What is meant by narrative? How can one elicit a narrative or analyze it in research? How can narrative work best be facilitated among older adults? This is the only text to provide fundamental information about the definitions, issues, approaches, and applications of narrative gerontology in research and practice. It addresses narrative approaches in community and long-term settings, writing in the virtual world, and such individual work as journaling or poetry. The book explores the theories of narratives across many disciplines, research practices, and analytical strategies as they relate to narrative work with older adults.

Focusing on the myriad theoretical underpinnings of narrative, the book provides a developmental history of narrative use in gerontology and details ways to use and facilitate narratives in such research settings. It discusses ways to incorporate narratives in such practice settings as retirement-community writing workshops, individual writing projects, and others. Chapters include step-by-step guides on how to analyze and report on, how to write up narrative data, and plentiful resources for further study.

Key Features:
- Offers a "hands on" research tool that guides the reader from theory to research to practice
- Describes the theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of narrative with older adults
- Illustrates how narrative gerontology is fundamentally different from narrative research with younger participants
- Addresses the breadth of available narrative methods and how to apply them in research settings
- Designed for use in qualitative methods, service learning, and gerontological research courses

In this important book, de Medeiros... provides a much-needed map of the terrain that narrative perspectives on aging can encompass, and lays out a broad and compelling vision of this rich... region of research and practice... Given the numerous suggestions de Medeiros lays out for how to facilitate older adults in telling and reflecting upon... their own unique stories, not to mention her in-depth discussions of the issues that a narrative approach to aging brings to the fore, this book will serve as an invaluable resource for students, researchers, and practitioners.”

— William L. Randall, EdD, Professor of Gerontology
St. Thomas University, Fredericton, NB, Canada
Narrative Gerontology in Research and Practice
Kate de Medeiros, PhD, is the Robert H. and Nancy J. Blayney Professor and Scripps Fellow in the Department of Sociology and Gerontology at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Dr. de Medeiros is a gerontologist with research interests in the narrative construction of self in old age, genre and the life story, the meaning of generativity in later life, and understanding how “friendship” is defined and experienced by people with advanced dementia. Her studies have been funded by the National Institutes of Health, the Brookdale Foundation, and the Alzheimer’s Association. In 2008, she was selected as one of only four national Brookdale Leadership in Aging Fellows for her work on autobiographical writing and cognitive performance in old age. Dr. de Medeiros is on the editorial boards of The Gerontologist, Gerontology and Geriatrics Education, and Narrative Works. Her work appears in such journals as International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry, Journal of Aging Studies, The Gerontologist, and Journal of Applied Gerontology; she is also the author of several book chapters.
Narrative Gerontology in Research and Practice

Kate de Medeiros, PhD

© Springer Publishing Company, LLC
To Al, Dillon, and Ian
## CONTENTS

*Foreword*  William L. Randall, EdD  *ix*

*Preface*  *xiii*

### PART I—THEORY

1. What’s in a Name? Disentangling Narrative, Discourse, Life Story, and Other Related Terms  *1*

2. Narrative Gerontology: Where Have We Been? Where Are We Going?  *17*

3. Self, Story, Identity, and Aging  *37*

4. Telling and Listening: What Happens When a Story Is Told?  *51*

5. Genres, Life Stories, and Self Stories  *61*

### PART II—CONDUCTING NARRATIVE RESEARCH

6. Truth and Interpretation in Narrative Data  *75*

7. Power, Positioning, and Ethical Considerations in Narrative Research  *91*

8. Interviews: A Background  *103*

9. Making Sense of Interview Data  *113*

10. Reading, Researching, and Analyzing Texts  *127*

### PART III—APPLYING NARRATIVE IN PRACTICE SETTINGS

11. Listening and Being Heard  *143*

12. Writing and Reminiscence With Older Adults  *155*
13. Facilitating Group Work With Older Adults: Some Practical Considerations 167

14. What Other Stories Can Be Told? Overcoming the Limits of Life-Story Genres 183

Appendix I. Interview With Joe 201

Appendix II. Interview With and Letter From Jane 207

References 221

Index 235
One of the more exciting developments in gerontology at present lies in the use of narrative approaches and perspectives in exploring the complex—yet under-researched—“inside” of aging. With a focus on biographical more than, say, biological aging, the resulting subfield, known loosely as “narrative gerontology,” is enriching our understanding of how we change subjectively over time; of how we change, that is, with regard to our sense of identity as a consequence of the continual weaving and reweaving within us of memory, emotion, and meaning.

With a view of human beings as, at bottom, *hermeneutical* beings—that is, as interpretive beings, or makers of meaning—narrative gerontology shares with narrative psychology, narrative sociology, narrative theology, and the like the guiding assumption that the main way in which we make meaning—of the events, situations, and relationships that constitute our lives—is by making (telling, sharing, and imagining) *stories*. In short, we are “the story species” (Gold, 2002) possessed of “the literary mind” (Turner, 1996). And, at the heart of who and how we are in the world—at the heart, as well, of whatever wisdom we possess or spirituality we experience—is the proverbial “story of my life” (Randall, 1995).

But, the “story of my life” is no straightforward concept, and pondering how we “story” (Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, & Randall, 2011) and “restory” our personal worlds (Kenyon & Randall, 1997) is a frontier type of task at which scholars will be laboring for years to come. Witness the proliferation of periodicals in recent years—journals such as *Storyworlds* and *Narrative* in literary theory, *Narrative Inquiry* in psychology, and *Narrative Works* in several disciplines at once—plus the explosion of conferences in which theorists and practitioners consider the implications of a narrative perspective for numerous issues and
themes—from reminiscence to cognition, history to art, politics to religion, therapy to ethics, and philosophy to faith: the (now six) biennial events called “Narrative Matters” (www.stu.ca/cirn/narrativematters) are a case in point.

Among those working hard to expand our sense of the narrative complexity of later life, a leading light is surely Kate de Medeiros. In this important book, de Medeiros demonstrates an impressive grasp of the several issues—theoretical to methodological—that confront us in the intriguing yet untamed intellectual territory that narrative gerontology has opened up for exploration. In it, she provides a much-needed map of the terrain that narrative perspectives on aging can encompass, and lays out a broad and compelling vision of this rich—but still emerging—region of research and practice.

Each thinker who self-identifies as a “narrative gerontologist,” or whose work has a narrative perspective, will inevitably select a different starting point to explain what “narrative gerontology” is. Here is one of the greatest strengths—among many—of de Medeiros’s seminal book: how she goes back to basics at every point and wrestles with definitions of critical terms (beginning with “aging,” with “gerontology” itself, and with “narrative gerontology” in particular), in the process delineating the differences between terms as well. She asks, for example, What is “narrative” and what is a “story”?—questions she acknowledges that invariably will be answered in differing ways by the different disciplines that have been touched by the “narrative turn” (psychology, sociology, etc.) with differing assumptions as to what narrative is and does.

From such foundational lines of thinking, supplemented by diagrams and appendices to clarify ideas for the reader, de Medeiros moves to discussions of an impressive array of issues (theoretical, methodological, and ethical) with which narrativists must sooner or later contend. These include the following: the thorny issue of “truth” in narrative, in “self stories” in particular; the issue of how the “master narratives” embedded in a given culture affect and inform—for better or worse—how people within it give expression to the stories by which they define who they are; and the issue of experiences that go unstoried because we have no socially acceptable ways—no narrative templates—with which to express them to others, let alone represent them to ourselves.

In the second half of the book, she shifts to issues that will be of particular interest to researchers who are using narrative methods in their investigations—through life-story interviews, for instance. Again, she
begins by asking what an “interview” is in the first place, yet another term that holds different meanings for the different fields—psychology, sociology, anthropology, and so forth—that feed gerontology’s multidisciplinary enterprise. This leads her to an equally valuable discussion of the various approaches with which researchers on aging can work in the *analysis* of narrative data—and, indeed, in the narrative analysis of a whole spectrum of “texts” with which those doing research on aging can work—from public documents to oral histories to diaries to blogs.

One of the most helpful contributions de Medeiros makes in this volume—and one that her own research equips her to discuss with significant authority—concerns how genres shape narratives; specifically, how the use of different literary forms used to narrate our experiences, from first-person reminiscence to third-person story to letter to poem, can elicit decidedly different ways of interpreting those experiences and integrating them into our self story as a whole. This has immense implications for how people story themselves in later life and, potentially, for the measure of insight, wisdom, and resilience that they bring to the challenges and changes with which later life is fraught.

Another especially thoughtful discussion, and one in which narrative gerontologists to date have engaged very little, concerns the nature of story *listening*—not only in research settings, where there is always the danger that the interviewer will “hijack” the participant’s narrative, but in practice settings as well, in the dispensing of what can be called “narrative care” (Bohlmeijer, Kenyon, & Randall, 2011)—for example, in personal or group reminiscence, in the activity-of-life review, or in one-on-one therapy or counseling with older clients. As with her discussion of how the master narratives running through cultures as a whole lead to different overall ways of experiencing and expressing our narratives as individuals, so to will different listeners, with different listening styles, inevitably shape what tellers tell, once more for better or worse—for example, leading either to increased narrative openness or to narrative foreclosure instead (Bohlmeijer, Westerhof, Randall, Tromp, & Kenyon, 2011).

Given the numerous suggestions that de Medeiros lays out for how to facilitate older adults’ telling of and reflecting upon—so that they can draw strength from!—their own unique stories, not to mention her in-depth discussions of the issues that a narrative approach to aging brings to the fore, this book will serve as an invaluable resource for students, researchers, and practitioners intent on deepening their understanding.
of the broad range of topics that narrative gerontology raises for our consideration. In writing this book, she has made a core contribution to the development of this exciting and expanding field.

William L. Randall, EdD, Professor of Gerontology, St. Thomas University, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada

REFERENCES


The world of narrative inquiry and narrative studies can be very complicated to navigate. Narratives are part of all disciplines; all disciplines “tell” certain narratives in a particular way to reflect their methods and ways of making sense of the world. Gerontology, unlike many traditional disciplines, is not composed of any one discipline; rather, it can include several. People trained as sociologists, for example, may choose aging as their focus, thereby bringing a sociological lens to the study of older age. The same can be said for anthropology and various other perspectives. Also, a growing number of students, researchers, and scholars are being trained from a gerontological perspective, in which older age is the object of inquiry; approaches to the study of older age may come from a variety of disciplines rather than one disciplinary perspective.

Gerontology is conceptualized in this book as both a newly formed discipline and one that overlaps with and has strong connections to many existing disciplines. Given the complexity of narrative juxtaposed with the complexity of gerontology as a field of study, the purpose of this book is to provide a rough map of both realms. Although there is a vast literature on narratives and a growing literature on narrative gerontology, most books and articles start from an “expert” level and explore important nuances, contradictions, and other issues related to narrative.

This book is designed to help someone new to narratives acquire a basic understanding of some of the definitions, issues, approaches, and applications—a first step into the field. It is not meant to be comprehensive in that not all approaches and outlets are included, nor is it in-depth on all aspects of narrative gerontology. Instead, it should provide the reader with enough background to understand what is meant by narrative gerontology, to consider ways in which to use narrative gerontology in research and in practice, and to know where to go for additional
insight. In other words, readers should think of this book as an introduction to the field before moving on to the excellent books and articles on narratives, from a variety of disciplines, that are already out there.

The book is organized into three major sections: theory, research, and practice. The first section is focused on the myriad theoretical underpinnings of narrative. It begins by disentangling terms such as “narrative,” “discourse,” “story,” “life story,” and others, which are often used interchangeably but have subtle although important differences. It then provides a developmental history of the use of narrative in gerontology, the disciplines that have contributed to narrative theory and methods, and the different ways in which narratives have been used and understood through these disciplines. This fundamental understanding of disciplinary perspective is important because, for example, anthropology has used “narrative” in ways very different from the ways in which social work has used it. This background is helpful in enabling readers to identify easily with their own narrative foundation (e.g., the discipline through which they work) while investigating new ways to apply narrative.

The second section, research, details the different types of narratives used in research settings (e.g., oral interviews, written texts), with chapters devoted to different types of research (e.g., oral interviews, written autobiography, memoirs, historical narrative texts). Chapters in this section include an overview of key ideas related to the approach and also introduce analytical strategies, practical concerns, and other related information.

The third section, practice, includes chapters on how to incorporate narratives in a variety of applied settings, such as writing workshops in retirement communities, memoirs and other individual writing projects, and others. As in the other chapters, there are details on sources of additional information, practical guidelines, and “how-to” approaches.

Overall, the goal of the book is to bring together a unique blend of disciplinary perspectives and practices not found in other books on life stories, autobiography, and/or narrative approaches to understanding one’s experiences.
What’s in a Name? Disentangling Narrative, Discourse, Life Story, and Other Related Terms

This chapter begins with the disclaimer that narrative is an infinitely more complicated concept than can be adequately addressed by one person in one book. With that said, the first step to navigating the various aspects of narrative gerontology is to gain a clear understanding of what key words mean, what they describe, and their limitations. In essence, it is to look at the parts and pieces that comprise narrative in its broadest sense. From there, the next step is to define and distinguish words commonly used in the context of narrative gerontology so that the concept of narrative can be further considered and applied. The final section considers the cultural context that gives narratives their form and meaning.

This initial look is meant to provide a roadmap of sorts through which to navigate the remaining chapters. Most of the concepts, such as self, genre, and culture, touched on here will be explored in further detail later; definitions will be expanded, refined, and reconsidered throughout the course of the book. In addition, because this book is specifically focused on narrative gerontology, which adds further layers to the study of narratives, subsequent chapters will explore older age as a site of narrative inquiry and will consider how advancing age
may or may not affect what narratives are possible, and how they are elicited, interpreted, and applied. Using a reflective approach such as this, whereby you, the reader, are asked continually to refer back to key words, rethink ideas, build on previous thoughts, and essentially engage and re-engage with the text, you will be an active participant in the narrative process.

WHAT IS A NARRATIVE?

Narrative at its most basic level is a telling of some aspect of self through ordered symbols. But what does this mean? Consider each component of this definition. The idea of “a telling” refers to narrative as a form of communication. A narrative requires action; speakers or writers reveal something about themselves with the intention that this revelation will be taken up in some way by a listener or reader. In other words, there is a purpose. A narrative isn’t a series of random words with no meaning. Exactly how much is revealed through this communicative action, why a speaker/writer tells a particular narrative, and what the narrative ultimately means are questions at the center of narrative inquiry.

Another part of the basic explanation of narrative is the phrase “some aspect of self.” What is meant by “self”? It is helpful to keep in mind that gerontology is a field composed of many disciplines and disciplinary perspectives. Consequently, words like “self” can have different meanings depending on the primary disciplinary tradition. In philosophy, for example, much of the concept of self lies in the conscious awareness of oneself as the subject of experience (Gallagher, 2000). “Conscious awareness” is a distinguishing attribute. In anthropology, self is the mediator of experience, where less emphasis is placed on awareness and more on action (Rubinstein, 1989). Psychologists Robert McCrae and Paul Costa Jr. define self as “a structured mode of participation in social life, what society expects of an individual occupying a given position in the group” (p. 158). For McCrae and Costa (1990), expected roles are important to the concept of self. Although the topics of self, narrative, identity, and aging are addressed in depth in Chapter 3, here self is briefly defined as “the culturally constituted individual” (Rubinstein & de Medeiros, 2004, p. 61) to recognize that self is more than a person’s consciousness and awareness of others but that culture, big and small, shapes the concept of self. Ultimately, one’s definition and perspective
of what self is will influence assumptions about what aspects of self can be revealed and interpreted through narrative (de Medeiros, 2005).

Definitions of self also influence how the last part of the definition of narrative, “ordered symbols,” comes into play. Symbols can include language (oral and written), gestures, images, movements, artifacts, and so forth. For example, a dancer may be able to perform a narrative by using expressive movement to reveal some aspect of self. The same holds true for an artist, who can narrate some aspect of self through the symbols used in painting, sculpture, and other artistic forms. For the purpose of this book, the term “symbols” will exclusively refer to language and how the symbols of language operate in a larger way to become a telling of some aspect of self. As such, the term “narrative” will refer only to narratives in language, although other types of narratives are certainly possible.

Despite the fact that narratives, for the purpose of this book, are restricted to narratives created through language, language adds its own forms of complications to the idea of narrative. Emery (1985) defines language as the “system of codes and rules for the transmission of information” (p. 6). Language includes a phonetic system of sounds; a word or body of words, which form the lexicon; grammatical structure, or syntax; and units or phrases of meaning, including inferential meaning (or semantics). In order for people to use language effectively, they must have the ability to encode and retrieve the symbols, signs, and sounds that comprise language and have the ability to understand the referential relationships among the language components.

In addition to rules and definable components, language embodies cultural symbols. Not only do bodies of words and phrases have unique meanings in different cultures; the forms of language (e.g., oral forms, written forms) available are also culturally shaped. For example, the rules that govern how words are used to convey meaning in a letter may differ from cultural group to cultural group. Whether a certain type of communication through language, like a historical account, is delivered orally or in writing is also dependent on cultural norms. Ultimately, it is important to understand that the language of narratives and the narrative forms available will affect what is communicated and

---

1 The word “culture” is used to describe a subculture, such as that of older women, in addition to culture in a broader sense (e.g., geographical or ethnic culture).
what is interpreted (de Medeiros, 2005; Kerby, 1991). This will be discussed in more detail later in Chapter 5, in reference to genres of narratives, and in Chapter 7, which addresses issues of power and position in narrative.

**NARRATIVES AS SYMBOLS OF THE SELF**

If the core of most narrative work is centered on trying to understand the self through the symbols of language, then this begs the following questions: with what parts of language (e.g., words, phrases, sentences), with how much language (e.g., one utterance, a lengthy story), and in what form (e.g., random thoughts, ideas cohesively strung together) can the self be made known? We therefore will move away from the initial broad definition of narrative to consider some of the numerous descriptions, definitions, and requirements that others have applied to narrative.

In their classic piece, William Labov and Joshua Waletzky (1967) defined narrative as having any sequence of clauses containing one or more temporal junctures. In their view, the temporal organization of information was first necessary to distinguish narrative from discourse in general (discussed later in this chapter), and it played an important role in helping one to make sense of a narrative by examining the various structures and components comprising the narrative. Later, Labov (2003) further defined narrative as a reportable event, temporally ordered and centered around the narrator’s theory of causality. The ideas of reportability and causality, in addition to temporal ordering, speak to a necessary relationship that the speaker/writer has to the narrative. As suggested earlier, narrative is an action that is purposeful in some way. It holds some meaning for the speaker/writer (although we may not know how much meaning). In this expanded definition, an explanation of why the reportable event occurred is important.

In Labov’s (2003) framework, narratives start with an orientation that establishes the time when the event took place (e.g., it was a cold winter day). This is followed by a complicating action, which puts the story into play (e.g., I was sitting in my living room when suddenly the phone rang). The action is then described until a final resolution is reached (e.g., I hung up the phone and called the police). Some personal evaluation of the resolution may follow (e.g., I probably shouldn’t have done that). The narrative ends with a coda, or a summary of what has
happened since the event described (e.g., and ever since then, I have never spoken to that person again). This type of structural analysis will be explored in further detail in Chapter 6, “Truth and Interpretation in Narrative Data.” Here, it is meant to point out one way in which the structure of narrative can be considered relative to self, where self is understood in terms of reportable actions. The fact that I included those particular details in that particular way is assumed to reveal something important about how I see myself.

In a slightly different perspective on narrative, Donald Polkinghorne (1988) defines narrative as referring “to the process of making a story, to the cognitive scheme of the story, or to the result of the process—also called ‘stories,’ ‘tales,’ or ‘histories’” (p. 13). In this definition, narrative isn’t just a product (story) but is also a process (narrating). Rather than taking a structural approach to understanding a narrative, Polkinghorne is concerned with the larger realm of meaning. He describes his view as follows:

If the unity and uniqueness of the self is achieved through the process of narrativity and if one conceives of one’s own particular existence as a special story and not as a physical or mental thing, then more adequate, hermeneutically oriented research tools will be needed to study personal identity. These tools will seek to understand the self as expression, and will be modeled on the processes a person uses to understand the meaning of a sentence, not on procedures for identifying characteristics or qualities. (p. 151)

Polkinghorne references hermeneutics, a tradition developed from philosophy and concerned with understanding and interpreting text, including narratives. He points to Wilhelm Dilthey (1883), stressing that “the epistemological base of understanding was to be found in the connection between cultural artifacts and one’s capacity to create unique and personal elements in one’s own life” (p. 39). In this respect, Polkinghorne argues that there is a meaning to be found in narratives that may be bigger than its characteristics (e.g., structure) or qualities (e.g., word choices). The symbols of language transcend the boundaries of words and syntax and take on new symbolic meaning in the context of a person’s meaning system.

From yet another perspective, Gay Becker (1997) defines narrative as “the stories that people tell about themselves. [Narratives] reflect
people’s experiences, as they see it and as they wish to have others see it” (p. 25). This definition places emphasis on the person telling the narrative (the speaker/writer). For Becker as well as others mentioned, the speaker/writer tells a narrative with a particular end result in mind. Unlike that of the other two scholars mentioned, Becker’s emphasis is on the person. The primary concern for her is more about what personal information the person is trying to convey than about how the narrative unfolds or what larger meaning system the narrative may embody. In this respect, she is taking what the person says as being meaningful in and of itself without looking too closely at syntax or other structural issues.

These three examples illustrate how assumptions about what narratives do and what can be learned from them can differ. In short, there is no right way to think about narrative. Instead, there are many possibilities.

Regardless of how narrative is defined, an important element in narrative is the presence of plot (Polkinghorne, 1988). According to Polkinghorne, emplotment requires an individual to select and present events that are central to an overall theme or purpose being presented. One may also elect to omit events or details perceived not to be central to the key plot. Anthony Paul Kerby (1991) argues that it is the way in which events are ordered that help give the narrative meaning, that “[it is] through the unifying action of narration that temporal expanses are given meaning. In other words, isolated events need to be placed within a developing network” (Kerby, 1991, p. 3). The idea that events are selected and presented in a way that makes some sort of sense to the speaker/writer, presumably with the purpose of also making sense to a listener/reader, is what gives narrative power over something like a list of events that are not linked in any meaningful way.

Consider, for example, Joe, the subject of the interview in Appendix I. As part of the content of his narrative, Joe lists a series of events. He was born in Cleveland (line 24), worked for an international agency (line 28), and was eventually reassigned to County Y (line 41). As the narrative develops, it becomes clear that these events are what led to the eventual development of Joe’s “thesis,” which is the subject of the overall narrative. As part of the narrative, these events have a much different meaning and level of importance than they might if they were simply listed on a resumé. The listener/reader would not understand Joe’s views on how these events were seemingly tied to his life’s work.
The importance of emplotment is also echoed by Becker (1997), who describes “emplotment,” or the selection of events and a plot to present in narrative form, as follows: “Plot has the capacity to model our experience. Plot provides the underlying structure of a story; emplotment is the process that draws a configuration out of a simple succession. Emplotment brings together heterogeneous factors such as agents, goals, means, interactions, and unexpected results and renders the story’s contents intelligible” (p. 27).

Jane Elliott (2005) describes three key features of narrative: (a) They have some type of chronology, (b) they are meaningful, and (c) they are social, or “produced for a specific audience” (p. 4). This definition, although helpful to having a snapshot of narrative, also introduces several of the problematic areas and tensions worthy of further consideration. For example, chronology doesn’t simply mean the order in which events occurred. Narratives don’t necessarily start at the beginning and end at the end. There may be instances of flashbacks, of providing introductory material, of introducing minor characters that are not central to the plot, of evaluation of others, and so on.

From a literary theory perspective, Seymour Chatman (1978) suggests that a literary narrative is composed of “a story, the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse, that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. In simple terms the story is the what in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the how” (p. 19). As in other descriptions of narratives, Chatman stresses the idea that events are not simply randomly extracted, but that they are related in some way to one another.

What all the definitions of narrative suggest is that narratives are not simply the representation of some reality, such as a photographic or video image, of a situation or thought. Narratives normally serve the function of personal interest. As Linda Garro and Cheryl Mattingly (2000a) write, “A story is not neutral. Nor is it a hidden text which the anthropologist somehow unearths like buried treasure. Narratives never simply mirror lived experience or an ideational cosmos, nor is a story a clear window through which the world, or some chunk of it, may be seen. Telling a story, enacting one, or listening to one is a constructive process, grounded in a specific cultural setting, interaction, and history. Text, context and meaning are intertwined” (p. 22). Speakers/writers relay or withhold narratives based on their assessments of whether a
given narrative is appropriate at a given time. In addition, the speaker/writer may also choose what details to include or exclude depending on a perception of what the listener/reader should know (or not know.) The role of telling and listening in shaping a narrative is discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

FORMS AND THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE

After having briefly considered definitions of narratives, links to self, and assumptions about narrative, the chapter now turns to a more practical view of narratives: forms of narratives. Narratives can be oral or written (Riessman, 1993). They can be found in interviews, in written documents, in conversations, and virtually everywhere that communication is taking place. The way a narrative is delivered—the narrative form—is another concept to consider (Garro & Mattingly, 2000a, 2000b). “Narrative form” is used here to describe the often unspoken rules that guide how something like a narrative in a conversation unfolds. Consider the following: In a casual conversation, a narrative may be based on whatever topic is at hand, such as what happened on a date on Friday night. Depending on the setting (a noisy restaurant) and the participants (three college roommates), details may be included or excluded in accordance with what the speaker deems is appropriate. If the setting is a quiet restaurant and the participants are a parent and teenaged child, the narrative about the same date may be substantially different. Narratives are therefore shaped by cultural expectations and rules.

In general, narrative forms can be thought of as having evolved within cultures as particular vehicles of expression. In communicating experiences, thoughts, opinions, and so forth, the narrative form plays a role in predetermining what is appropriate to communicate. For example, a man who is asked about his experience of depression may choose to string together events from his past that make his story of depression sound intelligible (e.g., family history of depression, wartime experiences in the military). He may leave out details that don’t fit together cohesively (e.g., random experiences of apathy or sadness that he can’t link to an event). One important consideration referred to periodically throughout the book is this: How does narrative form influence emplotment or the events that one chooses to include?

Catherine Riessman (1988) explores the potential cultural differences in narrative content. For example, in one study, she compared the
narrative content and style in an interview with Susan, a 36-year-old European American woman, with that in an interview with Marta, a 24-year-old Puerto Rican woman (Riessman, 1988). The two narratives were part of a larger study of gender differences in the experience of separation and divorce, in which 104 men and women were asked to “state in your own words the main causes of your separation” (p. 152). Riessman notes that Susan’s narrative followed a traditional and linear archetypal format of oppression, guilt, and powerlessness. Marta’s narrative, however, is described as following an episodic framework based on interconnected events that were linked by relevance to the topic of separation, not chronologically or in a linear progression. Riessman concludes that the role of culture played an important role in how the narrative response to the interview question was interpreted and constructed, and she suggests that the two participants’ responses represented different genres of first-person oral narrative.

Another example can be found in the interview and letter included in Appendix II. At first glance, these appear to be nearly identical stories, one told in an oral interview and one written in a letter. Both narratives were gathered during a pilot study exploring the potential differences in events disclosed through different narrative forms. In this example, Jane Doe is asked to tell a story about a meaningful event from her past. Afterward, she is asked to write a letter about the same event. In the oral interview, she describes a time in her past when she was sent to a branch of her company to help with labor relations. In the oral interview, Jane says (on lines 142–143) that the employees at the location were upset that the company had sent a woman because a woman would not be able to complete the job as well as a man. In the letter, Jane describes the incident as follows:

She wanted me removed from the position of director of civil rights. She felt that selecting a Black woman instead of a Black man for such an important role was like a slap in the face for the Black leadership of her community. She said it was perfectly obvious that I would not be able to handle the job because I would not be able to bring the force necessary to get the White power structure to change its tactics. (lines 70–74)

The key difference is that it was not just a matter of a woman being unable to complete a job as effectively as a man. It became an issue of a Black woman being unable to change the White power structure. The narrative
form affected what details were omitted, for a few possible reasons. First, there were differences between the age and race of the interviewer (a 35-year-old White woman) and those of the speaker (a 79-year-old African American woman). Second, there was a difference in power structure. The interviewer was the one asking the questions; the speaker was responding to the questions. It could be that the speaker withheld the details about the White power structure because she felt uncomfortable raising this issue with the interviewer, whom the speaker may have perceived as too young to understand the conflicts and challenges of the Civil Rights era; she may have wanted to avoid the issue of race so she could focus more on how the situation was resolved; the detail may have slipped her mind during the interview but was recalled during the letter writing, when she had more time to think about the event; the letter may have provided a safer venue for her to express her thoughts because she could more easily control what she divulged or withheld, having the ability to edit the letter before submitting it, or other reasons.

Furthermore, the notion that narratives are shaped by the surrounding culture and available cultural forms is addressed in work by Garro and Mattingly (2000a, 2000b). Citing work by Jerome Bruner and Carol Feldman (1996), they write that “narrative reports ‘must be constructed of cultural material.’ To shape one’s past experiences, for example, ‘meaningfully into a public and communicable form,’ it is necessary to draw upon ‘narrative properties like genre and plot type that are widely shared within a culture, shared in a way that permits others to construe meaning the way the narrator has’” (p. 14). Narrative forms, therefore, are created by cultures and have evolved and been shaped over time to serve certain communicative needs (Etter-Lewis, 1991; Paltridge, 1997; van Langenhove & Harré, 1993).

David Maines (1999) and others highlight the presence of pre-established cultural plots, master narratives, master frames, or scripts that may heavily influence how people tell things to each other, and what they tell (Garro, 2000; Garro & Mattingly, 2000a; Maines, 1999; Nelson, 2001). Maines describes narratives as “cultural frames and ideologies that prefigure some stories insofar as group beliefs and values contain already-articulated plots” (p. 318). For example, if an older person is asked to tell about his or her life, a life story may be told that the person thinks is appropriate to tell. The story may be more about the form (the life story) than about what is important to the person (de Medeiros, 2011a). This is an important consideration in narrative gerontology because we may be predisposed to expect certain stories from older
people or limit the narrative forms available to them. The narratives may therefore reveal more about cultural constructions of aging than about older persons themselves (de Medeiros, 2005). This is considered further in Chapters 3 and 5.

Given the importance of emplotment, language, and events, it is time to revise the definition of narrative. Earlier, narrative was broadly defined as a telling of some aspect of self through ordered symbols. Now, the definition can be further qualified to include plot, temporality, and language. The revised definition is as follows: narrative is a verbal or written telling of some aspect of self through temporally ordered events that are unified with a central plot.

**DISTINGUISHING AMONG NARRATIVE, STORY, DISCOURSE, AND RELATED TERMS**

Moving away from narrative definitions and components, we now turn to other terms often found in the narrative literature. A common question that people new to narrative ask is, How does narrative differ from other terms, such as discourse and story, or are they all the same thing? This section will begin by focusing first on these terms (discourse and story) before addressing other common words in narrative.

In contrast to narrative, which has a purpose, *discourse*, at the simplest level, is language use, verbal or written (Schiffrin, 1994). Discourse is the form of expression of a narrative (Chatman, 1978) and is a more encompassing language framework than narrative; emplotment or temporality are not needed in discourse. A grocery list is a form of discourse but is not a narrative. This is not to say that discourse is without meaning. Implicit in discourse is a social activity through which people derive some sort of meaning or understanding (Stillar, 1998). A grocery list, for example, means something. It is not a series of random symbols.

More restrictive than discourse and narrative is the term story. A *story*, according to Chatman (1978), is the content of narrative expression. In addition to the sequence of events and emplotment found in a narrative, stories include point of view, characters, and a sense of time (temporality) and place (setting). *Point of view* refers to the notion that the story is told from someone’s perspective, even if it is an omniscient narrator. *Characters* describes the many persons or the presence of one or more individuals involved in the story; temporality is a sense of events having occurred at a particular point in time (Labov, 2003;
McAdams, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988; Randall, 1995; Ruth & Kenyon, 1996). Setting refers to the details that provide the story with a sense of place, including location, people present, time period, and so on.

Additional terms often found in the context of narrative discussions are plot and utterance. Plot is “the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning (Brook, 1992, p. xi). An utterance is the most fundamental component of communication. It can be an affirmation or a word, a sound, or a sentence (Chatman, 1978.)

**RELATED NARRATIVE TYPES**

Other common terms in narrative gerontology are “autobiography,” “biography,” “life story,” and “life review.” Here are brief definitions, in alphabetical order. Terms with an asterisk are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

*Autobiography* is a literary form, written by a real person, generally (but not always) from a first-person or “I” perspective, in which the emphasis is on the writer’s developing self (Abrams, 2011; Eakin, 1999). The distinguishing feature of autobiography is that it is focused on the person’s life over time. This is in contrast to “memoir,” in which the emphasis is on events, not necessarily the person.

*Biography* is a literary form that tells about a real person but that is written by another. The biography attempts to capture the subject’s temperament and activities in such a way as to make an argument of who a particular person was or why the person acted in a particular way.

*Diary* and *journal* are often used interchangeably. Berman (1994) refers to Samuel Johnson’s definition, as cited by Mallon (1984, p. 1), of diary as “an account of the transactions, accidents and observations of every day; a journal” (p. 24). Berman notes that although Johnson did not distinguish between the two, it is possible to distinguish between diaries and journals: personal diaries, in which the main subject is the life of the author, and personal journals, whose prime purpose is to log or catalogue events, such as travel, and in which the author’s life is not the primary subject. Catherine Hobbs (2005) also defines diaries and journals together. She describes them as “life writing that is penned daily or sporadically in a variety of modes, always chronological. Some say the journal is less personal than the diary” (p. 4).

*Guided autobiography* was developed by Birren and Deutchman (1991) as a means of helping people conduct a written life review
through a process of revisiting specific life stages and, by writing about their conflicts and experiences, achieve some resolution. It is based on the concept of the life review (see the description of life review later in this section, after interviews; see also Chapter 12).

**Interviews** are a series of questions, conducted in the form of read statements or in a more conversational manner, in which the purpose is to obtain insight into a particular area. Narratives and stories may be embedded in interviews. Interviews are a form of discourse. Consider Steinar Kvale’s (2008) definition of interview as “an inter-view [sic] where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action [sic] between the interviewer and interviewee” (p. 1).

A *life history* is “an extensive record of a person’s life told to and recorded by another, who then edits and writes the life as though it were autobiography” (Geiger, 1986, p. 336).

The *life review*, a term introduced by psychiatrist Robert Butler, draws on Erikson’s life cycle premises regarding one’s need to revisit and revise past negative developmental conflicts (Butler, 1963). For Butler, this need to revisit and resolve the past is universal in older people and represents a productive function of reminiscence. Unruh (1996) uses the phrase “identity work” to distinguish between the life review and the simple recall of memories of the past. For Unruh, identity work describes “the ways people review their lives, attempt to make sense of the self, and seek to preserve some personal identities while discarding others. . . . The life review is marked by an intensification of this work to the degree that it becomes a significant aspect of the self and a focus of much social psychological time” (p. 29). For both Erikson and Butler, the life review is not necessarily a written activity but rather a focusing on memory, life events, and meaning. According to Barbara Haight and Barrett Haight (2007), over 200 publications have focused on the life review from the 1960s until 2007.

*LIFE STORIES* describe any stories people tell or write about their own lives (Linde, 1993). Charlotte Linde defines life stories as consisting of all the stories and associated discourse units, such as explanations and chronicles, and the connections between them, told by an individual during the course of his/her lifetime that satisfy the following two criteria: (1) The stories and associated discourse units contained in the life story have as their primary evaluation a point about the speaker, not a general point about the way the world is. (2) The stories and associated discourse units have
extended reportability; that is, they are tellable and are told and retold over the course of a long period of time. (p. 21)

Susan Chase (2003b) defines life stories as “narratives about some life experience that is of deep and abiding interest to the interviewee” (p. 274). Although the first-person memoir form is commonly used, life stories are not limited by genre (de Medeiros, 2007). Poetry (which may or may not be narrative in nature) and other genres, such as letters as third-person stories, can be used to tell a life story (de Medeiros, 2011a; see Chapter 14).

*Master cultural narratives or scripts* are the stories that are embedded within a culture to reinforce the cultural norms (e.g., values, expectations, attitudes, roles), such as the importance of marriage, the value of motherhood, and the meaning of old age. For example, in the United States, Horatio Alger’s novels, such as *Ragged Dick* and *Mark, the Match Boy*, have become master cultural narratives for the notion of going from rags to riches or that through hard work and self-reliance, success is possible. These narratives form an undertone of sorts of many ideas and attitudes expressed by Americans, including themes of independence and triumph despite adversity. Master cultural narratives or scripts can also refer to pre-established cultural plots to describe common cultural phenomena, like World War II and the Great Depression, in which themes of endurance, patriotism, and selflessness prevail.

*Memoir* refers to stories written and narrated by the subject (the “I,” a first-person perspective) about people and events that the subject may have known or witnessed (Abrams, 2011). Hobbs (2005) defines memoir as “the term traditionally assigned to autobiographical narratives that do not focus on the writer’s personality as much as on what the author witnessed in his or her historical time” (p. 4). Unlike autobiography, whose focus is on the person over time, the focus of memoir is on events.

*Narrative medicine* describes the application of personal narratives to clinical practice (Charon, 2001). The goal is not to have the teller (patient) achieve some type of personal healing, as in the life review. Instead, the clinician uses narratives elicited from the patient to try to address the patient.

*Oral history* is a narrative that someone gathers on behalf of someone else. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010) define oral history as “a set of techniques for gathering a story in which an interviewer listens to, records, shapes, and edits the life story of another” (p. 275).
Reminiscence involves the active recall of past events (Sherman, 1991). Reminiscence can take a narrative form if a person selects and orders events from the past in some way (see Chapter 12).

These and other terms will be used throughout the course of the book.

SUMMARY

This chapter has used broad brushstrokes to address the complex topic of narrative. By focusing on differing definitions of narrative, introducing the concept of self as the goal of narrative, and talking about the cultural frameworks that shape narrative, the chapter has constructed a framework that will be filled in during subsequent chapters and by suggested further reading.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

There are two journals worth noting regarding narrative study:

*Narrative Inquiry*, formerly the *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, explores theoretical, empirical, and methodological work on narrative.

*Narrative Works: Issues, Investigations & Interventions* is an interdisciplinary, online journal that explores the “complex role of narrative in countless aspects of human life.” It is accessible at http://w3.stu.ca/stu/sites/cirn/narrative_works.aspx