



*Narratives in Social Science Research*, by Barbara Czarniawska. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2004. Pp. 157. ISBN 0-7619-4195-9. \$39.95 (paper), Reviewed by Assya Turmukhanova, IN: *The Central Asia Business Journal*. V. 2. (1), pp. 29-36.

### **Narratives in Social Science Research.**

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Storytelling is essential in our lives. We see our life experiences as a story. In fact, the importance of narratives in our lives became evident after Roland Barthes informed that stories are all we have to live in: that all is speech of narrative. Nowadays using of narratives analysis in organizations' research is becoming one of the main issues under consideration. Barbara Czarniawska is the leading narrative researcher who has made a great contribution into this field. The present book about narratives can be very interesting for social science researchers and students concerned with qualitative research methods, and in particular for those who are doing study by help of that research instruments. The topic coverage presented in the book can be of a great value to managers who can use narrative techniques in the management of an organization.

The main idea of the book of Czarniawska is conveyed through its title: "Narratives in Social Science Research". The point of this book is that organizational studies can be richly empowered by taking narratives more attentively. This means not only focusing on how people in organizations talk about them but also perceiving, and implementing methods taken from other disciplines such as literary theory, interpretive sociology, anthropology, and science studies.

The book is divided into ten short and clear informative chapters, which describe the narrative methodology starting with its brief historic overview and ending with its application guidelines, numerous examples to be used in the research frame. Every chapter has an exercise at the end to practice. In general, the chapters are structured in three logical parts: I) firstly, there are chapters showing how narrative methodology can be used; ii) secondly, three other chapters describing how narratives can be read;



iii) finally, chapters generalizing, talking about modes of writing, comparing social science writing and other texts.

The book starts with a brief historical outline of how social and humanitarian sciences correspond with each other in respect of the narrative. Here three roles of the narrative are mentioned: the narrative as a basic form of social life and the narrative as a mode of knowing, and the narrative as a mode of communication. While discussing these three modes, Czarniawska addresses to the tenets of the researchers who founded the narration. Among them can be met such influential names as Alasdair MacIntyre, Alfred Schultz, Jerome Bruner, Walter Fisher and others.

In part one, it's said about the existing differentiation between the chronological compilation and the narration. It is asserted that the story can be the narration only, in the case of having a plot.

Giving a definition of the plot, the author uses an interpretation given by Todorov:

A minimal plot consists in the passage from one equilibrium to another. An 'ideal' narrative begins with a stable situation which is disturbed by some power or force. There results a state of disequilibrium; by the action of a force directed in the opposite direction, the equilibrium is re-established; the second equilibrium is similar to the first, but the two are never identical.

Furthermore, Czarniawska highlights the four main emplotment ways, such as: romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire. She draws a parallel between the emplotment modes and the four classical master tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. Each emplotment mode is based on one of the tropes, where romance is connected with the metaphor, tragedy – metonymy, comedy – synecdoche, and satire – irony.

In the sense that the modern organizations are considered to use tables, lists, and recipes as the contemporary mode of knowledge, Czarniawska views it important to



pay attention to the fact that the most of societal learning result of stories' circulation. It happens through the process of existing employees communicate and pass organizational stories, or sagas to the newcomers. In fact, story telling has a functional role. It is evidenced by how people are gathering together and discussing different issues. It becomes clear that their stories are not about their work, stories themselves are their work. This is exactly the standpoint of Orr. People talk about understanding their world they are working in. It is evident that this is very useful for companies, as many problems just get resolved only owing to that free friendly discussions, and story telling. Those stories help organizations managers to manage, organize. Moreover, Czarniawska points out that it is not enough for researchers to say and to show the presence of the narrations but their goal should be the interpretation of the narrative results for those who tell them and – who analyze them. Often the narratives of employees carry the message about the organization they work, which can be interpreted not through the plot but the mimesis .

Talking about an interview, Czarniawska gives the following definition: “ An interview is two persons seeking knowledge and understanding in a common conversational endeavor”. Furthermore, Czarniawska says that this definition is more likely about a dialogue. Here she applies to Kvale's standpoint on the interview. Kvale talks about professional interview, which usually invokes such phenomena as power asymmetry, i.e. interviewees are in a weaker position in relevance to interviewers, due to their professional store of knowledge. But there is always but, and Czarniawska claims that there is symmetry against that asymmetry. In a sense that nobody knows the subject better than interviewees, as its their story, their narrative.

There are many cases; novices-interviewers swallow the bait of, when interviewees just try to thrust their opinions on researchers. Another point Czarniawska worries about is that it's quite ordinary for people in the higher ranks to have all their thoughts with them, owing to their positions. Therefore, interviewing that people make the researchers become some kind of priests. Interviewees tell their narratives and interviewers share their knowledge. The question here is that whether this information



is useful for the researchers. And the answer is positive. Czarniawska mentions about the interview as interaction process. The definition many researchers don't like. Although, they shouldn't. During interaction the interview is recorded. Finally, it serves just as a sample of the reality; the researchers can rely on while doing research. Czarniawska highlights the issue of the interview as interaction, applying to the concepts of such researchers as, Silverman, Hammersley, Atkinson and others. She gives examples of the interview methods, based on those concepts, which can be useful for desperate researchers.

During the interview people often apply to some familiar narrative constructs. Plots of such constructs are taken from mass media sources, or interactions with other people. Czarniawska considers it as normal phenomena. All people live in the world of interactions, stories, and narratives, where the interview is a little scene interviewees and interviewers take participation in producing narratives on.

However, eliciting narratives in the interview is not deprived of difficulties. Czarniawska considers two main difficulties connected with it such as, diverse timeframe and logic of representation, researchers face while interviewing. Interviewers mainly expect to hear narratives in a chronological timeframe. However, their interlocutors sometimes can use different timeframes, as cyclical or kairotic . Another issue is the logic of representation. Czarniawska defines it as: "presenting oneself in a good light"(Czarniawska, 2004). People while being interviewed try to behave and talk in the best way, to tell the best narratives they have. Topic of the interview can be misled as a result of it. So, it can switch from the research subject to the narrative interesting for the interviewee. Although, Czarniawska claims that it is not so terrible, as every interview is just a mixture of the narration forms. Therefore, it can be partly a "child" of the representation logic on the one hand, and on the other – an embodiment of the improvisation and of some simultaneous fits.

While being interviewed many people avoid the narratives. Czarniawska mentions three strategies of avoiding the narratives, developed by Scott and Lyman. There are:



mystification, referral, and identity switching. A mystification consists in the interviewee trying to keep the information secret. A referral is about a case when the interviewee while talking about something refers on some other source of information, or on another person. The argument the interview has is that in this case the researcher can get more comprehensive information. An identity switching relates to the situation when the interviewee's attitude toward the researcher depends on some prejudices or preferences he (she) has about the latter.

In part two, Czarniawska says, that reading narratives can be implemented by means of Hernadi's triad. It is composed of three parts: explication, explanation, and exploration.

Often in explication stage researchers face two problems. Firstly, the most narratives are from the field of studies, which are under study. Therefore, it's usual for researchers to write one authoritative story. Secondly, the majority of researchers while rendering the narratives write them in their own way. In a way they understand them. Here, Czarniawska says that: 'No matter how well meaning the researcher is, such a translation is a political act of totalizing'. She also claims that researchers have to respect their interlocutors. However, it doesn't prevent them from making a number of narratives from the same story. As a good evidence of that she exemplifies studies of Gabriel and Skoldberg who plot the same story in different ways.

Czarniawska introduces three main modes of explanation used by different schools of thought: subjectivist (voluntarist), objectivist (determinist), constructivist.

As for exploration, it means the reader tries to stand on the place of the author, to see the picture through the eyes of the author. Czarniawska names it the meaning of the practice of social science. This process can be implemented in different ways; depending on what theoretical school the social scientist belongs to.



Talking about the modes of narratives reading, Czarniawska in her book considers the main theoretical approaches such as, structural analyses, poststructuralism, interruption, and deconstruction.

Structural analysis is considered to be a traditional way of analyzing narratives. While describing it Czarniawska shows the ideas of the founders-structuralists. Among them such big names as, Propp, Landau, Greimas, Latour, Todorov. In the structuralist analysis attention should be given to “Actant model”. In fact, much of interest Czarniawska put to this theory. Notion used to substitute structuralism word. Actant model suggested by Algirdas Greimas, gives more important place to machines and artifacts. Talking about the actant model, Czarniawska urges to focus rather than on the organizations, she argues for attention to be made to action net. Callon and Latour, based on Greimas’s actant model, develop it. This action net describes relations between actors. In particular, it is about how actors involved in many different projects have the same common narrative. So, in this theory action nets are compound of narrative. This theory is distant from hierarchical notions such as, individuals, organizations, groups, and society. On the whole, what Czarniawska tries to stress is that Greimas Callon and Latour have non-human focus. However, it should be mentioned that Latour doesn’t use the whole concept of Greimas but only some parts. He uses it because it’s convenient to show his research interest topics – innovation and power, through it.

Part three starts with Czarniawska’s stating that: “All analytical approaches can be applied to scientific texts. It thus changes the focus from the kind of approach applied to the area to which it is applied” (Czarniawska, 2004). Here Czarniawska shows the narratives methodology applied through the prism of analysis applied in dramatist, anthropologist, economist, and leadership disciplines.

One of the last chapters of Czarniawska’s book is devoted to modes of writing. She put them as the final stage in social science writing. Czarniawska pays more detailed attention to mimesis and plot. As it has been said before mimesis is considered to be



the representation of the world in the text. Therefore, the main focus here is oriented on such question put by Czarniawska, as “how to represent?”(Czarniawska, 2004). The crucial point and answer lie in the following words of Czarniawska that: “Emplotment is the crucial part of writing a social science monograph – and the most difficult” (Czarniawska, 2004). Thus, social scientists should put their main efforts to the emplotment problems, if they want to represent the world in a proper way.

The methodological problems of the narrative approach are discussed in the final chapter of the book. The unavoidable problems connected to any effort to represent the needs of the field, to keep a distance between these and the researcher's perceptions, and to methods for interpretation are called forth. Barbara Czarniawska ends up concluding that there is no distinct difference between fact and fiction, and that the role of organization researchers is somewhere between that of the literary critic and the novelist.

To my mind, Barbara Czarniawska, has made a profound work to write such an impressive and important book, which can be highly recommended for all social sciences researchers, and in particular for those interested in narratives. The book of Czarniawska is very well organized in sense of communicating theoretical views on narratives. It is also invaluable from the point of empirical and methodological aspects being presented throughout the entire book. Theory and practice with numerous examples are logically intertwined that makes the book more attractive and useful. Finally, Czarniawska's way of presenting the information, makes reading interesting and in some way amusing pastime. She is not only describing theoretical, empirical, and methodological approaches, but she shares her ideas about them with us, demonstrates her attitude, being agree in one place, disagree in another.

In the conclusion, it should be said that despite the fact the present book is very intelligent and significant, my understanding of it can be another story, different from yours. Therefore, the best way to check whether I get to the truth or truism is to read



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yourself. And after all I don't mind if my words look like advertisement. Why not?  
All of us live in the world of advertisements.