1
Stories, Narratives and Storytelling Practices

To provide a nonambiguous definition of narrating seems to be quite a complex endeavor. There are multiple interpretations of the phenomenon, as well as countless scholars who have provided narrative definitions according to their epistemological foundations and the purposes of their analyses.

In the first chapter I will pull together some of these interpretations and highlight some of the key concepts concerning a narrating definition that can be useful ground for the second part of the book – where we will see them at play in a specific organizational context.

The first chapter stands at the crossroads of different disciplines as narrative analysis, originally conceived in the literary criticism tradition, has over time acquired significant importance in the social sciences – informed by the insights of disciplines such as philosophy of language, pragmatics of communication or sociolinguistics, just to name a few.

A distinction must be made between the study of narrative using a structuralist approach, the study of narrative using a sociological approach and the study of narrative using a combination of the sociological approach and insights from postmodern philosophical thought and phenomenologist sensitivity, which will be my approach.

1.1 Beyond Fabula and Syzhet?

For a first definition of narrative we can recall the work of literary theorists who were interested in narratology (Todorov, 1965, 1986),
that is to say the analysis of the structures of narrative literary
texts, the main question for them being: what are the possible basic
structure of narratives? “What is narrative per se? What properties
must a text have to be called a narrative, and what properties dis-
qualify it?” asks Chatman (1984, p. 258), within the intellectual
debate that grew out of the symposium “Narrative: the Illusion of
Sequence”, held at the University of Chicago on 26–28 October
1979.

Vladimir Propp’s thorough analysis of Russian Folktales (Propp,
1928) is a significant example of structuralist endeavor and proba-
bly the first contemporary study on narrative analysis. I use the word
contemporary in order to distinguish it from the hermeneutic studies
of scriptures, which date back to the middle ages. Aristotle’s Poet-
ics can also be considered a pioneering work in narrative analysis,
although my decision is to start with contemporary accounts.

In order to approach the narrative definition given by narratolo-
gists we have to start from what it is considered for them to be the key
element of every narrative text, that is to say temporal development
(Chatman, 1978; Prince, 1982). Every narrative text is characterized
by a development, by a set of events following one after the other
which are able to signal the passage from one opposite to the other,
from an initial to a different final state (often in the form of a con-
flict). Using the words of two bespoken narratologists, narrative “may
be defined as the representation of real or fictive events and situa-
tions in a time sequence” (Prince, 1982, p. 1), or can be viewed as
“the shift from one equilibrium to another . . . separated by a period
of imbalance” (Todorov, 1986, p. 328). The constant element of nar-
rativity for narratologists seems to be a sort of evolution, a shift that
can be related to time sequence.

However, the time of the events does not always correspond to the
time of narration, that is to say that the events are presented in narra-
tive in a way that does not always correspond to their chronological
evolution.

If we think of certain movies such as Pulp Fiction (Tarantino, 1994)
where a set of intertwined events is broken down and reassembled
in nonlinear sequences, or the French Irreversible (Noé, 2002) where
the narration is made in reverse to the chronological time sequence
of events, we should have no difficulties in understanding such a
distinction.