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# Narrative Regimes. An Alliance between Descriptive Phenomenology and Biography

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5 **Narrative regimes: An alliance between descriptive phenomenology and**  
6 **biography**

7 Narrative inquiry can be, and is more often, understood as an investigation referring to an  
8 epistemology of singularity. By paying attention to life history and to the lived experience of human  
9 people, in fact, narratives contribute to understanding, from the subject’s point of view, the process  
10 of self-development and the constitution of experiential knowledge. However, as Pineau (1983/2012)  
11 suggested, it is possible to consider each story’s singularity and subjectivity as containing/contained  
12 by the collective and social as well as biological life: this ecology is central to Pineau’s proposal, his  
13 tripolar theory being inspired by Rousseau’s three masters and Bachelard’s work on imagination and  
14 matter. This led Pineau to coordinate four collective books devoted to human formation in contact  
15 with the four elements: earth, water, air and fire. Part of his work on “ecoformation” is marked by the  
16 concept of formative transaction, which implies an awareness of the relationship maintained with the  
17 environment, this relationship being taken in a dialectic between the habit of exploitative relationships  
18 and those relating to the awareness of an ecosystemic and reflexive world.  
19 In this chapter, I will address the ecologic dimensions of human lives and learning that can be grasped  
20 by comparing and combining different narrative regimes, namely in analysing my own experience and  
21 epistemology about narratives, time, and the constitution of a researcher’s identity and thought. I will  
22 propose a dialogue between different frames, that together may enrich our view of narratives and  
23 biographies. I will refer mainly to the French speaking world and the long-standing tradition of *histoires*  
24 *de vie*, that is a way to frame life histories in adult education and learning by developing settings for  
25 self-narration. This brings French – and maybe Southern Europe’s – biographical researchers nearer to  
26 the field of intervention, if compared with other traditions of inquiry in Northern Europe. In this  
27 approach there is no rigid separation between research and education, and no claim for the  
28 researcher’s distance or objectivity, but a desire to celebrate complexity and relationality in human  
29 lives and learning. The learner is a researcher of his/her own life, indeed (and viceversa, a researcher  
30 is a learner).  
31 In the French speaking tradition of *histoires de vie*, the biographical account is largely used to design  
32 life history group sessions, where narratives allow to grasp the social, cultural and historical  
33 determinants of individual lives and learning. This narrative approach seems to leave aside aspects  
34 that are nevertheless fundamental for experience, in particular the sphere of bodily experience<sup>1</sup>,  
35 which makes it possible to apprehend the world through perception, in direct contact with matter,  
36 impressions and “atmospheres”. Understanding embodied experience through words and language  
37 may be difficult, and this is a challenge for the biographical researcher. The ecological reciprocity - both  
38 physical and phenomenological - between human life and the physical environment (animate and  
39 inanimate) falls within the sphere of the sensitive. To be grasped, and recovered from oblivion, it  
40 requires a thorough description of the perceptions, impressions and inferences produced in the subject

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<sup>1</sup> I mention here, following an exchange with Laura Formenti, the existence of a working group within ASHIVIF dedicated to research on sensitive experience, which led to a seminar in 1994 in Montreux, Switzerland, organised by Pierre Dominicé and Christine Josso.

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41 by the lived situation. Descriptive phenomenology (or microphenomenology when this description  
42 aims to name sensorial experience) is a way to translate the processes of affordance and enaction into  
43 language.

44 Indeed, whether it is from the concept of enaction founded by Varela (1976-2001/2017), which  
45 postulates a co-emergence of the world in relation to the dynamics of perception of the subject, or  
46 from the concept of affordance (Gibson, 1979), which deals with the potentialities perceived in the  
47 environment by the individual (human or animal) to orient his actions, it is possible to find what  
48 Chalmers (1995) has called "the hard problem of experience": what is given to living in the environment  
49 is perceived in the mode of the obviousness, while the processes of donation, which is a matter of the  
50 sensible and the incorporated (Merleau-Ponty, 1969), remain unnoticed.

51 Based on these considerations, I propose to examine the complementarity – and maybe the generative  
52 dialogue - of these two "narrative regimes" – the description of lived experience and the narration of  
53 life history – and their specific contribution to the understanding of the ecological, social and historical  
54 dimensions of human lives. The first encourages the use of words to describe embodied experience  
55 (Merleau-Ponty, 1976) and brings to words the primary roots of existence, i.e.: the sphere of sensitive  
56 life, based on perceptions and sensations emerging from body-matter interactions. The second form  
57 of narrative, derived from hermeneutics and biography (Ricoeur, 1986; Pineau & Legrand, 2019),  
58 promotes meaning by weaving the historical conditions, social interactions, and experiential learning  
59 process.

#### 60 **The narrative regimes: phenomenological description and biographical narration**

61 Each experience told within the life story can be grasped as a temporal unit, a more or less extensive  
62 fragment of the person's story. The temporal dimension is a crucial one in human experience,  
63 correlated to the narrative process and necessary for the investigation of the different aspects of daily  
64 experience. In his book on the constitutive relationship of time and narration, Ricoeur (1986) considers  
65 the reciprocity between different forms of temporalisation of experience and the relative narrative  
66 processes. The theory developed by Ricoeur is the following: the narration of the lived experience  
67 presupposes establishing the temporal structure of the experience on the basis of a principle: that of  
68 succession. It is this principle of succession that orders the facts experienced in time and prefigures  
69 the causality connections whose function is to associate the facts among themselves in order to ground  
70 the story and configure the self- narrative. This is what makes Ricoeur (1983, p. 85) say that narrative  
71 activity transforms the episodic into a logic.

72 He assumes the existence of different “narrative regimes”, based on a principle of co-determination  
73 between the duration of lived experience as grasped during the narrative activity and the processes  
74 used for the composition of the narrative. The main difference between these regimes is the duration  
75 of experience grasped by the narrative activity. In fact, the narrative investigation of sensitive life  
76 would privilege description over experience: the narrator will seize a short moment to examine it in  
77 detail. Conversely, the biographical account would be characterised by the long duration of the

78 experience captured by the narrative activity. Ricoeur’s theory, however, is the subject of heated  
 79 discussion, especially in narratological studies (Adam, 2012), where description is usually considered  
 80 as a suspension of duration. If this may hold for an object’s description, it seems to me more  
 81 problematic when it comes to describing lived experience, which appears as “naturally” taking place  
 82 over time, if with different degrees of graininess  
 83 If a relationship can be established between the time lived and the time told, a third factor must also  
 84 be taken into account: time to say. Its consideration makes it possible to define and interrogate the  
 85 notion of "speed of the narrative text", as producing effects that can be distinguished according to  
 86 whether the experience is described in detail (for example, by choosing a short moment of life) or  
 87 narrated "en bloc" (for example, a period of ten years of life).

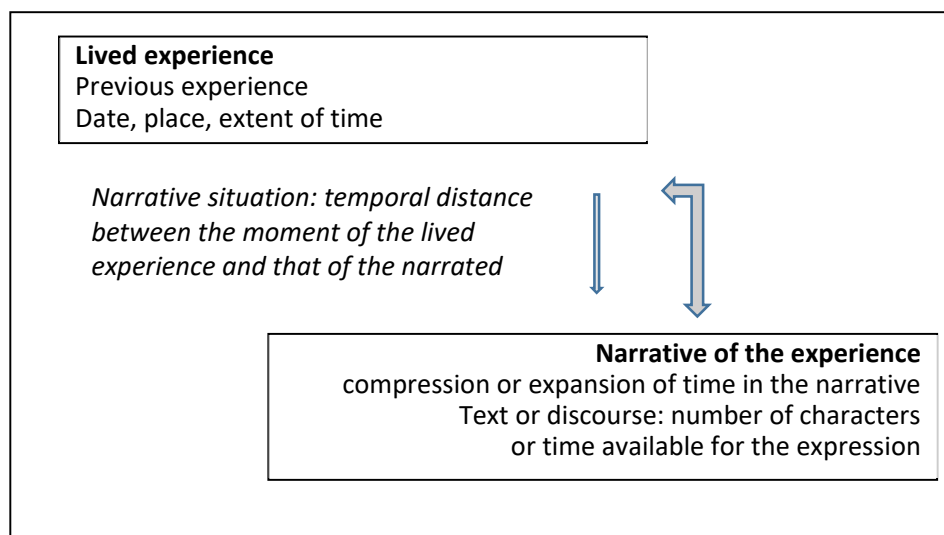


Figure 1: Time lived and time told during the self-narrative activity

106 The diagram in Figure 1 distinguishes "lived" and "narrated" experience, presenting a dialectical  
 107 tension between duration and narrative forms. This relationship generates effects regarding the detail  
 108 in wording some aspects of experience, thus the possibility itself of telling. The variation of the  
 109 relationship between "time lived" and "time told" may explain those effects. In the following sections,  
 110 I will consider how the emphasis placed on short-term experiences, during the narrative activity, leads  
 111 to microphenomenological description, that makes it possible to explore the embodied dimensions  
 112 of existence, while the understanding of a longer period of time directs towards biographical  
 113 narratives, hence highlighting the social and historical dimensions of life.

114 **Ecology of the sensitive world and embodiment of the lived world**

115 *While working on my computer, sitting in my favourite café in the morning, a situation comes to*  
 116 *my mind, and reminds me of another café, six months ago. It is ten o'clock, I am in New York and*  
 117 *the rather vast, very bright space where I am sitting resonates of movements and discussions, all*  
 118 *around me. My workspace is very narrow, and I can hardly find room for my computer, on the*  
 119 *same table where three businessmen are having a meeting and discussing aloud. I start sipping*  
 120 *my coffee, which is awfully weak. New York's coffee... It reminds me of other coffees, drunk in a*  
 121 *previous trip to Quebec... Gradually, my thoughts gather, and orient themselves towards the text*  
 122 *that I am writing about "narrative regimes". Now, noises are fading around me. Even the coffee*

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123            *has become more flavourful, and I feel its necessity, as a fuel for the activity that is about to start.*  
124            *Now, I feel compelled to write... and here I am, in a state of absorption...*

125            The first-person microphenomenological description (Depraz, 2013), focused on a short moment (or  
126            instant) of life, as in the story here above, provides access and expression to the sensitive and  
127            experiential aspects of lived experience and to the "sensory strata of the experience" (Petitmengin,  
128            2010, p. 168). Attention to details (“qualia”) offers a specific learning opportunity, that is linked to  
129            feeling and understanding the sensitive qualities of the specific lived experience, by grasping the  
130            atmosphere, listening to the lived body, and expressing the structure of perception. These sensitive  
131            dimensions of experience manifest themselves in presentational form: "Rather than saying that we  
132            have the experience of representations, it would be better to say that our experiences are  
133            presentational and that they present the world as having certain characteristics" (Zahavi, 2015, p. 91).  
134            In other words, the sensorial is the way in which the "world of life" is given to consciousness and, by  
135            extension, the way by which we live and inhabit the world. Before being represented or imaginable,  
136            the world is experienced.

137            This "first and immediate" dimension of experience has the effect of overlaying the underlying models  
138            of ecological relationships that govern our interactions with the environment. We forget that our  
139            perception is itself the outcome of interaction (enactment). Thus, the recognition of the ecological  
140            dimensions of existence demands that we become attentive to what constitutes the nearest and most  
141            obvious part of existence: our sensations in relationships with objects and matters, perception of  
142            atmospheres, affordances (Gibson, 1979) and enaction processes (Varela et al., 1993). To access these  
143            sensitive dimensions of experience, and be able to "translate" them into words, we use a specific  
144            narrative form, that moves towards detailed forms of exploration. The narrator pays attention to short  
145            moments of lived experience, and proceeds by careful examination of each strata.

146            In fact, micro-phenomenological description can distinguish and put in word different strata of the  
147            sensitive experience, the as follows:

- 148            – The stratum of affordances: action is described here from an ecological point of view, illuminating  
149            the narrator’s interaction and reciprocity with what is perceived in the situation.
- 150            – The physical stratum of perception: here, words try to express the sensations felt by the body in  
151            contact with objects, things or living beings: tensions, relaxation, agitation, texture of materials,  
152            smell of the place, sound of voices... The narrator's attention is focused on the proprioceptive  
153            sphere.

154            The identification of these strata may be helpful in clarifying how it is possible to translate into  
155            language those aspects of the experience that are not grasped by language or reasoning. The story  
156            that I used to open the paragraph illustrates these strata. I told a specific moment (an instant) in my  
157            history, that resonates with another story told by Jean-François Billeter (2012), who proposes a  
158            microphenomenological description of the atmospheres experienced in public places such as coffee  
159            shops, that appear to inspire reflection. Billeter dedicates this work published in 2012 entitled "A

160 Paradigm" to the study of the process of incorporating gestures, whether physical or psychological,  
 161 into situations. Through the phenomenological descriptions of moments and the autobiographical  
 162 narration of his life's path, it allows readers to grasp the temporal character of learning processes and  
 163 the forms of participation arising from the environment in the development of the individual's  
 164 agentivity.

165 The short text that I narrated, written in the first person, was meant to grasp and present different  
 166 aspects of my embodied experience in the café: sensory perception, atmosphere, and the dynamics of  
 167 the place. The narrator's attention is focused both on the qualitative dimensions of the experience,  
 168 and their reciprocal effects with the writing and thinking activity: the background noises fade out,  
 169 absorption in the writing activity, the coffee's taste and meaning change... At another level, the effects  
 170 of composition could be examined, which, beyond each of the identified aspects, contribute as a whole  
 171 to the constitution of an Umwelt which produces the propitious conditions for reflection and thought.  
 172 These data are revealed by the mobilisation of a specific form of narrative, that prioritises  
 173 phenomenological description, using the present tense (which is the time of lived experience). The  
 174 process entails an extreme slowing down of narrative speed and opens access to different aspects  
 175 (strata) and modes of experience for the narrative activity.

#### 176 **Life stories as a narrative regime in andragogy and lifelong learning**

177 *I first became interested in the effects of time compression and dilation within the narrative*  
 178 *activity during my master's degree at the University of Tours in 1997. In that period, I experienced*  
 179 *Pierre Vermersch's "explicitation interview" and the training sessions with Alex Lainé, using life*  
 180 *stories. It was then my first experience of life storytelling practice in an adult collective at the*  
 181 *university. I was then 25 years old: I discovered the infinite diversity of possible ways life stories*  
 182 *can exist. I then spent fifteen years doing research within two different frameworks: on one side,*  
 183 *microphenomenology, within the framework of a research seminar led by Claire Petitmengin,*  
 184 *Natalie Depraz and Michel Bitbol; and, on the other side, "les histoires de vie en formation", within*  
 185 *the framework of my doctorate supervised by Gaston Pineau. This is what led me to seek to bring*  
 186 *together two streams of narration: biographical narration, which apprehends the experience on*  
 187 *the basis of signification and duration; and microphenomenological description, which explores*  
 188 *the experience on the basis of its perceptive and sensitive components. This research has been*  
 189 *reflected in various publications, gradually becoming the central theme of my work.*

190 Detailed exploration may also occur in biographical narratives, as shown in the 192 word-text above.  
 191 If the description of experiential and sensitive dimensions implies an "extension" and "slowing down"  
 192 of the narrative time, in order to put in words the sensitive strata, the biographical inquiry proceeds in  
 193 the opposite direction: it compresses experience in order to contain multiple events and spheres of  
 194 adult life (family, social, professional...) in one text. In other words, while description brings attention  
 195 to specific moments in history, the biographical narrative apprehends whole periods of life, or phases  
 196 that can last several years.

197 If micro-phenomenological inquiry attempts to grasp the ecological and embodied dimensions of  
 198 existence, biographical inquiry reveals its social and historical dimensions. It is not a difference in  
 199 objects or content: rather, it should be emphasised that the main difference between the two narrative  
 200 regimes is in the way they capture experience by the narrative activity. However, they can ally and  
 201 create a more complex text. From this point of view, what Genette (1983) calls the "pause" in his study  
 202 of Proust's literature could be associated with the activity of phenomenological description.

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203 *To illustrate this process, the narrated time should be slowed down to the extreme in order to*  
204 *create the possibility of an intensification of the level of detail of the description, thus creating the*  
205 *possibility of putting into words micro-processes revealing the forms of pre-reflective adjustments*  
206 *between my modes of action and the lived environment. Thus, if I return to the moment I am in*  
207 *New York, in the coffee shop, I can focus my attention on the instant when, in the first sip of coffee,*  
208 *I perceive the singular taste of that coffee that sands me light, almost too liquid. Several directions*  
209 *are then open to me: describe the "texture" of the liquid; describe the taste and the intensity*  
210 *perceived as attenuated; characterise the temperature as it is given when the liquid pours into my*  
211 *mouth... However, among all these aspects of the lived experience, one dimension stands out*  
212 *because of my intention: that of showing that coffee participates in the constitution of my objects*  
213 *of thought. I am then led to examine the effect produced by coffee on my progressive immersion*  
214 *in the activity of writing. I then note a phenomenon that seems almost paradoxical to me: while I*  
215 *physically feel a kind of awakening, an intensification of the volunteer, at the same time, I feel*  
216 *myself surrendering myself in writing. The computer keyboard attracts my fingers, the process of*  
217 *absorption begins.*

218 The previous passage may be considered as a pause in the story. The speed of the narrated time has  
219 slowed down to the point where it only lasts a few seconds, the time needed for the first sip of coffee  
220 during the narrated moment in NYC. Baudouin (2010) has shown this dynamic in his work on the  
221 "kinetic regimes" of texts. In his examination of the configured dimensions of the autobiographical  
222 narrative - what Ricoeur (1983) calls "the framework of the plot" - Baudouin brings attention to the  
223 variations of the kinetic regimes of the narrative, that may be rich and diversified. A first modelling of  
224 these kinetic regimes has been formalised as in Figure 2.  
225

Pause	Suspended action	Important slowing down factor
Scene	Action narrated	Slowdown factor
Summary	Summary action	Summary acceleration factor
Ellipse	Action omitted	Important factor of acceleration

226 Figure 2: Narrative processes and kinetic variations in the life story narration (Baudouin, 2010, p. 419)

227  
228 This model distinguishes four ways of composing a life history narrative:  
229 – the "pause", that produces a discontinuity in the development of the story, hence making it possible  
230 to describe the experience, its strata and aspects;  
231 – the "scene", that proceeds to a detailed description while preserving the dynamics of temporal  
232 development; so, while the "pause" indicates a moment of interruption of the temporal flow in the  
233 text, the "scene" contains a dynamic of temporal expansion (or even dilatation);  
234 – the "summary", that makes an acceleration (therefore compression of time) in narration;

235 – the "ellipse", which is a "hidden time" within the life narrative; it represents the maximum  
236 compression of time in the text.

237 The story that opened this paragraph illustrates this modelling, by presenting a part of my life using  
238 some of the kinetic variations. This second account of experience maintains the focus on the processes  
239 of constitution of ideas and thought, so it approaches the "same object" as the first account, but  
240 adopting a biographical perspective. Thus, unlike the fragment on the café in New York, whose purpose  
241 was to illustrate the effects of microphenomenological description in focusing the sensitive dimensions  
242 of a given situation, this biographical account provides chronological and logical continuity in the  
243 process of developing choice of topics and methods within significant relationships (mentors) and  
244 academic contexts.

245 My 192-word autobiographical narrative compresses a duration of 20 years of lived time by  
246 synthesizing and aggregating many moments (summary), which would deserve to be narrated, or even  
247 described in detail, in order to clarify the relationships between these moments and the meanings that  
248 shape the story. The level of detail, in this case, is so reduced that it hardly allows to understand the  
249 dynamics that contributed to the emergence and constitution of a research object that became a life-  
250 long research project. However, the few uncovered data can be characterised as follows:

- 251 – a narrative of continuity and an associated duration;
- 252 – the identification of "training mechanisms";
- 253 – the designation of resource persons and reference authors;
- 254 – a biography of writings and research articles that contribute to the construction of the researcher's  
255 identity?

256 The biographical narrative, even extremely compressed, reveals the singular, collective, and social  
257 spheres of existence. In other words, putting the singularity of stories into words makes it possible to  
258 manifest both the anthropological and the ecological dimensions of human existence and different  
259 ways to learn from it (Dominicé, 2000; Formenti & West, 2018).

## 260 **Conclusions: Connecting description to narrative in adult education and social science research**

261 At first glance, the phenomenological description and the biographical narrative seem to rely on a  
262 similar process of "translation" of lived experience into words and configuration of these words into a  
263 narrative. In fact, the process is different: in order to access a specified point in the flux of time of my  
264 life, I must make myself available for a memory to come, while, on the other hand, if I want to  
265 understand a phenomenon experienced over time, I must go back to its starting point, then adjust the  
266 wording to reflect its evolution. The narrative challenge is thus modified: during the phenomenological  
267 description activity, the narrator is confronted with the question of relevance and graininess, that is  
268 what level of detail is necessary to describe a phenomenon. This intensification of the level of detail  
269 produces the slowing down of the text and give access to the spheres of the sensitive. On the contrary,  
270 with regard to autobiographical narrative, the narrator must deliberate on the relevance of the  
271 moments grasped in relation to the whole, and on the rhythm that their temporal ordering generates  
272 in the narrative framework of the story.

273 However, what seems to make sense, and to bring narratives to a deeper level of understanding, is  
274 often a mix, or an oscillation between the description of experience (embodied, authentic) and the  
275 configuration of the whole narrative (meaningful, coherent, continuous). This may generate in the long  
276 run a double perspective, and a composition of different levels of experience, producing an effect of



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277 self-understanding in context, and the awareness of the relationship between one’s life and the social,  
278 collective and ecological spheres of the lived worlds.  
279 This is what I have sought to show by proposing two stories of mine, telling about experience, and  
280 focused on a common theme - the alternance between the emergence of ideas and their inclusion in  
281 shared research objects within research collectives and academic networks - and by  
282 differentiating/composing two modes of narrative investigation (narrative regimes): the first based on  
283 phenomenological description; the second on biographical narrative. Investigation via description  
284 makes it possible to explore the contribution of interactions - with the physical, natural, and social  
285 environment, with atmospheres and places - by capturing an instant, a particular moment, and  
286 exploring it by active and sensitive dynamics. This perspective offers innovative ways to understand  
287 the contribution of natural environments, places, even food and the body's experience in the  
288 construction of a researcher’s identity, thought, and scientific work (Lawrence & Shapin, 1992).  
289 Investigation via biographical narrative opens up other perspectives: that of an understanding of the  
290 deployment of the processes of constitution of thought over the course of life, by identifying significant  
291 moments, by bringing out the processes of continuity because of the configurative power of the  
292 narrative (Collinot, 2012).  
293 On the epistemological level, the powerful effects of the oscillation between two narrative regimes  
294 brings light on the processes of (self)understanding, training and research in the social sciences. We  
295 can imagine it as a step forward in the definition of an ecological narrative epistemology. Storytelling  
296 research is an important axis within the ESREA network, as shown by the recent publication of the  
297 book entitled "Discourses we live by: Personal and professional narratives of educational and social  
298 practices" coordinated by Hazel Wright and Marianne Høyen which contains several texts presented  
299 at the 25th conference in the ESREA network, Life History and Biography Network (LHBN). The  
300 opportunity to think in narrative styles that explore the pre-reflective and sensitive dimensions that  
301 connect the person to the world opens up promising research perspectives, situated at the interface  
302 of educational sciences, hermeneutics and experiential phenomenology for both the French and  
303 English-speaking networks of biographical research in adult education.

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### 338 Abstract

339 The wholeness of a narrative can be thought of from different parameters. One of them use to be  
 340 underestimated or absent in biographical narratives: it is the ecological sphere from which the narrator  
 341 experiences the “physical world”. Integrating the dimensions of the sensitive life into the practices of  
 342 self-telling requires a combination of different narrative regimes. The processes of this form of inquiry  
 343 are the subject of the study proposed in this chapter.

### 344 Keywords

345 Biography – Ecoformation – Narrative regime – Microphenomenology