

## Discursive Narrative Analysis: A Study of Online Autobiographical Accounts of Self-Injury

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*This article offers an innovation in narrative analysis afforded by incorporating analytic concepts from discourse analysis. We share some examples from our study of online autobiographical accounts of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) to illustrate the various aspects of a discursive narrative approach to research. We show how the participants construct events and experiences as sequentially linked and temporarily related using a range of discursive practices and devices, including producing contrasting descriptions of emotional states, using figurative language, vivid or vague descriptions, and extreme case formulations. The specific way in which experience was constituted as sequentially and causally linked allows narrators to attribute relief from suffering to NSSI and to present NSSI as a reasonable and justifiable behavior to those who may read these autobiographies. This study offers insight into what may be missed when interpretation is focused solely on the content or broad structural elements of stories, as in much narrative analysis, and suggests the critical role of narrators' social or interactive orientation and their reliance on the micro-details of language in the construction of stories. Methodological and theoretical implications are discussed. Keywords: Narrative Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Self-Injury, Online Communication*

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Recently, there has been a call to situate narrative construction within social dynamics and context and to find analytic strategies that would allow treating narratives not only as a “window” into the subjective or private aspects of the narrator’s experience but also as *communicative* acts, based on shared socio-cultural resources and practices (e.g., Atkinson, 1997; Duranti, 1986; Edwards, 1997a, 1997b; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Lerner, 1992). Gubrium and Hostein, for example, highlighted that “stories aren’t simply conveyed, but they are given shape in the course of social interaction” (p. 16). Potter and Edwards (1999) argued that analyses often fail to address the *activities* (e.g., accusation, justification, refusal, request) done by people in telling stories. Riessman (2005) similarly discussed the “danger of over-personalising the personal narrative” (p. 6).

In this article we propose that the integration of narrative and discursive forms of inquiry, if epistemologically affordable, can be fruitful, particularly for conducting “interactional” analyses of narratives. Although narrative inquiry contextualizes the sense-making process by focusing on the storyteller and, in some cases, taking into account the role of the audience as a shaper of narrative (e.g., Riessman, 2008; Riley & Hawe, 2005), it often lacks the means for explicating the details of how narrative structures and the context of storytelling are produced *through* talk and writing (Atkinson, 1997), which discursive forms of inquiry can offer. As an illustration of this discursive narrative approach we explore the construction of autobiographical accounts, focusing on *narrative sequences*. Conceptualizing narrative structures as *in situ* interactive accomplishments, we highlight the micro-details involved in the construction of events and experiences as sequentially linked and temporarily related. We also show what social action sequencing of events allows narrators to accomplish in relation to the reader. The source of our data is personal websites containing

autobiographical accounts of individuals who engage in *non-suicidal self-injury* (NSSI), defined as the deliberate destruction of one's body tissue without suicidal intent (Nock & Favazza, 2009). These websites were not interactive and most provided little or no opportunity for the audience to comment or provide feedback. Nonetheless, we consider our analysis to be interactive or dialogical due to our focus on how the narrator used language to communicate experience of NSSI to an imagined audience.

Throughout the article we use the terms *story*, *narrative*, and *account* interchangeably to broadly refer to "spates of talk [and text] that are taken to describe or explain matters of concern to participants" (Gubruim & Holstein, 2009, p. xviii). For the purposes of this study, we did not differentiate between the two broad literary genres of prose and poetry and examined them both, considering that both were relied on in the construction of online autobiographies. We first discuss our discursive narrative approach to the study of narratives, including our conceptualization of the context of storytelling. This is followed by the discussion of data collection and analysis methods used in this study. We conclude by presenting the results of our discursive narrative analysis of online accounts of NSSI and discussing methodological implications of integrating narrative and discursive approaches to research. In particular, we focus on *structural narrative analysis* (e.g., Gee, 1991; Labov & Waletzky, 1997) given its close resemblance to discourse analysis as compared to other forms of narrative inquiry.

### Definition of Narrative

The definition of a narrative and how to examine it has been a matter of debate (Chase, 2005; Riessman, 2002). Frank (1998) and Polkinghorne (1988) distinguished between "stories" and "narratives," arguing that people tell stories and researchers, through a detailed analysis, discern narratives or ways of structuring stories. Recognizing that people interpret their lives according to the cultural narratives available to them, narrative analysts focus not only on the "simple" telling of stories but also on the story's underlying assumptions (Bell, 2002). That is, the story about someone's subjective or "private" experience is often interpreted with reference to larger socio-cultural dynamics and discourses (e.g., Burman, 2003; Frank, 1998; Parker, 2003). Overall, personal narratives can be analyzed through different theoretical and methodological lens, including textually, rhetorically, culturally, historically, politically, and performatively (Riessman, 2002). Philosophically, many narrative theorists and scholars adopt a constructivist or social constructionist lens (see Sparkes & Smith, 2008, for an overview). For example, it was argued that narrative is a form of (joint) action (Chase, 2005; Frank, 2006); that storytelling helps people make sense of their lives (e.g. Bruner, 1991; McAdams, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988); that experiences and identities are constructed socially (e.g., Ezzi, 1998; McLean & Breen, in press; Somers, 1994).

Many theorists have regarded temporality and sequencing of events to be the distinguishing feature of narrative (e.g., Bruner, 1991; Ezzi, 1998; Ricoeur, 1984; Riessman, 2002). Bruner (1991), for example, argued that narratives are descriptions of events taking place over time. Riessman (2002) similarly noted, "narration is distinguished by ordering and sequence. One action is viewed as consequential for the next" (p. 498). She further noted, "narratives represent a series of events and their associated meanings for the teller, and without this evaluative component there can be no narrative" (Riessman, 1991, p. 45). Narrative time is not necessarily chronological or linear; it may be circular and may involve retrospective reflections or exploration of future possibilities (Ricoeur, 1984; Riessman, 1991). Past events and future possibilities may be constructed in specific ways to create meaning of the present. In this way, the term "narrative" can be broadly used to describe not

only texts and verbal utterances which adhere to traditional story structures, but to other written, verbal, and visual forms of expression that construct meaning by establishing sequences of experiences.

In this study we build on prior attempts to examine narratives and narrative sequences using discursive perspectives and methods of inquiry (e.g., Atkinson, 1997; Taylor, 2006). Such attempts have included both applying discourse or conversation analysis to narrative data (e.g., Eder, 1988; Edwards & Middleton, 1986; Goodwin, 1986, 2002; Stokoe & Edwards, 2006; Taylor & Littleton, 2006), or alternatively, exploring the dialogic process between teller and listener as an adjunct to a more traditional focus on narrative structure (e.g., Bell, 1999; Clark & Mishler, 1992). A few studies examined temporality and sequencing in spoken interaction (Edwards & Middleton, 1986; Goodwin, 2002; Stokoe & Edwards, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Wooffitt, 1992). The present analysis distinctly addresses the topics of sequencing and time in written narratives posted online.

The study is informed by discursive work in social psychology (Edwards, 1997a; Edwards & Potter, 1992), discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1995; Wood & Kroger, 2000), and narrative theory and analysis (e.g., Bruner, 1991; Gee, 1991; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Lebov & Waletzky, 1997; Riessman, 2008). We also borrowed ideas related to narration being a social, interactive process from other perspectives, notably ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks, 1992), dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981; Volosinov, 1973), and social constructionism (Gergen, 2009). What makes this type of research discursive-narrative (as opposed to solely discursive) is the analysis of narrative (autobiographical) data (Chase, 2005); the focus on sequencing and temporality characterizing narrative inquiry; the analysis of a narrative in its entirety; and the use of narrative analytic questions, such as how stories are assembled, for whom, and for what purpose (Riessman, 2008).

### **Narrative as Construction**

In examining narrative sequences discursively we adopted a social rather than linguistic perspective. Discourse analysts do not focus on language *per se*, as is done by linguists, but on how social life and interaction are accomplished with language (Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 1995). For them, language is not a neutral medium through which people represent the nature of the inner and outer worlds, but rather through the use of language in specific contexts experience “emerges,” a premise shared by many narrative analysts (Sparkes & Smith, 2008). Research in social sciences (e.g., deploying thematic or constant comparison methods of analysis) often focuses on the *content* of talk or writing. In DA, content is not restricted to referential meanings (i.e., what text is about) but examined at various levels: lexical, grammatical, social, and pragmatic (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Discourse analysts are particularly interested in the “performative” function of discourse – how it is assembled and used to achieve particular social outcomes or effects (Potter & Wetherell, 1995). Overall, DA offers a range of useful concepts and analytic strategies and extensive body of knowledge regarding language and social interaction.

Structural narrative analysis (NA) and DA share some common features, namely the attention to the context of the storytelling, propensity to examine in-depth individual cases, and treatment of the micro-details of storytelling as consequential for what meaning the reader might take from the story (Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1997; Riessman, 2008). NA and DA are distinct in that the former commonly treats the entire story as an analytic unit, while the latter often breaks a story down in order to identify discursive practices and resources used in a particular exchange or part of text. DA is more focused on the micro-details of discourse as compared to NA; it typically draws conclusions on the basis of

studying multiple cases, and it attends to the participants' discursively displayed concerns and inferences (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Wood & Kroger, 2000). There is also epistemological compatibility between DA and constructivist versions of NA (e.g., Potter & Hepburn, 2008; Potter, 1996; Riessman, 1991). While DA, as developed and applied within social psychology, is constructionist, whether or not the narrative approach to analysis is constructionist depends on the epistemic intent that informs its use. Narrative methods can be used within an objective model of science to "discover" something, which had been already in the text or talk before analysis began or, alternatively, to approach narrative data and resulting research reports as emerging, situated, and social constructions.

Structural or thematic approaches to narrative inquiry typically involving data reduction through the application of (pre-existing) categories and progressive abstraction (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Although narrative analysts do not fragment the text into discrete content categories, as would many other qualitative researchers, they tend to engage in categorizing of longer stretches of talk organized around time and sequencing of events (Riessman, 1991). In contrast, discourse analysts prioritize *analytic* processes by breaking down data into components to explore relationships among these components and discern their function (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Discourse analysts interpret participants' utterances as instances of social categories (e.g., identity, motivations, gender, emotional or mental states) only if it can be shown how categorizing is the participants' concern or how participants themselves attend to and constitute social categories as they talk.

An example is provided by Edwards (1995) use of discourse analysis to examine couple's counseling and how categories (e.g., personal traits, emotional states) are produced discursively, through the very details of talk, to accomplish specific social outcomes (e.g., convincing, accusing, defending). He argued that by uttering "Connie had a short skirt on *I don't know*" (p. 333) Jimmy (male partner) managed to counter any notion that he is watchful or suspicious and, as such, undermine Connie's description of him as pathologically and dispositionally jealousy and, hence, responsible for their relationship troubles. Thus, what is distinct about DA is its emphasis on language as variable and context-dependent. *I don't know* may be used for, and recognized by the participants as accomplishing, different purposes depending on the context of its use (e.g., mark one's limited knowledge, present self in a favorable way, withdraw from interaction). DA practitioners are hesitant to rely on "external" categories in interpreting meanings of discursive actions (e.g., *I don't know* is a reflection of Jimmy's lack of knowledge). As Wood and Kroger (2000) put it, "the task of discourse analysis is not to apply categories to participants' talk, but rather to identify the ways in which participants themselves actively construct and employ categories in their talk" (p. 29).

Structural narrative analysts adopt a different analytic stance. They tend to read the text in light of specific (often pre-determined) structural features (e.g., orientation to time and place, core plot or complicating action, narrator's evaluation of events) and functions served by structuring stories in specific ways (e.g., Labov & Waletzky, 1997; Riessman, 2008). That is, there is a greater place for a "deductive" application of theory in NA as compared to DA. Moreover, although NA practitioners, similarly to discourse analysts, seek to substantiate their interpretive claims with empirical data (e.g., by displaying data alongside their conclusions), they tend to focus less on supplying the micro-details of language use involved in narration. Riessman (1990), for instance, discussed how one participant linked his past diagnosis of multiple sclerosis with his subsequent divorce, and how such sequencing of events allowed him to counter potential attributions of blame for divorce from the interviewer. Similarly to DA, the researcher's attention is on the action-orientation of language (the narrator is presented to "strategically" organize events in a specific way). However, the researcher is less concerned with identifying the specific features of discourse

involved in “linking” of events or with the variability of language (i.e., supplying the empirical evidence to support the interpretive claim that this sequencing of events serves to achieve precisely this function in this context). Riessman builds her convincing and interesting argument by supplying content-based, verbatim excerpts from other parts of the interview. Thus, it may be argued that the key analytic difference between structural NA and DA lies in the *degree* of discursive detail attended to by a researcher and used in supporting analytic claims (while recognizing the variability in attention to such details within narrative inquiry).

Furthermore, structural narrative analysts approach the study of the structure and meaning of narratives by attending to the context (e.g., social, cultural, political settings) (Gee, 1991) and examining how storytellers “do” context by supplying contextual details or sequencing events to influence the audience’s interpretation of described events and actions (Riessman, 2008). While similarly attending to the contextual features in stories, discourse analysts distinctly treat contextualization and sequentially of events as the participants’ *situated* and *emergent* (through the use of language) concerns and accomplishments (Stokoe & Edwards, 2006). As such, they are concerned with describing and explicating how storytellers make use of narrative resources locally – use, adopt, and modify them in light of local considerations and purposes. Rather than identifying fully formed narrative elements across contexts, discursively-informed narrative analysts seek to generate setting-specific ways of assembling narratives.

### **Situating Narrative within Social Dynamics and Context**

In line with some narrative scholars (Chase, 2005; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Frank, 2006; Riessman, 1991) and discourse and conversation analysts (e.g., Eder, 1988; Edwards, 1997a, 1997b; Goodwin, 1984), we incorporate an interactional perspective on storytelling and underscore the importance of analytically including not only the narrator’s telling of a story, but also the role of the intended audience in storytelling. This notion of the audience not only applies to who is mentioned and/or absent in narratives and their role in the story – what Gergen and Gergen (1984) referred to as the “supporting cast” of the narrator’s story – but also to the story’s listener or reader. Building on a constructionist premise that meaning is inter-subjectively constructed, emergent in and through the participants’ situated actions and inferences (Gergen, 2009), we could not simply resort to a dictionary in our attempts to understand the meaning of stories we examined. In a dictionary, meaning is fixed; in storytelling, on the other hand, the meaning is in constant flux, never fully complete or determined (Bakhtin, 1981; Duranti, 1986). Although narratives we examined are posted online in a “complete” form that is not subsequently revised, their writing and interpretation can be seen as *emergent* activities (Gergen, 2009). In writing a story, the narrator orients to the reader every step of the way and assembles the story in light of anticipated responses from the reader and the context of their interaction (and the socio-cultural context). Similarly, in trying to make sense of what is written, the reader orients to the narrator’s aims and agendas, as well as to the contextual factors the narrator supplies to guide the reader’s understanding of the story.

Our concern was with how the narrator supplies or constitutes, using a range of discursive practices and “devices,” the context to influence the reader’s interpretation of the story. We were also interested in the narrator’s interpretation of the context of interaction with the reader, evident in his or her responses to imagined or previously experienced audiences and criticisms (Stokoe & Edwards, 2006). Such orientation to the social dynamics should be evident, for example, in how the author reflexively organizes his or her description to counter alternative descriptions and to avoid one’s own descriptions being countered

(Edwards, 1997a, 1997b; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996). In our analysis, for example, we noticed how narrators observably oriented to others' possible interpretations of self-injury (e.g., as inappropriate, deviant, or nonsensical) and designed their accounts of NSSI with these alternatives "in mind" to manage various social issues. Such issues included accountability (is a behavior rational, appropriate, and justifiable); agency (who is responsible and how much control one has over his or her behavior); factuality (has something truly happened); credibility and stake (can one be trusted to be objective and unbiased in reporting events); group membership and identity; pathology and deviancy (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

## Method

### *Data Collection*

We examined online autobiographical accounts of Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI), which is the deliberate destruction of one's body tissue without suicidal intent, which includes but is not limited to: cutting, burning, and hitting (Nock & Favazza, 2009). We collected and analyzed data using a formal (clinical or medical) category of "NSSI" which, by definition, presupposes what constitutes self-harm and what is excluded from this category (e.g., intentional injury to self with suicidal intent or done by accident, eating disorders, masochistic acts). Adopting a formal category of NSSI, rather than describing various ways in which those who self-injure categorize and account for their actions and identities, may seem like a contradiction of our proposal to attend to participants' categories. Recognizing this limitation, we thought that the study of self-injury as the members' category (as opposed to researchers' category) falls outside of the scope of this study, which focused on the construction of a particular narrative sequence. Future research may investigate how individuals who engage in self-injury construe and account for what they do to their bodies and orient to issues of identity, morality, agency, and pathology.

We sought narrative data that would be easily accessible for our illustrative purposes. We chose poems (as opposed to interview, interactional, observational, or other types of data) due to their length – most poems we found were relatively short, which made them particularly suitable for a time-consuming discursive analysis of narratives in their entirety. Online communications offered a great variety of topics and forms of communication. One of us has had a long-standing research focus on self-injury and how it is communicated online (Lewis & Baker, 2011; Lewis, Heath, St. Denis, & Noble, 2011) and proposed to focus on NSSI data. All data were collected over the months of June and July 2010. Using Google's online search engine, we used the query terms "self-injury," "self-harm," and "self-mutilation" to identify personally constructed websites about individual NSSI experiences. Only those websites that were personally developed and that discussed NSSI-related experiences were retained. This search yielded a total of 71 websites that described people's personal experiences with NSSI, with narratives from 97 participants with a history of NSSI were selected for analysis. Out of 97 accounts containing prose or poems (or both), 55 were chronologically subjected to data analysis (37 poems and 18 prose) and represented the writing of 50 different participants. The length of narratives selected for the final analysis varied greatly from 23 to 15,000 words. We carefully consulted with our institutional research ethics board and were informed that provided the websites under consideration were in the public domain (i.e., no password was required to register as a user and view the website content), the website content could be examined without approaching the website developers for permission.

### *Data Analysis*

Using *MAXQDA*, a qualitative data analysis software, we analyzed the participants' narratives in-depth. We were interested less in the content of what the participants wrote about their experiences of NSSI and more in how they constructed their narratives, for whom, and for what purpose (Riessman, 2008). Analytic concepts and practices of discourse analysis were also employed, such as variation in language (within and across cases), focus on micro-details of language use, rhetorical organization of writing, accountability (matters of stake and justification), and building on prior analytic studies (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; Wood & Kroger, 2000). Analytic conclusions were generated inductively, through the detailed analysis of each text and its parts, although we thought that some degree of deduction was inevitable and even desirable for guiding and enriching the analysis. Particular cases were used to illustrate general patterns.

### **Results**

One narrative sequence used in constructions of online accounts of NSSI was of particular interest to us because of its prominence within and across stories. Specifically, narrators constituted their experiences as intense and unbearable using a range of discursive practices and devices (e.g., images, metaphors, extreme formulations). Such descriptions at times implied or identified a strong or desperate need for a solution that would relieve the intense pain. NSSI was presented as the effective solution available to narrators to relieve their suffering. Below, we demonstrate the discursive constitution of these elements in the *suffering-NSSI-relief* narrative sequence and discuss this sequence's functionality in this particular online environment.

#### *Example 1*

##### *Brutal Games*

It's all a game to you,  
A game you keep on playing,  
It's all a painful show,  
You watch me struggle,  
Bring out your popcorn enjoy,  
Ridicule and watch the blood flow,  
Ribbons of crimson red,  
... Watch my body crumble,  
It's all a game sick game you play,  
... Sitting there with your red popcorn,  
Beat me with your harsh words,  
..When morning comes  
... Everything settles to a calm breeze,  
Pain, fear, and sadness subside with ease,  
Brightened eyes will show no pains,  
Sealing cuts and strawberry open veins,  
You won't know anything I went through for everything will be gone,  
It will all disappear in thin air when comes the dawn,  
Eyes won't understand the disturbances I hold inside,  
Minds won't know the sharp intense roller coaster ride,  
Hands won't feel the shaking urges of dragging a blade,  
When morning comes it will all fade.

In the poem above, the narrator may be seen to rely on a contrast structure (Smith, 1978) to evoke two different emotional states: one of profound suffering and the other of tremendous relief and calmness. These states can be described as taking place temporally and sequentially (lines 2-12 & 13-23). “The blood flow” graphically portrayed in lines 2-12 seems to be presented as sequentially linked to a relief or absence of visible disturbance in the morning (“you won’t know,” “eyes won’t understand,” “minds won’t know”). In other words, it appears that NSSI is presented as having the power to eliminate the intense distress. Let us explore the details of how the narrative sequence *suffering-NSSI-relief* is constituted discursively in this poem.

We observed the author first constructing him or herself as emotionally and physically struggling while being watched and “ridiculed” by an unsympathetic other who just sits there and watches the author’s body “crumble” (lines 2-12). The depth of despair seems to be constituted through the narrator’s description of the other’s perception of the event as entertaining (“you watch me struggle, bring out your popcorn enjoy,” line 6), problematically so (“sick game,” line 10). By metaphorically comparing emotional pain to a “sharp intense roller coaster ride” (line 21) and painting visual images of the experience (“body crumbling,” “strawberry open veins”, lines 9 and 17), the author constructs himself or herself as deeply despairing. By supplying numerous contextual details (e.g., through graphic depiction of the scene) the author can be seen as warranting him or herself as a proper witness (Potter, 1996).

The description of cutting (“the shaking urges of dragging a blade”, line 22) can be viewed as mimicking a drinking addiction (an image of a shaking hand holding a glass) and thus presents NSSI as being outside of the narrator’s control or willpower (Ayerst, 2004; Potter, 1996). This “externalizing” device may serve to justify the author’s engagement in NSSI. Detailed descriptions of past events may open an account to undermining (Potter, 1996). Incomplete or vague descriptions of the past (“you won’t know anything I went through”, line 18) can be a way to create an impression of considerable past adversity while resisting potential discounting (Jefferson, 1985).

The graphic description of the author’s agony is contrasted with what follows the self-injury scene (“when morning comes”), namely relief from emotional pain compared to a “calm breeze” (line 14). The author credits NSSI for this experience of a complete relief. Formulating events and experience using extreme terms (e.g., “everything,” “anything,” “no pains,” “it will all fade”) may help present a compelling argument for a necessity of NSSI as an effective relief from pain (Pomerantz, 1986).

The participants can be seen to construct emotional suffering and its relief through NSSI as recurrent and predictable using verbs marking *repetition* (Tannen, 1987) (“it will all disappear,” “eyes will show no pains”, lines 19-20). Rhythmic patterns afforded by repetition can help intensify the impact of the narrative (Koch, 1983), what Tannen (1987) characterized as “being swept up by the sound and rhythm of language” (p. 576). Although the morning has not arrived yet, the author appears to predict that once it comes, distress will subside, constructing NSSI as unquestionably effective. The verb “will” and “won’t” (line 23) can be used to claim the author’s certainty in the matter (Vethamini, Manaf, & Akbari, 2008).

Together, these discursive devices (e.g., extreme formulations, metaphors, visual images, repetition, contrast) and temporal and sequential presentation of events allow *reifying* the effectiveness and necessity of NSSI – construct it as solid and real (Potter, 1996). Overall, the author seems to credit NSSI for the significant change in his or her emotional state (lines 15-17) and, as such, appears to justify to the reader his or her engagement in it. By formulating experiences and events as *justification* the author’s may be anticipating the reader’s negative appraisal (e.g., misunderstanding, disapproval) of NSSI. The author seems



to explicitly refer to this alternative, disapproving or critical outlook on NSSI in lines 1-12. Emotional suffering is not only described in detail, it may be constituted as being witnessed by the (particular kind of) other – someone accused of being indifferent and cruel. It is this unsympathetic other who the author seems to be inviting to witness NSSI. In the morning, not only is personal relief conveyed but suffering is no longer visible to the other. In addition to presenting events as sequentially linked, the author seems to be relying on the dichotomy “private-public” to convey that others’ judgment contributes to personal suffering.

### Example 2

#### *I Remember*

I remember when daddy promised  
 Not to hurt me,  
 I remember when daddy touched me,  
 I remember when I turned to cutting for relief,  
 So I didn't have to remember the nightmares  
 I endured every night,  
 I remember when cutting became something I had to do,  
 I remember when my family went against me  
 Because my coping skills were different from theirs,  
 I remember when I almost killed myself when I slit my throat,  
 But somehow I survived,  
 And I remember when I just couldn't stop myself from putting that razor down.

Both narrative and discourse analysts (e.g., Edwards & Middleton, 1986; Goodwin, 1984; Riessman, 1991) argue that *remembering* is not merely an objective reciting of factual events. Rather, narrators link events into a sequence that is consequential for subsequently reported actions (e.g., justify the narrator’s actions) and for the meanings that narrators want readers to take from the story. In other words, reports or “memories” of past events can be examined for their rhetorical design – how they accomplish factuality or lack of bias and how they are assembled to undermine alternatives (Edwards, 1994). The poem above illustrates this discursive perspective on memory as a social (rather than private) activity (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

The author here seems to begin by constructing his or her father as accountable for betraying the author’s trust and expectations of how the fathers should treat his child (“daddy promised” followed by “daddy touched me,” lines 2 & 4). The everyday use of a category “father” (and the endearing “daddy”) may be used to evoke positive feelings of care and safety. By first citing the memory of being promised to be kept safe and then being hurt, the author may be constructing abuse as *unexpected* – it came from someone who was supposed to care and who promised to keep the author safe. Presumably, abuse would have been easier to handle if it came from a stranger or if it did not involve deceit and violation of trust. A reference to “relief” in line 5 also implies that the author experienced distress associated with abuse. Repeated “I remember” can be a way to establish the factual nature of events and the author as an objective, disinterested reporter of events (Edward & Potter, 1992), rather than someone who has a stake in describing events in specific ways (e.g., painting a negative image of the father out of spite). Instead of directly writing “daddy promised not to hurt me... daddy touched me,” the narrator inserts “I remember” (similar to “as I recall”), which appears to present events as genuinely recalled, as they come to mind, rather than purposefully forged.

By closely examining the poem, it is possible to notice how it is highly selective and carefully assembled. The author may be seen as selectively citing events (incest) and linking

them temporarily and sequentially to the present engagement in NSSI. This may be accomplished through use of sequential markers “for” (“turned to cutting for relief,” line 5) and “so” causally linking NSSI and relief or forgetting of painful memories and nightmares (line 6). “So I didn’t have to” embeds a presupposition that before engaging in NSSI the author endured pain and nightmares. “Scripting” nightmares as recurrent (Edwards, 1994) using extreme formulation “every night” claims the persistent nature of the author’s suffering (Pomerantz, 1986). The author seems to further draw on the dichotomy (agency/lack of agency) (Potter, 1996; Wood & Kroger, 2000) by presenting him or herself as powerless over NSSI (“I remember when cutting became something I had to do,” “I just couldn’t stop myself”) or as unable to stop NSSI rather than unwilling to do so. At the end, the author seems to portray self-injury as a “coping skill” and as “different” (rather than deviant, sick, etc.) and presents rejection by her family as a consequence of such difference (“because,” line 10). In other words, rather than attributing rejection to NSSI (e.g., my family rejected me because I was cutting myself), the author appears to present rejection as a result of the *difference* in coping and implies that such rejection is unwarranted – that is, if someone is different, this does not merit rejection.

To summarize, the initially cited memory of being hurt and betrayed by the father may be seen as setting the context for the author’s subsequent engagement in self-injury. Immediately following the construction of the incest memory, the author cites the memory of “turning to cutting.” The reader is guided in interpreting self-injury as a sensible response to overwhelming emotional pain stemming from past traumatic experience. As Potter (1996) noted, “narrative organization can be used to increase the plausibility of a particular description by embedding it in a sequence where what is described becomes expected or even necessary” (p. 118). Likely, the author’s engagement in self-injury would have been interpreted differently without the author first contextualizing it through “remembered” abuse and carefully constructed emotional pain associated with abuse. This is a good example of how creating the context is the participants’ observable concern and resource.

### *Example 3*

Release the poison, release me  
 My blood is the only real poison  
 Burning, raging in my veins  
 Eating away at my being  
 I have to let the poison out  
 So I cut strait slashes  
 The blade burning red trails in my skin  
 Seconds after the cut, the poison comes  
 ...Screaming to be released  
 ...A sweet relief follows, and floods over me  
 But as the blood flow dwindles, the poison settles  
 Back into my veins  
 Burning, raging once again  
 The once sweet relief melts away  
 Leaving only the empty despair  
 Like that of a lost soul  
 There is nothing I can do  
 But cut again

Here we similarly observe the use of extreme formulations (“the only real poison”); externalizing devices (“I have to let the poison out,” “there is nothing I can do”); vivid and graphic descriptions afforded by figurative language (“burning, raging in my veins,” “eating away at my being,” “sweet relief melts away”) may substantiate the narrator’s claims regarding NSSI’s effectiveness in relieving emotional pain. The use of these devices and evoked temporality (“*seconds after* I cut” line 8, and “*once* sweet relief melts away,” line 14) and causality (“I have to let the poison out *so* I cut...,” lines 5-6) may help justify the author’s engagement in self-injury.

#### Example 4

I was scared the first time, razors are so sharp...they cut so easy and I fell in love with them. I would carry my razor with me almost everywhere. I had a little blue box that had rose petals in it. Such an ironic contrast.

The description of the author’s initial (“the first time”) reaction to razors as fearful and his or her reasoning behind such reaction (“they are so sharp”) may serve to present the author as a rational or reasonable individual (e.g., Wooffitt, 1992). “I was scared the first time” seems to constitute the author (in the past) as belonging to the category of “first time self-injurers” by specifying examples of thoughts about NSSI that one who has not injured him or herself would typically have, namely that it is stressful and painful rather than desirable. The inclusion of the author’s initial reaction to NSSI has implications for how the reader may interpret what the author is about to disclose next, namely “falling in love” with the razor. The term “love” used in the above metaphor may be used to evoke particular associations, conveying a sense of connection, affection, and strong desire. By comparing a razor to a lover, the reader gains a deeper understanding into the appeal the razor (and thus NSSI) has for the author. “*My razor*” further allows conveying the importance of NSSI for the author. Falling in love seems to be presented as an unexpected occurrence, contradicting the author’s initial expectation of razors being dangerous. The author constructs him or herself as recognizing the irony or incompatibility of loving something so harmful. This may be conducive to presenting NSSI as reasonable, undermining potential claims that it does not make sense to love something so harmful.

To summarize the results of this analysis, the sequential structuring of intense distress followed by an effective relief afforded by NSSI seems to permit narrators to account for their engagement in NSSI. Using a range of discursive practices and devices, the narrators seem to convey the extreme nature of their distress, calling for desperate measures to relieve it, and for which NSSI arguably provided. In other words, by presenting distress as unbearable and intense and NSSI as extremely effective in reducing it, the narrators seem to present their NSSI as justifiable and reasonable.

### Discussion

In this study, we used a discursively informed narrative analysis to investigate the online narratives of people who engage in NSSI. We showed *how* the description of events and mental states as sequentially linked and temporarily related (e.g., intense distress followed by relief, abuse as preceding NSSI) allowed the narrators to attribute relief from suffering to NSSI and present NSSI as a reasonable and justifiable behavior. There are some methodological implications of our discussion and analysis. First, we have argued that it may be possible to integrate discursive and narrative forms of inquiry. While narrative inquiry is often distinguished by its focus on temporality and sequentiality of events (Bruner, 1991;

Ezzi, 1998; Ricoeur, 1984; Riessman, 2002), discursive approaches to the study of narratives help identify the micro-details of language use involved in temporal and sequential ordering of events. As the results of our analysis indicate, narratives can be constituted using a range of discursive practices (e.g., extreme case formulations, vivid descriptions) and resources (e.g., drawing on shared cultural understandings – e.g., that sharp objects are harmful, reasonable people do not harm themselves on purpose). If narrative organization and sequencing are viewed as discursive accomplishments (Stokoe & Edwards, 2006; Taylor, 2006), narrative researchers may wish to attend to the micro-details involved in constructing narratives – namely, *how* stories are told. Discourse analysis thus contributes to NA the attention to details of how narrative structures and the context of storytelling are produced *through* talk and writing (Atkinson, 1997). It invites a different (micro-oriented) approach to the analysis of narrative types, genres, or structural elements, treating these as situated, interactive accomplishments or as the *topic* of analysis rather than a *resource* for understanding events, experiences, and identities (Zimmerman & Pollner, 1970).

Although NA informed by a social constructionist perspective challenges fixed, essentialist notions of self or the world and presumes that multiple identities or versions of events may be at work in the same interaction or text, it typically does not focus on the means for explicating these *variable* descriptions of events and subjectivities. Discourse analysis may contribute the appreciation for the variability in people's use of language and treat narrative conventions (e.g., narrative types, forms) as *possible* resources to be used in the course of narration. Discursive narrative researchers may attend to broad variations in narration and in what counts as “well formed” stories (Gergen 2005). They may approach sequentiality, causality, and temporality as participants' situated concerns, resources, and accomplishments. As our analysis illustrated, storytellers presented events as following or preceding other events, which allowed them to accomplish specific social outcomes.

Supporting of analytic claims is accomplished differently in narrative and discursive forms of inquiry, which is related to differences in aims, assumptions, and methods of these forms of inquiry. However, there may be advantages to researchers in combining NA and DA approaches. For example, discourse analysts have suggested that NA tends to insufficiently ground claims in data (Atkinson, 1997). From this perspective, it may be possible and beneficial to apply certain DA criteria to evaluating the rigor of a (discursive) narrative study. Conversely, NA offers analytic strategies to ensure that the researcher remains focused on treating aspects of a story as *parts* of a greater whole. By focusing on recurrent discursive practices and patterns, discourse analysts may lose sight of how specific practices and devices can build on, refer to, and inform greater narrative developments.

As we have argued and demonstrated, stories can be formulated as justifications, explanations, disagreements, that is as *responses* to anticipated accusations, misunderstandings, and assessments. We examined narratives as reflexive, shaped by and shaping of the contributions of others (Garfinkel, 1967). As such, we investigated storytelling as a relational and dynamic process. Narrators in our study used sequencing of events as an argumentative resource for advancing their own accounts and undermining alternatives and the analytic attention to narrators' observable concerns and considerations (e.g., Schegloff, 1997) is of crucial importance in this regard (i.e., what they consider relevant and significant in relation to the reader). Such participant orientations, as we have demonstrated, could be located in the very details of how the narrators structured their stories and may be a way to analytically explore the social, interactive aspect of written narration. The focus on a story being produced as a rhetorical counter to an alternative relates to the more general conversation analytic phenomenon of *recipient design* or the speaker's orientation and sensitivity to the particular addressee (e.g., ten Have, 2007). Such analytic focus can be extended in future studies to how storytellers orient to stories told by others who post their

narratives online (Arminen, 2004; Sacks, 1992). Arminen (2004), for example, examined second stories (i.e., stories that refer to other stories) in Alcoholic Anonymous meetings to demonstrate how the second story is formulated not as separate but as similar or different from the first story.

Although it is possible that similar discursive practices can be found in both oral and written storytelling, in all likelihood there is a difference between the way a written story orients to the reader and the way by which the story's recipient is oriented to in talk-in-interaction. In spoken interaction, the story's recipient plays a more direct and active role in producing a story. Lerner, (1992), for example, described practices through which a story is collaboratively delivered by narrators and story recipients. The oral production of a story can be modified midcourse in light of the audience's reactions (understanding, acceptance, etc.). A range of micro-details (e.g., gestures, paraverbal aspects of talk) commonly oriented to as relevant by speakers in making sense of what is said are not available in written narration. Further research is needed comparing and contrasting written and spoken storytelling and different ways in which the reader or recipient is construed or involved in telling or shaping of a story.

Let us conclude by briefly commenting on discursive narrative researchers' positioning in relation to the data and issues or challenges associated with mixing NA and DA. Narrative analysis encourages the researcher to engage with the data reflexively and consider not only their own rhetorical uses of language, alternative interpretations, and implications of re-presenting or re-narrating participants' narratives. Discursive narrative researchers must interrogate the dynamic created between their reading, interpreting, and narrating and participants' discourse and specify accountability mechanisms (Riley & Hawe, 2004). One implication relates to retelling stories of others in highly technical ways, divorced from commonsense or "lay" articulations. In other words, there is an unequal discursive power which may need to be acknowledged, with participants frequently being unable to access and contest researchers' narration. One way to minimize this power differential is to involve the participants in the telling (e.g., in joint data construction or write-up of research results). Another way is to present conclusions tentatively, as one version, rather than a privileged replacement of participants' stories.

Regarding challenges associated with integrating DA and NA, we take Seale's (1999) middle ground position that suggests that *practice* of science needs to be informed by *philosophy* of science (abstract and general theoretical, political, and philosophical considerations) without being determined by it. He highlights the primacy of researchers' "on the ground" decisions and judgments, informed by philosophical assumptions, in conducting quality research. Researchers interested in mixing NA and DA may need to be mindful of issues of epistemological commensurability while not allowing this general prescription or consideration to prevent fruitful and innovative work (e.g., each of us had a distinct paradigmatic stance yet we managed to collaborate on this project addressing challenges and negotiating differences at each stage of the project). There are other potential considerations and challenges associated with mixing NA and DA. Researchers may need to reflect not only whether NA and DA can be mixed but also on the ways that they can be combined in practice (e.g., at which phases of research – formulation of a research question, data selection, collection, analysis, write-up; sequencing in a study's design; and weight given to each approach). Researchers also need to consider whether they have sufficient familiarity with both approaches. Ideally, researchers have experience in conducting NA and DA separately before they consider using a design that combines both approaches. Conducting mixed methods studies as a part of a research team may be a way to address this challenge. Availability of time, resources, and supports may be other factors to consider when planning mixing NA and DA.

## Conclusion

In this article we explored a possibility of bridging discourse analysis and narrative analysis. Discourse and narrative analysts share many premises, including the primacy of meaning and social processes, constructive nature of language, historical and cultural sensitivity, and an analyst's reflexive stance. Despite these commonalities, these approaches diverge in many important ways. This article was an attempt to combine analytical concerns and procedures of DA and NA. While narrative analysts focus on identifying narratives structures and components, a discursive narrative approach we discussed and illustrated highlights stories' action-orientation and the way stories are constituted for the occasions of their production. As such, it may help to address a recent call to re-contextualize and re-relationalize NA or to situate narrative construction within social dynamics and context (e.g., Atkinson, 1997; Duranti, 1986; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Riessman, 2005).

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