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1 Special issue editorial:

2 **Narrative sense-making and prospective social action:**

3 **methodological challenges and new directions**

4

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8

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19 **Introduction**

20 I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the question ‘Of what
21 story or stories do I find myself a part?’

22 (MacIntyre 2013 [1981], 250)

23 The ways in which humans narratively make sense of their lives shape how they navigate the future.
24 At least, that is what prominent philosophers like Sartre, Ricoeur and MacIntyre proposed.
25 Philosophically this idea has roots in the long-standing thesis of mimesis; like art imitates life and
26 life imitates art in the Aristotelian sense, so do life and stories imitate each other (Bruner 1987).
27 Despite the tenacity of the idea, relatively little research has explored the relationship empirically.
28 How does narrative sense-making shape prospective social action? How can we best study the
29 interplay between stories told and lives lived? What kind of methodologies can provide the means for
30 social scientists to address questions concerning the future? In this special issue of *International*
31 *Journal of Social Research Methodology* we turn our attention to these challenges.

32 Narrative research is an international and interdisciplinary enterprise that has been
33 thriving since the narrative turn swept across the social sciences in the 1980s (Polletta et al 2011). In
34 a first wave of narrative research, scholars tended to emphasize the role of narratives as sense-making
35 tools with the capacity to produce, challenge and change the identities of individuals as well as
36 collectives (Holstein & Gubrium 2011, Kerby 1991). Methodologically, these studies often rely on
37 research interviews as sites for the construction of identities (Presser 2004). To give an example, a
38 study using interview data showed how a woman experiencing domestic violence may achieve an
39 identity as a survivor rather than a victim through a narrative reconstruction (Riessman 1989). More
40 generally, studies in this tradition tend to emphasize how it is through narratives and narrativity – the

41 principles and structures of storytelling – that we constitute our social identities (Somers 1994, Bruner
42 1990, Ochs & Capps 2001).

43 Another wave of narrative research is characterised by scholars turning their attention
44 to the situated practices and social contexts of storytelling. Methodologically, this orientation
45 privileges ethnographic approaches that thrust the narrative researcher into "the scenes of
46 storytelling" (Gubrium & Holstein 2008, 250) to investigate how stories are produced and used in
47 local contexts (Polletta et al 2011). For example, an ethnographic study showed how practices of
48 institutional storytelling in drug treatment produced gendered shame targeting female clients
49 (Andersen 2015). In general, studies in this tradition tend to emphasise how narrative sense-making
50 is an interactional achievement situated in particular social and local contexts which, however, does
51 not imply ignoring individual narrative selves (Järvinen 2004).

52 Contemporary narrative research continues to advance our understanding of narrative
53 identities (e.g. MacAdams 2019, Mattingly 2013) as well as practices of storytelling (e.g. De Fina
54 2016, Tutenges 2019). While these endeavors remain vital, we argue for the need for a third wave
55 within narrative research; one that further explores the relationship between narrative sense-making
56 and prospective social action. An exploration of this relationship requires methodological innovation.
57 More conventional traditions of qualitative interviewing, document analysis and ethnographic
58 fieldwork are well-suited to produce data to study narrative identities and the practice of storytelling;
59 however, empirical investigations of the dynamic relationship between narratives and social action in
60 a broad sense, not just the social practice of storytelling, require scholars to rethink research designs
61 and analytical approaches. To facilitate this innovation, we gathered leading narrative scholars to an
62 international symposium in Copenhagen in June 2018 to encourage collective thinking on how we

63 might approach the challenge of researching narrative sense-making and prospective social action¹.
64 Scholars from different fields and disciplines were gathered to share and respond to each other's work,
65 and this special issue - which builds on the seminar – contributes to the interdisciplinary conversation.

66 The articles that form this special issue have very different takes on how to research
67 narrative sense-making and prospective social action. This heterogeneity of insights reflect diverse
68 methodological and disciplinary approaches. That narrative has been taken up by different disciplines
69 is both a strength and a challenge. As knowledge communities operationalise the concept in radically
70 different ways we must ask whether there is anything 'essential' about narrative. For example, the
71 humanist traditions treat narrative as a hermeneutic structure, dynamically linking past, present and
72 future. Within positivist traditions, narrative may be subject to quantitative methodologies or
73 experimental investigations that seek to 'pin down' what narrative is. And finally, post-humanist
74 approaches may reject the privileged position of meaning-making by individuals altogether. Work in
75 feminist sociology has encouraged us to look carefully at ideas and structures that connect knowledge
76 communities. Niamh Moore (2016), for example has suggested that 'the archive' could be considered
77 as a 'boundary object' that brings together and allows interaction between different disciplines.
78 Moore draws on the work of Susan Leigh Star (2010) whose concept of the a boundary object alerts
79 us to the way that an idea or structure is shared by a number of communities of practice, but
80 understood and deployed differently. In parallel with this, we suggest that 'narrative' not only
81 constitutes a meeting point for different disciplines, but also for popular and lay audiences.

82 One of the defining features of a boundary object in Star's definition is its interpretive
83 flexibility. Hence, our aim is not to create a single definition or to resolve differing understandings,
84 but to work with this flexibility. Star also suggests that "boundary objects are a sort of arrangement

¹ The symposium was generously funded by a Sapere Aude research talent grant from the Danish Council for Independent Research (FSE) to Ditte Andersen (grant number DFF – 4182-00165). See more at www.vive.dk/da/cph-narrative/

85 that allows different groups to work together without consensus” (Star 2010, p. 602). This is very
86 helpful for our aims in this special issue. Instead of trying to align different disciplinary and
87 methodological approaches we explore what happens when these different approaches meet, how
88 they can inform each other and what new questions emerge from this.

89 In the remainder of this editorial we first set the scene for the papers that follow by
90 positioning the special issue in the context of the existing literature on narrative and prospective
91 action. We then introduce the papers elucidating themes that connect them.

92

93 **Researching futures**

94 Narratives configure *pasts* and project *futures* from the perspectives of the *present* (Mead 1959). Time
95 and life itself are thus entwined with human temporality and narratives interlock in what Ricoeur
96 (1981) conceptualises as emplotment. In the empirical social sciences, narrative research has
97 produced rich insights on how humans interpret past events from situated present perspectives
98 (Järvinen 2001, Ochs & Capps 2001, Plummer 2002, Presser 2008), while up until recently there has
99 been comparatively less research focusing on imagined futures (see e.g, Carabelli & Lyon 2016;
100 Cuzzocrea & Mandich 2016, Järvinen & Ravn 2015, Sools et al 2017; Ravn 2019). Few studies
101 investigate whether these projected futures actually eventuate.

102 In the burgeoning field of prospection science (Gilbert & Wilson 2007), researchers use
103 experiments to determine the extent to which people actually do what they imagine doing (Spreng &
104 Levine 2013). Research in this experimental tradition tends to study neural aspects of imagining the
105 future (e.g. how the frontal regions in the brain are activated) and examine behavioural aspects in
106 laboratory settings to establish whether or not intended actions are executed. The research pivots
107 around matters such as ‘errors of prospection’ (Gilbert & Wilson 2007), e.g. how people use
108 unrepresentative memories to imagine the future, and questions focus on whether an imagined action,

109 e.g. going to Scotland to climb hills (Spreng & Levine 2013), happens or not. These studies fall
110 outside narrative research paradigms, as they do not address the narrative aspects of how humans use
111 emplotment to make sense of their lives and imagine future selves, but rather approach actions
112 “independently of intentions, beliefs and settings” (MacIntyre 2013, 241).

113 The research agenda we raise in this special issue is not about assessing errors or
114 inaccuracies in individuals’ future imaginations. Through the concepts of ‘narrative sense-making
115 and social action’ we forefront the human production of meaning in both stories and deeds. Following
116 Paul Atkinson and Amanda Coffey, we embark from the assumption that “social life is performed
117 and narrated, and we need to recognize the performative qualities of social life and talk. In doing so,
118 we shall not find it necessary to juxtapose talk and events as if they occupied different spheres of
119 meaning” (Atkinson & Coffey 2003, 416). Thus, for us, the question is not first and foremost whether
120 or not an imagined action, such as going to Scotland to climb hills, happens or not; rather, we want
121 to know how a narrative may construct and enact such future actions as meaningful.

122 In studies of narrative sense-making in everyday lives, the question of how narratives
123 are embedded in social contexts and geographical locations has been central (Thomson et al 2002).
124 Through qualitative longitudinal designs scholars have illuminated complex and dynamic interplays
125 between narratives and social actions in unfolding lives (Plumridge & Thomson 2003, Ravn 2019,
126 Andersen 2019, see also previous Special Issues of this journal (vol. 6(3), vol. 18(3)). For example,
127 scholars have showed how daily experiences of structural constraints may or may not spur narrative
128 change in the ways individuals make sense of their pasts and orient themselves towards their future
129 (Harding et al 2016).

130 For the purposes of this Special Issue, we highlight two pioneering bodies of work that
131 have sought to address how narrative sense-making links with prospective social action. First, in

132 medical anthropology, Cheryl Mattingly has demonstrated how patients and health care professionals
133 locate themselves in unfolding stories that guide them in questions about what to do (Mattingly 1998,
134 2010, 2014, Mattingly & Garro 2000). Through close ethnographic observations of everyday
135 interaction in a hospital setting, Mattingly shows how Ricoeur’s ideas on narrative configuration play
136 out in practice as actors in the midst of acting work to create a plot out of a succession of actions
137 (Mattingly 1994). She thus reveals the narrative structure of action in hospital settings: “Stories are
138 everywhere in the hospital, and they [...]have powerful consequences upon how the present is
139 experienced and what future actions seem most reasonable, likely, or appropriate” (Mattingly 2010,
140 p. 52).

141 Second, in criminology, Lois Presser (2009) coined the term narrative criminology and
142 developed it with Sveinung Sandberg (Presser & Sandberg 2015, Sandberg 2010, 2013, Presser 2018)
143 to advance our understanding of how certain narratives make harmful actions or desistance from
144 harmful actions more likely. Theoretically, narrative criminology also takes inspiration from the
145 philosophy of Ricoeur, especially his idea that narrative shapes experience in a constitutive sense as
146 experience is always understood and acted upon in storied ways (Presser & Sandberg 2015, 4).
147 Methodologically, narrative criminologists employ qualitative interviews (e.g. Fleetwood 2015,
148 Sandberg, Copes and Tutenges 2015), ethnographic fieldwork (e.g. Ugelvik 2015, Tutenges 2019)
149 as well as visual methods (Copes & Ragland 2016) to scrutinise the meaning of offenders’ narratives
150 and relate it to future actions.

151 Reviewing previous research it becomes clear that empirical investigations of the link
152 between narrative and prospective social action seem to favour longitudinal research designs
153 (Holland, Thomson & Henderson, 2004). This is in some ways not surprising – longitudinal research
154 may seem like the obvious choice for investigations of how narrative meaning-making at Time 1
155 relates to action at Time 2. As Thomson & McLeod argue, qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) is

156 not just “a bundle of research strategies that .. mark out time” but rather involves a “processual
157 imaginary” that is at once “a sensibility” and “an ontological and epistemological project’ (2015, p.
158 247). A particular feature of this processual imaginary is how it allows “a fluidity of movement
159 between units of analysis, scales and the particular and general” (ibid., p. 246). The potential to zoom
160 in to consider the particularities of a narrative and to zoom out to understand the patterns emerging
161 from large numbers of cases is a feature of QLR that is also exploited in a number of the papers
162 gathered in this special issue – as is the facility to move about in time, juxtaposing different moments.

163 However, as will become apparent when engaging with the articles in this Special Issue,
164 longitudinal methods are not the only way to approach the relation between narrative and prospective
165 action. The contributions include qualitative, quantitative as well as mixed methods approaches, and
166 they engage with a variety of data materials that go beyond interview data to also include written
167 texts (letters and social media status updates) and visual materials. It becomes clear that with different
168 methods so different questions become relevant or take analytical precedence. For instance, while
169 the question of ‘what will happen’ – predicting future actions – seems to be a key concern in analyses
170 of cross-sectional data, this is less important in completed longitudinal studies. Here ‘what will
171 happen’ is already known, and the analytical question instead concerns *why* this happened. Tensions
172 between a prospective guessing and retrospective meaning making are characteristic of papers in the
173 special issue, highlighting how different understandings of ‘the future’ are in play. While for some
174 authors ‘the future’ is simply uncertain or a “known unknown”; that which we cannot know
175 (Uprichard 2011), for others it is something we can approach as it is enacted in the present and for
176 others again it may be measured or predicted. We can also think of ‘futures past’; futures that have
177 already been, in the sense of longitudinal research where both T1 and T2 have passed. This reminds
178 us to distinguish between the life of the data/research project and the life of our research participants.

179 As we now turn to the papers included in this Special Issue, we also want to emphasise
180 what McLeod & Thomson call ‘the indivisibility of past-present-future’ (McLeod & Thomson 2009,
181 p. 8). While we are focusing on narrative and prospective social action, we are not arguing for
182 separating out futures from past and present and studying these in isolation. These three dimensions,
183 or timescapes (Adam 2004, p. 143) are bound up with each other. Focusing on future social action,
184 as we do in this Special Issue, therefore means relating this to past and present and to meaning-making
185 across different time-scapes.

186

187 **The papers in this special issue**

188 In the first paper, Susie Pearce, Faith Gibson, Jeremy Whelan and Daniel Kelly study the relationship
189 between narrative sense-making and prospective social action in the lives of young people who face
190 the risk of untimely death due to cancer. The paper contributes with a demonstration of the usefulness
191 of visual and psychosocial methodologies for studies of narrative sense-making and prospective
192 social action in the context of radical forms of future uncertainty. In the face of life-threatening
193 disease, humans use narrative sense-making to create order, explore emotions and search for meaning
194 and connection to others (Bury, 1982, Kleinman 1988, Riessman, 2008, Williams, 2000). However,
195 as Pearce and colleagues make clear, narrative sense-making is no easy undertaking for young people
196 in cancer treatment. Visual and psychosocial methodologies are especially useful in this context as
197 they facilitate a sensitivity towards stories that are not (yet) possible to articulate. For example, one
198 young man struggled to verbalise the fear and anguish he experienced directly in interviews, but the
199 use of photographs enabled him to share an overwhelming feeling of ‘*bleak unending nothingness*’.
200 The narratives of another young man pivoted around future plans to travel Europe to regain a sense
201 of freedom and independence. Due to a progression of cancer, the extended journey was reformulated

202 as ‘a few days in Amsterdam’. In a narrative research paradigm, the question forefronted is not
203 whether an imagined action is carried out or not but rather how the imagined action is constructed
204 and reconstructed as meaningful. In this sense, telling stories of desired futures may be risky for
205 young people with cancer as narratives can call attention to the gap between expectations and
206 experiences. On the other hand, without stories of desired futures one might stare into a ‘*bleak*
207 *unending nothingness*’. Hence, Pearce and colleagues call our attention to the relationship between
208 narrative, social action and the making of possible futures in a context where the future itself is
209 precarious.

210 In the second paper, Cigdem Esin and Aura Lounasmaa delve into the potential of
211 narrative sense-making as social acts of resistance in the ‘Jungle’; the unrecognized refugee camp in
212 Calais. The paper contributes with a methodological consideration of how the principle of ‘ethical
213 hesistancy’ (Kofoed & Staunæs, 2015) could enable practitioners and researchers to facilitate
214 creative, relational and safe spaces for refugee-storytellers while avoiding to enforce rapid
215 interventions and point to the ‘right’ story from a privileged position. Esin & Lounasmaa explore how
216 narrative sense-making work as slow resistance through reflecting on workshops they facilitated in
217 the camp where participants were invited to tell stories different than the ones otherwise often
218 rendered mandatory for refugees. Refugees are repeatedly asked to narrate specific parts of their lives
219 as part of an assessment of their claims for safety, respect and human rights. In the narration process
220 linked to legal claims for asylum, the content and form are strict, and the act of narration is scrutinised
221 for consistency and plausibility (Millibank, 2009). In contrast, the workshops enabled the participants
222 to tell their own stories through various modalities, including digital photographing. In the paper, the
223 authors offer examples to demonstrate how refugee-storytellers use narrative sense-making in
224 different ways to question and re-interpret the ‘Jungle’. In one example, a storyteller accentuated his
225 ability to find beauty in the camp using a photograph to demonstrate this. The narrative is interpreted

226 as an act of slow resistance in a context where popular media stories tended to facilitate ‘othering’ of
227 the refugees by presenting the camp as a dirty, dangerous and inhuman place. In this way, Esin &
228 Lounasmaa draw our attention to how refugee-storytellers themselves engage with narrative sense-
229 making as acts of resistance in a context where other stories, e.g. disseminated through mass media,
230 act upon humans in extremely vulnerable positions.

231 In the third paper, Stefan Andrade and Ditte Andersen investigate the relationship
232 between narrative sense-making and prospective social action through a new methodology termed
233 Digital Story Telling (DSG). The paper contributes with a demonstration of the methodology’s
234 potential by applying it to an archived, qualitative longitudinal data set made up of successive
235 interviews with young people conducted over time (the TimeScapes study in the UK). While the
236 authors of the first two papers engage directly with their participants’ stories, Andrade & Andersen
237 work with the narratives through a ‘distant reading’ (Moretti 2013) facilitated by computerized text
238 analysis. The DSG methodology works through an algorithm developed by the first author that
239 identifies narrative units consisting of subjects, verbs, and objects. The methodology allows
240 researchers to simultaneously zoom in on patterns in narratives and to zoom out to examine how these
241 patterns relate to social structures such as gender and social class. For example, the DSG analysis of
242 the Timescapes interviews demonstrates that young people with middle class backgrounds more often
243 positioned themselves as subjects in narrative units while young people with working class
244 backgrounds more often positioned themselves as the objects of others’ agency, e.g. that of other
245 people or structural forces. Further, the authors show how the different ways in which young people
246 position themselves in their narratives correlate with the social actions they take in relation to their
247 school-to-work trajectories. Specifically, findings document that narrators expressing a greater sense
248 of agency at the age of 18 have a higher probability of being in employment and/or enrolled in
249 education when they turn 20. In this way, the DSG methodology opens up possibilities for systematic

250 analyses of the relationship between patterns in people’s narratives and specific outcomes in their life
251 courses.

252 Narrative methods, with a focus on formal and universal elements, are both deeply
253 humanist and can be operationalized at a larger scale utilising measurement and the authority of
254 statistical significance. It is to this interplay that the fourth paper by Jeanette Østergaard and Rachel
255 Thomson makes a contribution, by asking us to think in terms of narrative logics (shaped by sequence
256 and specificity) and variable logics (shaped by abstraction and relationality). The authors suggest that
257 these two logics can be at play in either quantitative or qualitative analyses. Working with a
258 longitudinal data set from a study on young adult Danes’ transitions to adulthood that has both
259 quantitative and qualitative dimensions, this paper reveals gaps in each logic but also suggests how
260 they may be used together. Specifically, the close reading delivered by qualitative, narratively driven
261 case histories can be productively complemented by the distant readings facilitated by large-scale
262 data sets to create synergies. The analysis provides insights into the ‘black box’ of causality set up in
263 a variable-oriented quantitative analysis, helping us understand the contingencies and narrative work
264 involved in creating a particular outcome. The case study material retains the ‘smell of the real’
265 (Cooper 2009) that preoccupied Pearce and colleagues as well as bearing the hallmarks of ethical
266 hesitancy championed by Esin & Lounasmaa. Shifting metaphors, Østergaard and Thomson liken
267 their case study protagonist to a butterfly caught in net through a sampling strategy shaped by
268 variables. Asking why and how this ‘butterfly’ was caught in a particular ‘net’ (manifested in a cell
269 in a two-way table) sheds light on both the similarities between different butterflies/individual cases
270 and the wider social conditions that have shaped their trajectories. However, it is in understanding
271 the unique route taken by a single butterfly that we gain insights that are simultaneously particular
272 and universal in narrative terms.

273 The last two papers in this collection are again different in tone and approach. Both of
274 these originate from outside the sociological tradition of narrative research and 'look in' through the
275 window that narrative as a boundary object creates. The fifth paper, by literary scholars Samuli
276 Björninen, Mari Hatavara and Maria Mäkelä, brings together narratology and social science research
277 through a study of political storytelling in Finland. More specifically, the authors combine the
278 narratological concepts of story (what happened) and discourse (how it is told) with positioning
279 theory as formulated by Bamberg (1997) to enable an analysis of socially situated storytelling. From
280 a narratological perspective, narrative *is* social action. When politicians use storytelling, and in
281 particular the stories of others, to promote their particular political agenda, they are acting *on* the
282 future as they seek to influence voters' actions *in* the future. However, this also raises a set of ethical
283 questions regarding ownership and authenticity, which mirrors some of the concerns in the
284 contributions by Peirce and colleagues and by Esin and Lounasmaa. How to determine the ownership
285 of stories in research, in activism and in politics (see also Shuman 2005)? Going back to the analysis
286 by Andrade & Andersen, where social inequalities were seen as conditioning narrative, this paper
287 suggests that other power differentials might also require our attention: Whose stories are seen as
288 valuable, useful or perhaps as co-optable? The social value of stories and status of storytellers –
289 whoever they are determined to be – effect its capacity to affect the future. Finally, the authors end
290 on a somewhat pessimistic note as they remind us of the power *of* stories, in this case not so much for
291 the therapeutic purposes that are indicated in the work of Peirce and colleagues but for political gain
292 in a 'post-factual' era.

293 We end the collection with a paper that helps us reflect on what future action *is* and how
294 we can investigate this empirically. Anneke Sools writes from the interdisciplinary field of future
295 studies, an arena of intense activity in which academic research ranges from brain science (the
296 physiological expressions of engaging with the unknown) to the study of science fiction narratives (a

297 history of imagining that bears the traces of changing presents). From this perspective, ‘action’ itself
298 again takes on different meanings as we are here not only engaging with the actions of research
299 participants, but also action in the form of therapeutic and pedagogic interventions and action
300 research. Sools writes about a prospective turn in research methodology, which includes her chosen
301 research method of asking research participants to write a letter from an imagined future of their own
302 choice. In the paper she explores the analytical potentials of these letters in her own research. Sools’
303 commitment to moving between psychological and sociological paradigms enables us to see how
304 profoundly different our positions around method can be. On the psychology side we have a
305 commitment to measurement as a means of building knowledge (however speculative) about how
306 humans do the work of projection into unknown futures. On the other hand we find sociologists using
307 the same texts as a route into the wider culture and into theory building about dynamic, yet resilient
308 social structures and processes that scaffold this future. Sools recognises the ‘utility’ of future-
309 oriented methodologies, available to us for therapeutic and political work, but also as techniques of
310 the self that can glean value from our anxieties about uncertain futures.

311 In closing, we wish to highlight the diversity of the contributions in this Special Issue,
312 and the multiple interpretations of both ‘narrative’ and ‘action’ that have come to the fore. Working
313 together, with narrative as our boundary object, has enabled us and the contributors to develop new
314 insights, approaches and methods that can add to the literature on narrative and prospective social
315 action. We have moved between close and distant readings of interview material, scaling narratives
316 and narrative analysis up and down. The analyses in the papers have demonstrated the power of stories
317 in not only imagining or narrating but also starting to craft futures, individual as well as collective.
318 As these futures are increasingly precarious, the need for methodologies and methods that can unpack,
319 scrutinise and engage with them is all the more clear. Importantly, the relationship between narrative
320 and social action is not only the terrain of the academic researcher. In a political culture increasingly

321 characterised by populism and ‘fake news’, the promotion of emotionally engaged ‘what if’
322 speculative thinking may be a critical practice of citizenship.

323 Our special issue comes together at a time where stories of climate change are calling
324 individuals across the globe to gather, protest and demand political action. These events attest to the
325 contemporary importance of world-wide, collective storytelling. As the quote prefacing this editorial
326 points out, we each consider the question ‘What am I to do?’ by considering the kind of story we find
327 ourselves in. If we find ourselves part of a dystopian story of irreversible climate breakdown will
328 efforts to do anything appear futile? Will locating ourselves in a heroic story of global activism
329 fighting ‘big evils’ change our everyday behaviour? At the moment of writing this editorial, we know
330 the horror stories about climate change that circulate worldwide. Time will tell how these influence
331 prospective social action in our individual lives as well as collective futures.

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