinction is one way to scrutinize the assumptions we make when considering writing marked by either its personal or narrative features.

Labov's work began with research about how people in New York City and Martha's Vineyard display variation in speech across sociolinguistic demographics. He was especially interested in eliciting unselfconscious speech in order to approximate authentic and indigenous vernacular talk. To do so, he asked people to tell stories about themselves. As guidance, he suggested they tell tales of their most embarrassing or dangerous experiences, sometimes in face-to-face interviews with an out-group interviewer, other times in conversation with only in-group peers. In "Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of Personal Experience," Labov and Waletzky (1967) formalize their approach to PENs using as data 14 of these nearly 600 narratives. They describe their analysis as *functional*:

> Narrative will be considered as one verbal technique for recapitulating experience – in particular, a technique of constructing narrative units that

> match the *temporal sequence* of that experience. Furthermore, we find that narrative that serves this function alone is abnormal: it may be considered empty or pointless narrative. Normally, narrative serves an additional function of personal interest, determined by a stimulus in the social context in which the narrative occurs. (p. 13)

Their work then suggests that PENs both communicate personal experience about one's past and offer reasons why that personal experience is important now.

Accordingly, Labov and Waletzky suggest that clauses in such narratives either serve a referential or evaluative function. Referential clauses concern a narrative's content: what it's *about*, as manifest in its events, characters, settings, and so forth. Evaluative clauses express a story's *point*: why it's being told and why it's worth hearing. This twofold nature of PENs highlights their communicational function, whereby such narratives not only relate some personal experience from the teller's past; they do so in a way that creates the relational connection necessary for an audience to understand the narrative thereof and its importance at the time of its telling. The implication of this insight suggests that PENs have an embedded structure: the first-order narrative comprised of referential clauses about a past experience, and the second-order narrative comprised of evaluative clauses designed to maintain listeners' interest in the first-order narrative. Such embedment has led Polanyi (1989) to give different names to the two types of "narrative" so not to confuse them. For Polanyi and those who have taken her lead (e.g., Johnstone, 2001), "narrative" thus describes the expression of one's personal experience from the past, and "story" means more or less a narrative with a point.

Perhaps the most influential feature of Labov's work is its contention that the necessary and sufficient condition for labeling a segment of language "narrative" is that it include two temporally ordered clauses. These narrative clauses cannot be rearranged without altering the chronology of a narrative's events and, by extension, that narrative's meaning. For example, "The teacher wept / and I gave her my homework" is a decidedly different sequence of events, with different implications, than the two clauses reversed: "I gave the teacher my homework / and she wept." But a personal experience narrative with only two temporally ordered narrative clauses makes for a "minimal" narrative, at best. A "fully formed" narrative contains more, and more complex, components. These include an (a) abstract, (b) orientation, (c) complicating action, (d) evaluation, (e) result or resolution, and (f) a coda. Each component plays a particular part in forming the semantic structure of personal experience narratives in their fullest state.

In Labov's model, the *abstract* prepares the audience for the narrative ahead by summarizing the story and its overall point. A clause or two suffices for this purpose. The *orientation* situates the audience toward the narrative by introducing the narrative's characters and settings—both temporal and physical. The orientation often occurs at the outset of a narrative, but sometimes appears or recurs at later points as well. Once the scene's been set, the *complicating action* consists of temporally sequenced clauses that bring a series of events toward a climax, the narrative's greatest point of suspense. With this accomplished, the *evaluation* comes next in clauses that explain for the audience why this story is important, and what its message is. The *result or resolution* follows when the teller resolves the tension of the climax and tells what happened in the end. Commonly, this ending comes with a further *coda*: a few clauses that indicate clearly the narrative is finished, and potentially bridge the temporal gap from the past events the narrative relayed back to the present moment.

Although Labov derived this PEN model from observation of speech, its six components might also deepen our understanding of personal experience narratives as they are written. The problems with his model, in any case, have less to do with differences between spoken and written communication (ample as they are), than they do with the shortcomings of his structural approach. Sometimes, for instance, his six components blur together, with certain clauses doing double duty: say, serving both as abstracts and orientations. Arguably, too, language is *always* doing evaluation, which obfuscates the relationship between, for starters, referential and evaluative clauses, and in turn, between the narrative and its point. What's more, although his work specifically concerns personal experience narratives—which, after all, are only one *type* of narrative—the structural components he lays out are often mistaken for a universal or normative definition of narratives per se. Treating his structural features accordingly reveals them to be a failed definition, at least by structural standards, because types of narrative exist that don't fulfill his conditions (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001). It's here we return to the two junctures of division that I suggested at this section's outset are crucial markers of how we understand personal narrative. Only refracted through Labov are they quite as revealing of the problems and differences subsequent scholars have found with the concept. I now consider each juncture in turn.

The Problem of Scope

Despite their influence, structural approaches aren't the only way to understand narrative. Work on *personal* narrative in particular has shown a penchant for moving beyond the strict confines of structural definitions that

would characterize narrative as stretches of certain kinds of language. Labov's focus on brief, spoken stories with limited topics, characters, a setting, and a plot has, for some scholars, been extended to include longer topical episodes and greater breadth of experiences than those contained in Labov's "danger of death" questions (Bamberg, 1997; Riessman, 1990). Going further, some scholars treat personal narrative not as isolated stories told in a particular context but as someone's "life story" developed over the course of years. Linde (1993) extends Labov to conceive of a life story as *all* the narratives told by an individual over a lifetime in order to maintain and create coherence between those narratives. As a discourse unit, the life story is therefore temporally discontinuous, but the stories contained therein "have as their primary evaluation a point about the speaker, not a general point about the way the world is" (Linde, 1993, p. 21).

A range of literature reviews attest that life story approaches are popular among sociologists (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984), psychologists (McAdams, 2008), and anthropologists, who often call them "life histories" (Peacock & Holland, 1993). Atkinson (1998) has written a compelling, book-length review of life story interviews as a multidisciplinary way to collect stories from all kinds of people. Atkinson notes that "typically, a life story narrative includes the aspects of our life and experience that we want to pass on about ourselves to others, the parts that we have come to understand and see as the essence of our whole experience" (p. 7). Interviews can elicit such stories from those interested in sharing them, but the process of doing so must itself be recognized as an extended discursive unit in which personal narrative both emerges and evolves through interaction. This interactive nature of interviews suggests that the "personal" quality of personal narratives has porous borders.

A number of studies bear this out. Mishler (1999), for example, has researched how individual identities among a group of artist-craftspersons emerged and developed over the course of extended interviews. Riessman has taken a similar approach in her divorce interviews (1989), illness interviews (1990), and work on stigma in South India (2000). As these examples indicate, extended notions of personal narrative as gradually emergent through the interview process end up approaching narrative as thematically coherent. That is to say, the questions and parameters of the interview have a tendency to channel even personal narratives along particular themes, often those motivated by the researcher's or interviewer's interests. When identity is an especially salient such interest (or more specifically, the constitution of one's identity through a personal narrative), then a thematic approach to narrative organizes identity around those common themes expressed over the course of extended interactions. The result is to understand personal narrative not through the way narratives are told, or even through what they *mean*, but

as expressions of important themes in an individual's personal identity and sense making. Journalists, doctors, or ethnographic researchers may certainly influence these narrative themes, but concluding that someone told a story about X because an interviewer asked about X is not as straightforward as it seems.

Moreover, not all talk in interviews is narrative; and not all sentences in a written text are either. Other parts include demographic information, statements of fact, lists, and so forth. Readers or interviewers thus face the interpretive challenge of determining where the parts of writing or talk we'd label personal narrative actually start and stop (Riessman, 2002). While "entrance" and "exit" cues in talk can help signal this distinction (Georgakopoulou, 2010; Jefferson, 1978), if written personal narrative emerges and develops throughout an extended exchange (through a series of different medical interviews in a clinical setting, for instance, or through the submission of peer reviewed drafts in a composition class), then the complicity of a coproducer in that narrative presents us with the further challenge of distinguishing one person's personal narrative from another's.

This is one area where Berkenkotter's work excels—and where some of her subtle indebtedness to Labov can be located. Time and again, Berkenkotter (2008, 2010, 2011; Bresch & Berkenkotter, 2012) has shown that "case histories" are complex illustrations of how influence operates in interview-like settings. The case histories Berkenkotter has studied are interview-like in that they partially involve physicians or psychiatrists eliciting and/or summarizing narratives from their patients, who may well have self-motivated interests in casting their personal narrative in a particular light, though as these narratives are rendered into "histories" they are written from a clinical and supposedly disinterested perspective. The adroitness with which Berkenkotter offers complex micro-level analysis of these narratives—assessing, for instance, how they are structured by a unique grammar and lexicon—bears traces of Labov's own gifts at such analysis. At the same time, though, Berkenkotter extends the micro-level insights inherited indirectly from Labov to the more porous and macro-level analysis that Labov's influential early work went on to inspire.

What results, certainly in *Patient Tales*, is a version of personal narrative marked, as Keränen (2010) puts it, by "the near elision of patient voices as their stories are transformed into the requirements of a shifting genre" (p. 504). It's this toggling toward genre that represents the complexity and power of Berkenkotter's take on narrative: namely, its recognition of the mutually constitutive and evolving relationship between the people invariably at its heart, and the larger macro-level factors that muddle its connection to the unique particularity of any single person. Among these macro-factors are competing

rationalities (narrative, scientific), disciplinary strictures (professional norms, legal regulations), material conditions (asylums, technologies), and sociohistorical winds (shifting attitudes toward the insane, for instance) that create highly localized genres and the types of narrative employed therein. In a sense, then, it is true both that "bottom-up" manifestations of the personal can structure the scope of narrative genres and that the "top-down" scope of narrative genres can structure manifestations of the personal.

In this light, thinking about *scope* has revealed that personal narrative is a bit like the chairs Goldilocks finds in a cabin in the woods. "This one is too small," say some scholars. "This one is too big," say others. Such an impression, at least, can be gleaned from a survey of the literature, from Labov's (1967) minimal two-clause PENs, to the longer life stories of Linde's (1993) hunt for coherence, or the middle ground of personal narratives emergent thematically through extended interviews. Yet, insofar as Berkenkotter deftly toggles between the micro- and macro-analyses (the chair that's too small and the chair that's too big) reading her work backward through Labov and others helps us to see that all these accounts share certain assumptions. First, that stories have a point, that part of what the teller/author does is to evaluate for listeners what that point happens to be. Second, that narration requires ordering and sequence: arranging actions and events in a consequential but otherwise not clearly ordered way in order to give them personal meaning. Finally, that personal narratives, in order to be *personal*, impart some sense of the teller's sense making about his or her own lived experience. If we read in Berkenkotter's work a tacit agreement with these assumptions, then one inference that follows is that "the problem of scope" I have been addressing may not be as problematic as it seems. As Berkenkotter shows, there is no normative or one-size-fits-all narrative because all (written) narratives are context or genre-bound.[2] They are structured by professional and genre conventions that have their own historical evolution and multiplicity. Concomitantly, though, the autonomy of the personal is structured by a complex host of factors all its own—which brings us to the problem of autonomy.

The Problem of Autonomy

The example of Goldilocks tells us more than at first it seemed. While we could clearly characterize the story of Goldilocks as a narrative, we would not want to claim it is a *personal* narrative. We have been working toward understanding the difference. What I call autonomy is the next juncture of division that may bring us closer to such understanding. My sense of autonomy concerns a problem best described as rhetorical. When we tell our

stories, whether out loud or in print, we do so for an audience (even if that audience is only ourselves). Although structural narratology and sociolinguistics teach us a good deal about narrative, it is the rhetorical tradition that best recognizes the context-bound, situational nature of narrative's constitutive addressivity—and it is in the broad study of rhetoric where Berkenkotter's work has perhaps had its greatest impact.

There is, of course, a robust literature within the study of rhetoric on both the speech communication and English composition sides of the field that has noted the intrinsically rhetorical quality of all narratives. This literature is broad and variegated, though it owes much to the work of Booth (1961), who saw in literary fiction that its narratives were fundamentally—and not just incidentally or occasionally—rhetorical. By identifying that all stories have different types or levels of narrator (implied, flesh and blood, reliable and not), Booth foregrounded the rhetorical relationship between these various narrators and their audiences, developing a formalist critical technique that can be understood as a kind of rhetorical criticism-*cum*-narrative analysis. From such a standpoint, the classical *pisteis* of ethos, pathos, and logos become central to any narrative's effectiveness. Questions about how sympathetic or credible narrators or authors might be, about the emotional strings they might pluck in the audience, or about the arguments tacit and explicit in their narratives make the autonomy of any narrative impossible to separate from its relationship to an audience.

Booth's influence on thinkers from Genette (1979) to Phelan (1996) and others has been impactful,[3] though there are of course many others to have connected narrative and rhetoric in profound ways. Among the most prominent is Walter Fisher (1984), whose narrative paradigm suggests not just that all narratives are rhetorical, but that the reverse is also true: Rhetoric operates through narrative. Humans are "*homo narrans*" (p. 6). When we consider that Fisher was influenced by Burke's (1941) dramatistic pentad, which does its own work according narrative an important place in human motive and symbolic action—though not as wholeheartedly, given Burke's *homo symbolicus* (1966)—we can see how easily the relationship between rhetoric and narrative spirals into far-reaching territories.

Nevertheless, the multifarious connections between rhetorical theory and personal narrative share in suggesting, at a minimum, that inasmuch as narrative exhibits inherently rhetorical qualities, we may change or modify the stories we tell in appeals to achieve the desired effect upon that audience. Along these lines, Bamberg and McCabe (1998) show that personal narratives can serve a variety of these rhetorical purposes: to remind, to persuade, to engage, to entertain—all for an audience. To the extent that narratives are directed toward an audience (real or hypothetical, known or merely

imaginable), the audience can be thought to play an influential role in how a personal narrative arises, how it proceeds, how it ends, and with what point or purpose. That is to say, while the "personal narrative" must owe some allegiance to its adjectival epithet in order to deserve the name, such narratives are not unambiguously "personal." They're also co-constructed through interaction and performance—a point made famously by Bakhtin (1973) in his theory of dialogism, which maintains that language is always both individualized and social; it is concretely formed by the writer *and* formed socially beyond any individual control. "The organizing center of any utterance, of any experience," he writes, "is not within but outside—in the social milieu surrounding the individual being" (Bakhtin, 1973, p. 93).[4] The problem of *autonomy* thus concerns the porous parameters of an "individual being" when expressed through narratives having variable intentions and affects depending upon the audience to whom they're addressed.

The interactional and performative aspect of narrative can perhaps be made clearer in light of work that Riessman (2005) has done describing four types of personal narrative analysis. She describes these types as *thematic* (concerned with "what" the narrative is about), *structural* (concerned with "how" a narrative is expressed), *interactional* (concerned with narrative as a dialogical "co-construction"), and *performative* (concerned with how a teller/ writer "does" a narrative "for" an audience). As I conceive it, the problem of scope is the divisive hinge in the former two types of analysis, and the problem of autonomy separates them from the latter. Increasingly, scholars are leaving Labov behind and assuming that personal narrative is co-constructed interactionally (see, e.g., Beck, 1994; Bell, 1999; Georgakopoulou, 2006a, 2006b, 2008; Helsig, 2010; Hsieh, 2004; Norrick, 2000; Ochs & Capps, 2001). Often called "positioning theory," this work considers an individual subject's capacity to position his or her subjectivity within or against the dominant discourses and master narratives in which his or her personal narrative occurs. It might be important, for instance, for someone to identify openly as gay precisely to position this identity in relief against the heteronormative social context that constrains what it's like to be a homosexual. Using Riessman's (2005) heuristic, if the problem of scope accounts for thematic and structural approaches to personal narrative analysis, the problem of autonomy accounts for interactional and performative approaches.

Bamberg (1997) represents this fundamental divide in an article titled "Positioning Between Structure and Performance." Again, Labov offers a starting point, as Bamberg suggests that Labov and Waletzky's work implies that narratives of personal experience can be understood on either side of the divide. On the structural side, such narratives "are representations of something that once happened and what this past happening meant (or 'now' means)

to the narrator" (Bamberg, 1997, p. 335). On the performative side, the act of telling or representing "at a particular occasion in the form of a particular story" intervenes "between the actual experience and the story" (p. 335). Bamberg explains, "Whereas the first takes its starting point from what was said (and the way it was said) and works toward why it was said, that is, its meaning, the second focuses more strongly on how it was performed as the main index for what the narrative as an act of instantiation means to the performer" (p. 335). Bamberg and other positioning theorists side more with the latter. Both approaches, however, emphasize that a narrative's meaning is determined by the person expressing it. How that meaning is determined, and why, remains in dispute. With autonomy as a key juncture of difference, the context of a narrative's telling (for researchers, questions about how data are obtained; for composition teachers, questions about the limitations of any given assignment or prompt) emerges as an important factor determining which approach to narrative makes the most sense.

As such, even Labov (1997) has revisited his earlier work and conceded that the PENs he studied were

> told in the course of a sociolinguistic interview, where the interviewer formed an ideal audience: attentive, interested, and responsive . . . they were essentially monologues . . . [and] exhibit a generality that is not to be expected from narratives that subserve an argumentative point in a highly interactive and competitive conversation. Such narratives are often highly fragmented and may require a different approach. (p. 397)

In light of such problems and the need for "a different approach" to deal with them, the "personal" in personal narrative begins to look less autonomous than thematic or structural interpretations seem to imply. In turn, messier rhetorical, interactional, and performance models become more viable because they implicitly acknowledge that "what stories can be about is, to a very significant extent, culturally constrained . . . [stories] can have as their point only culturally salient material generally agreed upon by members of the producer's culture to be self-evidently important and true" (Polanyi, 1979, p. 207).[5] One reason it's important to revisit the trajectory cast by Labov and those working in his wake (for instance, when considering the importance of someone like Carol Berkenkotter) is that the "personal" in personal narrative is less autonomous than thematic or structural interpretations of narrative seem to imply. Even Labov (1997) came to acknowledge a "theory of . . . the narrator as an exponent of cultural norms" (p. 415). From a rhetorical standpoint, certainly, we could say that a naïve sense of the personal as unadulterated by "outside" social or cultural influence greatly

reduces the actually existing complexity of the so-called available means of persuasion in any personal narrative context.

Indeed, if we begin to consider what Gee (1999) characterized as the difference between big-D and little-d discourse, the problem of autonomy gets more complicated still. The notion that sociocultural power structures—the big-D discourse that pervades even the most mundane social interactions—influences the way we speak in more local, little-d contexts, means that our personal narratives are also influenced in perhaps invisible ways by a larger hegemonic discourse. Such a notion further etiolates the ideal that personal narratives are somehow the autonomous expression of an individual subject's own lived experience. While a narrative about one's experience may maintain more or less veridical faith to events as they actually happened, how one reflects on that experience, that is, the meaning or "point" one assigns to it in its telling, is far more likely to be swayed by the influence of big-D discourses, whose ideological valence steers whole cultural norms and values. These discussions are not often foregrounded in either research or teaching about personal narrative, although doing so would almost certainly lead to more nuanced scholarship and student work alike.

Conclusions

So where does this leave us? How has the pioneering expansion of personal narrative studies beyond the literary made possible all the research done since—Carol Berkenkotter's being just one exemplar—to extend the ways we think about personal narrative even further? I have suggested that the problem of scope shows us that a personal narrative's size, where it begins and ends, is one key juncture in determining any orientation toward the concept. This is more than just a question of word count. After Labov, as theoretical orientations expanded the idea of personal narrative, the borders of personal narrative, narrative in general, and nonnarrative have become less distinct. When personal narrative emerges and evolves through a series of interactions in variable contexts, it may reveal some thematic integrity, but as our notion of personal narrative grows further to encompass a whole lifetime of biographical history and personal experience, the challenge becomes one of coherence.

As Alexander and Rhodes (2014) have argued, attempting to overcome that challenge in the face of our world's increasingly multicultural and multidisciplinary perspectives, should neither mean embracing our "common humanity" at the expense of forgetting our differences, nor emphasizing our "radical alterity" at the loss of our shared humanness (p. 431). In other words, although personal narrative is decidedly a way to express individuality in the face of public difference (Higgins & Brush, 2006), it is also a way to express

our commonness. Which emphasis is most promoted by those of us who think about personal narrative in our research, teaching, or daily lives therefore matters a great deal. Ultimately, lingering in the background of the scope problem is what might be called a *si omnia nulla* paradox: the notion that, if personal narrative is everywhere, it's nowhere. Emphasizing one's own experience as the necessary and sufficient basis from which writing can occur begins to answer to this problem by shifting the weight from scope to autonomy, as any conception of personal narrative needs somehow to maintain its distinctively personal nature.

I have thus suggested further that the problem of autonomy—to what extent an individual subject is autonomously responsible for his or her narrative as an expression of his or her personal sense making—is another key juncture in determining any orientation to the concept. Inherited from Labov as well, the autonomy juncture shows that narratives may be personal insofar as they express a single person's experience or sense of that experience, and they may be less personal to the extent that a rhetorical audience, sociocultural forces, and/or group membership identifications influence how, why, and with what point those narratives are told. As scholars, we have the ability to convey exactly what "personal narrative" means (or, at least, what we imagine it to mean) in each rhetorical occasion for the written word. Is the emphasis on the *narrative*—and in that case, calling into play the scope of when it begins and ends? Or is the emphasis on the *personal*—and in that case, interested in how extra-personal forces or people influence and negotiate a narrative's personal subjectivity?

In trying to explore how some of the early, pioneering work to extend narrative studies beyond the literary may have opened up a path for the insights of Berkenkotter and others, we find personal narrative studies again returning to the literary: in the context of the composition classroom, certainly, but also more broadly in the recent flourishing of memoirs in popular writing (see Yagoda, 2009), and in the glut of personal updates and timelines across multimodal social media. But it's a return with a difference. The problems and challenges are greater. To face them, we need to remember that whatever personal narratives now may be, that is partly because of what they once were.

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Notes

1. Although the terms *narrative* and *story* have a long history of being conflated, they are not the same. In these pages, which focus on narrative in particular, I have tried to use that word as much as possible, though I sometimes rely on *story* or similar alternatives for stylistic reasons that I hope will not be mistaken for slovenly thought.

2. It's worth noting that this position on genre's radical contextuality is one she had staked out with Huckin much earlier in her career (1995), writing then, "If genres are dynamic rhetorical structures and genre knowledge a form of situated cognition, it follows that both genres and genre knowledge are more sharply and richly defined to the extent that they are *localized* (in both times and place)" (pp. 13-14).

3. Disclosure: This list includes myself, as Booth was my advisor during my master's work, and I was his archivist (see Ingraham, 2013).

4. It is worth noting that Berkenkotter and Booth were each influenced by Bakhtin. For instance, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) work through Bakhtin's notion of dialogism to suggest that "communication, oral *or* written, is constituted by a series of turns" (p. 10). I take this to provide some justification for reading Labov's work on oral narratives as relevant to Berkenkotter's work on written ones. For more about Bakhtin's influence on Booth, see Booth (1984).

5. Labov's (1972) important work on the Black English vernacular suggests a similar cultural particularity, implying that the "personal" is also a product of different group identifications and communicative contexts.

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Author Biography

Chris Ingraham is an assistant professor of communication at North Carolina State University, where he also serves on the faculty of the interdisciplinary Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media PhD program. His research focuses principally on contemporary rhetorical theory and public culture in a digital age, though several years of teaching writing have deeply informed his thinking.