

# 3

## Thematic Analysis

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What do we think a narrative means? What information is communicated that can aid exploration of our study issue? All narrative inquiry is, of course, concerned with content—“what” is said, written, or visually shown—but in thematic analysis, content is the exclusive focus. The general approach is probably the most common method of narrative analysis and, arguably, the most straightforward and appealing in applied settings. Many studies in nursing and other health occupations (including those influenced by interpretive phenomenology and hermeneutics) have implicitly adapted the approach to uncover and categorize thematically patients’ experiences of illness.<sup>1</sup> Thematic narrative analysis is akin to what scholars in folklore and history use with archival data. It is often confused with grounded theory in the qualitative methods literature. There are key differences that I develop more fully at the end of the chapter but, to note an obvious one, narrative scholars keep a story “intact” by theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases.

The chapter articulates specific features of thematic narrative analysis by working through selected exemplars that use oral and written data. (A similar approach to visual data is discussed in Chapter 6.) I make explicit how particular scholars did their work, that is, how they thematically analyze narrative materials. Because the candidate exemplars are extremely different (in kinds of data, theoretical perspective, epistemological position, research questions, even in definition of narrative), students looking for a set of rules will be disappointed. Instead, my objective is to excavate concrete practices or ways of working with narrative data where primary attention is on “what” is said,

rather than “how,” “to whom,” or “for what purposes.” The exemplars are diverse in other respects. Several researchers come from university settings in the United Kingdom with ongoing programs in narrative inquiry, reflecting the international and multidisciplinary scope of the field. Two of the exemplars use research interviews as data, another draws on documents, and another combines ethnographic observation with analysis of interviews and published biographical accounts. The diversity illustrates how the thematic approach is suited to a wide range of narrative texts; thematic analysis can be applied to stories that develop in interview conversations and group meetings, and those found in written documents. Several exemplars illustrate how stories can have effects beyond their meanings for individual storytellers, creating possibilities for social identities, group belonging, and collective action.

Adapting Mishler’s distinction, the research featured in this chapter focuses almost exclusively on the “told”—informants’ reports of events and experiences, rather than aspects of “the telling.”<sup>2</sup> Data are interpreted in light of thematics developed by the investigator (influenced by prior and emergent theory, the concrete purpose of an investigation, the data themselves, political commitments, and other factors). There is minimal focus on *how* a narrative is spoken (or written), on structures of speech a narrator selects, audience (real and imagined), the local context that generated the narrative, or complexities of transcription (issues discussed in Chapter 2). These are taken up in other approaches described in chapters to follow.

Turning to the four exemplars, I begin with the questions that frame each study, summarize briefly the general findings, and then focus intensely on methods—the pragmatic steps each researcher took to thematically interpret their data (not always fully described in the published work). Drawing on points I made in earlier chapters, I interrogate each exemplar in light of four issues: (1) how the concept of narrative is used; (2) how data are constructed into text for analysis with attention to language and form, if present; (3) the unit of analysis (or focus) in each investigation; and (4) the investigator’s attention to contexts, local to societal (micro and macro). I address these foci as I move through each exemplar, summarizing in Table 3.1 at the end. The chapter concludes with some general observations and questions about thematic analysis.

## Working With Interviews

The sociologists’ work that is featured can be contrasted on the dimension of time, specifically when and where each article appeared in the history of the “narrative turn” in the human sciences. Gareth Williams (from the U.K.)

published his research in 1984 in a British medical sociology journal, anticipating (and shaping in key ways) the emerging area of narrative inquiry that was to flower several years later. Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey (from the U.S.) published their narrative article in 2003 in a general top-tier sociology journal (*American Journal of Sociology*) that in recent decades has published little qualitative work, let alone narrative work; they could take full advantage of more than twenty years of narrative scholarship (and a supportive journal editor). I take up each exemplar in turn.

## 1. A Study of Illness Narrative

Gareth Williams uses thematic methods to analyze interviews about illness.<sup>3</sup> Building on prior theoretical work by British sociologist Michael Bury and others,<sup>4</sup> he develops the concept of narrative reconstruction, meaning the imaginative work individuals do when chronic illness disrupts the expected life course. Not unlike the issue I explored in my infertility research, Williams asks how individuals explain and account for the biographical disruption of rheumatoid arthritis. He argues that beliefs about the causes of misfortune are human interpretive practices, and meet our need to narratively reconstruct discontinuities in an imagined biography (continuing the ancient tradition of reflecting on origin and purpose, or *telos*).

Williams conducted and tape-recorded thirty interviews with individuals who had been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. Many interviewees told long stories in response to Williams's brief and simple question, "Why do you think you got arthritis?" They expanded on the stories as the research relationship developed. Williams then constructs three case studies to illustrate the process of making sense of the genesis of disability. Cases were not selected to be representative statistically, but instead to develop a theoretical argument: the arrival of chronic illness initiates a process of cognitive reorganization—meaning-making. Individuals revealed through their stories different attempts "to establish points of reference between body, self, and society and to reconstruct a sense of order from the fragmentation produced by chronic illness."<sup>5</sup> They "reaffirm the impression that life has a course and the self has a purpose or *telos*."<sup>6</sup> (Negative cases are not presented, that is, biographical accounts in which narrative reconstruction doesn't occur, are resisted or remain incomplete.)

The three cases illustrate marked variation in individuals' interpretation of the genesis of the same disease. While the interpretations are different, each narrator rejects (in a different way) simple medical formulations of etiology. To help illustrate this, the interview material is quoted extensively. For instance, to account for why his biography has been disrupted, one narrator

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(“Bill”) develops a story that connects his job as a factory worker and foreman (“working gaffer”) with the onset of symptoms:

I was a working gaffer . . . but, you know, they were mostly long hours and the end result, in 1972, was every time I had a session like, my feet began to swell and my hands began to swell. I couldn’t hold a pen, I had difficulty getting between machines and difficulty getting hold of things.

As Bill relates the subsequent events of his life—referrals to doctors, blood tests, hospitalization—he explicitly connects work and illness:

I didn’t associate it with anything to do with the works [factory] at the time, but I think it was chemically induced. I worked with a lot of chemicals, acetone and what have you. We washed our hands in it, we had cuts, and we absorbed it. Now, I’ll tell you this because it seems to be related. The men that I worked with who are all much older than me—there was a crew of sixteen and two survived, myself and the gaffer that was then—and they all complained of the same thing, you know, their hands started to pull up. It seems very odd.

Doctors dismissed his hypothesis about workplace toxicity, pursuing instead a genetic hypothesis to explain his illness:

I was assured by them [the doctors] that this is what it was, it was arthritis. Now, it just got worse, a steady deterioration, and I put it down that it was from the works. But with different people questioning me at the hospital, delving into the background, my mother had arthritis and my little sister, she died long before the war, 1936/7, and she had not arthritis, just rheumatism and that naturally did for her.

Bill refuses the medical explanation of genetic transmission and, as he returns later in the interview to the topic of the workplace, he picks up the theme of toxic exposure:

But thinking back to the way the other blokes were who are now gone, so we can’t ask them, and what I remember of them, they more or less came to it in the same manner . . . I wasn’t in there with them all the time, I was travelling between floors so I was coming out of it and getting fresh air and washing more frequently than they did. So this is something to do with it.

Bill’s causal narrative also includes a graphic description of the physical decline of a fellow worker. He develops a political critique of exploitative social relations where workers were the victims of injustice and neglect. Williams notes that the company eventually accepted some degree of liability, and paid compensation to surviving dependents.

I reproduced Bill's full narrative account as Williams presents it to make an essential point about his analytic method. Williams does not fracture the biographical account into thematic categories as grounded theory coding would do, but interprets it as a whole. Given his focus on the imagined genesis of illness, he roots Bill's explanatory account in political criticism, for he "linked his own demise with that of others, transcended the particulars of his own illness, and redefined his personal trouble as a public issue."<sup>7</sup> The sociologist brings prior theory to bear to interpret the case (in this instance, C. Wright Mills<sup>8</sup>).

Williams uses a similar thematic approach with the biographical narratives of two others in his sample to uncover strikingly different explanations for the genesis of arthritis. One is rooted in everyday understandings from social psychology (stress and hardship associated with a woman's place in the modern world), and the other is rooted in religious beliefs (the mysterious working of God's will). Each of the three case studies serves to thicken Williams's theoretical argument: "narrative reconstruction is an attempt to reconstitute and repair ruptures between body, self, and world." Individuals confront the assault of a major chronic illness by "linking up and interpreting different aspects of biography in order to realign present and past and self and society."<sup>9</sup> Analysis interprets and compares biographies as they are constituted in the research interviews.

Williams's implicit definition of narrative (it is never explicitly defined) is the biography as a whole, and specifically the story of the illness that unfolds over the course of a single interview. The definition is inclusive, referring to all speech that relates to the illness and typical of one strand of work in the thematic narrative tradition. The investigator works with a single interview at a time, isolating and ordering relevant episodes into a chronological biographical account. After the process has been completed for all interviews, the researcher zooms in, identifying the underlying assumptions in each account and naming (coding) them. Particular cases are then selected to illustrate general patterns—range and variation—and the underlying assumptions of different cases are compared. Williams is not interested in distribution (e.g., how many individuals rely on "political" as compared with "religious" or "social/psychological" explanations), although other researchers have used thematic narrative analysis to do that. Instead, he seeks to map the contours of the interpretive process that happen with biographical disruption—*telos*.

Williams reproduces excerpts or segments (some fairly lengthy, from the long interview narratives) that are interspersed in the written report with his interpretation, theoretical formulation, and references to prior theory. Speech quoted from interviews is "cleaned up" to some degree, for his texts erase dysfluencies, break-offs, interviewer utterances, and other common features

of interview conversations. In thematic narrative analysis, emphasis is on “the told”—the events and cognitions to which language refers (the content of speech). Consequently, “messy” spoken language is transformed to make it easily readable. Although ambiguity remains, the investigator does not explore it, assuming a reader will “fill in” and make sense of the main point.<sup>10</sup>

Investigators in the thematic narrative tradition typically pay little attention to how a story unfolds in a conversational exchange or the questioner’s role in constituting it. In other words, readers usually learn little about the local context—conditions of production of a narrative. Consequently, in the written report, it appears that a biographical account emerges “full blown” from the “self” of the narrator, rather than in conversation between a teller and a particular listener/questioner. Issues of audience, and the subtle give and take between speakers as they make meaning together, slip away. The active participation of interviewer, transcriber, and analyst disappear from writing. Ironically, Williams’s use of an open research interview is consistent with Mishler’s general approach to narrative interviewing (presented in Chapter 2), but insights about the co-construction process are erased in the written report. Bill’s account, for example, is presented as if it came out of a vessel, uncontaminated by human interaction.

Williams does attend to the research relationship briefly in one of the three case studies. He is conversing with a woman who has rheumatoid arthritis and he notes that her medical vocabulary (“virus”) provides a “shared concept and a common understanding.” He contrasts this with another comment, by the same woman, that he “couldn’t understand.” Her model for the genesis of her illness—the stress of womanhood—“was not something I could possibly have encompassed with my social experience.”<sup>11</sup> With this fleeting acknowledgment, Williams locates himself in the interview and interpretative context, rather than pretending he wasn’t there (customary in studies using thematic analysis).

Although attention to local contexts is minimal, Williams attends in a sustained way to broader contexts that shaped the “personal” accounts. Individuals’ varying explanations for the genesis of illness draw on and, in turn, reinforce specific discourses—ordinary citizens’ beliefs about the unjust workings of the world. A causal narrative about motherhood and stress leading to illness, and another about workplace toxicity, are firmly rooted in a particular history and industrial culture—the twentieth century Western world of late modernity. In his interpretive commentary about each case, Williams tacks back and forth between his respondents’ theorizing about inequality and broader social structures that weigh heavily on their lives.

Lastly, how does Williams attend to narrative form and language choice? Because interest in thematic analysis lies in the content of speech, he interprets

what is said in interviews by assuming meanings for an utterance that any competent user of the language would bring. In thematic narrative analysis (and in other thematic coding methods), language is viewed as a resource, rather than a topic of inquiry. In this respect, the approaches can mimic objectivist modes of analysis where themes appear to be unmediated by an investigator's theoretical perspective, interests, mode of questioning, and personal characteristics. Again, however, Williams fleetingly hints at complexities of language choice, drawing the reader's attention, for example, to metaphors that might be overlooked. For instance, in one case study, a participant "brings into play two metaphors, one religious and one mechanical, to suggest the inevitability of illness in society."<sup>12</sup> Williams "unpacks" the metaphors, exploring their functions in the narrative text—analogous meanings they may carry.

Although attending occasionally to particular word choices, thematic analysts generally do not attend to language, form, or interaction. In these ways, thematic narrative analysis is similar to grounded theory. The second exemplar illustrates the general pattern where the primary focus is on "what" is said, rather than "how" or "to whom" and for "what purpose."

## 2. Stories of Resistance to Legal Authority

Published in 2003, the study examines the problem of citizen resistance to authority. The authors, Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey, are North American sociologists interested in the role of law in everyday life, for the law has an extended hegemonic reach in the contemporary United States. While collecting data for a large survey on law in the lives of ordinary Americans, the authors were told "thousands of stories, some of which were stories of resistance to legal authority."<sup>13</sup> After their book was completed in 1998 (it relied on survey questions and a few open-ended items) the authors returned to the stories to inquire how persons in less powerful subordinate positions resist the law in "small acts of defiance." The investigators wondered, when greater power lies with others, how individuals in conflict situations at work and in the community develop "underlives" and engage in oppositional action. The research builds on and extends prior theory from social history, labor studies, sociology, and feminist studies, which articulates hidden, mundane everyday resistance practices that individuals employ to challenge oppressive social structures.<sup>14</sup>

The exemplar models a way of working carefully and systematically with stories about ordinary events to unmask how sociological concepts work in everyday life. Complex and fluid relations of power are made visible in Ewick and Silbey's analysis (topics essential to social movement theory), which help individuals and groups understand their situations, and engage in subversive

actions to disturb social structures, or “impede the routine exercise of power.” The authors posit that the narratives about resistance practices can have more power than the subversive act itself (i.e., actions reported in the narrative) by mobilizing others. The work emphasizes the social change potential of personal narrative noted in Chapter 1.

The paper begins by articulating a compelling relational theory of power that draws on Foucault and others but (in contrast to much macro sociology theorizing) seeks to include the thoughts and actions of actors, that is, individual agency. Individuals’ acts of resistance invoke a reaction in the speaker, which can be considered “a consciousness of being less powerful in a relationship of power” and a “consciousness of opportunity” to challenge the powerful.<sup>15</sup> Acts of resistance make “claims about justice and fairness” and, because actions are typically “institutionally indecipherable,” they are “officially unreadable,” that is, they do not break the law in a narrow sense.<sup>16</sup> With this strong theoretical framework (which can be only cursorily summarized here), the investigators return to the interviews to look for acts of resistance (their unit of analysis) that took the form of stories. A subset of 141 interviews from the larger sample was then transcribed in full. As is typical in narrative analysis, sampling was purposeful, not random as Ewick and Silbey clarify, “Because . . . [the] principal analytical goal in this part of the project was not to generalize to the population but to interpret the meaning and function of stories embedded in interviews,” the subsample was selected based on familiarity with the case and the “richness of the interview (in terms of length and degree of detail).”<sup>17</sup> The investigators used trained interviewers, and they conducted some interviews themselves.

Interview questions and probes inquired about problems and events that people might see as legal (vandalism, work-related accidents), and others less connected to traditional legal categories (division of household labor, obtaining needed medical care or schooling for a child)—instances where “a person might, if they chose, assert a legal right, entitlement, or status.” Respondents, rather than answering “yes” or “no” in response to a list of possible problems in a survey item, told “dozens of stories” about small moments when they got the better of an oppressive system.

The investigators then identified a set of stories that met specific criteria: acts had to be intentional and purposeful, where a “reversal of power” was the goal of a participant’s actions. “To identify stories of resistance, we examined whether the narrative described an opportunity to avoid the consequences of relative disadvantage,”<sup>18</sup> paying particular attention to the means through which resistance actions were achieved. After selecting stories that met their criteria they coded them, categorizing the different “means” actors used to get out from under a position of relative disadvantage. Working with



well-defined criteria and a sizable sample of incidents, they then grouped the stories and constructed a typology of resistance practices. The typology includes the masquerade (where the actor is playing with roles in the story), rule literalness (playing with rules), disrupting hierarchy (playing with stratification), foot-dragging (playing with time), and colonizing space. Ewick and Silbey relate the typology to their prior theory of power and, as they present and interrogate the stories, the theory is complicated and qualified.

Below is a story told by a respondent (“Sophia Silva”) about the tactic of colonizing space in a department store, which she subsequently taught to a young mother having difficulty getting service one day:

I was in Sears one day, and this young girl was there with all these children around her. . . . She had bought a vacuum cleaner like a week before and it did not work, and they were telling her to mail it back [to the manufacturer]. . . . And she was distraught. I said to her, “Don’t you move.” I said, “You stay there, you’ll have to stay two or three hours until they give you a new one.” And I kept coming back to check, and they did give her a new one.<sup>19</sup>

Another woman used the same tactic—a kind of informal “sit in”—to advocate for her son’s special needs in a high school when his requests were being ignored:

My son wasn’t getting any place [trying to obtain a copy of his transcript]. So one morning, I got up and I dressed nicely. Not jeans, but I got dressed nicely. And, I went to school with him at 7:30 in the morning and I went to the guidance waiting room and I sat in the chair and I said I’m going to sit here until I talk to him [the official]. And when he walked in and realized I was sitting with my son—because he recognized my son—he was very friendly. . . . So I got results. . . . But I feel that if I hadn’t done that he’d probably, he may have missed out on the only school he wanted to go to, because they weren’t sensitive to his needs. So I don’t like to have to interfere like that but I learned back in elementary school when other mothers used to do it, and I used to be the type who didn’t say much and sat back, that other parents were getting what their kids needed for them. . . . So I had to change my ways and I had to start speaking up.<sup>20</sup>

Note that Ewick and Silbey’s conception of narrative contrasts sharply with the previous exemplar. The “story” here refers to a brief, bounded segment of interview text, rather than an extended biographical account. Their unit of analysis is the particular act of resistance. Like Williams, the authors “clean up” spoken language to construct an unambiguous plot line, using ellipses ( . . . ) to indicate deleted speech. Unlike Williams, the textual stories

are short, with clear beginnings, middles, and ends. For example, Sophia Silva, in the incident about the defective vacuum, begins with a classic story introducer, "I was in Sears one day . . ."; she develops the middle of her story with a sequence of observations of a "distraught" young woman surrounded by her children, carrying a defective vacuum, who Sophia instructed to stay put; in the middle section she carries the plot forward over the next several hours ("I kept coming back to check"); she ends the story by resolving the plot ("and they did give her a new one"). Consistent with the investigators' theoretical interest, the stories Ewick and Silbey present resolve positively, that is, each act of resistance effects a desired change, however small, in the established order of things from the narrator's standpoint. As readers, we may wonder about negative instances (resistance actions are not always successful), just as in the Williams exemplar we might wonder about cases where biographical reconstruction did not take place.

Ewick and Silbey, like others who use thematic narrative analysis, are not generally interested in the form of the narrative, only its thematic meanings and "point." Interrogating the particular language a speaker selects is not relevant to their purpose; focus is on the act the narrative reports and the moral of the story. Exploration of the interpersonal conditions and "local" production of a story is irrelevant to the aims (although the authors acknowledge greater familiarity with some interviews, perhaps because they conducted them, and they acknowledge that narratives are "constructed interactively—with an audience and context"<sup>21</sup>). Readers learn little about the lives of individual narrators, except in relation to categories of power and subordination in the investigators' interpretive schema (e.g., the class, race, and gender positioning of the narrator). The authors frame a story of resistance in terms of the actor's one-down position (e.g., the mother of the youngster in the excerpt above was working class; she needed a school transcript from the guidance department of a "snooty" school). Like other researchers using thematic narrative analysis to interpret a large number of cases, local contexts tend to get eclipsed. Stories are presented as if they dropped from the sky, with interview excerpts contextualized only in relation to social structures of power. Readers, then, must assume that themes have similar meanings across narratives and narrators; they "transcend the subjective and the particular."<sup>22</sup> In these subtle ways, the analytic approach of Ewick and Silbey shares some features with the category-centered approach of grounded theory: primary interest is in generating thematic categories across individuals, even as individual stories are preserved and grouped, and the work is located in the narrative research tradition.

The exemplar illustrates a way of working with narrative data that will appeal to many sociologists who encounter stories in interviews. With a strong theory as a resource, an investigator can link everyday, seemingly insignificant acts that people engage in (e.g., refusing to leave a store until

a defective item has been replaced) with social change processes (e.g., resisting power and authority). Telling a story “makes the moment live beyond the moment.”<sup>23</sup> Stories function to alter the ways we view mundane everyday events. Stories can indeed accomplish change.

The final two exemplars in the chapter move away from sole reliance on interviews to show how thematic narrative analysis has been employed to interpret documents, and how it is also used in ethnographic work.

## Working With Archival Documents

Thematic analysis is the usual approach to letters, diaries, auto/biographies<sup>24</sup>—documents historians and biographers draw on. When social scientists analyze archival materials in relation to a question, they tend to provide little information about how they work. Readers encounter compelling findings, but learn little about the circuitous route an investigator took to produce them. I selected the exemplar below because I was able to talk extensively with Maria Tamboukou, the author, about details that are only hinted at in her published work.

A sociologist, she examined life writings of women teachers in late nineteenth century England.<sup>25</sup> Given the occupational group’s pivotal position in women’s move beyond the domestic sphere, Tamboukou was interested in how women teachers thought about and imaged space. She asks how geographic and existential spaces are inscribed in women’s subjectivities. How do they live and experience familiar spaces and reinvent themselves in new spaces? Like Ewick and Silbey in the previous exemplar, Tamboukou turned to personal stories because they can embody theoretical abstractions—sociological concepts are enacted as individuals talk and write. Building on Foucault’s theorizing about space, power, and genealogy, she worked “with grey dusty documents, looking for insignificant details . . . discourses and practices that human beings [take up] . . . to make sense of themselves and the world.”<sup>26</sup> Letters provided fertile primary data, and she interrogated the pages to understand the constitution of the female self—how women negotiate the “thematics of space” in self-writings.<sup>27</sup> The researcher discovered how the freedom of imagined spaces and the material reality of other spaces were important for women teachers working within the confines of gender during the late nineteenth century. These meanings were often encoded in brief narrative segments in women’s long letters about their daily lives.

To examine the subjectivities of women teachers regarding space and place, Tamboukou began her research by reading available auto/biographies to gain general contextual knowledge about the times. Moving then to published letters and other archival materials, she made personal copies of relevant

letters of women teachers, and read them at a surface level, drawing on Foucault's ideas: "instead of going deep, looking for origins and hidden meanings, the analyst is working on the surface, constructing [angles rather than many sides, noting] various minor processes that surround the emergence of an event."<sup>28</sup> During this nominal level of analysis, Tamboukou circles and highlights words and phrases that strike her. Regarding references to space in the letters, particular verbs appeared and reappeared, such as "go out," "get out," "be out," "spread my wings," "run away," and "leave."<sup>29</sup>

She then reads the documents again with spatial categories in mind, looking in the texts for additional statements that relate in a general way to the larger concept. As themes emerge during the process, the investigator interrogates them historically, using "discursive constructs of historical contingencies" that individual women might have questioned and reversed.<sup>30</sup> In the letters of teachers, for example, Tamboukou looked for statements about confinement and escape; these were received concepts for the sociologist (learned from prior feminist work), but related to her nominal analysis. The confinement in the home of white middle-class women in *fin de siecle* Europe and America is well established, as is the symbolism of travel—escape. How did women teachers experience confinement? Did they long to travel and, if so, how were these themes expressed in self-writings? Tamboukou finds ample evidence: "women's self-writings present selves on the move, always attempting to go beyond the boundaries of their families, their locality, their town or city and, in some cases, their country."<sup>31</sup> In these ways women constructed counter-narratives,<sup>32</sup> bending colonial practices and ideologies about women's proper place. Teachers during the period were positioned at a border between private and public worlds; because of school vacations, travel was possible for some, and could be only imagined by others.

The investigator confronted puzzles and paradoxes in the documents. Reading letters and autobiographical writings for spatial references, she came upon seemingly contradictory statements. Women wanted to "escape" enclosed spaces, and they wanted "a room." They wanted to get away from home, and they wanted a space of their own in it. The paradox sent the investigator to the library, where she discovered other scholarship that forced her to critically interrogate her thematic categories—who might they exclude? Black feminist scholars, for example, had written about home as a safer place for African American women during the same historical period. Thematic analysis then gained specificity. (What household space meant to white working-class women in England might also have been interrogated.)

Library reading sent the investigator to other documents in archives. Reading about the origins of the first women's college at Cambridge University (Girton, which opened in 1871), Tamboukou learned that each woman

was given, in addition to a bedroom, another room, described as “a small sitting-room to herself, where she will be free to study undisturbed, and to enjoy at her discretion the companionship of friends of her own choice.”<sup>33</sup> The writer of these words, Emily Davis, as she was preparing Girton College for its opening, realized that “the power of being alone” could be a distinctive feature of college life for women. Discovering Cambridge University documents about the allocation of space by gender (male students were not given two rooms) invigorated Taboukou’s thematic analysis, reinforcing ideas she had begun to develop while working with the letters.

Knowledge about “the room” informed subsequent coding of narrative segments in letters and other documents written by women teachers, most of whom would never experience the privilege of Cambridge University. For example, Molly Hughes came from a lower-middle-class family to attend a teacher training college, writing about the moment later in her autobiography:

When my trunk was landed, I was shown my room. This was some twelve feet square on the ground-floor, with one small window flush with the pavement, a narrow bed, a scrap of carpet, a basket chair, one upright chair and a bureau. A fire crackled in the hearth. “Is this *mine?*” cried I in ecstasy (emphasis in original).<sup>34</sup>

“The room” became a central concept as the investigator interrogated the autobiographies and letters again. Tamboukou discovered that the documents were filled with spatial drawings that provided meticulous and enthusiastic detail about spaces where women found solitude and independence, and where they could invite others on their own terms. Theorizing from these materials, Tamboukou interprets “vocabularies of space” as ways that women could imagine themselves differently from their confined positions in the bourgeois family. Well before Virginia Woolf wrote her influential lecture about “a room of one’s own,” the theme was circulating among women. It was also an established housing policy in the women’s colleges of Cambridge University.

Turning to my four questions, the definition of narrative that Tamboukou employs needs some explication. Individual letters took many forms, not all of them narrative. Some women simply reported news, without evaluation. Other letters were little more than lists of questions they hoped the recipient would answer by return mail. Some women, however, developed storied accounts in individual letters about important moments. Additionally, as other biographical researchers do, Tamboukou treats the entire epistolarium narratively, for lines of women’s lives can be traced across letters.

Below is an extract from a letter written in 1902 by Winifred Mercier, a woman teacher who became a leader in the British reform movement of teacher training colleges, to her friend and fellow teacher, Jean Borland.<sup>35</sup>

[W]ouldn't you like to go to America, Canada or the great wide west? Where perhaps there might be more chance of finding out what manner of being you were?—where there is more room, more freedom, and one is not so hide-bound by conventions—where you could get nearer the soil, and as I said before not be stifled by artificialities and habits and conventions, your own and other people's. Oh wouldn't you like it, wouldn't you? Wouldn't you?

The poignant utopian narrative about longing for space is written in a hypothetical form.<sup>36</sup> It recounts a sequence of actions that *hasn't* occurred, but for which the writer fervently wishes. Because Tamboukou wants to make theoretical claims across her subjects about confinement and escape, she (like Ewick and Silbey) does not examine form and language choice. In the excerpt above, for example, one might theorize the meanings of North America (the “wide west,” the “soil”) for British women toiling in small classrooms in the polluted urban environments of early twentieth century England. Or, one might interrogate particular phrases, such as “artificialities and habits and conventions” from which the letter writer wants freedom, but which (she wisely sees) are both “your own and other people's”, that is, self-imposed restrictions and cultural ones. As in previous exemplars in the chapter, there is little attention to local context. But future investigators could ask, where in the overall letter did a story appear? Who was the audience and what was the relationship between writer and recipient? Micro contexts need not slip away entirely when the goal is broad theoretical generalization.

Epistolary narrative (a corpus of letters) is a potentially rich resource for social scientists interested in biographical experience. Like those developed during research interviews, these stories have an embodied subject and recipient. Audience—the relationship between writer and recipient—can be brought to bear in interpretation.<sup>37</sup> Unlike spoken interview data however, a letter does not require textual transformation.

To summarize, Tamboukou's thematic analysis is careful and methodical. She begins by educating herself about contexts: her subjects' lives and times (biographical reading), and theoretical work that bears on the study issue (e.g., social theory about space and power). Examination of self-writings with thematic categories begins at a surface level. Classifying statements from letters into thematic groups is theory-saturated from the beginning. (Note the difference from grounded theory coding here, where a priori concepts are discouraged.) The investigator tacks back and forth between primary data and the scholarship of others, checking what she is seeing in the self-writings (e.g., themes of escape and traveling) against concepts others have elaborated (e.g., “narratives of elsewhere” in women's writing). A theme may emerge from reading a primary source, but it needs to be supported with other historical materials (e.g., “the room” at Girton College). Material from other sources

enlivens an emerging theme and complicates it. The investigator is sensitive to seemingly unimportant issues in the materials, topics that the women themselves might take for granted (e.g., the geography of a room). Submerged aspects of women's subjectivities, thus, can come to life.

Discoveries about women's complex relations to space and place have opened up topics that continue to preoccupy Tamboukou, as readers will see in Chapter 6 where I feature her work in the visual narrative tradition; she examines the images, letters, and biography of the Welsh painter, Gwen John.<sup>38</sup> From letters, Tamboukou learned that Gwen John lived in Paris surrounded by cats. Tamboukou later told me, "I hate cats, I never thought I'd be writing about them." This is a small indicator of the detours, surprises, and disorderly trail implicated sometimes in thematic narrative analysis.

The final exemplar features a narrative study that integrates diverse kinds of data (documents, interviews, and observations).

## Working Ethnographically

In the last twenty years, narrative concepts and methods have increasingly informed ethnographic research.<sup>39</sup> I selected an exemplar from a large corpus of possible work because of its relevance for students: Carole Cain was a doctoral candidate in anthropology when she published her study of "identity acquisition" among members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).<sup>40</sup> The exemplar provides a suitable bookend to a chapter that has featured diverse sorts of data. The author used thematic methods to interrogate documents, group meetings, and interview narratives.

Like Williams in the first exemplar, Cain studied individuals who had experienced great personal difficulty, but her interest was in the development of group identity. She asks, how does a person learn to be an alcoholic in Alcoholics Anonymous, that is, how does the cultural knowledge of the organization become self-knowledge for an initiate member? Put differently, how is a group identity created and sustained?

To explore the social construction of identity, Cain analyzed and related three kinds of data: (1) written documents published by the AA organization (diverse pamphlets and the *Big Book*); (2) field notes from her observations of open meetings at three AA groups; and (3) transcripts of taped interviews with individuals she met at AA meetings.<sup>41</sup> Narrative was everywhere as members reconstructed the past with "one device in particular . . . telling personal stories."<sup>42</sup> Stories also pervaded the organization's literature, dominated the AA meetings she observed, and her interviews with members. About the observational and interview data, she writes:

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I heard stories told in three settings: discussion meetings, speakers' meetings, and interviews. In some cases I had the chance to hear the same persons tell their personal stories, or parts of them, in more than one setting. . . . It became clear that there were regularities in the stories each person told, even as they were adapted to the different settings.<sup>43</sup>

Cain also sensed similarities between the spoken narratives and the written ones (in documents, such as the *Big Book* and shorter pamphlets). Detailed study of each data source followed. What precisely was similar and different?

Working first with the written texts from AA documents (which contained forty-six accounts of drinking), she did careful textual analysis, "for each paragraph noting main points, what episodes and events were included, and what propositions were made about alcohol, self, and AA. I sketched the overall structure of each story."<sup>44</sup> (By "overall structure," I interpret Cain to mean the broad storyline, including episodes and turning points in the plot.) Cain identified propositions that reappeared in the form of thematic assumptions taken for granted by the teller/writer. For example, alcoholism is seen as a progressive "disease," the alcoholic is "powerless" over alcohol, the alcoholic drinker is "out of control," AA is for "those who want it," and, "AA is a program for living, not just for not drinking." The propositions "enter into stories as guidelines for describing the progression of drinking, the desire and inability to stop, the necessity of 'hitting bottom' before the program can work, and the changes that take place in one's life after joining AA."<sup>45</sup> Certain episodes reappeared in predictable sequences: taking the first drink, the negative effects of drinking, progression of drinking, suggestion (by others) that drinking may be a problem, denial, attempts to control drinking, entering AA, giving AA an honest try, and becoming sober. In the language of thematic analysis, Cain found a common pattern of embedded assumptions, and also a common sequence of episodes—a kind of overarching master narrative, as some would call it.<sup>46</sup> She located many local instances of this storyline. There was variation, of course, depending on the audience for a given pamphlet (a drinker, a family member, or another audience).

Next, Cain examined her field notes, comparing the stories told in AA discussion group and speakers' meetings to the stories in the organization's literature. There were marked similarities in the form noted in the documents and that which was repeated by speakers. The episodes in the spoken stories at meetings were also thematically familiar, though the sequence of the plot was often telescoped, and the narrative shortened. Field notes revealed that the drinking history of individual members followed the biographical storyline in the AA literature, and contained its basic propositions about drinking.

Finally, Cain applied the thematic categories she was developing to narratives recorded in interviews with three AA members whom she had met at



meetings. Like Williams's research, the narrative interviews began with a broad question asking each person to tell about their "drinking experiences." "Beyond this [opening question] I tried not to direct the narrative until it reached what seemed to be a natural ending."<sup>47</sup> Two of Cain's three informants "seemed to have a clear concept of a set of episodes that constituted a response to my request" and these two narratives closely paralleled the model AA story—the storyline and propositions of the master narrative she had found in AA literature. There was interesting variation however, in that one informant (who had been sober for fourteen years) very closely approximated the AA story structure, while the other informant (who had been sober for two years) told a drinking story that was not as fully reinterpretive, deviating from the AA storyline at key points. The third informant did not have a fully formed narrative at all, only bits and pieces of some thematic elements (e.g., the episode of the "first drink"), and he showed little integration of propositions (e.g., alcoholism is a "disease"). This man had been in and out of AA for over twenty years, but never stayed in the program for long at each interval. He left the program a few weeks after Cain interviewed him. Analysis of the three interviews was consistent with what Cain's emerging theory would predict. One learns to be an alcoholic in AA through a process of narrative surrender, and a group identity develops over time:

I argue that as the AA member learns the AA story model, and learns to place the events and experiences of his own life into the model, he learns to tell and to understand his own life as an AA life, and himself as an AA alcoholic. The personal story is a cultural vehicle for identity acquisition.<sup>48</sup>

In coming to "perceive oneself and one's problems from an AA perspective," individuals "must learn to experience their problems as drinking problems, and themselves as alcoholics."<sup>49</sup> As Cain argues, the AA identity is neither natural nor simple to learn:

People do not describe themselves as alcoholics and their lives as alcoholic lives because this is natural and obvious; rather, they learn to tell about themselves and their lives in this way, and the process of learning can take much effort and cooperation between the neophyte and other AA members. . . . Members must agree to become tellers, as well as listeners, of AA stories.<sup>50</sup>

A group identity is made and maintained, then, in the organization through highly regulated storytelling practices.

Turning to the questions I have asked of other exemplars, how does Cain conceptualize narrative in her research? Actually, she never does define the term, but as other anthropologists do she views narrative as related to ritual, songs,

and ceremonies—cultural mediating forms that groups use to initiate and integrate new members and maintain continuity. But Cain's citations suggest she has also been influenced by sociolinguistic definitions of narrative (she cites Labov, whose work is featured in Chapter 4). She says the "drinking-experience narrative" is a "bounded unit,"<sup>51</sup> meaning, I believe, that it is a response to a question—the (typically unstated) request made of new members at AA meetings, for example ("tell us your story"). The organization's literature also refers to the "personal story," suggesting it is a recognized discursive form in AA. As Williams was in the exemplar about illness, Cain is interested in the biography of the narrator and, in a similar way, she limits analytic attention to the "life story about drinking"—bounded, but a broad enough definition to include relevant career and family changes. Her focus (and unit of analysis) differs from Williams because Cain explores the biography of the narrator only to the degree that it reveals patterns, that is, episodes in the master narrative.

Regarding representational issues, Cain decides to present types of narrative in different ways. (Remember, she has three kinds of data: written accounts from documents, her field notes from AA meetings, and the interview transcripts.) Choices about the written narratives are straightforward; Cain reproduces a text verbatim from an AA pamphlet written for young people. For example, a man called Al begins a long personal story by saying, "My drinking resulted in trouble from the very first. I was a sophomore in high school when. . . ." The story continues with a detailed description of partying, having trouble in college, a psychiatric hospitalization, realizing "alcohol had the best of me," and going to his first AA meeting. He concludes:

That was over two years ago. I have not had a drink since, one day at a time. . . . I am now back at the university, and will probably be on the dean's list this term. . . . There is a balance in my life today between studies, AA, and doing other things I enjoy.<sup>52</sup>

The text is long and cannot be reproduced in full here, but Cain does present it.<sup>53</sup> It provides evidence for her claims; a reader can evaluate its goodness of fit with the prototypic storyline that, she argues, characterizes AA documents. Her decision about how to represent stories she heard at meetings is more complicated. Cain tells readers in a long footnote about fieldwork complexities and how she resolved them:

Note-taking or tape recording during meetings would be inappropriate, so excerpts presented as quotations from meetings are reconstructions taken from notes I wrote up after each meeting. However, I believe the reconstructions to be fairly close to the original, and I have tried to both capture what was said and the contours of how it was said.<sup>54</sup>

The issue is unavoidable in sensitive research situations and Cain's strategy (to reconstruct the narratives she heard, creating summaries in field notes) is the typical solution, albeit problematic. Readers must trust the investigator's representation, blurring further the boundary between transcription and interpretation (an issue noted in Chapter 2). Cain writes that she tried to create a narrative that "capture[s] what was said and the contours of how it was said." It's impossible, of course, to "capture" the past; it is gone, and memory is always partial and selective. Below, for example, is Cain's representation of a moment constructed from her memory, encoded in field notes she made after a meeting:

One night as some members shared anecdotes about things they had done while drinking, Gary told this tale:

One morning I woke up after a night of drinking, and I thought I'd had this bad dream about running into the side of a bridge at 55 miles an hour. Then I went outside. Three inches off the side of my car were gone. And I thought, "Man, I've *got* to stop *driving*."

Was the brief narrative told in the precise way Cain represents it, with identical word choice and emphasis? Unlikely, and we will never know. All the reader has is Cain's reconstruction of what happened at the meeting. Does it really matter? Ethnographic work in the narrative tradition often rests on persuading the reader, a topic I take up in Chapter 7.

Representing the long interview narratives also presented problems for Cain; she ended up creating synopses of each interview (presenting them in an appendix). Each is several pages long and written in the third person, with an occasional direct quotation, as the following synopsis (further abbreviated by me) illustrates:

Hank begins his narration with an orientation in which he says who he is: a person who wants to educate young people about alcoholism. . . . He describes the kind of person he was before he started drinking. . . . He began to have serious physical effects from drinking, and was taken to the hospital several times. . . . Eventually, when he was in the service, he was caught drinking on the job, and had to cut back on the amounts he drank. . . . One morning he found he could not get up even after several drinks. . . . When he did get up, he found AA, although he cannot remember how he knew where to go. . . . From the morning when he contacted AA, he did not drink again for over five years. . . . Life improved, he got himself in better shape and got back together with his wife. After several years, the marriage broke up again, and in anger with his wife, he went back to drinking for another five years. He again reached a point where he had to do something about his drinking, and started back at AA. This time he went for six years without a drink. Problems in his life, and the death of his two sons led to the beginning of his third period of drinking. He began

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to drink really heavily when his second wife died. He states that this period of drinking almost killed him. He went into a deep depression for which he was hospitalized . . . he reached a point when he felt that nothing was going to save him. It was at that point that he reentered AA, 14 years before this interview. "AA has been my life ever since" . . . he decided that if he was going to live, he would have to "take the AA program, its directions, and *live* it."

"This time I decided, you know, I was gonna do it . . . that way. And part of it is, is realizing that, you know, from the beginning that I'm powerless over it."

In the rest of the interview Hank tells about different ways he has been involved in AA and about different people he has helped become sober, and how they have recovered. Cain relates at the end of her long synopsis that two years after the interview, she visited Hank again; he'd had a stroke. He remained "heavily involved with AA, and had extended his period of sobriety to over sixteen years since his last drink."<sup>55</sup>

The life story the investigator constructs is thematically compelling, despite its third person voice and distant clinical tone. Hank's biographical account could be interpreted a number of ways, depending on the theoretical orientation and interests of the analyst. For instance, a dynamically oriented psychologist might interpret connections between a series of tragic losses and his drinking, while Cain (from anthropology) interprets the text in light of group identity formation—how the speaker integrates and reproduces through narrative the cultural knowledge of the AA organization. Note that her decision to use a synopsis limits attention exclusively to thematic content. Readers have no access whatsoever to aspects of *the telling* (except sequence), only *the told*. In a similar way, use of field notes necessarily limits analytic attention to thematic content. For example, the way a new member might speak at an open AA meeting—pauses, break offs, and word-finding problems that are common in spoken discourse—cannot be included.

Regarding context, Cain's work strongly emphasizes the social forces at work in personal narrative. The author skillfully moves back and forth between individual biographies of drinkers and broader institutional frames. In AA, alcoholism is understood as a disease (not moral weakness, an expression of psychological distress, or inappropriate social conduct); individual members must groom their accounts over time, the ethnographer suggests, to conform to medicalized understandings that the organization values. She contextualizes further by showing that seeing human problems as diseases is a historically and culturally situated practice, "the general Western trend toward medicalizing deviance."<sup>56</sup> As Williams did, Cain connects biography and history, but adds organizational culture and group expectations to the mix. Regarding the local context, Cain generally leaves

herself as observer/interpreter out of the report (she was a graduate student when she published the research in 1991; the times and expectations of the university may have shaped decisions).<sup>57</sup> We don't learn much about how she gained access, nor are readers invited into the construction of the ethnography—how an anthropologist negotiated relationships, in this case with AA members and groups, whose stories she then presents.

Lastly, how does the investigator attend to narrative form and language? Cain pays careful attention to sequence—the ordering of events into a personal narrative and inclusion of particular propositions—and she finds recurrent patterns. “AA members learn to tell personal stories, and learn to fit the events and experiences of their own lives into the AA story structure. . . . Members also learn appropriate episodes to serve as evidence for alcoholic drinking, and appropriate interpretations of these episodes.”<sup>58</sup>

The work hints at the importance of narrative form and language use. Readers might wonder, for example, what happens when a story is told at an AA meeting that doesn't conform to the group narrative? Precisely how, over time, is it shaped in conversation to conform to the expected storyline? Is there resistance, and if so, how is it expressed, or does a reluctant storyteller simply drop out of the group? Focus, instead, is on the broad contours of narratives—the scaffolding. Like others working with ethnographic materials, words are taken at face value, and they call up referential meanings competent users of the language routinely accept.

## Conclusion

By working through four very different research projects, researchers can see how thematic narrative analysis generates significant findings. In each instance, prior theory serves as a resource for interpretation of spoken and written narratives. The exemplars (all strong representatives of the thematic approach) were drawn from a large number of studies that examine primarily what content a narrative communicates, rather than precisely how a narrative is structured to make points to an audience, although several studies trouble the borders here. Several exemplars (Ewick and Silbey, and Cain) suggest how stories function socially to create possibilities for group belonging and action. Future work could extend this line of inquiry, by examining, for example, how individual's stories of resistance actually generate collective action in social movements.<sup>59</sup>

A thematic approach often appeals to novice researchers who are working with narrative data for the first time. It appears intuitive and straightforward, but the exemplars show how methodical and painstaking analysis can be. The

approach is suited to many kinds of data; it can generate case studies of individuals and groups, and typologies.<sup>60</sup> Theorizing across a number of cases by identifying common thematic elements across research participants, the events they report, and the actions they take is an established tradition with a long history in qualitative inquiry.<sup>61</sup> Continuing this tradition, while also preserving narrative features, requires subtle shifts in method. Of the four approaches featured in the book, thematic narrative analysis is most similar to qualitative methods such as grounded theory and interpretive phenomenological analysis, and even approaches to data analysis not typically associated with qualitative traditions, such as oral history and folklore. But there are some differences, especially with methods of coding in grounded theory, with which narrative analysis is most often confused.<sup>62</sup>

First, the two methods differ on the place of prior concepts in the analytic process (generally eschewed in the early stages in a grounded theory study). Prior theory guided inquiry in all the narrative exemplars, at the same time as investigators also searched for novel theoretical insights from the data. Second and most important, analysts in the four exemplars preserve sequences, rather than thematically coding segments. In narrative analysis, we attempt to keep the “story” intact for interpretive purposes, although determining the boundaries of stories can be difficult and highly interpretive. In grounded theory according to Kathy Charmaz, “We take segments of data apart, name them in concise terms, and propose an analytic handle to develop abstract ideas for interpreting each segment of data.”<sup>63</sup> There is debate among grounded theorists about the significance of “fracturing” data,<sup>64</sup> but narrative analysts do strive to preserve sequence and the wealth of detail contained in long sequences. Third, most narrative investigators attend to time and place of narration and, by historicizing a narrative account, reject the idea of generic explanations. Finally, although the size of the unit of text to be coded in grounded theory can vary considerably (Charmaz describes word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident coding),<sup>65</sup> the objective is to generate inductively a set of stable concepts that can be used to theorize *across* cases. By contrast, narrative analysis is case centered (note that the “case” was the identity group in the Cain exemplar). At a fundamental level, the difference between narrative methods and grounded theory flows from this case-centered commitment.

The four exemplars I selected to include in the chapter display a wide range of methodologies within the thematic narrative tradition. The table attempts to summarize the positions of the authors on the set of key issues I posed at the beginning of the chapter and discussed throughout. There is considerable variation in how each investigator defines a narrative unit, ranging from the entire biography, or “life story,” to a bounded (spoken or written) segment

Summary Table 3.1 Thematic Analysis

<i>Author of Exemplar</i>	<i>Definition of Narrative</i>	<i>How Represented: Attention to Form and Language</i>	<i>Unit of Analysis; Focus</i>	<i>Attention to Contexts</i>
Williams (1984)	Extended account of a speaker; story of the illness	Lengthy interview excerpts; cleaned up speech; some attention to metaphors	A narrator's understanding of genesis of his/her illness	Local: minimal Societal: considerable
Ewick & Silbey (2003)	Bounded segment of interview text about an incident	Brief interview excerpt; cleaned up speech	Acts of resistance reported in personal narratives	Local: minimal Societal: considerable
Tamboukou (2003)	Bounded segment of a document about space (implicit)	Segment of document as written	Subjectivities of women teachers as they reflect on meanings of space and place	Local: minimal Societal: considerable
Cain (1991)	Life story of speaker or writer about drinking	As written (documents); Reconstructed from memory (observations); Summaries of interviews (from tapes)	The narrative primarily (recurrent episodes across narratives); the narrator secondarily	Local: minimal Societal: considerable

about a single incident. Related to this, authors represent narratives differently, constructing some from edited transcripts of interviews, and others from memories of fieldwork observations. When written narratives served as data, they were reproduced as printed. Because each author's focus was distinct, the unit of analysis in the exemplars varied. It was on the narrator in some (e.g., Williams and Tamboukou), and on the narrative in others (in

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Ewick and Silbey, and Cain). Lastly, contextual information varied. Although there was little “local” context—about audience, where a specific utterance or written narrative appears in a longer account, or the relational dimensions that produced it—there was considerable attention to macro contexts, as all the authors make connections between the life worlds depicted in personal narratives and larger social structures—power relations, hidden inequalities, and historical contingencies. Thematic narrative analysis has strengths that are lacking in the methods described in later chapters, but also limitations. Readers must assume, for example, that everyone in a thematic cluster means the same thing by what they say (or write), obscuring particularities of meaning-in-context.<sup>66</sup> The investigators’ role in constructing the narratives they then analyze (the topic of Chapter 2) tends to remain obscure. Nor is thematic narrative analysis suited to all research questions. The next chapter displays what can be gained by close attention to speech.