Narrative
Department of Sociology (920:512:03)
Spring 2013
Rutgers University
Syllabus

Instructor:  Professor Judith Gerson
Office: Davison room 139, Douglass Campus
E-mail: gerson@rci.rutgers.edu
Office Hours: Mondays 3 -5 and by appointment

Course Overview:

Narratives are the stories well tell one another. Narratives order and connect events, objects and processes in meaningful ways. They occur in a seemingly endless variety of forms including personal accounts, recorded histories, official documents, political campaigns, cultural myths, and course descriptions to cite a few examples. Many scholars would disparage the claim of a universal narrative, though some would insist that ideas about the individual self in modern life represent such a narrative. An emerging field of study within sociology, narrative scholarship crosscuts and intersects with every research area within the discipline, and simultaneously transcends the traditional chasm between the humanities and the social sciences. The course takes advantage of this intellectual complexity and makes the argument that all narratives are socially constructed and thus are important sources of knowledge of larger social processes and structures.

The learning goals of this seminar are reflected in its organization. The readings begin with a discussion about how best to define narratives. Are narratives and stories synonymous, or are there differences between the two concepts? Does genre or narrative form matter? What characteristics best define different narrative forms and narratives in general? Do narratives invariably represent a chronological or even orderly sequence? Are all narratives accounts and/or explanations? Does narrative description imply explanation? What do narratives allow scholars to understand about the self and about identity? Does the focus or substance of a narrative matter? For instance, are there important categorical differences among illness, trauma, and social justice narratives? How do empirically minded scholars analyze omission, silence, and trace in narratives? Are there occasions that are more likely to produce and/or reproduce the telling of stories, and some stories rather than others? In what ways are narratives shaped by the conditions and processes of their production; how do narrative production, communication, and circulation respond to socio-historical requirements, regulation, and audience response? How do repetition and emphasis, omission and silence, translation and transferability operate to define the narratives we write, tell, depict, read, see and hear? And what can the structure of a narrative—its order and disruption, its beginning and ending tell us? Finally, how can we best analyze narratives given our interests in comparison, generalization and applicability, and the analytic tools available to us? Are there limitations that narratives impose on researchers?

This seminar enables participants to develop the necessary theoretical, substantive and methodological tools to analyze narratives. The readings open with questions of conceptualization and epistemology, and then turn to a rich mix of theoretical and methodological issues often using empirical cases as evidence. The later weeks will concentrate on narrative analyses in several substantive fields of interest including political and trauma narratives, and which will also reference seminar participants’ research interests.
The syllabus lists the required reading (noted by an asterisk following the citation) and unmarked optional resources for further exploration. Regular attendance and active engagement with the ideas and materials in the course are essential practices. Each week students should come to class with a one- to two-page analytic overview of the assigned readings, which they will post on the course website by the evening before class meets (i.e., by Tuesday, 6 pm), read the other statements, and be prepared to discuss them in the seminar. These informal papers should highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the materials read, identify points of confusion, questions meriting further discussion, and ideas in conflict or contradiction with one another. In addition, every week one seminar member will facilitate our discussion and present a brief opening or closing statement. Carefully considered weekly papers and thoughtful participation in seminar discussions are important elements of the seminar’s success.

The final paper, based on original research, enables students to select a group of narratives and analyze the context of their creation and distribution, patterns of meaning, and contributions to understanding larger social, cultural and political formations. Research papers are due without exception on Friday, May 10th at noon. Final grades will rely on a composite evaluation of your weekly written and oral contributions, and your final paper. Though weekly work and the research paper are of equal value, if either facet of the work is less substantial than the other, I reserve the right to adjust this percentage in determining final grades in students’ favor.

Except under the most extreme circumstances, I will not give incomplete grades. Instead the work completed during the term will be the basis of the evaluation. All work for this course must adhere to the specific practices and ethos of the University’s policy on academic integrity, which should be read in its entirety at http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/integrity.shtml. This requirement includes the practice of not using written work for this seminar completed in other venues without explicit permission of the instructor(s).

Schedule of Readings and Assignments

January 23 Course Introduction

January 30 Foundational Issues


February 6    Foundational Issues, Later Articulations


February 13    Disciplining Narratives


Disciplining Narratives, continued


February 20 Personal Narratives


February 20  Personal Narratives, continued


March 1  Collective Identities


March 6  Narrative Politics and Social Movements

Polletta, Francesca. 2006. *It Was Like Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [Pages to be assigned]*


March 6 or March 13  Paper Topics

Post one-page descriptions of projects for discussion in class by March 6 or 13 (the earlier the better). Be as specific as possible and include citations to a few key reference works. If you remain undecided about your focus, provisionally post two possible projects.

March 13  Methodological Issues, Part 1


March 13   Methodological Issues, Part 1, continued


March 27   Methodological Issues, Part 2


April 3  Erasure, Silence, and Trace


April 10  Catastrophe Narratives and Collective Memory


April 10, 17, 24, May 1 Workshops

Discussion of work in progress. Please post a partial, preliminary draft of your paper, present it briefly to the seminar with the goal of having a constructive discussion of your work in progress.

May 10 Final Papers Due