While the sociological analysis of personal stories is becoming more sophisticated, it would benefit from a refined appreciation for narrative practice. The theme of this article is that the coherence of stories and the experiences they convey are reflexively related to the manifold activities and the increasingly diverse conditions of storytelling. Drawing on ethnographically assembled story material, we offer an empirically sensitizing vocabulary to illustrate how practice constitutes coherence through the interplay of narrative composition and the local conditions of storytelling. The vocabulary highlights the growing need to think of personal stories and their coherence as an active ensemble of narrative practice, now "owned" as much by the diverse auspices of storytelling as by the storyteller (Alasuutari 1997).

As social research increasingly points to the narrative quality of lives, the personal story is being resuscitated as an important source of experiential data. Early texts are being revisited for their heuristic value (Allport 1942; Dollard 1935; Murray 1938; Shaw 1930; 1931; Thomas and Znaniecki [1918–1920]1927), while narrative analysis has ascended as a significant procedural genre (Cortazzi 1993; Dégh 1995; Denzin 1989; Hinchman and Hinchman 1997; Linde 1993; Richardson 1990; 1991; Riessman 1990; 1993). More and more, we are learning that life comes to us in the form of stories, articulated through storytelling (Alasuutari 1997).

The collection and analysis of personal stories also has become more methodologically self-conscious (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992; Shotter and Gergen 1989). Leading work in the area rarely takes stories to represent more-or-less accurately individual experience through time. Methodologically self-conscious narrative analysts no longer view storytellers and their accomplices as having unmediated access to experience, nor do they hold that experience can be conveyed in some pristine or authentic form (Scott 1995). On the contrary, stories are analyzed as much for the ways in which storytellers and the conditions of storytelling shape what is conveyed as for what their contents tell us about lives, even while emphasis on the free play of narration is now perhaps excessive.
This article elaborates this theme by offering an analytic vocabulary for describing the practical production of coherence in personal stories, which range from brief accounts of events, to blow-by-blow renderings of a lifetime of experience. We view personal narration as reflexively linked to the interplay of discursive actions and the circumstances of storytelling, which in contemporary life are more multisited than ever (Gubrium and Holstein 1994; 1995b). Using narrative material taken from a variety of everyday settings where personal stories are told or elicited, we illustrate the utility of the vocabulary for sensitizing analysis to both the spontaneous and the patterned dimensions of narrative production. The approach is especially applicable today, for it provides a way to account for the diverse authenticities characteristic of these postmodern times, as organizational and institutional contexts for the construction of coherence become increasingly diverse and interactive.

NARRATIVE PRACTICE

We use the term “narrative practice” to characterize simultaneously the activities of storytelling, the resources used to tell stories, and the auspices under which stories are told. Considering personal stories and their coherence as matters of practice centers attention on the relation between these “hows” and “whats” of narration, on storytellers engaged in the work of constructing coherence under the circumstances of storytelling. Orienting to practice allows us to see the storytelling process as both actively constructive and locally constrained.2

Our vocabulary for analyzing narrative practice embodies a dual concern for the activeness and spontaneity of performativity (Bauman 1986), on the one hand, and for the narrative resources and auspices implicated in storytelling (Mills 1940), on the other. Resources include any and all experiences that can accountably be incorporated into personal stories, as well as the discursive formations that are locally available and understandable. Narrative auspices are the discursive mandates and constraints that characterize a particular setting, group, organization, or institution, which, whether “experience-near” or “experience-distant,” further mediate and condition storytelling (Geertz 1983).

Notable among these narrative auspices are the people processing and regulating institutions that increasingly elicit, screen, fashion, and variously highlight personal narratives (Ahne 1990; Drucker 1993; Foucault 1980a; Giddens 1992; Presthus 1978). Schools, clinics, counseling centers, correctional facilities, hospitals, support groups, and self-help organizations, among many other sites for storytelling experience, provide narrative frameworks for conveying personal experience through time, for what is taken to be relevant in our lives, and why the lives under consideration developed in the way they did. In some sense, such organizations incite participants to construct the stories they need to do their work. Their diverse and now seemingly ubiquitous narrative “technologies” constitute experience in accordance with local relevancies (Rose 1990).3

But this doesn’t happen automatically. Storytellers are not mere communicative puppets of their circumstances. Personal accounts are built up from experience and actively cast in the terms of preferred vocabularies (Garfinkel 1967; Sacks 1974, 1992). If Michel Foucault (1978; 1979; 1980a; 1980b) has shown that discourses of experience in diverse institutional settings set conceptual limits for the shaping of lives, the local and the particular nonetheless continually insinuate themselves to construct difference.
The complex relationship between storytelling activities, resources, and conditions poses a serious challenge for narrative analysis. Because it is difficult to foreground simultaneously both the spontaneous and the conditional sides of storytelling, we rely upon a technique we call “analytic bracketing” to allow us to focus on one aspect of narrative practice while temporarily suspending analytic interest in the others (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). We may focus, for example, on how a story is being told, while temporarily deferring our concern for the various what that are involved—for example, the substance, structure, or plot of the story, the context within which it is told, or the audience to which it is accountable. We can later return to these issues, in turn analytically bracketing how the story is told in order to focus on the substance of the story and the conditions that shape its construction.

Our ultimate aim in describing the production of coherence is not nihilistically to challenge or deconstruct the integrity of lives or experience, nor to reify narrative practice into discrete components. Instead, we want to make visible the way narrative activities play out in everyday practice to both produce coherence and reveal difference. This is a perspective on story-in-use that dismisses neither personal narratives nor coherence but, rather, expands our appreciation of the practice and conditions of storytelling as an integral part of what proper stories are taken to be (Zimmerman and Pollner 1970; Zimmerman and Wieder 1970).

Years ago, Dell Hymes underscored the importance of not setting the internal organization of stories against the study of storytelling. Commenting on the then “current movement to go beyond [the] collection and analysis of text, to [the] observation and analysis of performance,” Hymes (Cazden and Hymes 1978, p. 32) argued for a “[third moment] continuous with the others, this third [being] the process in which performance and text live.” He referred to this as practice, viewed it as grounded in everyday life, and considered it ethnographically accessible.

Norman Denzin (1989) and Matti Hyvärinen (1996) have recently reiterated this sentiment. Criticizing Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) diatribe against biographical coherence, Denzin (1989, p. 62) writes:

The point to make is not whether biographical coherence is an illusion or reality. Rather, what must be established is how individuals give coherence to their lives when they write or talk self-autobiographies. The sources of this coherence, the narratives that lie behind them, and the larger ideologies that structure them must be uncovered. Bourdieu’s general position glosses [over] the complexities of this process.

Dispelling the polarities of coherence and diversity, which relate respectively to modern and postmodern sensibilities, Hyvärinen (1996, p. 3) succinctly poses the pertinent question: “How do individuals give both coherence and diversity to their lives when they write or speak self-autobiographies?”

This moves us away from the analysis of stories and their structure per se, refocusing our attention more on storytelling as a practical activity. While analyzing the internal organization of personal stories can reveal subjective anchor points and meaning domains, it tends to overdetermine the consistency of themes and the constancy of meaning in people’s everyday lives. By procedural default, the “whole” person (indeed, the coherence of personhood itself) can easily become an artifact of the themes and organization of a
particular story. Focusing on practice allows us to see more clearly the ways in which both coherence and difference, even authenticity, are socially assembled.

At the same time, the analysis of narrative practice does not necessarily devolve into the molecular documentation of story-like talk at the expense of storylines. Nor does it imply an exclusive focus on the utterance-by-utterance hows of storytelling to the exclusion of the_whats_ that personal stories are about. As a communicative genre, stories, after all, can have plots, characters, themes, and flow that are the recognizable grist of storytelling.4

**NARRATIVE COMPOSITION**

As texts of experience, stories are not complete prior to their telling but are assembled to meet situated interpretive demands. Recognizing this, our analytic vocabulary is reminiscent of terminology used to characterize the production of other texts; it casts storytelling as an ongoing process of composition rather than the more-or-less coherent reporting of experience. Narration is constructive, a way of fashioning the semblance of meaning and order for experience. Storytelling can thus be likened to composing written text, or even music, in that it involves the organization of what might be imagined as experiential “chaos” into coherent and decipherable forms (Brannon, Knight, and Neverow-Turk 1982). Recent decades have seen a growing appreciation for how the production of written text involves a continual process of forming; writers are now being told, “You can’t know what you mean until you hear what you say” (Berthoff 1982). The upshot, of course, is that product and process are reflexive, mutually constitutive.

This conception of narrative composition opens to view the developing construction of personal stories, revealing the process by which narratives are connected, assembled, rearranged, and revised, but under the auspices of decidedly practical circumstances. Composition involves both the active side of storytelling (the artful activities through which stories are assembled) and its more substantive side (the available meanings, structures, and linkages that comprise stories). Just as the word “composition” has both noun and verb forms, it implicates both the substantive and the dynamic agentic sides of story-in-use.

**Narrative Linkage**

If personal experience provides an endless supply of potentially reportable, storyable items, it is the incorporation of particular items into a coherent account that gives them meaning. Local and broader cultural resources each provide familiar or conventional guidelines for how stories unfold, but they do not determine individual story lines. There is a persistent gap between what is available for conveying a story and how a particular narrative unfolds in practice. Telling one’s experience in the context, say, of a group that shares a relatively crystallized repertoire of story lines presents one with a set of discernible plots, offering ways of giving shape and substance to experience in those terms. But even in this context, individual stories distinctively emerge as they are told, just as available storylines are put to use and biographical particulars are linked together in locally accountable ways (Gubrium and Holstein 1995a). The meaning and coherence of a story is thus drawn as much from such “narrative linkages,” as from the disparate items and available plots from which a story is composed.

Susan Chase’s (1995) study of the work narratives of women school superintendents is an interesting case in point. Chase highlights the important discontinuities that always
exist between received cultural categories and the way those categories are narratively applied. One way of conceiving of these gaps is in terms of “narrative slippage.” By this we mean to capture the indeterminate interpretive circumstances and activities that exist at points of articulation among culture, lived experience, and storytelling, points at which there is considerable play or elasticity in the way shared understandings are circumstantially brought to bear on matters of interpretive concern. Cultural resources do not determine how they are used but, instead, provide material for the narrator to construct his or her own story as distinguishable from others who may be similarly placed in life. Chase’s analysis illustrates how individually tailored stories reveal narrative slippage.

By analyzing in-depth interviews with women from various racial and ethnic backgrounds who work as superintendents in rural and urban school systems, Chase documents the diverse ways a successful professional career can be narratively assembled and, in the process, shows how much slippage there is between culturally shared meanings and individual accounts. These women all speak of professional power and success, on the one hand, and discrimination in a white, male-dominated occupation, on the other. Their stories, however, wind up being quite different. Chase asks: Why is it that a common standpoint in relation to experience results in such diverse narratives? Why do the women produce difference out of a seemingly shared institutional reality?

In providing an answer, Chase implicates her own orientation as a woman, aiming to document how the superintendents connect experiences to construct self-understanding. The orientation sensitizes Chase to the hows of narration in relation to two distinct but experientially shared whats—the cultural discourses of individual achievement and of inequality—in the context of being female. The superintendents are presented as active storytellers, playing a part in how their work narratives are put together, skillfully constructing their careers in relation to biographical particulars.

Chase presents four case studies from a sample of twenty-seven interviews. We briefly compare two of them for the way speakers assemble their stories. Ana Martinez, a Hispanic woman, excludes talk of discrimination and highlights competence in her career narrative. She is asked about both the successes and the elements of inequality that shaped her career, topics that Martinez acknowledges as relevant to the lives of women superintendents, but she avoids talk of discrimination. Chase notes that like the other women, Martinez has trouble combining the contradictory themes of success, inequality, and discrimination in the same story.

Chase (1995, p. 79) asks herself, “How can [Martinez] connect this story about subjection [to discriminatory practices] to her broader story about professional competence and commitment?” For Martinez, the solution is to construct a story whose success is built on a clear narrative separation of applicable discourses. According to Chase, Martinez’s way of resolving the narrative tension is to exclude themes of discrimination from her account. Tellingly, in response to a follow-up question about whether ethnicity figured in her career, Martinez offers a “metastatement” or comment about what she is communicating: “Uh because [pause] although I recognize the inequities that exist I don’t dwell on them. [Chase: hm hmm] I don’t talk a lot about them” (p. 82).

Margaret Parker, an African-American woman, composes the two discourses differently, putting her own artful gloss on the woman superintendent’s story. Rather than suppressing themes of inequality and discrimination, Parker links them together with success into a story of resilience. Her narrative uncovers layers of vulnerability and strength. As a woman and an African American seeking success in what is largely a white man’s world,
Parker is admittedly vulnerable to discrimination throughout her career. She tells the story of job discrimination several times. But she also relates sources of inner strength. While Parker was discriminated against, her ability to work through the consequences adds to a tale of fortitude in the face of adversity, which narratively enhances her career achievements. At one point, Parker reveals how she in effect uses the discourse of inequality in support of, not against, the discourse of achievement. The following comments refer to her way of handling her relations with the man who was hired for a job that should have been hers.

And my people who were working with me were saying [whispering], "Boy how is she doing this? How is she taking it?" [Return to normal voice] Especially when the guy came on board [pause] and he was introduced to the cabinet as the assistant superintendent and everybody’s eyes sort of propped on me and I’m sitting here holding back all of my feelings ’cause I’m very pained, no question about that. [Chase: hm hmm.] Um [pause], but I went right ahead doing my job and people’d see him and me standing talking together. They’d see us eating lunch together you know [Chase: hm hmm.] and uh that’s just who I am. [Chase: hm hmm.] That’s just who I am. (pp. 136-137)

Both Martinez and Parker tell good stories, if we take stories to mean that they display sequentiality and make a point (Gergen and Gergen 1986; Labov 1982; Polanyi 1979; van Dijk 1993). The stories are narrated in terms of how the women superintendents succeeded over time, despite the odds, to become leaders in their respective school systems. The stories also have points in the context of the competing themes of success and inequality. These are tales of redemption, articulated through their respective linkages. But the points, while competently made, reveal considerable slippage. Redemption comes in contrasting forms; it is not determined by a common standpoint in experience. Chase highlights the resulting narrative difference, showing how distinct linkages can shape what is shared into alternate configurations. At the same time, while slippage contributes to the differences in the women’s stories, patterns of narrative linkage sustain the conveyed coherence of each woman’s unique experience.

Narrative linkage can operate at the very start of storytelling, acting as a kind of preface to narration. It does not simply emerge to structure distinct meaning as a story unfolds but can be used reflexively to signal possible coherences. In parent effectiveness classes observed as part of a study of the descriptive organization of emotional disturbance, it was not uncommon for mothers, fathers, and significant others to preface comments about their children as a set of alternative accounts (see Buckholdt and Gubrium 1979). For example, at one class meeting, a mother, Connie, responded to another mother, Barb, who was telling a brief story about how much progress Barb’s daughter, Kim, had made recently in controlling her temper. Connie remarked on the way the story was put together, contrasting how she, in turn, might have to assemble the story of her own daughter, Celeste:

I like the way you said that, Barb, you know, the kinda things ya don’t really think about. It made me think about what I’d say if someone asked me how Celeste was doing. I guess, if I tried hard enough, Celeste would come out smelling like a rose, just like Kim maybe? But, sad to say, that’s not the whole story. There’s more to it. Celeste is Kim up to a point, just like you said Barb, but then the story changes. [Elaborates] I don’t know. When Celeste starts in on her brother, it’s just not the same story.
As Connie then tells her story, she weaves elements of Barb’s account of Kim’s progress into her own narrative, assembling the story as much in relation to the linkages Barb admirably constructed and presented as in terms of what “more [there is] to it.” In the process, Connie arranges her story to reveal expressly both similar and contrasting linkages, thus constructing a good story drawn as much from Connie’s and Barb’s interactions, as from Connie’s knowledge of Celeste. At a later point, for example, Connie remarks, “Here’s another one of those places the story changes.” As the story is completed, it is evident that Connie has constructed a story explicitly with Barb’s narrative in mind, as Connie directly signaled at the outset of the extract above. Like Chase’s women superintendents, what Connie shares in common with the other parents, she weaves narratively into a story of her own, creating coherence out of both shared and unique linkages. From start to finish, Connie’s narrative works both for and against her “own” story. We will return to this point in our concluding remarks in relation to the question of narrative ownership.

Prefatory linkages are often established through the specification of “narrative footing,” again providing clues for listeners about the kinds of stories that could be told and possible points to be made. Such footings reveal the positions from which storytellers can offer their narratives. Consider the following extract from another parent effectiveness class in which childrearing practices are being discussed. A mother of three children is asked whether she models herself after her parents in disciplining her own children, leading to the following account:

It depends. When my kids are really bad, I mean really bad, that’s when I think how my mother used to do with us. You know, don’t spare the rod or something like that in those days? But, usually, I feel that Mother was too harsh with us and I think that that kind of punishment isn’t good for kids today. Better to talk about it and iron things out that way. Still, like I say, it depends on how you want to think about it, doesn’t it?

By the end of the extract, we learn that the prefatory “it depends” marks two possible sets of linkages, both potentially good stories but with different plots and morals. We can interpret this mother’s prefatory remarks as initially pointing her listener to a story about her parenting concerns “when [her] kids are really bad.” In this story, the mother comments that she thinks about discipline in terms of how her own mother acted. If she had continued with that story—developing its plot, themes, and characters—she might have reasonably made linkages with, say, the ostensible rampant breakdown of discipline in today’s younger generation, something, she could have added, her mother would have swiftly dealt with in her time. The mother paraphrases the maxim “spare the rod and spoil the child” to highlight related sentiments. This story had a well-motivated beginning, with linkages that could recognizably have been developed into a predictable middle and a reasonably conclusive end. In that narrative context, her own mother served as a positive model for parenting, pointing to the need to be strict, lest children go out of control.

Mid-response, however, the mother shifts her footing. While her initial, inchoate story highlighted the misbehavior of children in relation to recognizable generational differences, midcourse the account becomes a tale focused on retribution. The prefatory phrase “but, usually” sets off a shift in linkages in which punishment rather than misbehavior is narratively foregrounded. While similar, linkages now orient more to consequences than causes. The story is now about her own mother’s disciplinary practices and produces a
negative model of someone prone to exacting excess punishment. "Punishment" is tacitly divided into two categories, corporal and verbal, and the storyteller states that, currently, "ironing things out" is more effective. The kind of punishment her mother applied would not be "good for kids today."

At the end of the extract, there is yet another shift in footing. Repeating "it depends," the mother offers a kind of "metanarrative," in effect broaching a story about storytelling. She explains that what one makes of her experience depends upon "how you want to think about it." This not only signals the equally compelling narrative force of two quite different stories, with distinctive implications for plot development and contrasting points about domestic discipline, but also evokes the narrative reflexivity that always lurks in the storytelling process. The mother virtually instructs her listeners that she is not just a narrator propelled by stories to be told, but that she also is aware that she is actively involved in deciding which story to tell and how to tell it.6

**Narrative Editing**

The storytelling mother's self-consciousness as she narrates her experience highlights the reflexive agency of the storyteller. Among other things, storytellers need to decide what perspective to take in telling a story; they are not locked into any particular narrative position, nor are they simply more or less productive of coherence. They communicate this, for example, when they state that they have to think things over before answering, that they recognize diverse contexts for interpretation, or that they need to take certain matters into account in deciding how to put it, what to say, or what point to make. They shape their stories by also telling their listeners how they can or should be heard, in effect both communicating narrated events and sentiments and using story to display a perspective.7 Conveying their experiences in more or less good form, storytellers are not tied to an unalterable set of linkages nor to a fixed narrative perspective.

As much as the storyteller can be the author of his or her narrative, he or she is also an editor who constantly monitors, manages, modifies, and revises the emergent story. Invoking shifts in footing—such as referring to the position from which an account is offered—is one prominent type of "narrative editing" through which storytellers attend to the perspectives of personal stories and to the ways they will be heard. Editing confirms that storytellers are never narratively "frozen" as authors of the texts they produce (Gubrium 1993).

Consider the editing done by Betty, the elderly caregiving wife of an Alzheimer's disease sufferer, as she recounts home care experiences at a caregiver support group meeting. The following extended extract from this discussion is reconstructed from ethnographic field notes, with the paragraphs numbered for easy reference.8

[1] I'd say that as a wife of fifty years, it's been up and down, mostly up, probably, like most "happily" [signals quotation marks] married couples. Actually, as far as husbands go, George's been a pretty good husband. [Other participants recount episodes from their own "good" marriages, which encourages Betty to elaborate on George's "good" qualities and, as a result, what she "owes" him] He's the kinda guy who'd give you the shirt off his back and joke about it. [Describes George's generosity and relates to participants' "stories" that wind up like hers, "after all those years"] We had good times and he was always right there when I needed him. [Mentions how good it makes her feel to be able to take care of him "after all those years"] Like they say, you can't
forget that, can ya? I guess what I’m saying is that I owe the big lunk in a real big way. Gotta keep him with me [in home care] as long as possible. [Betty stares out the window]

[2] But, you know, I have to ask myself, even after all those years, what’s he now? You know, like they say we need to ask ourselves at Chapter [local chapter meetings of the Alzheimer’s Association]? Who is this big lug I’m living with? Who am I supposed to be? A saint? Most of the time, he doesn’t know me. He’s like a shell. You all know how terrible that is. Lord, he weighs over 200 pounds and you know what a burden that is. [Elaborates and recounts her relations with George from that viewpoint, this time drawing from the familiar stories of local caregiver exemplars] When I think back over the years, maybe I was just “dreaming,” like Sally [a former participant] said one time. Remember that? Geez, what an eye-opener that was! I ask myself that sometimes, now that he can’t patch things up all the time. [Others describe similar feelings] Did I spend all those years living for George, to make him happy? I don’t know. He was pretty darned cross and demanding sometimes, that I have to say. [Another participant details life with her “demanding” husband, which Betty then integrates into her own narrative]

[3] Now don’t get me wrong, but what about that? What about me? You know what I mean. What about this here “maturing” [again signals quotation marks] woman? [Laughter] You know, this here woman with her own needs? [Recounts details of her current “lonely” married life] I’ve got my own life to live. We all have, at least that’s what we keep hearing and telling each other. Sometimes I ask myself if I ever did [have my own life]. [Betty’s emotional recollections develop into a story of unnecessary sacrifice and self-effacement.]

[4] I wish I had the words to tell all of you how I feel sometimes, like I just wanna bust free and be who I am, Betty, not just George’s wife. But not really, I guess. [Chuckling, another participant suggests that Betty is sounding “like one of those feminists.”] Well maybe I am! [Laughter] It was my life, too, you know.

[5] I’m just blabbing away here. I have to admit, though, that we were a pretty happy couple. Lots of close years. [Recounts aspects of that story] Fifty years of being a wife. That’s a lotta years. [Embellishes her “happy” years of marriage story.] (see Gubrium 1986)

Beginning with the prefatory remark, “as a wife of fifty years,” Betty informs her listeners of how they should hear her forthcoming story. Responding to several shared recollections of married life, Betty tells others she feels obligated to take care of her spouse George, “the big lunk,” at home for as long as possible. From the outset, her caregiving sentiments support her related story, adding to its particular narrative flavor. Sentiments are not the story, but they support the authenticity of one of several possible accounts, as we will soon learn. In the first paragraph, properly hyphenated, Betty’s narrative is the story-of-a-wife-of-fifty-years. It is not just a woman’s, nor just a caregiver’s story, but the narrative of someone who is positioned to communicate both thoughts and feelings in a particular way.9

As Betty continues with her account in the succeeding few paragraphs, it is evident that she has alternative stories to tell, that, from their distinct footings, link together her experience into different narratives. Note that, in paragraphs 3 and 4, Betty begins to retell “her” story from what we will eventually learn is the point of view of a woman-with-her-own-life-to-live, thus engendering her narrative in a distinctive way. At the end of paragraph 3, there are other sentiments displayed, but this time they signal remorse, the emotional underbelly of a life lived more for someone else than for one’s self, a life perhaps wasted because of that. As Betty continues with that story in paragraph 4, she somewhat uncer-
tainly banters with the other participants about just who the story might have been about, “Betty” or “George’s wife.”

Later, in paragraph 5, she again switches footing, communicating “her” story from the point of view of a participant in a close, long-term relationship with a man, her husband, foregrounding the wife-of-fifty-years. At this point, we have no idea which story she prefers or even if the difference is thought of in terms of preference. She may, indeed, eventually inform her listeners—or her listeners inform her, as sometimes happens—that she is “of two minds” and let it go at that. It also is not evident what her “true” feelings are, even while they are variously expressed throughout her account. One thing is clear: if we are to take feelings as a warrant for the authenticity of her account, their expression needs to be sorted in accordance with their narrative footings and accompanying linkages.

Betty is in even greater communicative control of what she conveys than the attribution of narrative footing would suggest. She not only edits her account for footing but positions her listeners, too. For example, later in the support group meeting, the proceedings of which are not reproduced here, the conversation reverts to the familiar topic of caregiving responsibilities. At one point, Betty urges group members to “think of this from a woman’s point of view” and then recounts the story of what she felt the first time her husband failed to recognize her as his wife. As she tells that story, she clearly marks her comments with reminders to her listeners that she is assuming they are hearing what is being conveyed as women, as she asks rhetorically, “You know what I mean? Woman to woman?” She then proceeds to convey what she feels, as a woman, not just as a spouse, and seeks confirmation with, “You know the feeling.” At yet another juncture in the proceedings, she expressly positions herself as a woman by “putting her woman’s hat on,” which she admonishes two listeners to likewise do, continuing with her account. She tells her listeners to put themselves in her place and try to understand from that point of view, one familiar way of extending narrative footing.

Throughout, Betty adroitly builds contexts for her stories. She not only actively constructs a narrative perspective but manages her listeners’ footings in the process. Like others, Betty simultaneously edits the content of her story as it might relate to her listeners’ responses. Not wanting to sound too harsh in speaking as a “woman with her own life to live,” she prefaces her various comments with “now don’t get me wrong,” as in extracted paragraph 3 and later in the meeting with “don’t take this personally, but . . .” Following the latter comment, Betty relates what goes through her mind when George doesn’t recognize her or fails to show any appreciation for what she is doing for him. Adding, “you have to admit you’d feel exactly the same,” she suggests that what she has said is not gratuitously harsh but part of the shared sentiments of a particular story about the caregiving experience. Several listeners confirm the editorial remarks. When she subsequently accounts for her descriptive “indiscretions” and seemingly “exaggerated claims” with the ostensible need to put harsh realities “in plain English” and not “gussy them up” because, among other things, “it’s not a pretty picture,” she further shapes the intended storyline.

**NARRATIVE CONTROL**

If storytelling is artfully constituted, what keeps the process from becoming a swirl of self-referential practices overriding the storyline? That is, beyond the personal control of narrative composition, what serves to control the composition process so that the what of narration are not simply arbitrary or capricious?
Narrative Practice and the Coherence of Personal Stories

While we have argued that the coherence of lives and experience is always actively assembled, not just anything goes, interpretively speaking. To a significant degree, features of narrative practice may also be formally designated or constrained, especially in a contemporary world replete with formal organizations, interest groups, and bureaucracies. Personal stories are increasingly geared to institutional agendas, with preferred plot structures, “points,” or morals. The following sections introduce terminology for describing these story-conditioning factors. Still, in considering matters of formal narrative control, it’s important to remember that the particular substance of what is locally preferred is not definitive in practice. What is formally circumscribed, like what informally unfolds, remains subject to the active composition of narration, which is always controlling in its own right.

Substantive Monitoring

We begin to see aspects of narrative control in Betty’s story. Reconsidering some of her storytelling practices, for example, we find that while Betty edits her story in relation to preferred footings of her own and those of others, participants occasionally remind each other to attend to the kinds of stories that are typically told in the circumstance at hand. They take what is locally relevant or acceptable into account. This is, after all, a support group for the caregivers of Alzheimer’s disease sufferers; this sets substantive parameters for storytelling. Stories conveyed by participants typically relate in some way to the experiences, trials, and successes of caring for dementia sufferers in the context of the home. Many of the stories are sad and lead to weeping, remorse, and heartfelt concern over caregiving responsibilities. Some are celebratory and center on the triumphs or minor accomplishments that caregivers have been able to muster from “36 hour days” of care that can be like “a funeral that never ends,” two phrases frequently borrowed from the disease’s popular culture. Occasionally, the stories are quite funny, as caregivers recount the humorous episodes that crisscross daily living with those whose memories are permanently impaired, such as the “funny story” that Betty once told about George’s hilarious attempt one morning to put on her panties over his corduroy trousers.

Of course, participants often veer away from discussions of caregiving per se. They speak of the need for long overdue vacations and imagine what it would be like to spend time away from the disease sufferer. Some are stories of what life will be like after a demented spouse or parent has been placed in a nursing home or dies. And there are stories about daily living in general, especially about earlier times before the onset of the disease. As in typical everyday conversation, topics include the weather, events in the news, and other subjects of current or pending interest.

At the same time, there are persistent narrative clues to what is locally relevant or acceptable, to what good storytelling at this particular time and place should be. When storytelling dwells too long on what some believe to be ancillary topics or issues, it is not uncommon for participants to ask a speaker such as Betty, “So what’s the point, Betty?,” “What are you trying to say?,” or “What are you getting at?” These questions reference topicality and the local relevance of an account. A participant or the support group facilitator may simply state that the discussion is veering off course, that the group should return to the discussion of specific caregiving matters and their stories. This suggests that occasions may “own” stories as much as people do. Participants, in other words, actively monitor the local relevance of their accounts, reminding each other that, as far as the point of
what they say is concerned, there are circumstantial limits to the substantive bounds of the tellable; there is local interest in what the caregiving story is about, not just active attention to how one tells it.

This “substantive monitoring” extends to local variation in the rendering of beginnings, middles, and ends to stories. Some support groups share highly crystallized formats for storytelling, organized around a typical course of progress for both the disease and the adjustment of the caregiver. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s (1969) well-known stages of dying, for example, have been adapted to what the caregiver “goes through” as she or he adjusts to the “brain failure” of a loved one. In the context of these groups, story after story is conveyed with beginnings located at stages where, say, a spouse or child is denying that a loved one has senile dementia. Stories may even have pre-onset starts, detailing what life was like before the disease. Stories in these groups then typically unfold in terms of some or all of the other ostensible stages of adjustment—anger at the diagnosis or that “this can be happening,” depression over the inevitability of decline and the overwhelming burden of care, and, finally, acceptance of the need for institutionalization. When this form of reckoning is not reproduced, a caregiver may be asked where she “is at” or whether he has “gone through” all of the “phases of this thing,” prompting stories whose sequentiality accords with local specification.

Other support groups convey less crystallized story formats, with more elastic substantive monitoring. Stories are not scrutinized for their compliance with any commonly shared storyline. Rather, employment follows along and develops with the shifting accounts of participants from session to session, with group members comparing, embellishing, and altering the substance of their narratives in the process. For example, a story told by a participant in one session may prompt another to tell hers in the same or contrasting way, which, respectively, are said to confirm or offer up alternative adjustment trajectories. Another session may prompt a different set of comparisons and contrasts, with story lines formed around other factors.

Substantive monitoring also appears in the form of “metaediting,” as participants address group members’ local expectations for story lines. For example, on one occasion, an elderly caregiving daughter commented on the diverse stories communicated in the group she was attending. Focusing on accounts of “what it means” when the dementia sufferer no longer recognizes the caregiver, she commented, “I really like what I’ve heard tonight and am gonna keep coming. In that other group [across town], all I ever heard was denial, depression, and nursing homes.” She went on to add, “There, it was the same old story, over and over and over again.” In the more narratively crystallized groups, in particular, metaediting produced comments alluding to nonconforming storytelling. In these groups, it was not uncommon for participants actually to notify storytellers that their accounts did not accord, say, with “what we all know we go through.”

The swirl of self-referential practices is further contained by local monitorings of the disease’s popular culture. Time and again, support group participants inform each other, or are reminded by facilitators, experienced commentators, and expert visitors, that “the disease of the century” has particular personal manifestations and that those involved face a common burden. Well-known exemplars of the individual impact of the disease are regularly referenced in widely distributed promotional films and instructional literature. Celebrity experiences also are effectively brought to bear on the Alzheimer’s story; Ronald Reagan’s and Rita Hayworth’s experiences are currently prominent. There are even celebrity caregivers’ accounts, such as Rita Hayworth’s daughter’s story. The interplay of a
range of very public narrative exemplars and local particulars—substantive what's specific to the Alzheimer's disease experience—further deters the hows of narrative composition from becoming the whole story.13

**Formal Narrative Control**

The play of narrative composition is further controlled by institutionalized storytelling circumstances or the formal relations between interacting parties. A research interview, for example, forms an environment expressly designed to elicit the respondent's, not the interviewer's, narrative. Interview circumstances, format, and protocol dictate that the interviewer does the asking, while the respondent provides the story. Narrative topics are predesignated, and storylines at least partially predetermined. In such instances, we might argue that formal narrative control resides in the project itself, although we must be careful not to overstate the determinant power of any communicative framework. In practice, control is interactionally asserted.14

Everyday institutional arrangements surrounding storytelling similarly provide formal narrative control. Job interviews, eligibility screenings in social service agencies, psychotherapy sessions, medical interviews, and the like are all arranged to elicit particular kinds of stories, following partially predetermined storylines. The intent is to ensure that the storyteller is responsive to the informational and interpretive needs of a going concern. Legal proceedings are quintessential instances of such control. In the ostensible interest of eliciting "factual" information upon which to make binding legal decisions, all talk is procedurally circumscribed. Whatever is spoken must be said within the organizationally conditioned, sequential environment of questions and answers (Atkinson and Drew 1979). Interrogators are allowed to ask relevant questions and expect answers to take a particular form. This often results in direct, truncated responses as opposed to extended narratives.

Consider the narrative control that resides in the circumstances and regulations governing a hearing in which a former welfare recipient was contesting the state's termination of his benefits (see Miller and Holstein 1996). The state-appointed hearings officer (HO) was questioning Samuel Natt (SN) when the following exchange took place:

HO: So you didn't contact employers because you didn't feel [the welfare agency worker] was giving you adequate assistance?
SN: I was looking out for my own15/
HO: //Wait, just a moment. Just answer my question.

In response to the hearings officer's question, Natt embarked on a story apparently leading to an explanation of why he had failed to contact prospective employers. The story, however, was short-circuited by the hearings officer's interruption and insistence that the question be answered in a different format. In such circumstances, the rules governing the proceedings explicitly permit the hearings officer to impose narrative control, which in turn shapes both the what's and the hows of communication.

We see this in another illustration, drawn from an involuntary commitment hearing (see Holstein 1993), where a representative of the district attorney's office (DA) is interrogating Bill Dobbs (BD), a candidate for involuntary psychiatric hospitalization.
Once again, formal narrative control is evident as the DA and presiding judge invoke the narrative prerogatives of the court to constrain the story Dobbs was trying to tell. What is an adequate answer to the question—an appropriate story—is a matter of the court’s, not the teller’s, discretion.

Formal narrative control is not just a matter of organizational protocol. Harvey Sacks’s (1992) conversation analytic work shows how one’s ability to tell a story involves the implicit interactional negotiation of the conversational “right” to extend a turn at talk beyond the first possible speaker transition point that is a formal feature of conversation’s turn-taking machinery. After all, one needs conversational “space” if one is to tell an extended story; teller and listener must work together to create the conversational environment in which a story might emerge. Indeed, listeners are often active coparticipants in both the elicitation and production of stories, working with the machinery of ordinary conversation to shape storytelling.

Consider the way story production draws on both organizational order and conversation’s turn-taking “rules” to fashion a candidate patient’s story in another commitment hearing. In the following exchange, the district attorney (DA2) is questioning candidate patient Lisa Sellers (LS) concerning her recent and current living circumstances. After initiating fourteen prior question-answer pairs that conformed concisely to the court’s preferred interrogation format, the DA instigated the following sequence of talk:

1. DA2: How do you like summer out here, Lisa?
2. LS: It’s OK.
3. DA2: How long have you lived here?
4. LS: Since I moved from Houston
5. ((Silence)) [Note: If unspecified, length of silence is one to three seconds.]
6. LS: About three years ago.
7. DA2: Tell me about why you came here.
8. LS: I just came.
9. ((Silence))
10. LS: You know, I wanted to see the stars, Hollywood.
11. ((Silence))
12. DA2: Uh huh.
13. LS: I didn’t have no money.
14. ((Silence))
15. LS: I’d like to get a good place to live.
16. ((Silence 5 seconds))
17. DA2: Go on. ((Spoken simultaneously with onset of next utterance))
18. LS: There was some nice things I brought.
19. ((Silence))
20. DA2: Uh huh.
21. LS: Brought them from the rocketship.
22. DA2: Oh really?
23. LS: They was just some things I had.
In the extract, the questioning and answering proceeds rather directly through line four. At this point, however, Sellers offers an answer that is hearably complete, but the DA refuses to resume his questioning—declining his turn at talk—so that silence emerges at the completion of Sellers’s answer. Silences are conversationally disruptive and typically implicate the prior speaker (Maynard 1980). One way of terminating the silence is to extend the previous line of talk, which in this case Sellers does, elaborating on her prior answer, creating a nascent story. The DA thus passively prompts an extended turn at talk—a brief spate of storytelling—that departed from the prior question-answer format. We see this practice continue in the subsequent exchanges.

At line 7, the DA resumes his interrogation, but this time, instead of asking a question, he makes a more general request for information. Sellers responds briefly but receives neither response nor acknowledgment from the DA. By declining possible speakership, the DA again encourages Sellers to elaborate, which she does at line 10, again generating a story. At line 11, the DA once more refuses to take a turn at talk but encourages Sellers to continue (“uh huh”) at line 12 (Schegloff 1982). With a combination of silences and minimal encouragements, the DA “collaborates” with Sellers to string together an extended, if somewhat conversationally discontinuous, story of Sellers’ recent activities, culminating with the mention of the “rocketship” at line 21. The DA’s response (“Oh really?”) is a strong indication of apparent interest (Schegloff 1982) that elicits an elaboration of Sellers’s prior utterance. The DA is now eagerly responsive to what Sellers is saying and, by line 28, he is virtually inviting a full-blown story, which Sellers subsequently provides.

As far as storytelling goes, this example shows that narrative production in conversation is necessarily collaborative, even while it is institutionally informed. In a sense, control is the responsibility of all parties to the conversation. At minimum, one needs the passive cooperation of a conversational partner in order to tell a story. On such occasions, an institutional context may provide normative expectations and restrictions on how talk—and therefore storytelling—might proceed, but it can’t control conversation completely. Narrative control is also exerted by the machinery of conversation and interactants’ competent, adroit mastery of that machinery. The emerging “plot” of the story and its eventual climax are functions of both competent conversational practice and the court’s agenda for eliciting accounts relevant to commitment decisions.

**DISCUSSION**

The vocabulary we have formulated for describing narrative practice provides analytic purchase on personal stories and their coherence. Equally concerned with composition and control, it shows how the meaning of experience is both artfully constructed and circumstantially conditioned. We conclude by discussing some analytic implications and directions for further consideration suggested by our approach.
Coherence in Practice

The first issue relates to the sources of coherence. One source is the empirically constituting qualities of story as a communicative genre. This is the coherence drawn from what some expect from a good story—that it have sequentia and make a point.16 The second source works against this sense of story but does not eliminate it. It is the coherence that narrative practice puts into effect. In real-time and in concrete places, narrative control is asserted through what is properly tellable and how proper, accountable stories are to be told. Practice keeps the horizons of stories within local bounds, thus constituting occasioned coherences. Significantly, the coherence produced under the narrative conditions of one circumstance is not necessarily the coherence produced in another.17

The diverse conditions of storytelling suggest that narrative has no final, privileged, or genuine form, only circumstantially warranted stories to be told and related coherences to be conveyed. If, indeed, we are to entertain the prospects of “authentic” or ultimate narrative renderings, this should be done in relation to practice, in which case authenticity can only be viewed as locally attained, not as essential or transcendent. The authenticity (or inauthenticity) of a story is an important, ongoing concern of members of an interactional setting and should be analyzed as such. This does not obviate authenticity but implicates just the opposite, namely, a socially organized, narrative world rich with genuine and practically consequential versions of coherent experience through time.

Narrative Ownership

A second consideration centers on the question of who owns personal stories, an issue especially pertinent for our times, which some describe as a hyperreal world of free-floating narratives (Baudrillard 1983). Typically, the personal story is believed to belong to someone; someone’s account is his or her story. Our conception of narrative practice, however, complicates the issue of ownership, requiring an analytic vocabulary attuned to ownership’s social organization. A story may belong to its teller, in one sense, but features of narrative composition and local conditions of storytelling are also proprietary. As a practical matter, one way of thinking about this is in terms of the question: Whose voice do we hear when a story is conveyed? Whose voice, for instance, did Betty’s account express in the examples we discussed above?

When Betty told the story of her caregiving experiences, both she and her listeners understood that she was talking principally about her life with George, not about the lives or circumstances of other people or couples, even while the latter served to inform what Betty communicated. It was evident, too, that Betty’s account was suffused with attention to the process of storytelling. Diverse claims to ownership were implicit in the many comments she made concerning where she stood in her account, how she expected others to hear what she was saying, and what the connotation of her remarks should be. The comments showed how Betty worked at establishing narrative grounds for her story, giving proprietary shape in practice to her renderings of personal experience through time.

Yet, it was a limited ownership. Would Betty tell the same story, edit it in the same way, and provide the same linkages under the auspices of a different support group? Would she, in effect, “own” the same story elsewhere, or would it be “owned” by the auspices of the storytelling situation? A comparison of ethnographic material gathered in other support groups suggests that Betty’s story would certainly be conditioned by alternative local
senses of what experiences one does and doesn’t properly own in matters of caregiving. For example, while a caregiver such as Betty might claim not to follow distinct stages of adjustment to the care receiver’s increasing dementia, the account would be subject to charges of denial in some groups and accepted as just another version of caregiver adjustment in others. Accordingly, narrative ownership is always subject to local rhetorics of authenticity (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993).

The issue of ownership also implicates narrative “rights” and “obligations.” These, too, serve as forms of control. Interactional and institutional circumstances can virtually specify who can, or should, tell what kind of story or, indeed, tell any story at all. Participation in therapy or support groups that feature “twelve step” recovery programs, for example, virtually obliges members to offer narratives of descent, recognition, and recovery. Participants are locally obligated continually to communicate open-ended redemption stories with points that affirm the recovery program. The recognition of rights and obligations also helps to explain narrative “silences.” The adage “children should be seen but not heard,” for instance, may apply in adult-oriented social circumstances, thus stripping children of the right to contribute to conversation and convey their stories. Feminists suggest that something similar transpires in relation to women in male-dominated social circumstances (Thorne and Henley 1975).

Viewing stories of personal experience as a matter of practice allows us to expand this concern to ask questions about who is, or is not, entitled, obligated, or invited to offer their stories and under which social, institutional, historical, and material circumstances. One could, for instance, trace the conditions of practice surrounding the dictum that children should be seen but not heard in order to detail its variable institutional or historical groundings. For example, a comparative study of family therapy agencies (Gubrium 1992) found that an agency holding a model of domestic equilibrium, based on ideas about the functionality of hierarchies of authority, placed rather strict limitations on what and how children might offer accounts of their experience in family therapy sessions. Another agency, envisioning the functional family as a democracy of emotions, cast children’s narrative rights and obligations quite differently, virtually demanding that each child (and adult) offer his or her own stories and explanations, obliging each of them in turn to apply techniques of active listening. In comparing the two agencies, we find that there is considerable institutional variation in the ownership of narrative rights and obligations.18

Ownership is also diffused by narrative collaboration. Storytelling unfolds in relation to others, who more or less collaborate in giving a story its shape and substance. For example, as we noted earlier, a formal survey interview is a highly collaborative undertaking, in which the interviewer not only elicits a story from the respondent but variably controls the editing process (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). Narrative linkage is controlled from the very start, when the subject matter of the interview is announced, as well as throughout the interview exchange, as topic after topic and their related questions are introduced. In practice, the narrative controls of the survey interview systematically displace ownership from the individual respondent to the interview and its research agenda as a particular kind of storytelling event. Indeed, the interview project can inadvertently claim complete ownership, as the respondent’s story wends its way through a schedule of topics and morals, winding up being the subjective account of a research report.

Finally, formal narrative control further complicates ownership. We can think of this as varying by institutional site. As we showed earlier in the extracts from legal proceedings, control can be as much a matter of the formal organization of the proceedings as it is an
artifact of the participants’ interactional skills. Other institutional contexts provide alternative and contrasting kinds of formal control, the range of which is striking. From the production of accounts of domestic battering and abuse (Loseke 1992) and traumatic memory (Young 1996) to stories of unemployment (Miller 1991, Miller and Holstein 1996), institutional practice forms stories in its own right, chronicling endless narratives of locally recognizable, troubled lives.

**Analytic Procedure and Practice**

The third and final consideration relates to the direction of narrative analysis in the postmodern context. Contemporary life increasingly deprivatizes stories, displacing ownership from individuals to broader going concerns, constructing the authentic narrative voice of the person in such distinctly public contexts as talk shows, self-help groups, and therapeutic fellowships (Giddens 1992; Gubrium and Holstein 1994; 1995b; Plummer 1995; Wuthnow 1994). It is not that narrators lose all control of their own stories, nor that stories are no longer about those whose experiences are communicated. Rather, ownership is increasingly mediated by widely available communicative frameworks and, thus, is more diffusely proprietary than ever. Narrative ownership becomes a diverse and multisited postmodern condition, though with specific communicative groundings (Lyotard 1984).

Acknowledging that story has entered the realm of the postmodern does not necessarily lead us to surrender analysis to an unending play of signs and difference. Nor should we nostalgically strive to resurrect the theme of essential personal coherence. Instead, we can build on a set of analytic procedures for empirically appreciating both coherence and difference. We have aimed for this by orienting systematically to the constructive hows of storytelling together with its substantive and conditioning whats, within the varied sites under whose auspices these take effect. This is a continuous, dual concern with how a story is conveyed in relation to the criteria for what serves to make it a good story. Attention focuses as much on forms of narrative composition and control as on the substance of stories conveyed, their plots, themes, and the local and broader cultural resources that are brought into play.

Applying analytic bracketing to Betty’s narrative, for example, we could begin by examining the varied whats of her account and trace the increasingly multilayered cultural applications of dementia in relation to home care and caregiving. We might specify themes from popular cultural understandings of the disease experience, their foregrounding in the Alzheimer’s disease movement, and their varied local adaptations in order to document how they are woven into, and reconstructed in relation to, biographical particulars. Themes of marital satisfaction and familial responsibility, for example, compete with the growing infringements of the disease on the caregiver’s own well-being. In this context, Betty’s account, like those of Chase’s school superintendents, is suffused with received cultural categories and configurations, drawn from shared layers of meaning.

But how Betty’s stories take shape is as important as what is being conveyed. Now temporarily bracketing what Betty was saying, we can focus on how Betty works at her account, how she monitors who she is as a storyteller, how she believes she is being heard. We can thus analyze how Betty, in effect, moves in and out of her account, narrating and chronicling her experience, managing its story, and in the process constructing personal nuance for an ostensibly shared narrative.
At the same time, we must also be sensitive to issues of narrative collaboration. Listeners are not simply narrative depositories or passive receptors. Neither are they discursively homogeneous. They collaborate in both the whats and hows of narrative practice, invoking cultural meanings and expectations and supplying biographical particulars of their own, all in relation to the local auspices of narration.

An interactionally and institutionally sensitive analytic vocabulary is necessary if we are to expand the purview of narrative analysis into the various sites where stories are told in contemporary life. Such a vocabulary can help us capture the complex dynamics of narrative practice, providing detailed portrayals of story-in-use within diverse contexts of narrativity. This sustains both fine-grained appreciation for the interactional flow and institutional conditioning of storytelling, as well as the ethnographically documented description of the circumstances of narration. The “field” analytically constituted through this vocabulary is narratives-in-practice, coherent ensembles of personal experience constructed under the auspices of increasingly diverse storytelling occasions.

NOTES


2. The perspective and terminology we offer here—narrative practice and associated terms—are part of a more comprehensive analytic vocabulary we have been formulating for documenting “interpretive practice” (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). Marked by ethnomethodological sensibilities but still sensitive to more naturalistic concerns for meaning and cultural context, this vocabulary points to a particular kind of empirical field and phenomenon comprising real-time interactional and communicative activity and the institutional and discursive conditions under which interaction takes place.

3. While we have tended to consider narrative auspices in terms of formal organizational or professional influences (e.g., Gubrium and Holstein 1993; 1997), the term is equally apropos for characterizing the mandates, controls, and constraints that informal group membership exerts on its members. For example, membership in racial, ethnic, or gendered groups carries with it distinctive auspices—sometimes called “standpoints”—that consequentially shape storytelling.

4. Stories are not reducible, qua stories, to the communicative machinery of storytelling. The risk of such treatment is to make stories, narrative, talk, and conversational utterances indistinguishable. While the analysis of narrative practice, of course, features communicative usage, it also takes account of plot, story lines, themes, and story content, which, as Clegg (1993) suggests, are substantively consequential for power and control. It does matter for speakers and listeners what is said, not just how or even whether it is competently assembled and conveyed.

At the same time, stories need to be accountably placed in the flow of communication. As Sacks (1974; 1992) and others interested in the sequential organization of conversation suggest, we must remember that the interactional environment and dynamics of storytelling are always consequential in the production of narrative. Sacks’s conversation analytic work on stories offers useful observations about storytellers’ positioning within the stories told, the “storyability” of talk, and speakers’ entitlement to tell a story.

5. “Prefacing” is also a key feature noted in the interactional analysis of storytelling. Sacks (1992), for example, points to the massive work done by story prefaces in producing the interac-
tional environment within which an extended narrative may emerge. Among other things, he suggests that prefaces provide for the recognizability of story beginnings and ends and serve as virtual instructions for how listeners should respond to forthcoming utterances.

6. Narrative footing in this and other extracts is explicitly evident in talk. But footing also develops implicitly, as the shifting coherence of accounts suggests. Sometimes footing is not apparent until subsequent metanarratives indicate what had been occurring in this regard. Implicit shifts in footing are made visible or sorted out, for example, when a listener eventually asks a storyteller, “So what [or who] are you talking about now?”

Implicit shifts represent another occasion for narrative slippage, but the degree of slippage a researcher might discern ultimately rests on his or her analytic orientation to the relation between ethnographic and discourse analytic perspectives on narrative practice. Focused as ethnography is on the institutional environments and situational patterning of storytelling, there is warrant for entertaining hypotheses about locally likely, but not conversationally evident, footings. Discourse or conversation analysis, on the other hand, engage only hearable footings and can reveal the actual work that footing does in producing narrative coherence and difference. See Gubrium and Holstein (1997) for an approach that combines ethnography and discourse analysis to describe interpretive practice.

7. See Maynard’s series of articles on what he calls “perspective display sequences” (1989, 1991a, 1991b) and “forecasting” (1996). For example, Maynard argues that, from a conversation analytic viewpoint, discursive control does not simply reproduce formal or informal authority but is actively built up through the machinery of talk and interaction, such as the use of a perspective display sequence to deliver bad news. A perspective display sequence operates as a kind of invitation to one’s own story that is facilitated through the prefatory incitement of interest in a particular narrative theme.

8. West (1996) discusses the challenges and utilities of transcribing conversation while doing field research. The extract that follows is an instance of what she calls “transcribing without tapes.” While detailed field notes were taken on what was being said, when the data were collected, the issue of how the conversation was conducted was not paramount. Thus, many of the interactional details of the actual conversational exchanges in which “Betty’s story” was told cannot be reconstructed. Consequently, we attempt no detailed analysis of these aspects of the story’s telling and limit our attention to the various story-editing practices that are visible (hearable) in the content of what Betty was saying, which has been recorded in the field notes. See West (1996) for further discussion of the appropriateness of using “less than perfect transcripts” for different types of analysis.

9. This, of course, points toward what some feminist scholars call the “positionality” or “standpoint” of description (Harding 1987; Smith 1974, 1987).

10. This highlights the ethnomethodological observation that interaction is reflexively sensitive to and productive of context (Wieder [1974]1988). Betty simultaneously shapes her story in response to the context of its telling, a context that she continually specifies and alters through her storytelling.

11. Scott and Lyman (1968) and Hewitt and Stokes (1975) once distinguished “accounts” and “disclaimers” as important devices for managing meaning-making, but they did not provide a general framework for usage. Here, we take accounts and disclaimers to be two types of narrative editing, focused primarily on the content of stories that, along with narrative footing and other aspects of practice, serve to show some of the ways in which coherence is continuously “worked up” and “reworked.”

12. Elsewhere, we have used the term “deprivatization” to characterize the organizational and institutional conditioning of interpretive practice (Gubrium and Holstein 1994, 1995b, 1997). By this, we mean to highlight the ways that interpretive circumstances shape (if not determine) what are typically thought to be private, personal interpretations.

13. Examination of the everyday work of narrative composition suggests that there are empirical grounds for arguing that “pure” editing undermines social interaction. A speaker who insists on exclusively attending to storytelling in its own right, while ignoring the story line, can spoil the sub-
stantive basis of conversation. Such an interactant risks being castigated, ignored, or indulged in what might be called a narrativity game, where narration itself becomes topical.

Garfinkel’s (1967) well-known breaching experiments demonstrate this empirically. Students, for example, were directed to respond to others strictly in terms of the hows of social interaction, studiously ignoring the whats, and to document others’ reactions. Typically, those targeted quickly became frustrated, dismissing the student, or themselves engaging in “how-ing,” thus topicalizing the experiment. A parallel point here is that conversation, to the extent it occurs, is always conversation-about-something, a matter that occasionally gets overlooked in formal conversation analysis.

Another point is taken from the phenomenological stricture that consciousness is always consciousness-of-something. This is called “intentionality” by phenomenologists (Schutz 1970). So-called pure consciousness is no consciousness at all, since it would necessarily exist bereft of language and reflexivity, the fundamental elements of the “inner conversation” that Mead (1934), in the context of his developing pragmatism, called “mind.”

14. Even highly structured surveys are instances of conversational interaction and are thus never formally surveyic. Competent conversational practice is always necessary for the exchanges required in the production of questions and answers (Holstein and Gubrium 1995).

15. The // indicate a point at which the subsequent speaker intrudes upon a current line of talk.

16. This is, of course, a culturally promoted expectation. Members of Western societies (at least before postmodern times) have come to expect their stories to have beginnings, middles, and ends, to have a story line (if not a full-blown plot), and a point, even a moral. When one launches into storytelling, one tacitly signals that some semblance of each of these will be forthcoming. Thus, the coherence, say, of an episode of experience is “preordained” by our expectations for the communicative vehicle through which it is conveyed.

17. Related to this, Linde’s (1993) work is a major contribution to the study of narrative practice. Her considerations of coherence systems, for example, present the ways in which everyday applications of available explanatory frameworks, such as Freudian psychology, behaviorism, and astrology, serve to organize speakers’ narratives (see also Gubrium, Holstein, and Buckholdt 1994). But Linde’s analysis is not institutionally grounded. She does not consider how institutional arrangements sort and mediate the selection of explanatory frameworks for narrative application. Studies in the institutional ethnography of storytelling move in this direction, offering a way of socially locating Linde’s otherwise pioneering effort (e.g., Loseke 1992; Miller 1991; Gubrium 1992; Young 1996).

18. Issues of narrative entitlement and ownership may also be explored from a conversation analytic perspective. Sacks (1992), for example, offers suggestions for the examination of how one establishes the “right” as well as the conversational “space” to tell stories. Zimmerman and West’s (1975) work on conversational interruptions and gender suggests further examination of how the “right” to tell stories is interactionally accomplished or thwarted. While this work centers on the hearable work of rights accomplishment, the often unheard silencings enacted in some institutional environments are more readily detectable through comparative institutional ethnography and cultural analysis.

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