

Narratives in International Studies Research

Summary

Narrative research is a trending topic in international studies, with a growing body of literature adopting limited insights from narratology, sociolinguistics, and related fields to construct new insights into the workings of international relations. These studies are mainly concerned with questions about how narratives can be used to shape future policy courses, or how they impact the identity of agents and actors. The proliferation of studies using “narratives” in international studies research has been widespread since the 2000s, following a series of puzzles raised by scholars writing on language and discourse more broadly, ever since the late 1980s as part of the “linguistic turn” in the field. The adoption of narrative theory into international relations research

presents a series of important questions about the methodological implications of taking narratives seriously. These include inquiries into the extent to which scholars see themselves as contributing to current social, political, and economic configurations of the world through their own work. Other questions motivated by this include: can international relations scholarship contribute to narrative theories of their own, or are they content in borrowing insights from other disciplines? How far should scholars engage in assessing what actors say, rather than what they do? Or is this distinction a false one to begin with? Are there more or less potent narratives, and why do some become prominent while others do not? What is the causal significance of narratives, and what is the best way to study them?

Keywords

narratives, narratology, linguistic turn, discourse analysis, critical theory, perception, identity

Introduction

The word narrative comes from the Latin *narrare*, which means to tell or to speak. At its most basic, a narrative is a story of how events unfold(ed). But narratives are not merely a chronological recollection of factual incidents. If this were the case, studying narratives in the context of international politics would be of little value to scholars besides providing descriptive embellishment for wider explanation. Yet more and more scholars in the early 21st century are looking to incorporate insights from narratology (that is, the branch of knowledge dealing with structures of narrative, its purpose and conventions), and related fields of linguistics and cognitive psychology, into the field of international studies. In international studies, narrative theory is used to denote a concern for the effects of narrativity over time in normalizing and creating particular modes of being, thinking, and policymaking. Indeed, the example of how international

relations (IR) was studied and written about well into the 20th century is instructive here on the omnipresence and potency of narratives, in that there was created a self-evident truth that the world functioned according to a realist theoretical paradigm consisting of an anarchical system, self-interest, balance of power, and security dilemmas (Donnelly, 2000). Only in the 1980s did alternative perspectives such as liberalism, constructivism, and latterly postcolonialism really begin to dent the realist narrative in the field that had come to seem so natural and self-evident to many.

This article begins with an introduction to narrative theory, followed by a discussion of its applications in the field of international studies, all the while interweaving this with ideas about where there could be even more fruitful integration of the former into the field.

At this stage it is worth noting that where “discourse” in a social science setting refers, broadly, to questions about how

knowledge, language and power are configured, narrative research is more narrowly focused on how *stories* are used to push political agendas and expand influence. There is, however, a generalized concern with discourse analysis about the connection between how the world is represented and what is considered realistic, conceivable, or acceptable policies to pursue in the first place. Understood in this sense, narratives can be thought of as powerful tools that shape our very notions of reality. This article gives the reader an insight into how narrative theory can be incorporated into international studies, especially in terms of explaining identity formation, power struggles, the development of policies and security, but also broader critical questions around the role of scholarship in shaping our understanding of the world. To be sure, part of this concern for how to understand our place within the world coincides with a rise to prominence of critical theories of social science. Narratives matter here,

because, as [Mona Baker \(2006, p. 4\)](#) has argued, “narrative both reproduces existing power structures and provides a means of contesting them.”

While narratology and linguistics tend to focus on one text at a time, the first mostly on literary text (and more recently cinema) and the second mostly on oral narratives, narrative theory as outlined here treats narratives—across all genres and modes—as diffuse, amorphous configurations rather than necessarily discrete, fully articulated local “stories.” It is simultaneously able to deal with the individual text and the broader set of narratives in which it is embedded, and it encourages us to look beyond the immediate, local narrative as elaborated in a given text or utterance to assess its contribution to elaborating wider narratives in state and society. Narrative theory further allows us to piece together and analyze a narrative that is not fully traceable to any specific stretch of text but has to be constructed from a range

of sources, including nonverbal material. The reader may wonder at this stage whether process tracing is similar to the narrative method. This is a fair question, which can be answered thus: whereas the former is about evaluating the impact of variables in a causal chain (albeit in narrative form), narrative theory orientates the scholarly gaze more towards how the configuration of a causal chain we construct itself elicits a particular understanding of the world. In so doing, it acknowledges the constructedness of all scholarly narratives and encourages us to reflect critically on our own embeddedness in them.

The Broader “Linguistic Turn” in International Studies

The rise in interest around narratives can be partly attributed to the broader “linguistic turn” in social science that centered research on the role of language in how we understand our world (see [Debrix, 2003](#); [Fierke, 2002](#)). The implications of

this turn resulted in a plethora of studies focusing on language and forms part of the genealogy of how a narrative approach crept into the field and is thus worth recalling here. This way of thinking has encouraged scholars to look critically at their own role in constructing the world around them, be it through the discussion of certain topics at the exclusion of others, or the standards they impose about truth. It was also part of the broader postpositivist turn that allowed the language of poststructuralism and constructivism to enter the field of international studies. In IR theory, this has entailed a critical appraisal of the role of scholarship in maintaining existing hierarchies, such as the continued focus on great powers, or the prevalence of themes such as war and competition.

Feminist scholarship, and more recently postcolonial perspectives, in particular, have benefited immensely from the linguistic turn's emphasis on deconstruction and interpretative methods.

The linguistic turn in IR was also part of wider debates in the 1980s about the future of the discipline, especially the dominant role of realism. Constructivist approaches came to challenge realism's focus on the state and its overlooking of identity in shaping a state's actions (see, most prominently, [Wendt, 1999](#)). Critical approaches went even further and challenged the ways in which scholarship itself was implicated in maintaining global hierarchies that valued research about some states over others, and also excluded the role of women, race, and class in discussions about how international politics functioned (see [Cox, 1999](#)). Remaining at the core of debates in international studies, methodological differences revolve around one camp favoring a continued "scientific" (positivist) agenda, while others favor a "critical" (postpositivist) approach emphasizing the role of the observer/scholar—and thus a greater role for individual agency—in shaping the world around us ([Fierke, 2002](#)). As

George (1994) has written on discourse studies more broadly, the common theme in the latter has been about “how ... textual and social processes are intrinsically connected and to describe, in specific contexts, the implications of this connection for the way we think and act in the contemporary world” (p. 191, quoted in Milliken, 1999, p. 225). In other words, language and how we speak (or write) about something is linked to other spheres of life, such as culture, politics, values, and norms. If studying discourse was in vogue from the 1990s, narrative has become increasingly popular from the 2000s onwards. Thinking in terms of narratives also lends itself to questions that are very much in line with more mainstream IR preoccupations, including strategy and competition. This is because, the argument goes, if narratives are powerful, they can surely be wielded pragmatically and with notable impact.

Narrative research in IR also benefited, like discourse analysis, from innovations in linguistics, which is the formal study of language. It is worth describing this briefly so as to understand why thinking about how language functions is popular in the social sciences. In linguistic studies, there has been an appreciation in Western scholarship since at least the last half of the 20th century that language does not simply help humans present ideas and state facts; language, in fact, *does things*. Austin's (1965 [1955]) early work on "how to do things with words" opened up thinking in mainstream Western philosophy about the broader remit of language beyond just conveying meaning. Among the luminaries to contribute to this debate were Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Searle, who added their weight to these discussions. One approach, the so-called Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, even contends that language influences "perceptions, thought, and, at least potentially, behavior" (Holmes, 2001). The language

we use in discussing, researching, and writing about international politics has a direct bearing on how it operates. This also has methodological implications: as [Sadriu \(2018, pp. 27–28\)](#) argues, it is now an outdated “logical positivist thinking which viewed language merely as a communicative device conveying facts or emotion – and thus largely hollow – thereby ignoring its illocutionary and perlocutionary functions” (see also [El-Hakkouni, 1989, p. 314](#)). Illocutionary and perlocutionary are two technical terms in the theory of language that refer to what words do: the former is an utterance that has a social function in mind (e.g., a professor saying “you must write up your thesis to get your PhD”), while the latter refers to the effect of the “speech act” on a person’s emotional state, so that they are, for example, persuaded, intimidated, or amused (e.g., the author of this article telling you to “please read this paper in full,” and you doing so, would mean that the speaker has achieved his

perlocutionary act). As El-Hakkouni notes, the works of Austin 1965 (1975) and Wittgenstein (1958) in particular did much to push away from the previous logical positivist views and expose the many layers of linguistic function (Sadriu, 2018). In essence, the move to speech-act theory means that we no longer view language as merely proposing a truth value.

However, some scholars in international studies insist on a view of language only in relation to its role in reporting what is being said by a politician in the name of a state, and then to turn to a discussion about what all this means as part of (what, in their view, is the more important discussion) a speaker's wider, material, international political agendas. This approach is favored largely by scholars from a realist perspective who consider what a state's representatives present to the outside world in their dealings with other states as less important than the nitty gritty of international politics—that is, a quest for

security, balancing, and rivalry. In this reading, then, narratives—and language more broadly—are disparaged as unimportant or ephemeral, with statesmen and women thinking in terms of “rhetoric vs practice,” to repeat a subheading in a notable monograph by one of realism’s greatest advocates, John Mearsheimer (2001, p. 25). In other words, what politicians say is less important than what they actually do. More directly, Hollis and Smith (1991) argue in their *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* that “luckily, theories of International Relations need not grapple with the nature of language in any depth” (p. 69). This is part of what Beer and Hariman (1996) call the “systematic inattention to the role of words in foreign affairs” (p. 1). The other approach, as discussed in the section “The Use of Narrative Concepts in International Studies Research,” is to address narratives not merely as a chronology of events, and not to dismiss it as part of “mere speech.” Rather, insights

from narratology are part of the broader linguistic turn in international studies that can help to enrich our understanding of how the world of international politics works by providing a plethora of tried and tested ideas.

Narratology

Narratology is the “original” field that took narratives (usually fictional types) seriously. At the basic level of understanding, a narrative was taken to be a story with a beginning, a middle, and an ending. More precisely (and narratologists would agree) it is wise for students of international studies to think of a narrative as a “message.” We will return to this issue later in this section, but here it is useful to stick to the more mainstream understanding of narratives as “stories.” The idea of a narrative is a universally understood concept, as acknowledged in the classic study of narratives by Barthes and Duisit, who note that it has an

infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups, have their stories, and very often those stories are enjoyed by men of different and even opposite cultural backgrounds: narrative remains largely unconcerned with good or bad literature. Like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural. (Barthes & Duisit, 1975, p. 237)

Despite narratives being universal, but with a distinct lack of a common model among them, narratologists such as Barthes and Duisit persisted in trying to decipher their significance and to reach some sort of “central vantage point” for description of this phenomenon. Very much part of the early wave of scholars working on this, creative work such as

Barthes and Duisit's here followed a structuralist concern for order and narrative forms, as well as the uncovering of common patterns, themes, and typologies. And despite the lack of a coherent and common model of narratives emerging across different cultures around the world, early authors were eager to press on with studying this concept—a preoccupation that went back hundreds of years, all the way to Aristotle—and they “concerned themselves with the study of narrative forms, and not have abandoned all ambition to talk about them, giving as an excuse the fact that narrative is universal” (Barthes & Duisit, 1975, pp. 237–238).

Studying narratives is an exercise in understanding the ways in which human language is immensely complex and layered. Narrative theory tries to comprehend these layers—the meanings of subtle or overt cues in storytelling, for example—as part of the study of human understanding of any given situation.

To give a brief example from international politics: telling “the story” of “the Cuban Missile Crisis” in mainstream IR research has usually involved, across hundreds of books and essays, a discussion of superpower rivalry, nuclear deterrence, and security dilemmas. Yet, in all this, we are not so much being informed about how the tension between the United States and the USSR developed, but rather we are being introduced to a broader concept—that is, how international politics operates. And in this world—in this narrative—Cuba does not actually matter very much (Laffey & Weldes, 2008). What matters are the themes just mentioned: superpower rivalry, nuclear deterrence, and security dilemmas. Moreover, where we begin the discussion matters—if we begin the story with the United States stationing missiles in Turkey, the mainstream U.S. view of the USSR’s “aggressive act” of placing missiles in Cuba is seen as nothing more than a defensive response to U.S. belligerence. Such readings of the

situation exemplify just one of the levels of analysis that narrative study allows for. Indeed, in this example, the structure of the message (narrative) being delivered—with its starting points, main actors, plot, and props—must necessarily be studied in order to divulge fully what the narrative has achieved (and excluded). Its “achievement” has been that “for three decades Castro and Cuba were practically invisible in a vast body of research on the Cuban missile crisis” in a larger narrative whereby an international hierarchy is described and ultimately maintained (Laffey & Weldes, 2008, p. 572).

Before returning to this theme, it is necessary first to discuss the broader context in which such discussions have emerged.

Narrative and Cognition

Interdisciplinary research linking cognitive science and narratology seems to have produced valuable insights for international studies researchers just at the time when

constructivism had made themes centered around identity inveterate to the field. First used by Manfred Jahn (1997), the term cognitive narratology centers on the relationship between the mind and storytelling (see section “The Use of Narrative Concepts in International Studies Research”). Such a concern has also been discussed in fields such as cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence, where “analysts began developing their own hypotheses about cognitive structures underlying the production and understanding of narrative” (Herman, 2013, p. 4). For example, there is the idea of narrative rule systems that are inherent in people, such as Mandler’s (1984) idea of story grammar whereby six nodes compose a base structure for most stories: the setting, beginning, reaction, attempt, outcome, and ending information. This forms part of “a generalized schema that individuals use for encoding, organizing, and retrieving information ...” (Hayes and Kelly, 1985, p. 346). This becomes important for international

studies research because if such a general schema is indeed universal, then this provides a powerful insight into how states people conceive of their place in the world and articulate their policies to the outside, and it provides a locus where research on narrative contentions should be focused (see a discussion of [Oppermann & Spencer \[2018\]](#) in the section “The Use of Narrative Concepts in International Studies Research”).

Other insights include the ways in which memory interacts with narratives, with research suggesting “people are able to build up complex interpretations of stories on the basis of very few textual or discourse cues ... [thus] informing the study of how particular features of narrative discourse enable particular kinds of processing strategies” ([Herman, 2013](#), p. 4; See also [Mustafa 2020](#)). For example, the interpretation given to U.S. President Donald Trump’s [2017](#) claim that “Islam hates us” ([Johnson & Hauslohner, 2017](#)) is down to “higher-order knowledge representations or frames”—that is, the preexistent

memories or patterns of thought one has about particular situations (Minsky, 1975). It could be a blatantly racist and Islamophobic trope, a truism, an election ploy, or populism, depending on not just your position in the world, but also the preexisting ideas you have about Muslims, why politicians say things, or your view on Trump personally. This insight also has implications for those studying collective memories, organized as they are around narratives, and how states use these to foster cohesion (Wertsch, 2008). Applications of such approaches can be seen in IR, with Berenskoetter (2014) discussing the ways in which national biographical narratives are a source of group feeling within a state, and by studying this we can “understand how it [the state] perceives and evaluates the world and others within it” (p. 282; see also Lang, 2003; Onuf, 2003).

When studying narratives, we are not just studying them as a way to understand what the author means, or how it is

received by an audience, or the type of “world” the author is trying to evoke. Rather, and more profoundly, we are asking, to quote Herman, how a narrative is located in a broader discourse environment, and

questions concerning why or with what purposes that act of telling is being performed at all. To reiterate, stories do not merely evoke a world, and thereby constitute a target of interpretation; they also afford resources for sense making by intervening in a field of discourses, a range of representational strategies, a constellation of ways of seeing—and sometimes a set of competing narratives, as in a courtroom trial, a political campaign, or a family dispute. (2013, p. 10)

That is to say, narratives can be thought of as *intervening into the world*, in that they provide materials for future narrative building since, as we have seen, narratives become implanted into human cognition in a complex interplay with memory

stores that come to bear directly on how—and what—we recall as information and thus how we orientate our actions (for a review, see [Herman, 2013](#); those accessed here directly include [Herman, 1997](#); [Jahn, 1997](#); [Mandler, 1984](#); [Palmer, 2004](#); [Schank & Abelson, 1977](#); [Werth, 1999](#)). By way of example, think about what comes to mind if you were to hear from a narrator that a terrorist attack has occurred in New York and caused many casualties; experiential repertoires, stored in the form of scripts, would allow you to “fill in the blanks” and assume that in all likelihood a white, right-wing assailant has bombed the city.⁴ This is because, just as humans bring to bear prior knowledge about characters in a story from our social and literary experiences ([Schneider, 2001](#)), there is no reason why we would not do the same in real life as we encounter different “characters” in world politics.

It is also important to remember, as Sternberg ([2003](#)) rightly points out, that narratology in particular “has

accordingly studied the field longest, hardest, in the most diverse aspects and lights ... Its theories also have the most elaborate and versatile arts of interpretation to draw upon or test themselves against—as vice versa—along with an immense empirical range of closely analysed texts of all kinds, periods, cultures” (pp. 301–302).

In what follows, I will present approaches to date in the field that have taken insights from narratology to enrich understandings of international studies. Broadly speaking these can be characterized according to three main approaches: critical/interdisciplinary, policy-orientated, and use of narratives in a more basic sense of the meaning. There is much overlap between the first two: for example, a study may have a policy focus (e.g., how did negotiations over Israel/Palestine develop) and simultaneously take a critical social scientific approach to the world: that is, acknowledging that “what happened” is no less important than “how

something is interpreted.” What distinguishes a policy approach is that some scholarship here is focused more squarely on policy outcomes and uses concepts such as “strategic narratives” to outline policy prescriptions (see, e.g., [Kaldor, Martin, & Selchow, 2007](#); [Miskimmon, O’loughlin, & Roselle, 2014](#)). Critical scholarship, however, is characterized by a methodological commitment to uncovering deeper levels of understanding about what is motivating action in the first place and what narratives *produce*, but also the broader postpositivist turn in international studies ([Debrix, 2003](#), p. 6). These tend to be more detailed studies in terms of their taking stock of developments in narratology and cognitive approaches to narratives, attempting to rigorously apply theoretical and conceptual approaches to the study of international studies as will be discussed. Concern for how a narrative approach can make international studies more

interdisciplinary, and talk to fields such as history, sociology, or media studies, is also a trend within narrative research.

The Use of Narrative Concepts in International Studies

Research

At the heart of narrative approaches to international studies has been a concern for analyzing how the ways in which we structure our language and stories interact with the *range* of possibilities open to actors in the international arena. For example, what is the connection between the way we present our views and the way things play out in the real world? A basic premise here is that to narrate is to produce.

In Policy Analysis

A number of recent contributions continue this trend of using the “stories” told by states, or states people, as central to their analysis of things such as legitimation, security, identity,

conflict, and wrangling over policies in ways that are more sensitive to traditions in narratology more broadly. Scholars here treat narratives as “tools” in the hands of states that can be wielded strategically, though they tend to go deeper into questions of epistemology. Notably, Ronald Krebs’s (2015) *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* helps us to think about how dominant narratives come to shape national security policy. In his study of Cold War national security debates in the United States, he contends that public narratives set the boundaries of legitimation, thus constraining politicians in what they could legitimately argue for. In this reading, national security policies are defined not by the structure of a prevailing anarchic international system (as realists would contend) nor purely as a result of bargaining among different elites (as liberals would contend). Instead, Krebs follows in the footsteps of Jackson’s (2006a) *Civilizing the Enemy: German Reconstruction and the Invention of the*

West in articulating an argument about how tussles over the meanings of background commonsense and prevailing discourses come to impact likely policy outcomes precisely through dictating the limits of valid argumentation.

Krebs is thus interested in the ways in which narration sets the limits for legitimation. In analyzing U.S. presidents and how they narrate to the nation, he is able to bring to the reader a sense of how all this sets the limits of what can be considered possible and how their narratives structure the possible policy options available. Such a perspective is attractive to international politics scholars because it reinvigorates classic IR debates about power, and especially the role of agenda-setting and symbolic power (Berenskoetter & Williams, 2007). Indeed, as Krebs (2015) notes, “language is a crucial medium, means, locus and object of contest. It neither competes with nor complements power politics: it is power politics” (p. 2).

Legitimation is a key theme for Jackson (2006a), too, who explores the rehabilitation of Germany following Nazism and World War II, and the ways in which narratives of belonging to Western civilization were strategically used by U.S. and West German policymakers to bring Germany into the U.S.–European alliance. His approach has a policy-orientated focus but is more critical, relying on a process-tracing method—taking narratives as data—to question how our ideas of what is possible are constructed. Jackson’s concern is for how particular political configurations are produced through rhetorical deployments that legitimize some courses of action over others. His approach is decidedly more critical than most, in that he believes enthusiastically in the power of agents to actively shape their reality, and he meticulously plots the ways in which public rhetorical commonplaces are used to shape the limits of argumentation and thus policy choices. What matters are the “patterns of claims” that are

made and are part of producing the “boundaries of action” (Jackson, 2006a, pp. 23–24). Elsewhere, Jackson (2006b) has developed this into a concept of “eventing” whereby the contours of events are constantly reshaped by agents looking to frame them in particular ways that are advantageous to them. In particular, there is the idea that “previous narrations of events” impose “certain parameters on those trying to make sense of the new occurrence” (2006b, p. 501). What is interesting here is that this perspective can be read alongside our previous discussion on cognition and narrative frames and how our memories store data in the form of narratives that then come to bear on situations in the future.

Other questions motivating scholars to use a narrative approach include those of policy success or failure.

Chowdhury and Krebs (2010), for example, look at this in terms of counterterrorist strategies, opining that without undermining the legitimacy of insurgent violence they cannot

conceivably defeat an insurgency. Narratives matter because they empower some groups over others. [Oppermann and Spencer \(2018\)](#) similarly use insights from narratology to show the ways in which we understand this in terms of the “Iran nuclear deal.” Policy success or failure is conditioned by tussles over narrative, according to them. For the authors, focusing on the content of debates in the U.S. Congress in September [2015](#) over the nuclear deal shows both that politicians followed identical narrative structures when articulating their points, and that success did not depend on who was the more powerful side (what they call “the narrator approach”); nor did it confirm an “audience approach” analysis type, which focuses on how preexisting hatred for Iran determined narrative dominance ([2018](#), p. 271). Much like these studies, Oppermann and Spencer are interested in how narratives can be deployed strategically to push agendas. They propose a structure for analysis of narratives in IR

focusing on “(1) the setting of the story; (2) the characterization of actors; and (3) the causal and temporal emplotment of events” (Oppermann & Spencer, 2018, p. 272). They view these as the basic elements of a narrative and thus as worthy of analysis. These basic features of narrative are taken as the empirical starting points for an analysis over policy wrangling, demonstrating that narratives for both the success and failure of the Iran deal in 2015 were structured along similar lines. This confirms insights from narratology already discussed here: that humans have an inbuilt propensity to narrate. The article is useful for making it clear that despite the concept of a narrative being used widely in IR, “this has often simply been used as a synonym for discourse or rhetoric and has frequently ignored many of the advances made in the home turf of narrative analysis, namely, literary studies and narratology” (2018, p. 269).

Two insights from literary studies and narratology would be helpful in pushing the agenda Oppermann and Spencer have deftly advanced even further. First, the authors' dismissal of what they call an "audience based" approach that would prejudge the success or failure of a narrative based on preexisting "culturally embedded narratives among the audience" (2018, p. 288) should be tempered. Preexisting cultural narratives form the bedrock upon which argumentation happens (Goddard & Krebs, 2015). Indeed, narratologists have studied extensively the ways in which "people are able to build up complex interpretations of stories on the basis of very few textual or discourse cues ... [thus] informing the study of how particular features of narrative discourse enable particular kinds of processing strategies" (Herman, 2013, p. 4). In particular, we cannot dismiss a history of anti-Iranian and, frankly, anti-Islamic narratives in circulation in the United States. As postcolonial scholarship

has also demonstrated, there is a long history of negative portrayals of non-Western societies in scholarship done in the West that has portrayed “the other” as inferior and irrational (see [Said, 1994](#)). Muslims, Islam, and the Middle East are particularly demonized, and “anti-Iranian sentiment in the United States drew heavily on the stereotyped representations of the Arab Middle East that had become so prevalent in the [1970s](#), particularly the image of ‘Arab terrorism’” ([McAlister 2001](#), p. 214). As [Izadi and Saghaye-Biria \(2007\)](#), p. 151) find in their analysis of three leading U.S. newspapers and their portrayal of the Iranian nuclear program, “the three newspapers’ editorials define the Iranian nuclear problem in terms of the two premises of Oriental untrustworthiness and Islam as a threat.” Such findings are not limited to these three papers (see [Semmerling, 2008](#)).

Narrative research in other fields is replete with evidence of how we interpret new situations presented to us using

previously held beliefs. Oppermann and Spencer do not foreground the fact that the Obama administration faced an uphill battle to convince their own party to help block Republican efforts to stop the nuclear deal in Congress. This is because even if we accept Oppermann and Spencer's claim that the Iran nuclear deal "constitutes an unsettled narrative situation in which no single narrative is dominant, but in which competing narratives of success and failure have relatively equal standing" (2018, p. 271), this ignores another, very pertinent question, of how Americans view Iran—a question on which there is little doubt or narrative unsettledness.⁵ Pew research shows that U.S. citizens hold an overwhelmingly negative view of Iran. This is consequential because, as Herman notes, "people are able to build up complex interpretations of stories on the basis of very few textual or discourse cues" (Herman, 2013, p. 4). How a person interprets a particular narrative about a deal with Iran comes

down to “higher-order knowledge representations or frames,” as discussed previously, which is to say the preexistent memories or patterns of thought one has about particular situations (Minsky, 1975). We know that narratives “do not merely evoke a world, and thereby constitute a target of interpretation; they also afford resources for sense making by intervening in a field of discourses, a range of representational strategies, a constellation of ways of seeing—and sometimes a set of competing narratives, as in a courtroom trial, a political campaign, or a family dispute (Herman, 2013, p. 10). In other words, if the starting point for an audience’s interpretation of a narrative is one of negativity towards Iran, then Democratic narratives *for* a deal would be competing not just with what has preceded this debate, but with ongoing Republican (and Democratic!) antideal narrators *in the present*.

Much ink has been spilled among narrative theorists in arguing that narratives intervene into the world and provide

materials for future narrative building since, as we have seen, these become implanted into human cognition in a complex interplay with memory stores that come to bear directly on how—and what—we recall as information (for a review, see [Herman, 2013](#)). The fact that President Trump reversed the Iran deal only a few years later is evidence of the salience of the (anti-Iran) narrative rather than its unsettledness. Trump’s reversal of the deal similarly does not bode well for their second contention, that the “conventional actor-centred and resource-based understandings of discursive power, the plausibility and reception of a story would critically depend on the role and power of the narrator” ([Oppermann & Spencer, 2018](#), p. 287), since in their reading the “more powerful side of the debate in the form of the administration and president is not the dominant narrative.”

In narratology, the narrator is the agent that “transmits everything” by shaping the story, transmitting it, and

testifying to a particular truth relevant to that “reference world” (Phelan & Booth 2005, p.388). Oppermann and Spencer’s revelation that a common form (i.e., a basic form of a story that is needed for it to be considered a narrative) pervades both Democratic and Republican narrative strategies in their wrangling provides a good starting point for integrating narratological insights into the field of IR. It provides a heuristic device and organic link to the field of narratology, thus bringing them both closer in conversation. Their contention that narratives are instrumental to constituting norms and identities is equally in line with developments in cognitive narratology and other related fields such as sociolinguistics and sociopsychology. Yet focusing their discussion on the question of *how* narratives become successful by honing in on the similarities between pro- and antideal politicians’ narrative “structure” poses some problems. For them, narratives following the same structure

means having key elements (as mentioned previously). But narratologists would contend that a basic feature of a narrative does not constitute its “structure.” Mandler (1984), for example, argues for a cognitively based “narrative rule systems” whereby six nodes constitute a base for most stories: the setting, beginning, reaction, attempt, outcome, and ending information, thus forming “a generalized schema that individuals use for encoding, organizing, and retrieving information ...” (Hayes & Kelly, 1985, p. 346). The structure of a narrative includes a range of issues not entirely predicated on the overall form a narrative takes; instead, narrative structure refers to a series of issues such as how the narrative world is presented by forays backward or forward in time, along with descriptions of space and how these impact our processing strategies (Abbott, 2008, p. 163; Genette, 1980), or the way “specific discourse patterns enable narrative experience” (Herman, 2013). Understanding narrative

experience is predicated on answering a broader set of questions that may include:

How does the time frame of events in the storyworld relate to that of the narrational or world-creating act?; Where did/will/might narrated events happen relative to the place of narration—and for that matter, relative to the interpreter’s current situation?; How exactly is the domain of narrated events spatially configured, and what sorts of changes take place in the configuration of that domain over time?; During a given moment of the unfolding action, what are the focal (foregrounded) constituents or inhabitants of the narrated domain—as opposed to the peripheral (backgrounded) constituents?; Whose vantage point on situations, objects, and events in the narrated world shapes the presentation of that world at a given moment?; In what domains of the storyworld do

actions supervene on behaviors, such that it becomes relevant to ask, not just what cause produced what effect, but also who did (or tried to do) what, through what means, and for what reason? (Herman, 2013, p. 10)

Indeed, “the interplay among the dimensions at issue—the specific pattern of responses created by the way an interpreter frames answers to these sorts of questions when engaging with a narrative—accounts for the structure as well as the functions and overall impact of the storyworld at issue” (Herman, 2013, p. 10).

Critical Approaches and Interdisciplinarity

Critical approaches are often blended with policy-orientated research. There is a focus on legitimation and identity and how narratives buttress these. For example, Goddard's (2009) approach to the argument is similar to that of Jackson in

recognizing that one cannot pick and choose any argument “out of thin air” but must center these on existing social and political configurations. In her case study she looks at how Ireland and Israel/Palestine became cases of “indivisible territory” in an attempt to show the connection between how a conflict is spoken about by politicians and the impact this has on coalitions, and thus on bargaining at higher levels. Such a concern for how language—as a basis for legitimation—impacts social and political structures and thus policy outcomes sits at the heart of what taking narratives seriously may mean for future research. In particular, narratives of colonialism, domination by one group over another, and past (failed) negotiations are important as they make up the historical memory of a particular nation. Borrowing, if not always explicitly, from narratology’s insights into the ways in which messages are received by readers/listeners, [Goddard \(2009, p. 24\)](#) argues that “if a claim appeals to a cultural

narrative that is recorded in writing, repeated in textbooks and immortalized in museums, it is likely to resonate strongly with an audience.”

Tracing the lineage of this perspective, we notice Goddard’s reliance on the sociologists Olick and Robbins (1998), writing on historical memory and sociology; they, in turn, trace their endeavor back to the 19th century and novelists such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who is accredited with the notion of “collective memory,” while they also rely extensively on other works on narrative and cognition throughout their study (see Olick & Robbins, 1998, p. 106). Goddard (2009) also speaks about the “dominant narrative” (p. 25) upon which are situated the contours of acceptable argumentation (what she calls “legitimation”). Goddard draws on Stuart Kaufman’s (2001) ideas about myth-symbol complexes and the rise of ethnic politics; Kaufman, in turn, draws on the influential works of Murray Edelman (1977),

whose works on symbols and politics were heavily influenced by ideas from sociolinguistics and cognitive psychology. We have seen how these two fields developed in tandem with concerns among a broad array of scholars about the mind, memory, and the role of narratives. That is to say, there is a debt owed by IR scholars to these fields.

Narrative theories can also help scholars to question further how identity shapes outcomes in international affairs. Bially Mattern (2005), in an ambitious study, speaks of “power laden narrative constructs” that for her form the basis of international identities. It is these narrative constructs that structure reality. She demonstrates the importance of such a reading for IR by looking at how the U.S.–U.K. “special relationship” temporarily broke down during the Suez Crisis of 1956 and then subsequently “repaired.” “Identity is nothing but narrative,” Bially Mattern argues, and lasts “only as long as authors keep authoring it, sharing it with others, and

collectively believing it” (Bially Mattern, 2005, p. 12). Bially Mattern borrows heavily from the French literary theorist and philosopher Jean François Lyotard, especially his *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Lyotard, 1988), his linguistic-cum-philosophical tract on how “subjects are only such in the way that they move and are produced by moves within different language games” (Gratton, 2018). Lyotard was very much concerned with narratives and the ways in which these constrain human behavior, as noted by Michael Bamberg (2005) in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. Indeed, Lyotard is said to have coined the now widely used term “grand narrative” (or metanarrative) to explain how this worked (see Bamberg, 2005, p. 287). Borrowing insights from semiotics and linguistics more broadly allows Bially Mattern to develop a compelling analysis of how narratives about the Self can be accessed strategically to make or break relationships even at the international political level. In this

reading, language is “powerful” since “narrative is not just about authors telling events, it is also about authors constructing those very events as they tell them. In this way, narrative creates ‘reality’” (Bially Mattern, 2005, p. 10). This approach clearly borrows from the discussions we saw previously in narratology and other fields about the salience of narratives to human cognition, and Bially Mattern applies such ideas deftly in her work, helping in the process to show the usefulness of narratological insights in the field of IR (see also Bially Mattern, 2003). In essence, Bially Mattern’s account takes these approaches and makes the analytical leap by claiming causal significance for narratives in international political tussles. This is supported by research on narrative theory in Translation Studies: according to Baker, narratives are a means of subjugation in that “the retelling of past narratives is also a means of control. It socializes individuals into an established social and political order and it encourages

them to interpret present events in terms of sanctioned narratives of the past” (Baker, 2006, p. 21).

A final, but as of yet underdeveloped approach, may also be useful in buttressing the critical and policy-orientated narrative approaches in international studies research. Part of the interdisciplinary approach concerns how narrative accounts can advance the study of IR in rendering the world “less puzzling than before” (Suganami, 2008). For Suganami, “narratives are fundamental to the explanation of social events” (2008, p. 338) and cannot be avoided by scholars, so they may as well begin to appreciate how the explanations produced therein fit into one of three narrative forms, “chance coincidences, mechanistic processes and human acts” (2008, p. 334). Understanding that what we write is necessarily a narrative (with a chosen beginning, middle, and end) enables us to realize that “competing accounts” among historians and IR scholars are not competing at all, but ones that start with

different questions—even if they are “trying to explain the occurrence of the same event under identical descriptions” (2008, p. 342). In essence, narrative is central to explanation because it is central to human experience and the way we think and try to understand our own existence. It is this premise, gleaned from philosophical, linguistic, and narratological insights (Suganami relies on the French philosopher Ricoeur for his insights into narratives), that allows Suganami to illuminate convergences between disciplines. Ricoeur was also a prominent narratologist, who wrote extensively on the centrality of narrative to discussions on ethics and identity (Ricoeur, 1984–1988).

A narrative approach to IR could also aid scholars grappling with issues surrounding enduring imperialist legacies in the field. Indeed, as Tarak Barkawi (2010) argues, “unlike anthropology, IR and security studies have not come to terms with their own implication in imperial power and

what this might mean for how they understand the world.” A postcolonial critique of scholarship has, since the 1970s onwards, been calling into question scholarship’s implications in racism and imperialism (see Said, 1994). In IR, a call to “decolonize” the discipline is ongoing and designed to question and expose Eurocentric bias in research, bring to the fore frequently marginalized voices, and challenge conventional understandings of IR (Sabaratnam, 2011).

Studying narratives here becomes essential because they are seen as inherent to the ongoing sustainment of imperial endeavors, and only through taking into account alternative narratives can we achieve a “recovery” of places’ and people’s historicity (Ayers, 2006). A keener focus on the ways in which narratives are embedded socially and interact with our cognition—but also how they may be systematically broken down to create new, fairer ones—represents new

research avenues that a focus on narratives in international studies can encourage.

Using Narratives in a Simpler Sense

Communication theories of narrative are concerned with “either the production of messages and what they represented, or perceptions of them and their effects” (Haspel, 2005, p. 77). A key concern, and what makes narratives attractive to these scholars, is the ways in which communication can achieve social action (Haspel, 2005, p. 77). For Miskimmon, O’loughlin, and Roselle (2014), strategic narratives should be seen as “representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors—usually elites—attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives. Critically, strategic narratives integrate interests and goals—they articulate end states and suggest how to get there” (p. 7).

Their work, and work on strategic narratives more broadly (from a communications perspective), traces their insights to earlier works on role theory pioneered by [Holsti \(1970\)](#) and the broader constructivist framework in international studies (see [Checkel, 2004](#)). Insights from cognitive science are generally relied upon by Miskimmon, O’loughlin, and Roselle, mainly in discussions of how narratives regulate shared meaning (like identity) and shape policy endeavors more broadly, citing works like (see also [Bernardi et al., 2012](#); [Corman & Goodall 2011](#); [ÓTuathail, 2002](#)). The concern here is for the ways in which states can get between cognitive processes and actions, by showing the possibility of actors intervening actively in the shaping of this process through the deployment of what they call “strategic narratives.” These studies tend to be concerned with theory very little beyond the basic outline sketched here. This is likely because the main thrust of theorizing relates to practices of communication in

the digital era, with narratives as foil for such a discussion rather than its main point of contention.

Other scholars in the field also use “narrative” in their work more simply as a byword for discourse analysis (Berenskoetter, 2014; Campbell, 1993; Epstein, 2008; Fierke, 2002) while paying limited attention to the field of narratology. Other than this, the work of scholars also interested in rhetoric and argumentation as a basis for understanding world politics would also be enriched by narratology’s insights into the way humans process information, how previous narrative frames we hold impact our ability to read new situations, and so on. Risse (2000), in a widely cited article on this topic, adopts Habermas’s concept of communicative action as “useful in conceptualizing the logic of arguing,” which helps us understand world politics better (p. 3). Other scholars working on this (Müller, 2004; Schimmelfennig, 2003) similarly adopt theories of

communicative action to examine the ways in which norms are transformed in negotiations and arguing contexts. To be sure, even here, insights from narratology and related disciplines would be beneficial since processes of argumentation have already been shown to be stored in narrative form (Minsky, 1975); such studies would also be augmented by works mentioned earlier about how narrative structure impacts the narrative experience.

If we are to take such insights from narratology seriously, the important question of *how* we study narratives becomes paramount. Taking seriously the power of narratives in international studies depends on the nature of the topic under review. One way to incorporate narrative study into international studies is to focus on the more well-established method of discourse analysis. In essence, this is when you look at an issue and try to figure out how the surrounding social, political, and economic environment contributed to it

developing the way it did. That is, discourse is seen as a structure and practice regulating social life (Laffey & Weldes, 2004; see also Milliken, 1999). Such an idea was most popularly associated with the works of Michel Foucault (1972), who saw discourse as “rules” we inherit in society and tried to analyze the ways in which they came to have a hold over society.⁶ In discourse analysis one would also consider how it is that what actors say is related to the world around them and how they construct narratives about the world.⁷ In this approach narrative is largely a byword for studying higher-order “discourses” that come to govern our understandings of given situations.

Process tracing is also popular among scholars interested in documenting the stability (or not) of narratives (and thus wrangling, bargaining, and argumentation) over time. Process tracing is a method for making causal claims whereby, as the name suggests, the process through which an event happens is

traced and variables are tracked to determine when, or if and how the latter impacts. This is defined by [Andrew Bennett](#) and [Jeffrey T. Checkel \(2015\)](#) as “the analysis of evidence on processes, sequences, and conjunctures of events within a case for the purposes of either developing or testing hypotheses about causal mechanisms that might causally explain the case” (pp. 7–8). This type of method is particularly suited to narrative studies because it advocates meticulous documenting of how issues developed in sequences and is used by a range of sophisticated studies mentioned earlier that incorporate narratological insights into the study of international politics ([Goddard, 2009](#); [Krebs, 2015](#)), while [Jackson \(2006a\)](#) and [Bially Mattern \(2005\)](#) also rely extensively on the notion of events as “processes” that should be meticulously documented to map out causal pathways.

Content analysis is another method that can be used in studying narratives. This is when you look at a particular

speech or text and try to draw out the keywords used—you could group them into themes; or, you could simply count the number of times particular words are used and draw a graph of their frequency. Such an approach helps to quantify assertions about what language is used in discussions of a particular issue as part of a wider narrative-building endeavor. This approach is quantitative and may prove useful (as in [Krebs, 2015](#)), though generally studies taking narrative theory seriously are qualitative in nature, whereas content analysis is generally more suited to a quantitative methodological commitment.

Narratives and the Role of the Scholar

As we have seen, many postulations about cognition and narratives in narratology and related fields have found their way to theorizations about international politics. Yet, as Meir Sternberg ([2003](#)) has argued, the narrative field is currently

“unhappily ... parcelled up among several disciplines, which tend to work in casual or even studied disregard for one another’s very subject matter as well as methods and findings” (p. 297). The applications of insights from narratology and related fields into international studies has not always steered too far from assumptions made in frame theory in cognitive science, and rarely has it entered into deeper discussions of narrative structure in its broader understanding. This “discussion of narrative structure properly involves the entire set of analytical and hermeneutic implications arising from the foundational distinction between story and discourse [and is] essentially coterminous with the enterprise of narratology itself subsuming all aspects of the interactive relationship of narrative agents, including such issues as narration, focalization, and speech representation” (O’Neill, 2005, p. 366). Thus, it can be said that narrative studies in

international studies still has a rich field of fruits from which to pluck in the future.

Cognitive approaches should also be considered in light of their own controversies, of which I will discuss the most pressing here since it also has a bearing on how international studies engages with narrative study from a methodological point of view, especially on questions concerning epistemology (which refers to questions about how we arrive at truth or science). Broadly speaking, there are poststructuralist and nonpoststructuralist camps. For Sternberg (2003), “a great many narratologists” cannot accept entirely a poststructuralist worldview (p. 299). Poststructuralism is concerned with the social construction of interpretations and, broadly speaking, denies any stable meanings for things across time and space (except, of course, the stability of their postulations about instability). Yet, as far as narratology is concerned, this position is hard to sustain, since “hardline

relativism cannot tolerate, or survive, generic universals”—

whereas in narratology there is a

shared range of corpora, issues, values, horizons, analytic traditions, things to do with texts, narrative and otherwise, which mark the choices from or against which one proceeds. So typical commonalities of interest among literary narratologists (in, e.g., novelistic fiction, point of view, originality, thickness, verbal art, subtext and intertext, close reading) double as battlegrounds, or less often, even as a background to some new departure. (Sternberg, 2003, p. 299)

In other words, while narratologists may “do battle” over perspectives, they nonetheless retain “analytical traditions” with established theories and methods for testing theories. To poststructuralists, such inherited beliefs and a taken-for-granted assumption about the ability of scholars to adequately

represent the meaning of a text (or language and communication in general) is highly suspect (Belsey, 2002, pp. 7–10). More to the point, poststructuralist thinking, with its emphasis on ambiguity and wariness of the language of scientism, would balk at Sternberg's assertions, choosing instead to focus on the ways in which order and standards are imposed by the scholar/analyst as part of a socially constructed world of possible meanings. Indeed, whereas cognitivist-inspired narratology focuses on the processes of human interpretation and employs a scientific method to analyze this behavior, poststructuralist narratology instead focuses on the social constructionist aspect of how interpretations arise. The picture for international studies is no less complicated. Bially Mattern (2005) and Jackson (2006a) fall into the poststructuralist camp, whereas it is harder to characterize the work of Krebs and Goddard discussed in "The Use of Narrative Concepts in International Studies

Research” as such. This raises the question of how much poststructuralist assumptions about the stability of meaning and the role of the scholar can coexist with a narratological approach, with its shared traditions and its “generic universals.”

Conclusions

The study of narratives was once relegated to narratology, and later to cognitive science and the different strands of psychology. Much later, it came to international studies. In many instances the most basic insights from the narratology have made it: a focus on the now universally acknowledged human propensity to narrate as a way of processing, storing, and understanding information, but also experiencing new ones. This finding has usually been coupled with a discourse analytic approach that looks at how social norms and practices are created and what all this may mean for international

politics. But this can be taken further. Insights from narrative study allow scholars to gain a more informed understanding of particular situations in global affairs and thus better explain/predict how events are likely to play out. Put differently, being aware that narratives frame perception allows scholars of international studies to assess whether their reading of a situation is the result of a subjective narrative, which may lead them to false inferences. As it stands, deep insights from narratology, mentioned previously, have not been fully integrated, although scholars have done remarkable work to demonstrate the utility of analyzing in terms of narratives in understanding international politics. In particular, analyzing the world with narrative at the forefront has helped us to understand how politicians, and the states they represent, think about the world, and how they try to gain influence in the world; moreover, it has opened up new frontiers of battle—the narrative space—to analytical pursuit. Some key

questions remain for scholars to pursue, however: how far can narratological insights be incorporated into the study of international politics without diluting the field entirely? What other narratological insights, gleaned from fiction, can be usefully incorporated into the study of international studies today? What unique insights can international studies offer those interested in narratives across disciplines, rather than simply borrowing insights from narratology? Such questions will likely ensure that such a research focus on narratives is not merely a passing trend but integral to the discipline as a whole.

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⁴ As Herman (2013, p. 4) notes, “other analysts have explored how literary narratives, by presenting atypical, norm-challenging, or physically impossible fictional scenarios, intermix processes of script recruitment, disruption, and refreshment (Alber, 2009; Herman, 2002, pp. 85–113; Stockwell, 2002 pp. 75–89).” My example is adapted from Herman (2013, p. 4). Of course, the conclusion drawn in my example is not your typical one but is deliberately provocative in order to show the ways in which our prior experiences come to bear on situations by helping us to “fill in the blanks” and draw conclusions about what has happened.

⁵ The claim, based on two polls (by Pew and YouGov), asked different questions, and included a message to respondents before they could cast their poll (for the wording, see Beauchamp, 2015). Suffice it to say that this is not inconsequential.

⁶ In international studies, for example, you may wish to look at how 9/11 shaped U.S. foreign policy, and you may wish to focus on scholars such as Huntington (2003 [1992]) or the broader idea of democratic peace to explain the United States’ response. You could similarly take a discourse analytic approach and look at how the attackers understood their world and how they came to think of the United States in a particular way, thus leading to the attacks (see Barkawi, 2004).

⁷ This usually (but not always) involves analysis of textual or speech data, but also a quasi-ethnographic approach that takes into account people’s lived experiences, to build up a sense of how they understand the world (Sylvester, 2012).