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Hiles, David, Cermák, Ivo and Chrz, Vladimir

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# 8 Exploring Human Narrative Intelligence with Narrative Oriented Inquiry

DAVID HILES, IVO ČERMÁK AND VLADIMÍR CHRZ

## Abstract

At last year's conference (see Hiles, Čermák and Chrz, 2009), we outlined an approach to narrative research which we call *Narrative Oriented Inquiry*. We see this as a dynamic framework for good practice, ie. a psychological approach developed with respect to research on personal narratives which offers a distinctive and critical framework to narrative inquiry. In this paper we want to explore how our approach can be used to explore the *narrative intelligence* that is at work in our everyday lives (Ricoeur, 1987/1991). We argue that the first steps in narrative data analysis offer crucial insight into how people exhibit this intelligence. Indeed, a relatively straightforward distinction between *fabula* and *sjuzet* can be used to reveal the *identity positioning* at play in a narrator's constructions. Taking an example from an interview with an elderly man, who is outlining his life journey with particular emphasis on the life events that influenced and changed the course of his career, we demonstrate NOI in action. The data analysis especially focuses upon the subtle ways in which NK *participates* in his own constructions of self.

## Narrative Oriented Inquiry

In this paper we will attempt to explore the nature of human narrative intelligence, using a research perspective that has been developing over the past few years (Čermák, Hiles and Chrz, 2007; Hiles and Čermák, 2008; Hiles, Čermák and Chrz, 2009). We call this perspective *Narrative Oriented Inquiry (NOI)*, which we offer as a dynamic framework for good practice, and has several key features. Firstly, while we recognize that the study of narrative is a very broad field indeed, our concerns have been primarily focused on the study of personal narratives, usually arising from interviews and other similar forms of data collection. In this respect, the model of NOI stresses a focus on narrative research from the outset, beginning with the initial formulation of the

research question, then a narrative style of interviewing (Mishler, 1986), followed by the preparation of a transcript that will facilitate a number of different approaches to data analysis, while still retaining the transparency that is a necessary and fundamental requirement of any approach to qualitative research (Hiles and Čermák, 2007; Hiles, 2008).

NOI is not prescriptive in its approach, but has been developed as a broad framework for narrative research. In its approach to narrative data analysis, NOI draws upon several complementary perspectives that includes the theoretical and practical insights of Herman and Vervaeck (2001), Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) and Emerson and Frosh (2004). In the present paper, we additionally draw upon the seminal work of Labov and Waletzky (1967) to facilitate in the analysis of the complex structure of conversational narrative discourse. Our underlying philosophy is in full agreement with Catherine Riessman (1993) when she says: "... there is no single method of narrative analysis but a spectrum of approaches to texts that take narrative form" (p.25).

From the outset our focus has been upon collecting and analyzing narrative interview data, because as psychologists this is where our interests lie. And, in this respect we follow again the perspective of Riessman (1993, p.2) when she writes:

The purpose is to see how respondents in interviews impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives. The methodological approach examines the informant's story and analyses how it is put together, the linguistic and cultural resources it draws on, and how it persuades a listener of authenticity. Analysis in narrative studies opens up forms of telling about experience, not simply the content to which language refers. We ask, why was the story told that way?

Our claim is that NOI is particularly useful in trying to understand how people impose order on their flow of experience, in making sense of their lives. We argue that the first steps in NOI data analysis are especially crucial to making progress in this area, and this paper sets out to demonstrate this with an appropriate transparency.

In our paper at this conference last year (Hiles, Čermák and Chrz, 2009), we pointed out how narrative research has largely focused upon what has been "told". But it is just as important to turn our attention onto the "telling" of a story – ie. how it is told. Whatismore, behind the told, and the telling, is the "teller," the person who is positioning themselves towards what is being told, ie. in the active choices involved in telling of the story. It is this inter-relationship between the told, the telling and the teller that we will mostly be concerned with here. We intend to bring a distinctive and critical framework to the data analysis that explores the way in which a teller positions themselves

with respect to the story they are telling, something that we call *identity positioning*, with a view to highlighting the subtle narrative intelligence that seems to be at work. We will do this by way of a detailed example of data analysis using NOI.

### **Narrative Intelligence**

The notion of narrative intelligence has been mostly clearly articulated in the work of the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, who has pointed out what he calls the implicit narrative intelligence that is foundational to our engagement with life.

Ricoeur (1987/1991, p.426-8) characterizes this narrative intelligence, which he also calls a *phronetic* intelligence, as having three key features:

- a synthesis of multiple events into a *singular* story
- a resolution of the tension between concord and discord into a *unity*
- the construction of a *configuration* from a temporal succession.

The stress here, on the construction of a configuration, towards a unity that is realized in a singular story, can be taken to be a working definition of what narrative intelligence basically involves.

Very much a similar point of view is expressed by Randall (1999, p.11) when he writes:

Without narrative intelligence it can be argued, countless processes integral to human existence are impossible, perhaps inconceivable.

Randall goes on to discuss how narrative intelligence is involved in four key areas: (i) the way we can express the novelty of our lives, (ii) its origins in our childhood, (iii) its dynamics in terms of the many familiar story conventions at play in the construction of our life stories, and (iv) the changes in the experience and expression with how we “story” our lives in later life.

As psychologists, we find this idea of narrative intelligence very important indeed. But, we also want to take this to another level, beyond Ricoeur’s focus on what is being constructed, and beyond Randall’s focus on the functional place of narrative in our lives, to the question of precisely how someone is able to harness this intelligence in the telling of their stories. And to this end, we are focusing upon how the first steps in NOI data analysis can throw light on the expression of this intelligence, not so much in what is told, but in the *telling* of the stories.

### **First Steps in Narrative Analysis**

What has emerged from our research using NOI is how the subtleties of narrative discourse encode the ways an individual is able to create what we have called “identity positions” (Hiles, 2007). What we are interested in is how people can actively participate in their own meaning-making – how the individual actively and creatively engages with their narrative intelligence.

Previously (Hiles, 2005, 2007), it has been argued that current theories of identity fall short of any criterion of sufficiency, and that we need to understand human identity in terms of both subject positions *and* identity positions. Our proposal is that by using narratives in our everyday lives the individual can position themselves with respect to the events that befall them. Individuals can actively participate in the *creation, compromise, celebration* and *configuration* of who they are.

Our claim is that it is the first steps in NOI data analysis that are crucial in uncovering how narrative intelligence is at work. In this respect it is the distinction between *fabula* and *sjuzet* that is so crucial. In basic terms, the *fabula* corresponds to the event being related, and the *sjuzet* corresponds to the “window” on that event.

What we have found is that the subtleties of the *sjuzet* are especially important in understanding the way in which an individual creates personal meaning. While the *fabula* consists of an outline of the events as they had occurred, or might have occurred, it is the *sjuzet* that encodes the “way” in which the person relating the story positions themselves in relation to the event being retold.

This is why we have stressed that, in narrative data analysis, one of the first steps must be to “separate” *fabula* and *sjuzet*. The rule to do this has been adapted from the distinction between “bounded” and “unbounded” that has been made by Herman and Vervaeck (2001, p.46). What they have pointed out is that the *fabula* is essentially bounded in nature, since altering any of its details will simply change the story being told. But, the *sjuzet* is unbounded, since altering it usually will only affect the emphasis, asides and remarks, etc., that are crucial for the identity positions constructed in telling the story, but not for the *fabula*. In practice, some overlap between *fabula* and *sjuzet* is found, but for the most part this a fairly straightforward part of the analysis to be carried out.

### **The Story of this Data**

This data was collected by the first author as part of an ongoing study into transformative human experience – ie. *what are the significant events that you*

*feel have changed your life?* Specifically, for this particular interview, there was a focus upon difficult or painful life events, that might have led to a change in career, or movement towards a more helpful and supportive role in working with others.

The process of data collection was a *focused* life-story interview (ie. not a life-story interview as such, but focused upon part of the life story. The entire interview lasted just over 40 mins, and the excerpt that is being analyzed here is taken from the middle section of the interview. The data was collected some time ago, and was reported as part of a previous study (Hiles, 1999). Also an outline of the NOI analysis that is discussed in the present paper has also been recently reported as part of a recent review paper (Hiles, 2008b).

When the data was originally collected as part of a series of interviews, the focus had been rather more upon the “content” of the interviews, ie. upon what we now would call the *fabula*. Initially a discourse analytic approach had been taken, turning eventually to the techniques of *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Smith, Jarman and Osborn, 1999). The data was taken to a discourse analysis workshop, but the overall impression was that with many of these approaches something was missing from the analysis.

The problem was that narratives seemed to dominate this data, and any approach to data analysis that simply tried to reduce the data to a set of themes merely ended up with a limited perspective of what was obviously more subtle and complex than these approaches could offer. Even some of the existing narrative approaches to analysis, particularly those that focused on narrative content, ie. *fabula*, did not do justice to the material. It was clear that the participants in these interviews were relating events that had real personal significance. They told their stories in ways that revealed that what really mattered was the particular choices made in the way of telling. There was an authenticity to how these stories were being told that was proving to be an ongoing challenge to capture properly.

In retrospect, it now seems likely that it was this dissatisfaction with the then available methods that led to our own eventual development of NOI. What we wanted was a data analysis tool that could capture, do justice to, and help us to begin to understand the narrative intelligence that was so much in evidence in the data we had been collecting.

We will use as an example, data taken from an interview with NK, a man in his mid seventies, who has been asked to outline his life journey with a focus on how life events had influenced or prompted changes in his career. We see this as a clear demonstration of NOI in action. The interview was tape recorded, and then transcribed, and identifiers have been removed. We use normal punctuation in our transcriptions, choosing not to represent short pauses, hesitations, and inflections, etc., although these could easily be included where the nature of the research question might require this. The raw

transcript for the portion of the interview being used here is presented in Table 1. NK is just concluding a series of episodes that lead up to his most recent, and last, change of career. NK leaves a pause inviting the interviewer to make another turn in the conversation. The interviewer begins by summarizing what NK has covered so far in the interview, and then puts the emphasis upon NK's "need to help other people." Following this with the introduction of a key question planned for the interview: "In what way have the difficulties in your own life enabled you to identify with other peoples' difficulties?" What follows is a long uninterrupted account, structured as narrative, of three inter-related events, his mother's funeral, getting support from a colleague on the social studies course, and the war-time memory of the day he left home to go into the army.

It is NK's narrative construction of this series of events that is the focus of our analysis. If we recall Catherine Riessman's point, that was made earlier, our over-riding interest is in understanding how NK imposes order on the flow of his experience and is active in making sense of the events and actions of his life.

### **The Data Analysis**

Reading through the raw transcript the first few times, leaves one with the impression of a tension between the vivid pictures that NK, seemingly with little effort, portrays, and the complexity and subtlety of his constructions. Highlighting the underlying themes would be fairly straightforward, but asking how does NK precisely achieve this is not nearly so clear.

We have described the initial steps in beginning the analysis in several previous papers, and will just summarize them here. Working from the raw transcript we begin by segmenting the text into a sequence of episodes, or "moves." These are then numbered for ease of cross-referencing later, and the text in this segmented form is arranged over several pages, with wide right-hand margins which are used for notes, comments and annotations later in the analysis. The next step is to "separate" the *sjuzet* and *fabula*, by convention we underline the *sjuzet*. The simple rule here is that the *fabula* is bounded, and the *sjuzet* is unbounded. Separating *sjuzet* and *fabula* is regarded as a "working step" in the analysis, they cannot be fully separated, and where this happens we "highlight" that overlap. The result is what we call the "working transcript," which is illustrated on the left-hand side of Table 2, presented as a sequence of 20 segments.

**Table 1: NK's Story (Raw transcript)**

- NK. . . . and that's when I went on a counselling course, in [. . . year] it was. And about that time I had also been invited to join [. . . detail] to get it off the ground really. So the two went hand-in-hand, and I found that very useful. [. . . details]. And so it went on from there, and gained momentum [. . .]
- I. *What I see in that, is from quite a young age you were involved in helping other people, and people have been seeing in you that quality, and they've invited you to do things. What I am quite interested in is that kind of need to help other people. Is there anything in your own life, a difficult period that you feel you got through yourself, that helps you to offer this to other people? In what way have the difficulties in your own life enabled you to identify with other peoples' difficulties? [. . .]*
- NK. I remember one particular incident. My father died in nineteen . . . seventy, seventy seven. My mother died in . . . sixty seven. Um, when me mother died, I went up to the funeral on my own. We were hard up at the time, we had only just been up there because we heard she was dying, and she lived another fortnight after that, and we'd been up as a family, and quite frankly we couldn't afford to go up there as a family again. So I went up for the funeral on me own. That meant that when we came to the graveside . . . there was me two brothers with their wives, and me sister with her husband, and my father, and I was on me own in a way. Um, I remember standing at the graveside, putting my hand on me dad's shoulder, and he shrugged me off. I was very hurt by that, um, but you know, being a tough guy, I got to smother those feelings. But I did feel quite rejected and very much alone. . . . uh . . . and still it stresses me to think about it now. I was talking to [. . . name] about it, when I did the social studies course, and he helped me to look at times when my father had actually shown his love for me. And, um, that was you know before I went and did the counselling I think. Yeh, it was before the counselling, and I think that's what made me feel that [. . .] people could be helped by other people. I think that was the first experience that I had of being helped by somebody. And I looked at times when my father had, when I went in the army for instance. He stood outside in the rain, it was drizzling with rain. We lived in a street with a hundred houses, we lived at number six, and in order to get to the main road to get to the bus stop, we had to walk right up the hundred houses. A terrace of a hundred houses. I walked all the way, and kept turning round, and my dad kept waving to me. And it was things like that that helped me to feel that my father did love me. He was dead then, so I couldn't do very much. It was one, it was one, that I could feel good about it again. And I was helped a lot by that [. . .]



It is especially interesting to read out loud the fabula, ie. the part of the transcript that is not underlined. The fabula simply relates the basic story, but reads rather “flat,” lacking any emphasis and drama in telling the story. Even the reasons for telling the story falls away. It becomes obvious that it is the sjuzet that “brings the story to life,” animating and highlighting the significance that NK attaches to the telling the story in the way he has chosen.

Another matter now emerges which concerns the complex structure of the fabula, this seems to fall naturally into three connected but separate “stories” – *Segs. 1-8*: the funeral; *Segs. 9-14*: the social studies course; and *Segs. 15-20*: the terrace of a hundred houses. This pattern of *narrative chaining* is fairly typical of narrative discourse (Hiles, 1996). One essential tool that is particularly helpful in identifying the structure of the fabula stems from the work of Labov and Waletzky (1967). In their analytic framework for oral narratives, they distinguish two functions of narrative (i) referential, and (ii) evaluative, which more or less corresponds to the distinction between fabula and sjuzet, respectively. Furthermore, they propose an overall structure that can be refined into six basic narrative functions: Abstract, Setting, Complication, Evaluation, Result and Coda. While it is not necessary for all these functions to be present, this is crucial in identifying the three stories.

In Table 2, *Segs. 1 & 2* are the expression of the situated action of the interview. NK is introducing his response to the question “*In what way have the difficulties . . .*” that the interviewer has posed. However, this also functions as the Abstract for the story of the funeral. Story 1 starts with “*me mother died*”. This is then followed by an aside (*Segs. 4 & 5*), which is in effect a small flashback story (not coded here) of the earlier visit to see his mother, which enables NK to explain why he attended his mother’s funeral “*on me own*”. Then follows the Setting (*Seg. 6*), the Complication (*Seg. 7*), the Evaluation, Result and Coda (*Seg. 8*). In this way, the cohesion of Story 1 can be identified, as it can for Story 2 and 3.

A familiar feature emerges here, concerning what we might call the “division of labour” between sjuzet and fabula. The Abstract, Evaluation and Coda are for the most part expressed in the sjuzet, and the Setting, Complication and Result are expressed in the fabula. However, this is not by any rule, and this pattern is never by any means clear cut, but it is relevant to understanding the different functions achieved by sjuzet and fabula.

The right-hand margin is used to annotate this overall structure, as well as to make comments and notes that might be relevant for later analysis (see below). However, what has been achieved by these first steps in narrative analysis is some very real progress towards answering Riessman’s question of: “*Why was the story told that way?*” In one respect at least, we might claim that what was rather intimidating when looking at the raw transcript (Table 1), has now become clearer. Especially, the way in which NK effortlessly links

**Table 2: NOI analysis of NK's Story**

- 1 I remember one particular incident.
- 2 My father died in nineteen . . . seventy, seventy seven. My mother died in . . . sixty seven.
- 3 Um, when me mother died, I went up to the funeral on my own.
- 4 We were hard up at the time, we had only just been up there because we heard she was dying, and she lived another fortnight after that, and we'd been up as a family, and quite frankly we couldn't afford to go up there as a family again.
- 5 So I went up for the funeral on me own.
- 6 That meant that when we came to the graveside . . . there was me two brothers with their wives, and me sister with her husband, and my father, and I was on me own in a way.
- 7 Um, I remember standing at the graveside, putting my hand on me dad's shoulder, and he shrugged me off.
- 8 I was very hurt by that, um, but you know, being a tough guy, I got to smother those feelings. But I did feel quite rejected and very much alone. . . uh . . . and still it stresses me to think about it now.
- 9 I was talking to [. . . *name*] about it, when I did the social studies course,
- 10 and he helped me to look at times when my father had actually shown his love for me.
- 11 And, um, that was you know before I went and did the counselling I think.

/cont.

**Comments:**

Abstract\*

*[remembering!]*

•**Story1** [*start of story: me mother died . . .*]

*[explanation told in flashback!]*  
[Story1(f/b)]

*[rep./recap!]*

Setting\*

Complication\*

*[rejected]* **IP-1**Eval.\* **IP-2**Result\* *[he coped]*

Coda\*-Story1(IP-1)

*still: now* **IP-3**} •**Story2**

} Setting?

} Result?

*[remembering!]*

<b>Table 2: cont.</b>	
12 <u>Yeh, it was before the counselling,</u>	
13 <u>and I think that's what made me feel that [..]</u>	<b>Comments:</b>
14 <u>people could be helped by other people.</u>	[clarification]
15 <u>I think that was the first experience that I had of</u>	}Evaluation <b><u>IP-4</u></b>
16 <u>being helped by somebody.</u>	} Coda-Story2
17 <u>And I looked at times when my father had, when</u>	}} <b>•Story3</b>
18 <u>I went in the army for instance. He stood outside</u>	}}Abstract
19 <u>in the rain, it was drizzling with rain.</u>	rain [rep: rain]
20 <u>We lived in a street with a hundred houses, we</u>	}}Setting
21 <u>lived at number four, and in order to get to the</u>	[explanation]
22 <u>main road to get to the bus stop, we had to walk</u>	[rep/refrain!]
23 <u>right up the hundred houses.</u>	}}
24 <u>A terrace of a hundred houses.</u>	}}Compl.
25 <u>I walked all the way, and kept turning round,</u>	}}Eval./Result <b><u>IP-5</u></b>
26 <u>and my dad kept waving to me.</u>	[nar. reframing]
27 <u>And it was things like that that helped me to feel</u>	}} Coda-Story3
28 <u>that my father did love me.</u>	[Overall eval.] <b><u>IP-4</u></b>
29 <u>He was dead then, so I couldn't do very much. It</u>	[Coda-Story2/1??]
30 <u>was one, it was one, that I could feel good about</u>	
31 <u>it again. And I was helped a lot by that [..]</u>	

**Table 3: Coding Notation**I remember . . – Sjuzet is underlined

\* - Labov &amp; Waletzky (Abstract, Setting, Complication, Evaluation, Result, Coda)

[ . . detail] – identifiers removed; [ . .] – pauses; [clarification] – comments/notes

•Story1 – Story 1, i.e. sequence of stories making up the fabula

I was very hurt . . – highlighting of word/phrase that functions as both sjuzet and fabula**IP-1** – Identity Position 1, etc.

three stories, of three separate events, spread over a time span of more than 50 years!

One further matter that is worth briefly noting concerns making mistakes in these first steps of NOI analysis. When the data was first analyzed, a small mistake was made in the coding of *Seg. 15*, which although rather insignificant still caused some confusion until corrected. The point that needs to be made is that making “mistakes” in interpreting and analyzing qualitative data cannot normally be detected. But, being able to spot mistakes, we see as a strength of the NOI approach!

## Discussion

It is the nature of the narrative intelligence at work in NK’s discourse that we now want to focus on. However, first we want to acknowledge how NOI differs very little from that of Riessman, except perhaps in our general methodological emphasis, and the stress placed on the first steps of analysis, that we see as so crucial. Our approach does differ a little from Labov and Waletzky by primarily focusing upon segments rather than clausal analysis, and in emphasizing the situated action of the telling. However, we do see ourselves as differing from several other approaches to narrative research in that, besides the focus on what is *told*, we do insist on highlighting the *telling* of a story, in order to understand precisely what the *teller* is caught up in. We regard stories as not concerned with merely reporting temporal sequences of events, but with constructing personal meanings and exploring self-identity, and it is this that reflects a crucial *narrative intelligence*.

### *Further Steps in Analysis*

It is important to acknowledge that we have been focusing on the initial steps of analysis, and that the full model of NOI incorporates several further interpretive perspectives. For example, we have drawn upon the work of Lieblich et al. (1998) who offer four further steps for analysis. These include: *Holistic-Content* – which involves exploring broader themes in the fabula, from NK’s data these might include: being alone, being loved, etc.; *Holistic-Form* – which involves analyzing the form of the story, or plot, especially NK’s narrative chaining, and ways he achieves Ricoeur’s notion of narrative unity; *Categorical-Content* – the exploration of self-contained areas of content, such as the funeral, rain, terrace of houses, etc.; and, *Categorical-Form* – which normally focuses on careful analysis of the *sjuzet*, such as the use of emphasis, explanation, flashback, etc.

Another interpretive perspective that we see as particularly important, draws upon the work of Emerson and Frosh (2004). This takes a *Critical Analysis* approach, and might involve concerns such as identity vs. subject positioning, social and institutional contexts, power issues, situated action, etc. It is the identity positioning evident in NK's discourse that we will focus on in the final section of this paper.

**Table 4: Coding of NK's identity positioning:**

**IP-1 – rejected, not being loved**

**IP-2 – being very hurt, but coping (being a tough guy)**

**IP-3 – still hurting now**

**IP-4 – being helped**

**IP-5 – being loved by my father**

#### *Coding the Identity Positions*

In the section of NK's interview that we have been analyzing, it is the hurtful experience of NK's subject positioning, by his father, that he is unloved, that is the spur to the narrative that then unfolds. But, NK does not simply relate three brief stories in explanation of this experience, instead he tells three stories in a very careful way, positioning himself to each of these stories, constructing a complex series of what we have called identity positions – NK's active constructions of how he sees, or has seen, himself. These are summarized in Table 4.

We want to emphasize that the five identity positions cannot be equated simply to a set of themes. They are realized in the text, by the way the stories are told, and this is especially achieved as a function of the *sjuzet* – in the *telling* of the stories. We treat these identity positions as narrative realizations of NK's active engagement with his personal meaning-making.

A closer examination of these identity positions is worth a brief exploration. IP-1 is disclosed in the fabula of Seg. 7, and then re-emphasized in the Coda of Seg. 8. IP-2 is situated in the Evaluation of Story 1. IP-3 refers to how NK is feeling as he speaks, ie. the situated action of the interview itself. IP-4 is established in the Evaluation of Story 2, but it is also a reprise of the interviewer's original question, which is reprised yet again in the Coda to Story 3. IP-5 established in the Evaluation of Story 3, is the key identity position of

the interview, and provides an excellent example of the narrative reframing of the original identity position, *IP-1*, that has now been reframed from a new perspective.

Throughout this examination of these identity positions, what is striking is the importance of the *sjuzet* in creating the space or opportunity for their expression, and their consistent placement in the Evaluation/Coda phases of the narrative structure.

We see these five identity positions as a demonstration of a fundamental narrative intelligence. Building upon Ricoeur's ideas, we can see how NK synthesizes a series of events into a *singular* chain of stories, how he resolves the tension between being loved and being hurt into a *unity*, and how he constructs a *configuration* of his lived experience by narrative reframing, and, finally, constructing a new position for himself, out of the temporal succession of the events he recalls.

## Conclusion

We see NOI as a distinctive and critical approach to narrative analysis in which we can explore how in telling a story, the teller can construct identity positions that actively engage in acts of personal meaning-making. We have stressed that without a proper focus upon both the *sjuzet*, as well as the *fabula*, the active and participatory role of narrative in ordinary life will largely be over-looked, and the possibility of capturing the authenticity of everyday life experience, as evidenced in NK's story, will be sadly missed.

The major challenge that we are now facing is that, while narrative is so evident in our ordinary lives, we are still such a very long way from any kind of proper theory of narrative intelligence. But, then perhaps we have just been making those all important first steps.

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