

# 4

## Activation

---

**N**arratives are ubiquitous. Catherine Riessman (1993, p. 54) suggests that the “impulse to narrate is . . . natural, and apparently universal.” Implying that stories are always there, just waiting to be told, she argues that they are readily available to researchers, if research procedures don’t “get in the way.” But do people just burst out with stories? Is the impulse to narrate an adequate springboard for storytelling? Recall that Stanley was quite circumspect about the matter, knowing in his fashion that if there was an impulse, it needed to be kept under control. This chapter turns to the interactional mechanisms that incite storytelling. The leading question is “How is storytelling activated in practice?” As we will show, this is far from being a matter of simply launching into storytelling.

### Orienting to Activation

Narrative work envisions the subject behind the storyteller to be an agent who skillfully crafts stories in response to the communicative demands of everyday life. While this hardly sounds radical, it differs significantly from the storytelling subject presumed in much narrative analysis. When stories are viewed as “narratives waiting to happen,” the storyteller is conceived, in broad strokes, as a repository of accounts that will emerge if only given the chance. The stories themselves are held to be the communicative property of the storytellers.

Narratives are thought to be especially revealing or informative because they are their subjects’ personal accounts—“their own stories” (Shaw, 1930).

## 42 Narrative Work

Their authenticity makes such stories special because they are thought to convey the actual circumstances and sentiments of the individual telling the story, as that individual (and only that individual) knows them to be. A kind of narrative humanism pervades this vision, casting individual accounts as genuine reflections of the lived experience retained within and recounted outwardly in relation to others, not produced in collaboration with them. The social contingencies of narration are assumed to be exogenous factors that might “get in the way” of the subject’s already-formed expressions of experience.

In contrast and in practice, the narrating subject is enmeshed in a social world. If the narratives are personal, they are worked up and conveyed with others under discernible circumstances. To be sure, storytellers have access to unique storyable material, such as biographical particulars and recollections of specific life events. But such tellable material does not constitute narrative wholes. Narratives are not a mere collection of facts held within the subject and waiting to be tapped. As short or long, simple or complex as stories can be in practice, they are generated, put together, and communicated in some fashion (see Ochs & Capps, 2001). They need to be formed, told, and heard. As a result, the facts of experience are locally configured as storytellers and listeners actively take part in discursive exchanges. Storytellers and listeners respond to concrete exigencies, configuring accounts in the give-and-take of the process.

This view of the active (and situated) narrating agent has major implications for how stories and storytellers should be approached methodologically and analytically. Narratives emerge in context—interactionally, situationally, and organizationally. In practice, narrators are the architects and builders of their stories, but they accomplish their craft interacting with other storytellers and with listeners. The narrative process—from start to finish—yields an ever-emergent, pliant product that should be treated as something more dynamic than a more or less accurate, waiting-to-be-told text. Analysis needs to orient to the interactions and circumstances of narrative production as well as to the story that is produced. In practice, narratives are social to the core.

Harvey Sacks (1992b) provides a useful framework for approaching the sociability of narratives. Sacks tells us that stories in conversation are extended turns of talk. In describing stories this way, he suggests that studying narrativity requires us to look beyond the single spate of talk that is the traditional focus of text-based narrative analysis. It requires inspection of the conversational environment of accounts, especially the mechanisms that provide interactional space for an extended utterance. While we cannot do justice here to the entire analytic framework of what has come to be called

“conversation analysis” or CA, a few rudiments will help us examine how storytelling is activated.

CA holds that “talk-in-interaction” is highly coordinated and methodically produced (see J. M. Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Heritage, 1984; Sacks, 1992a, 1992b; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973; Silverman, 1998). Conversation analysts often use the metaphor of machinery to convey the systematic way that conversation is self-organized to produce orderly communication. The metaphor suggests that conversation proceeds in an orderly, methodic fashion, one person speaking at a time, in sequences of exchanges. Turns at talk do not merely follow one after another; instead, they work together as organizational units with methodic relationships between the different units. In conversation, mutual obligations are established by the structured relations of sequenced parts, with each conversational action projecting a next turn or preferred response (Sacks, 1992a, 1992b; Whalen, 1992). Changes between speakers occur at recognizable speakership transition points, preserving single-person speakership, with orderly mechanisms for designating who will speak next. While speakership exchange does not occur automatically, conversational participants are nonetheless accountable to this normative expectancy.

Speakers usually alternate turns at talk, with one person speaking at a time. A conversation may involve several speakers, however, so transitions from one speaker to the next must be orderly or conversational disorder arises. The challenge is to seamlessly transfer speakership from a first speaker to a single next speaker. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) argue that coordinated, single-speaker turns are achieved with remarkable regularity, regardless of substantive variations in the conversation. This is even true when multiple potential speakers are involved. Turn taking is far from being extemporaneous or capricious. And it is also subject to cultural and institutional variation in turn-taking practices and normative expectations (see Drew & Heritage, 1992).

From the CA perspective, *adjacency pairs* are the building blocks of conversational organization. Schegloff and Sacks (1973) offer a simple description of how adjacency pairs operate: “Given the recognizable production of a first pair part, on its first possible completion, its speaker should stop and a next speaker should start and produce a second pair part from the pair type the first pair part is recognizably a member of” (p. 206). These sequences are normatively invariant, so that even when the second pair part is not forthcoming, the second speaker is required to show that he or she is oriented to the normative framework. When turn-taking “errors” or adjacency pair “violations” occur, participants exhibit their accountability by invoking “repair mechanisms.” For example, when more than one speaker

talks at a time, one of them may stop, recognizing the basic rule that only one person should be speaking. If speakership isn't shifted appropriately, the previous speaker may repair the sequence by speaking again, respecting the ongoing sequence-in-progress. The turn-taking system is preserved even when violations occur.

Fundamentally, CA views conversation as sequences of action. These sequences, and the exchange of turns within sequences, rather than individual utterances or sentences, are the units of analysis. Normative expectations regarding the turn-taking sequence virtually compel potential participants to pay attention to the ongoing conversation. Taking account of others means that speakers constantly orient both to what has gone before and what is likely to follow. Interactional accountability is thus achieved through the "recipient design" of one's contributions to the conversation (Sacks & Schegloff, 1979). That is, any particular turn at talk is crafted so that hearers are likely to understand what's being said and what's going on interactionally. Because speakers take one another into account, are prepared to show that they understand what is going on, and are ready to take their turns when appropriate, participants in conversation are truly partners. Conversation is a deeply collaborative enterprise.

Storytelling takes place in this sequential, collaborative, and interactional environment. As we shall see in the remainder of this chapter and in chapters to follow, narrative production requires constant orientation to both the emerging conversational context and the broader organizational matters that are themselves brought to bear in narrative production. This suggests the following guideline for orienting to the activation of storytelling:



### *Guideline*

Be alert to the communicative machinery from which stories emerge. Consider how narratives are activated in the context of ongoing talk and interaction.

## Into the Field

So how do narratives get started? How are they activated? Since, from a CA perspective, stories involve extended turns at talk, prospective storytellers are immediately obliged to secure the right to extend their turn in conversation (Schegloff, 1984). As Sacks (1992b, p. 18) puts it, a story is "an attempt to control the floor over an extended series of utterances." Contrary to the impulse-driven view of storytelling, the teller must be able to string together multiple sentences while holding the attention of listeners without having

them intrude into the conversation with anything more than signals that they are paying attention. In other words, a space for storytelling must be established in the give-and-take of social interaction. The story must “fit in”; it must take account of both what previously has been said and what will likely follow in the conversation (Jefferson, 1978). This involves getting potential next speakers, who may themselves want to speak at the first opportunity, to allow the aspiring storyteller to speak. Then the narrator must hold the floor until the story is hearably complete. All of this activity can be construed as part of the work that goes into providing and securing narrative space.

Researchers might begin by scanning a spate of interaction for conversational actions that invite or incite a story. For example, a speaker may say something at a particular moment that reminds another participant of a story, which subsequently may or may not be told. Researchers should not presume a story’s inevitable emergence. Following our guideline, they should examine the conversational environment for factors that incite or activate narrative production—or that curtail storytelling, as the case might be.

Gail Jefferson (1978) suggests a variety of mechanisms that are used to introduce or initiate a story. Most of them display a relationship between the emerging story and prior talk. They work to create a sequential environment that allows the story to emerge and establishes the appropriateness of the story’s telling. Perhaps the most straightforward way a narrative enters a conversation is by way of a direct invitation or a question. Stories are often explicitly solicited; extended narratives can be openly invited. We find this, for example, in situations where one party requests information from another. This may take place in an informal setting such as the dinner table (e.g., “Tell me about your day, honey.”) or in more formal information-gathering venues. Research interviews are a prime example, but media interviews and job interviews are similar. Indeed, interviews may be characterized in general as intentionally designed attempts to activate or incite narratives (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995a, 2000b).

Consider the following example from an interview project conducted in a nursing home. Jay, the interviewer, explicitly asks 82-year-old Rita Vandenberg to tell her life story, and the story quickly ensues.

*Jay:* Everyone has a life story. Why don’t you tell me a little bit about your life?

*Rita:* Well, there’s not much. I worked as a telephone operator before I was married. After I got married, I moved to New Jersey and had two boys. [The story continues uninterrupted, as Rita tells of her work life, her married life, her children, her extended family, her illnesses, and several other aspects of her life’s experience.] (J. F. Gubrium, 1993, p. 29)

In the context of the research interview, this explicit request clearly opened space for storytelling and granted permission for the story to emerge in an extended turn at talk. The ways in which stories are invited or incited, of course, have implications for what sort of stories develop. Hence, the study of narrative activation should carefully document the different forms of incitement as part of the narrative process. Different forms produce different stories. Consider the implications of the following interview questions for the sorts of stories that ensue.

*Example A:* Miss Mary, why don't you tell me about your life? (J. F. Gubrium, 1993, p. 76)

*Example B:* A lot of people think of their lives as having a particular course, as having gone up and down. Some people think it hasn't gone down. Some people see it as having gone in a circle. How do you see your life? (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995a, p. 47)

*Example C:* As you look back over your life, what are some of the milestones that stand out? (Kimmel, 1974, p. 116)

*Example D:* Let me ask you this. If you were writing a story of your life, what chapters would you have in your book? Like what would the first chapter be about? (J. F. Gubrium, 1993, p. 158)

Each of these queries aimed to elicit a life story. All culminated in a direct question, an invitation to narrate the respondent's life. And each succeeded in eliciting a spate of storytelling. But consider how the form of incitement—the interview question itself—served as an activation resource as well as a prompt for assembling the story in a particular way. Example A, for instance, which followed a discussion of death and disease, elicited a story of the informant's recent illnesses, her husband's death, and the various jobs she had held (J. F. Gubrium, 1993). Example B produced a story of a complicated life, told in terms of the metaphor of a "tangle" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995a). Not surprisingly, Example C generated a narrative of various professional milestones described as central to the informant's life (Kimmel, 1974). And Example D led to a series of accounts, each addressing a more or less discrete segment of the informant's overall life story (J. F. Gubrium, 1993).

The point to be gleaned from this is not that research questions "contaminate" informants' answers. Rather, it is a reminder to look outside the story itself for traces of the interactional environment that inform the narratives that emerge. Most interview studies fail to report, or generally gloss

over, the interactional sequences within which narratives are produced. Our suggestion is to consider the conversational environment surrounding storytelling for the ways in which it activates particular kinds of accounts. Given this orientation, we wouldn't be so readily tempted to reach the conclusion that we had derived "a" life story. We would be less likely to overlook the dynamics of narrative production that contribute to the elasticity of accounts.

Storytellers themselves can pave the way for extended accounts, accomplished in the context of social interaction. Simple story "prefaces" (Sacks, 1992b), for example, are often used to set narratives into motion, securing the conversational rights and space for an extended turn at talk. Offering a preface signals that the speaker has a story to tell, thus announcing the reasonable expectation that the next speaker will allow the prospective storyteller to speak again and at length. From that point onward, the storyteller may expect that others will allow the story to proceed.

When looking for mechanisms of story activation, the researcher should be alert for the most recognizable of preliminaries of this kind, statements such as "Did you hear what happened to me last night?" or "I heard something interesting today." These prefaces virtually announce that there is a story in the offing and that other potential speakers should hold back until the nascent story is hearably complete (Sacks, 1992b). But even the simplest of story-opening gambits require cooperation, as in the following example:

*Sally:* The most fascinating thing happened to me today.

*Pam:* Oh, yeah?

*Sally:* Yeah, I ran into a teacher I had 35 years ago. [An extended story of the encounter follows.]

Note that Sally's claim to the opportunity to tell her a story proceeds because Pam encourages the storytelling in her turn at talk. In effect, after prefacing her story, Sally awaits Pam's tacit invitation for her to launch the narrative. The turn-taking sequence virtually demands it. Consider, for example, what might happen conversationally, if Pam had responded with "Yeah, I had a real exciting day today, too." Rather than continuing with her story in the next turn, Sally would have found herself vying with Pam for narrative space and opportunity.

The researcher should remember that opportunities and space for storytelling are never automatically achieved. These opportunities need to be artfully crafted within the ongoing flow of conversation. In the following example, an animated conversation is in progress, with mother and daughter

## 48 Narrative Work

discussing what the teenager will take for her school lunch. In the midst of the exchange, the daughter uses a type of story preface to clear the conversational space to tell her brief story. (Double slashes [//] indicate the onset of overlapping talk.)

1. *Mother:* Whatter you takin' for lunch?
2. *Daughter:* Peanut butter, there's nothin' else.
3. *Mother:* What about yogurt?
4. *Daughter:* I don't like yogurt.
5. *Mother:* Wait a minute. You don't like yogurt?
6. *Daughter:* Not // for lunch.
7. *Mother:* // You won't eat yogurt? I ASKED you Tuesday what you'd eat and you specifically said yogurt. // Why do you think we bought it?
8. *Daughter:* // No::oo it's not that. I just I just I don't // want it.
9. *Mother:* // That's it! You change your mind about what you'll eat twice a week. That's it. I'm makin' your lunch // from now on.
10. *Daughter:* // No no::oo just lemme tell you // I wanna say something
11. *Mother:* // What
12. *Daughter:* I like yogurt, I know I said to buy it but I did NOT change my mind, I always eat it. I have always liked yogurt, but not for lunch. Not for lunch at school. I eat it at home. I am NOT changing my mind.
13. *Mother:* Well how can I tell?
14. *Daughter:* All right I'll EAT it. (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000b, p. 133)

In the exchange, both mother and daughter quickly claim turns at talk. They are in the midst of a disagreement and there is considerable contention over who is going to get to talk. Finally, at utterance 10, the daughter objects ("No no::oo") to her mother's prior declaration ("I'm makin' your lunch // from now on") and offers a preface that forcefully indicates that she has something to say that may involve an extended turn at talk ("just lemme tell you // I wanna say something"). This elicits an expression of interest and invitation to proceed from the mother ("What"), which in turn creates an opportunity and space for a story of the daughter's history of liking yogurt,

which emerges at utterance 12. The prefacing move was instrumental in creating the opportunity to extend an utterance in a conversational environment previously marked by repeated contests for speakership. The story that eventually emerged was an artful, collaborative achievement. Here, again, taken out of narrative context, the story told in utterance 12 might easily have been read as the account of an obstinate child, without recognizing the interactional dynamics in which the utterance is embedded.

Issues relating to narrative rights, obligations, and power may come to the fore if the researcher takes seriously the fine-grained conversational work done to produce stories. (See Shuman, 1986, 2005, for extended discussions of narrative rights, obligations, and entitlements.) A social structural analysis would likely look to an individual's social status or roles, for example, as entitlements to storytelling, a topic to which we will return in Part III. We suggest that the researcher look closely at how narrative rights and control are actually enacted and achieved, rather than taking this for granted.

If status were the key to controlling speakership and narrative production, adults would likely do most of the talking and control the floor in adult-child conversations. But this is empirically far from the case. Sacks (1992a) tells us that, while adults often permit or encourage children to speak, children have many effective conversation-seizing devices at their disposal. Consider the following example from a dinnertime conversation where two parents and a grandmother were questioning three school-aged children about the standardized testing administered at school that day. In the midst of the conversation, a fourth child, 4-year-old Marticia, piped up:

*Marticia:* Guess what, Momma? Guess what?

*Mother:* What, baby?

*Marticia:* I got to take Coco [the neighbor's dog] for a walk today. [Marticia proceeds to tell a story of how she was invited to walk the dog and what happened on the walk.]

In a conversational environment where Marticia previously was nearly unable to get a word in edgewise, she used what arguably could be heard as a question of her own to secure the floor for telling her own story. This gambit trades on the normative convention that when asked a question, the next speaker is obliged to provide an answer or to indicate that an answer is not available, thus returning speakership to the person who asked the question. In this instance (as in most other instances of this gambit) there is no good answer to "Guess what?" By replying "What?" the mother explicitly invited Marticia to supply the answer to the original question that the mother herself

could not supply. In so doing, she activated Marticia's story. (Alternatively, Marticia's utterance might be heard as a command, a riddle, or even an opening move in a childish game. In any case, the utterance was not designed to elicit an answer; regardless of how it is heard, it is more likely to provoke another question.)

Schegloff (1980) observed that it is common for prospective storytellers such as Marticia to gain access to extended turns at talk by asking questions themselves. "You know what?" or "You know something?" are common examples. Although such moves appear to prompt next speakers to answer the question, they are asked in such a way as to nearly ensure that an answer is not forthcoming. (Providing a substantive reply to "Guess what?" for example, would create the sort of normative "breach" that some of Harold Garfinkel's [1967] ethnomethodological demonstrations prompted. It would very likely lead to a breakdown in the conversation.) When no answer is available, another question—"What?"—is a warranted alternative. This, of course, provides the opportunity for the original questioner to supply an extended answer (see Schegloff, 1980).

Conversation analysis supplies myriad other insights into the methodic organization of talk-in-interaction that are pertinent to the study of narrative production. To be sure, we are not suggesting that the study of narrative be reduced to the mechanics of conversational sequencing. If the mechanics of turn taking provides space for storytelling, it does not construct the story. But attention to how narratives are incited and activated helps us to see how thoroughly interactional stories are, from the very start and throughout the storytelling process. In Marticia's case, for example, it helps us to take a more nuanced view of the idea that one's position in society determines one's storytelling rights.

Not all activating mechanisms are direct or explicit. Nor do they necessarily operate at the start of storytelling. By means of an unfolding series of exchanges, the overall flow of a conversation may itself be an activating mechanism. In the next example, we would be hard pressed to think of the life story that emerges as a continuously narrated whole because its activation unfolds throughout. We would be equally hard pressed to conclude that it was straightforwardly the respondent's own story, as ownership appears to be a diffuse artifact of participants' collaboration.

Recall our earlier discussion of how the following questions were used to activate a nursing home resident's life history narrative: "Let me ask you this. If you were writing a story of your life, what chapters would you have in your book? Like what would the first chapter be about?" (J. F. Gubrium, 1993, p. 158). We noted earlier that the emergent story portrayed the respondent's life in more or less discrete segments in response to the request

for a chapter-like format. Here is how the life story eventually emerged. Carol is the interviewer and Opal is the resident.

*Carol:* Like what would the first chapter be about?

*Opal:* Fighting arthritis.

*Carol:* Fighting arthritis? That'd be the first chapter of your book? Okay. What would the next one be about?

*Opal:* How to handle it. [Opal provides a brief story of how she's managed her condition over the years.]

*Carol:* Other chapters?

*Opal:* Well the other chapters would be, as you realize it's getting worse, you have to see the limitations coming on . . . to accept them. [Opal continues a story of dealing with limitations and protecting her family from being overburdened by her health problems.]

*Carol:* What about the last chapter?

*Opal:* The last chapter? Well, I think it's not a terminal disease. [Opal continues with an extended narrative about persistence in the face of adversity, ending with an exhortation: ] Don't give up. Whatever you do, don't give up.

*Carol:* I'm curious. I've asked some other people the questions, you know, about chapters, and most of them started out with things like their childhood. I noticed you went right away to arthritis. Why do you think you did that?

*Opal:* Because I've lived with it a long time and I'm so familiar with it . . .

*Carol:* So, it's been a huge thing in your life?

*Opal:* Oh, yes! [Opal talks again of disease and degeneration, and how she's suffered.] But I didn't let it win. That's my mission in life. (J. F. Gubrium, 1993, pp. 158–159)

As is clear in this interview conversation, narrative activation is an ongoing process. Opal's story is invited in the form of chapters, but they don't simply flow forth. Carol, the interviewer, maintains the chapter motif, repeatedly prompting Opal for another installment. By activating a series of small stories, Carol eventually gets Opal to assemble her "book-length" life story, which is thematized around disease, disability, and determination. If this is Opal's life history, formulated around her most salient and abiding concerns, it is not her story alone. Activated by Carol's repeated questions and enlivened by Carol's prompts, Opal narrates her life according to her own plans and preferences, but in collaboration with her conversational

partner's proffered framework. To analyze this life story—as the book of Opal's life—without acknowledging Carol's contribution would shortchange its situated, collaborative character. This admonition applies not only to the analysis of interview talk, but also to those more “naturally occurring” contexts of narrative production.

Finally, it is impossible to discuss narrative activation without considering its absence. The flip side of story activation, of course, is narrative silencing. Just as stories need to be incited, opened up, and elaborated, they are also discouraged, preempted, ignored, and shut down. To fully appreciate the emergence of narratives, we must also empirically examine their failure to materialize. Silence is often attributed to macropolitical factors such as power, status, authority, and hegemony. To be sure, these are important considerations for appreciating narrative production. But it is crucial for our understanding of narrative reality to show how such forces are empirically manifested in the interactional circumstances from which narratives do or do not emerge.

Taken by itself, a transcribed narrative seldom demonstrates what is *not* said. The researcher might speculate regarding what was omitted, ignored, or could otherwise have been said, but ungrounded conjecture falls short of being an empirical explanation. The ethnography of narrative, however, affords the researcher the opportunity to focus outside the narrative itself, to consider narrative contexts and resources that may influence narrative production. But it is up to the researcher to demonstrate in explicit empirical detail how “external” factors shape how, when, and where particular narratives might emerge and flourish, or not emerge and flourish as the case might be. This is a mandate for the researcher to describe how phenomena such as narrative rights, power, obligation, authority, and entitlement are actually realized in socially situated interactional practice.

This amounts to showing explicitly in practice how narrative competition might emerge and be resolved, or how some narratives might come to be widely asserted or preferred, while other narrative possibilities remain dormant (see Vila, 2005, for a rich discussion of competition between discourses). As Pablo Vila (2005, p. 240) suggests, some narratives “have the upper hand in the struggle for the construction of hegemony. Consequently, they are much more locally available, have much more local prestige, and look much more locally genuine than others.” It is the task of the narrative ethnographer to unpack the interactional, cultural, political, and organizational circumstances in which such hegemony is constructed. This may be accomplished, for example, by demonstrating ethnographically how cultural or organizational resources and preferences are brought to bear in the interactional production or preclusion of particular narratives.

It's one thing to claim that status, authority, or power "work behind people's backs" to control what they say or do. It's more compelling to actually demonstrate ethnographically how narrative resources, preferences, and entitlements are brought to bear interactionally to enact the narrative "power" of influential or privileged social actors such as doctors (Heritage & Maynard, 2006), judges and other officers of the court (J. M. Atkinson & Drew, 1979), teachers (Mehan, 1979), or therapists (Vandewater, 1983). One point of departure for such an analytic project is to show how different narrative strategies and resources are employed to activate or silence particular narratives. Alternatively, one might unpack the practices, circumstances, and resources brought to bear on other occasions of narrative collaboration, contest, and control (see Chapters 8 and 9).

## Conclusion

The key analytic lesson of this chapter is to carefully consider the myriad interactional influences on narrative activation. Just as an interviewer helps shape an informant's responses, so does a partner such as a listener in ordinary conversation. A full understanding of storytelling (or narrative silence) requires attention to all participants in the process. While we can only surmise that storytellers impulsively narrate, we can empirically document the hearable mechanisms that prompt and sustain, or curb, the narrative process. We see this clearly as we step back to look at the talk and interaction that activate storytelling.

