

Reading by the lines.

Proposal for a narrative analytical technique in empirical theology

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This paper proposes a method of reading narrative interviews (and other texts). The focus is on the different story-lines a narrator uses and weaves together to construct his or her personal narrative. The analysis combines qualitative and quantitative elements to discover the narrative structures. The method of reading is exposed and illustrated at one interview from my research project on religious dynamics in male victims of sexual abuse (see appendix for a description).

Within the field of empirical theology, the narrative approach is a promising one. As I will try to show, it offers possibilities for a systematic understanding of religious dynamics, while staying close to the religious individuals we study. Far from claiming it to be the only or even the best approach, I do believe narrative theories and methods offer a unique contribution to the field. Before proposing a method of reading however, I will first highlight some advantages of a narrative approach, outline my version of narrative theory, and discuss some methodological issues.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, an uprise of interest in narrative can be observed in many scientific disciplines¹. Closest to empirical theology are biblical and systematic theology, ethics and philosophy on the one hand, and psychology on the other. In psychology of religion and practical theology efforts have been made to study religion from a narrative perspective. This includes such diverse themes as moral development, religious education, religious coping, mass media, fundamentalism, pastoral care, homiletics, community development, faith development and religious identity.

Besides authors explicitly employing a narrative perspective, many scholars using different concepts and terms can be understood as working in the same theoretical field. Or at least their work could easily be fitted in a narrative framework. This would include those taking a hermeneutic approach, role theorists and researchers working with the legacy of Sundén, attribution theorists, personal construct theorists, some

¹ Space limits prohibit discussion of the burgeoning literature of narrative in all these domains. See Ganzevoort (1998 Ed.) for specific references.

object-relations and self-psychology theorists and many more. This suffices to prove the extensive use of a narrative perspective (and the like) in a variety of disciplines and fields. For me it suggests the value of exploring the use of narrative a bit further, in the direction of analysis in empirical theology.

1.1 WHY NARRATIVE?

Empirical theology, closely connected both to the human sciences and to the other disciplines of theology, would benefit from taking a narrative turn for at least the following five reasons.

First, as Patton (1994) argues, it creates the possibility of interaction with biblical theology, through a fresh understanding of Boisen's famous phrase of the 'Living Human Document'. Whereas earlier this term was used to accentuate the contrast between dead texts and living humans, narrativity underscores the parallels of written texts and meaningful human action (Capps 1984). This connection invites empirical theology to employ methods and insights from biblical theology and to explore the relation with human documents.

Second, a narrative perspective can serve as a meta-theoretical framework. It may help us understand the connection between theology and social sciences and the discussion of contesting approaches within both worlds (cf. Browning 1987). In differing theories and approaches the underlying story-lines can be discerned, with their implicit normative assumptions (like faith development, religious maturity, pathology). Because of this meta-theoretical character, and the growing body of literature on narrative psychology, narratively oriented studies on cultural anthropology, theology and more, a narrative perspective has a strong potential for interdisciplinary communication and research.

Third, taking a narrative turn involves a hermeneutical stance, in which the individual biography and religious construction are valued over general descriptions and statistical averages. From a theological point of view, this is called for if we want to do justice to voices of the oppressed and the unheard (Metz 1977), and if we want to acknowledge the religious individual. From a social scientific point of view it is warranted, given the situation of a more and more fragmented and plural society. Individuals construct their own bricolage of elements from various religious traditions and world views.

Fourth, a narrative approach has the advantage of proximity to the object of investigation. Where people are inclined to talk and interact in a narrative mode, probing a narrative theory and method for our research is useful. Even if one does not share the presupposition that the entirety of human life and experience is structured narratively, the human object of our observations prefers a narrative discourse. If we can employ this discourse in theory and methodology, higher validity can be expected. We will discuss this further under the heading of methodology.

Fifth, as I will try to prove, a narrative approach is workable and viable, because it serves the systematic generation of research questions and methods for research and practice. A prerequisite for this viability is the formulation of sound narrative theory, as I will elaborate below. The proximity of this theory to the observational field results in applicable questions and interventions. Thus, a narrative approach enhances strategy development in pastoral counseling, policy making, education, and so on.

1.2 WHAT IS NARRATIVE?

My previous remarks indicate the necessity of outlining the narrative perspective I take. I do so by defining narrative as the story-like structure in which the author (from his or her own perspective) experiences and understands life, assigns the parts and roles, and through which (s)he positions him- / herself relationally, and accounts for him- / herself in front of the audience. This definition helps us determine six dimensions to be explored: structure, perspective, experience, role assignment, relational positioning, audience. Elsewhere I have expanded this theory and made reference to essential literature (Ganzevoort 1998 Ed.). The purpose of this paper only allows for a brief indication of relevant factors within these dimensions.

Structure describes the selection of and the sequential connection between the elements included in the story or stories. The narrator uses a time sequence to present the story-elements in a specific order, which may or may not be chronological. In doing so, the story creates its own time. Retrospection of the past and anticipation of the future are used for interpreting the present. The structure can be highly coherent or consist of loose fragments. It can be construed by means of logico-argumentative and/or associative, metaphorical devices. The sequential ordering of events and characters is further determined by meaning attributed to it by the author. Through causal, temporal or thematic connections, story lines emerge. This process can be called emplotment.

Perspective describes the stance from which the author chooses or is forced to construe his or her story. The perspective taken constitutes the selection and interpretation of events. Social and religious interaction is therefore determined by the position of the narrators (including gender, age, ethnicity), their respective interests and needs, and the division of the power to enforce a particular perspective upon the interaction. If within the story another story is nested, perspective is to be established on two levels.

Experience describes the dialectic interaction between sensation and interpretation. Emotions and the body are seen as interpreted phenomena, and a claim to direct experience is dismissed. Emotional and physical processes are structured narratively. This process is called enactment. Simultaneously, the sensations and bodily events have a semi-autonomous character, demanding interpretation by the author.

Role assignment describes the way the author attributes specific roles to him- / herself, and to other characters in the story. Through this assignment, (s)he construes a constellation of roles deemed useful for the maintenance or enhancement of the narrative structure and identity of the author. The correlation between the roles in the story, their conflict and complementarity, is an important feature of the narrative process.

Relational positioning describes the processes through which the narrator uses his or her story to establish, maintain, shape and conclude relationships. A narrative approach to social and religious interaction sees actions and stories as performative, rather than representative. The interaction of the various authors with their respective narrative means results in a social drama of negotiation. To be clear: whereas role assignment addresses the use of relations within the stories, relational positioning concerns the use of stories within the relations.

Audience describes the way the author is addressed by significant others, and accounts for his or her life in front of these significant others. This account or justification is

judged by criteria for legitimacy and plausibility the audience holds. The constellation of the audience determines the number and consistency of stories needed for justification.

The six dimensions of the narrative process are not atomizable elements, but mutually dependent and inclusive. Each particular structure, perspective or audience implies specific configurations in each other dimension. The dimensions are useful to offer a number of ways in which the narrative process can be observed and analyzed. These six dimensions then, can serve the purpose of generating questions for research and practice. Their theological consequences and empirical validity need to be explored. In this paper I will restrict myself to the second question. I will describe a method of reading, based on this narrative theory. Before doing so, some remarks have to be made on methodological consequences of taking a narrative turn.

1.3 METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

One of the most obvious points at stake is the view that human action and discourse are performative rather than representative. This implies a turn from facts to language (taken broadly), from a supposed interior self to a self entangled in narratives (Day & Tappan 1996). Consequently, responses of subjects in research projects (whether in depth interviews or surveys are used) are not seen as disclosing the facts of the life of these subjects, nor of their religious lives. They are seen as efforts in performing and interacting in such a way that the relational purposes of the subject are served best. Precisely these narrative efforts are observed and interpreted in research, not the facts claimed (Gergen 1994).

This touches on the matter of social desirability, which is usually seen as an unwanted bias in research. From a narrative perspective we should say that every interaction (including research) is formed by the desire of all involved to interact and thus to have the chosen relational position validated. The interaction with the researcher (another common issue in methodology, and seen as possible bias for the results) is similarly constitutive for the research process. Stated briefly, what we investigate is precisely this interaction (Mishler 1991).

Frequently the problem of retrospectivity is addressed as a bias in obtaining sound results. From a narrative perspective this is hardly a problem, because we do not investigate the past. We focus on the present construction as the subject presents it, in which (s)he uses past and future. Naturally, longitudinal studies (often mentioned as a solution to the problem of retrospectivity) would still be highly interesting as they may clarify the changes and continuity within these narrative constructions.

All this suggests that in a narrative perspective the classical methodological issues need to be redefined. The fundamental stance implies a departure from the objectivist position. Instead of claiming access to reality, we claim access to communicative efforts of individuals in interaction. Clearly this means that high demands should be made on the interviewer. Notably in the phase of data collection, a narrative approach has to meet strict requirements to provide the data needed for analysis. I can not deal with that matter in the scope of this paper. My aim here is more modest in proposing a method of understanding the narrative construction in a given text, in this case the written account of an interview, fully aware that it is not the only possible construction of this interviewee.

Several authors have claimed that qualitative research (especially unstructured narrative interviews) tends to score higher on the matter of validity than quantitative approaches, but lower on reliability (e.g. Mishler 1991). Higher validity thus may be a characteristic of narrative research, depending on the quality of data collection. Reliability, the probability that replication will yield similar results, is not as easy in narrative research. However, a redefinition of reliability can lead to criteria applicable to qualitative results. This should include rigorous methods of reading and interpreting (as the one I will describe in this paper), thus enabling other researchers to track down the conclusions. Furthermore, the involvement of multiple readers, and their consensus on coding and interpretation adds to the reliability of the conclusions. Then, conclusions of narrative research should be considered as more evident, if they are more able to resist counter-arguments and alternative interpretations. Yet, reinterpretation should not be excluded, as it is pertinent to a narrative approach. Finally, narrative research is focused on individualities and particularities. This might be a problem regarding generalization of results. However, as many qualitative researchers have claimed, although we cannot draw conclusions from individual cases to general populations, we can conclude from qualitative research to theory. Here I see the need for qualitative (e.g., narrative) and quantitative methods to cooperate. A congenial approach can be seen in the qualitative and quantitative analyse of pastoral protocols as proposed by Van der Ven (1994). His method deals more directly with the pastoral interaction, and is less focused on research interviews; mine deals with the narrative construction (the story / stories) of the interviewee.

2. A METHOD OF READING

Based on reading methods of others, I begin with the idea of multiple reading of a text. Brown, Tappan, Gilligan, Miller & Argyris (1989) have offered a method of reading narratives of real-life moral conflict and choice in a circular way. They propose starting with the overview of the text as a whole, then establishing the perspective of the narrator, tracking the different moral voices, followed by the construction of a typology based on these readings. Day & Naedts (1997) propose fourfold reading. They code interviews for 1) connected and separate identity presentations, 2) principled and relational religious orientations and 3) consistency of alignment of self to one of these voices. Finally, 4) they conduct an open reading for themes emerging in the interview that do not fit the categories of the earlier readings. Day, Naedts & Saroglou (1994, June) propose readings for the self-presentation, the content of religious experience, and the gender component in relation to both.

The starting point for the method of reading I want to introduce here, is the observation that one text may consist of more than one story line. These story lines can be distinguished from one another. Then the characteristics of each story line and the interrelatedness of these story lines can be determined. Here we can use qualitative and quantitative elements. The method of reading consists of four basic steps: 1) global reading; 2) discerning the story lines; 3) differentiation in dimensions of time, evaluation and roles; 4) describing patterns. Each can be adapted for specific research purposes. I will describe each step in some detail, illustrated by one example from my research project on religious dynamics in male victims of sexual abuse.

2.1 GLOBAL READING

The purpose of the first step is to get a general picture of the text. Reading the full text gives the researcher an intuitive grasp of the central meaning. The researcher may now answer central questions concerning the six dimensions of the definition of narrative: structure, perspective, experience, role assignment, relational positioning, audience. To summarize this, the researcher may formulate the central themes of the interview text. A brief biography of the subject can function to describe these findings. This first step serves to provide the intuitive and interpretive reading that will be validated in the following steps.

BOX 1: BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

The subject of my example was born shortly after World War II in a large city. Between his parents, semi-active Roman Catholic shopkeepers, much tension is felt. The second of three children, he is abused sexually by his father for two years, starting at age six. Diagnosing venereal disease, the family doctor intervenes and arranges placement in a children's home. Several times, his mother takes him and his siblings away, and they are returned by the police. He resorts to religious images of suffering for the sake of others, and plans to become a priest. In his university years, he is inspired by liberation theology, and ends up in a social job. He has had homosexual and heterosexual relationships, and is still uncertain about his sexual orientation. A father of two, his marriage has stranded after ten years. He is living alone now, although he has a (female) partner. In therapy for some years, he started painting and writing. At present he is no longer a member of the church. Central themes in the story are living in conflict, being invisible and serving.

2.2 DISCERNING THE STORY LINES

The second step tries to validate and correct the central story lines that emerged in the first step of global reading. It is assumed that the central story lines will be present in opening statements of the interview, as they form the fabric of the self-presentation of the narrator. In this second step, the interview is coded on these story lines (for printouts this can be done, using bold, italics, underlined, capitals). Overlap and double coding are admitted. The number of central story lines should be limited, and if possible, all utterances of the subject should be coded. If meaningful parts of the interview cannot be coded on any of the story lines, a redefinition of the story lines may be needed. During this procedure, the meaning of the central themes may develop, and the researcher should keep track of his or her use of the story line labels. This way we employ the notion of the hermeneutical circle, moving from an understanding of the whole of the story to its parts, and back.

When working with more readers, interrater agreement can be measured and consensus can be pursued. Another validation strategy is to check the instances where the interviewer launches new topics. If the opening statements following this intervention include all the story line, this suggests that the selected themes are central in fact. Box 2 displays the way the opening statement of the subject is coded on three story lines, that are discerned as 'conflict', 'invisible' and 'serving'. They appear in the

another. When pieces of text are double-coded, the fragment is duplicated, so that each fragment is limited to only one story line. All unscored fragments, including interviewer interventions, are eliminated. The result of this procedure is a file consisting of single-coded fragments. Using these fragments as units of correlation is warrantable, if the use of differing story lines by the narrator is accepted as a legitimate way of storytelling and reading. Then each time a different story line is employed, a new fragment is started.

Using this procedure, we found a total of 330 fragments, 135 (40.9 %) coded 'Invisible', 114 (34.5 %) 'Conflict' and 81 (24.5 %) 'Serving'. We calculated the number of words per fragment in each story line, and found significant differences. 'Conflict' has a means of 43.3 words per fragment; 'Serving' has 38.5 and 'Invisible' 35.9. This finding suits the content. 'Invisible' includes the experience of not being heard or seen and the wish to withdraw. Hesitance to speak can therefore be expected. 'Conflict' includes inner and social conflicts, contradictions, etcetera, and it can be expected that more words are needed here.

2.3 TIME, EVALUATION AND ROLES

The third step explores the differences between the story lines in various dimensions. Many dimensions can be explored here, and the choice should be informed by the specific direction of the research project. Choosing dimensions for structure rather than content is useful. Basic dimensions, as I used in this research project, include time, evaluation and relations. This is coherent with the narrative theory outlined, in which structure is created by time sequencing, interpretation and role assignment. Specific dimensions I used are religion (experience, beliefs and behavior) and sexual abuse (background, events, experience, consequences).

Time. Within the dimension of time, in this project I distinguished between youth, past, present and future. As only one fragment scored on future, this category was combined with present. Because some fragments were double-coded on time, the total amounted to 333. Of this total, 151 (45.3) were coded Youth, 58 (17.4 %) Past, and 124 (36.9%) Present (or future). Differentiated by story lines, we find that of 'Serving' 59.3 % concerns the past and only 23.4 % the present. Of 'Invisible' 41.5 % concerns the past and 43.7 % the present, differing significantly from the total score. This means that the narrative construction of our subject uses a shift in which the importance of the story line 'Serving' decreases, and the importance of 'Invisible' increases. The correlation of 'Serving' - youth and 'Serving' -present is statistically significant at a level of $p < 0,010$.

Evaluation. Within the dimension of evaluation, I distinguished between wanted, unwanted and neutral or mixed evaluation. This interpretation was based on the way the subject was addressing topics, emotional involvement, etcetera. Fragments are scored 'wanted' (or 'unwanted') if it is clear that the subject speaks positively (negatively) on a topic, or expresses positive (negative) feelings. In case of doubt the code neutral / mixed was assigned to the fragment (see Box 3 for examples).

BOX 3: EXAMPLES OF FRAGMENTS CODED FOR EVALUATION

Wanted:	'[My children] mean a lot to me. In a way that, my main purpose is, what is driving me, is first the relation I have with each of them separately, en second the persons they are.'
Unwanted:	'... why I feel absent, why I don't want to be there, why I disconnect the telephone. Why I can't talk to people, or just hear myself talking.'
Mixed / Neutral:	'I recently fell in love with someone that really was worthwhile falling in love with. But as it turned out, he was a copy of my self. That didn't work. (laughs)'

Still 176 fragments (53.0 %) were coded as unwanted, 75 (22.6 %) were coded wanted, and 81 (24.4 %) neutral. The number of words per fragment differs significantly (Wanted 51.1, Unwanted 34.8, Neutral 37.6). Differentiation by story line leads to about the same results, although 'Conflict' has fewer fragments scored wanted (17.2 %) and more coded neutral or mixed (30.2 %). This is caused by the mixed feelings that arise in conflicting fragments. When correlating time-dimension and evaluation, as presented in Table 1, we observe the striking fact that the fragments coded wanted amount to 41.5 % in present against only 11.3 % in youth. Unwanted reaches 66.2 % in youth, and only 34.9 % in present. Percentages are statistically significant (shaded cells only, $p < 0,000$). The move from unwanted to wanted predominance is read as an indication that the presentation by the narrator is a construction of coping or improvement.

TABLE 1: CORRELATION OF TIME AND EVALUTATION

TOTAL	Youth	Past	Present-future	Row-total
Unwanted	100**	33	43**	176
Neutral - mixed	34	18	29	81
Wanted	17**	7	51**	75
Column-total	151	58	123	332

In this construction of coping or improvement, the shift mentioned earlier (away from 'Serving') is used. Table 2 will present the number of fragments differentiated by story-line, time and evaluation. Shaded cells represent significant correlations, based on the total number of fragments within that part of the table (* $p < 0,010$; ** $p < 0,000$; # $p < 0,050$). The narrative construction follows the pattern of evaluating the

present in equally wanted and unwanted fragments, whereas youth is consistently evaluated as unwanted. The story line ‘Serving’ is an exception, in the sense that more youth-fragments are evaluated as wanted. This is because the subject describes ‘Serving’ as a refuge story, which made his experiences of abuse meaningful. This positive interpretation is abandoned in present, and the story line ‘Serving’ recedes in the background.

TABLE 2: CROSS TABULATION OF TIME, EVALUATION AND STORY LINE

<i>CONFLICT</i>	Youth	Past	Present-future	Row-total
Unwanted	32 *	16	13 **	61
Neutral - mixed	14	6	15	35
Wanted	1 *	2	17 **	20
Column-total	47	24	45	116
<i>INVISIBLE</i>	Youth	Past	Present-future	Row-total
Unwanted	43 **	10	24 *	77
Neutral - mixed	9	6	10	25
Wanted	4 **	4	25 **	33
Column-total	56	20	59	135
<i>SERVING</i>	Youth	Past	Present-future	Row-total
Unwanted	25	7	6	38
Neutral - mixed	11	6	4	21
Wanted	12	1	9 #	22
Column-total	48	14	19	81

Role assignment. The third dimension I used is that of roles and relations. As I outlined in the narrative theory, the attribution of roles is a means of narrative identity. Each character the subject presents in his or her story is included in this analysis. The relationships are cross-tabled with dimensions of time and evaluation. Some significant correlations are self-evident. Obviously father, mother and peers at school score mainly in fragments of the category Youth. In past, only his wife and society (as a whole) reach significance. In present we find significant scores of partner and children. Most relationships do not correlate significantly to any time-dimension. Only a few significant correlations were found between relationships and evaluation: Father - Unwanted, Children - Wanted and God / Jesus - Wanted. Careful interpretation is needed for the finding that Partner is highly (though not significantly) correlated to Unwanted evaluation. The reason may be that in their intimate relation they have to confront dysfunction of the subject, attributed to his negative experiences.

Cross-tabulation of relationships and story lines offers further insight. Fragments concerning his partner are significantly more present in the story line ‘Invisible’. Significantly lower than in other story lines are the numbers for his father and mother, church and society. In the story line of ‘Conflict’ the number for his mother is

significantly high. Significantly higher numbers of fragments within the story line of 'Serving' are found for Society, God / Jesus and Brother. A significantly lower number in this story line is found for his partner. Except 'Serving' - Society ($p < 0,010$), all correlations mentioned only reach significance at a level of $p < 0,050$, based on a total of 330 fragments. Further differentiation shows that significant correlations of evaluation and relation within a specific story line are only found for the relation with God - Jesus. In 'Invisible' we find more neutral / mixed scores. Both in 'Invisible' and 'Conflict' we find no fragments Unwanted. In 'Serving' we find more fragments scored Wanted.

2.4 PATTERNS

The fourth step seeks to synthesize the findings in describing patterns of the narrative construction. For this purpose, the significant correlations of the structural analysis are put together into one coherent framework. This step is less analytical and more interpretive. One criterion for establishing the proper pattern is the 'best fit' of correlative results. A useful tool is a graphical display in which the story lines discerned are used as the axes, and the dimensions analyzed are located in the scheme, dependent on their positive correlation to a specific story line. The researcher may use features as distance and size to portray the specifics of each element included in the scheme. In this case I did not use size, but distance and location in the figure signify the meaning of the roles and events included. Moving directly to the display and the interview may be helpful in describing this step further.

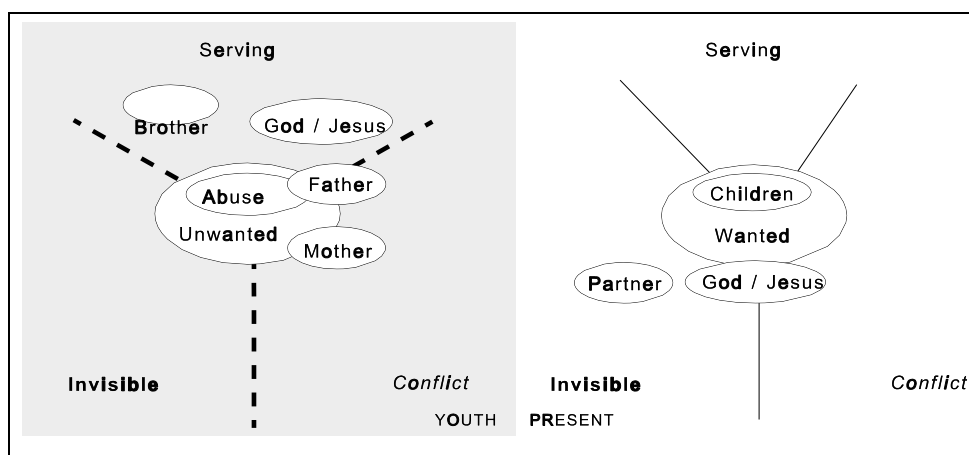


FIGURE 2: PATTERNS OF THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION

This figure shows some central features of the narrative construction of this subject. On the left we find the constellation for the period of his youth, on the right for the present. In his youth, the core of his story is made up by the evaluation of unwanted, and by the theme of sexual abuse. The theme of abuse functions equally in all three story lines. In 'Invisible' it is an ambivalent meaning. While the subject has the experience that his feelings are not taken into account, the sexual relation with his father is his only experience of intimacy. This ambivalence leads to the meaning of 'Conflict', which he experienced in his family, but also in his own feelings and thoughts. Unable to cope with 'Invisible' or 'Conflict', he construes a story of 'Serving', in which being abused becomes the symbol of sacrifice. This symbol is interpreted by means of religious images. Through this construction he creates a place and meaning for himself.

In his construction of the present, the segment of 'Serving' has become smaller. The core narrative is now evaluated as wanted, closely connected to his children and his experience of relating to God - Jesus. The position of God - Jesus has shifted from the story line of 'Serving' to the story lines of 'Conflict' and 'Invisible'. In this shift, he describes God as impersonal, dynamic, and close to him. Jesus still functions as an example, no longer in terms of suffering, but in terms of responsibility and freedom.

The unwanted relation with his father is re-experienced in the relation with his partner, and he expects that further development will lead to a more wanted situation.

In his narrative construction, the subject finds a reinterpretation of the story line of 'Invisible', in which intimacy and connectedness emerge. The wanted evaluation of this story line is elaborated, whereas the wanted evaluations in the other story lines are not as easily or clearly construed. The continuing experience of conflict (in thoughts and feelings) challenges his reinterpretation of 'Invisible' to intimacy and his choice for autonomy instead of 'Serving'. Because of this challenge, the positive framing of 'Serving' in his youth and of 'Invisible' in present are under pressure. Therefore he is not able to tell his story self-confidently and coherently.

The religious dimension functions in both periods mainly in the story line framed positively. In his religious stories he finds the images that attribute meaning to his suffering as a child and later to his development as a free and responsible adult, relating intimately to others. In this creative process of religious construing and reconstruing, he distinguishes between God and Jesus. Increasingly he sees God as impersonal and Jesus as a personal example. This is related to his experiences with his father on the one hand and his partner and children on the other.

3 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The presentation of a proposed method of reading has shown that narrative structures of an interview text can be discerned through a differentiated reading of the story lines that are present. For this purpose I have combined more interpretive elements (distinguishing story lines, coding for evaluation, establishing patterns), more factual coding (time, relations), and statistical procedures. The result of this method is an understanding of the structure of the self-presentation or narrative construction of the subject. The next step would be to formulate answers to the research questions (see Ganzevoort, submitted). Finally, applications for pastoral or clinical assessment and interventions should be explored systematically. The relevance of such a method of reading for pastoral care and counseling is indirect, mediated through results obtained from scientific research, and/or through a theory of narrative that facilitates pastoral understanding and intervention (see Ganzevoort, 1998 Ed.).

One issue of methodological interest remains to be noted. Part of my method of reading a text allows for multiple or overlapping codes, whereas other parts do not. The rationale for this is that each step in the procedure is designed for a specific purpose. Overlap in the initial coding is allowed because the subject cannot be expected to tell his narrative in separated story lines. As the real story employs overlap, so should our coding procedure. However, assessment of specific correlations between story lines and other dimensions is enhanced by eliminating overlap. For that purpose segments are created artificially by marking the boundaries of story lines and if needed duplicating parts of the text. Clarity of correlations is also pursued in a preference for using the extreme categories of time and evaluation (in this case, youth vs. present and wanted vs. unwanted). As the results underscore, the middle categories (past and mixed / neutral evaluation) form a transition category between the extremes. It could be argued that these procedures might yield false positive results in establishing statistical significance at points where there is no actual correlation. This is a risk inherent to the procedure of enhancing clarity. Therefore coding the extreme categories should be done conservatively. In case of doubt on the

part of the researcher, or interrater disagreement, a middle category should be chosen for assigning codes.

Application of this method of reading to specific research would also include the question what dimensions of narrative are to be included in the analysis. For example, I could have given more attention to perspective (including power and needs), experience (including emotions and the body), positioning in the relation to the interviewer, and the audience (including strategies for justification). My choice in this paper has been informed by the aims of my research, the material of interview-text and the presentation of the possibilities of a narrative theory and methodology.

The final topic for this discussion concerns the theological implications of this research approach. In the opening pages I have given some (partly theological) legitimation. Here we wonder what theological consequences ensue, so that theologians can decide upon the theological desirability of the method. To answer this question, we can consider two polarities: empirical versus theoretical theology and narrative versus non-narrative approaches. With regard to the theological consequences, the choice for narrative in the second polarity radicalizes the choice for empirical in the first.

The choice for empirical approaches in theology implies an emphasis on human perception and subjectivity. Truth claims that may arise from systematic and exegetic disciplines are suspended to allow for empirical validation of religious structures and contents. Empirical theology thus tries to establish criteria within the praxis. However, the empirical tradition as propagated by Van der Ven and others, takes its starting point not in the praxis, but in the religious tradition or in the theological reflection thereof. For example, research in theodicy is structured by theological 'ideal types', 'the result of extensive study of the theological history and the contemporary theodicy literature' (Van der Ven & Vossen 1995, 17). These authors acknowledge that human religious reality does not coincide completely with theological models, and for that reason the research program included inductive projects as well (Van der Ven 1990, 185-186). As a whole, the emphasis seems to be on empirically validating deductively constructed hypotheses from theological discourse.

It is precisely at this point that narrative methods as the one proposed here offer a radicalised approach with regard to the theological stance. Inductive throughout, the presupposition and implication is that models, theological theory and criteria are formulated with the praxis as starting point and frame of reference. Narrative approaches take human experience and religion utterly serious as subject in relation. Theological discourse is entered only in the reflective phase following the empirical research. This need not be in conflict methodically with the empirical approach described. The inductive phase mentioned there could be strengthened by using more elaborated narrative interview analyses, just like the results of narrative research could be validated and enriched by more quantitative designs (See appendix for a description of my research project in which both are combined). Theologically, a completely narrative approach would focus less on models and ideal types available in the religious and/or theological tradition.

Besides this, I would like to point out, that the narrative theory outlined is open to a variety of theological questions and perspectives concerning the 'reality' of God. Within the field of psychology of religion some kind of methodic agnosticism is

warranted, even when the same narrative theory is employed. In theological discourse, I stress the point that God is not only part of the story (as designated in the dimension of role assignment); faith means that a person positions himself or herself relationally toward God. This means that a narrative approach, though focusing on human perception and experience, can include transcendence.

A further consequence for theology and pastoral work is that acknowledging the narrative construction by human subjects does not imply approval. From a theological perspective, the dimension of audience and interaction is important, in which critical interaction occurs. The pastor, religious community, tradition, and authoritative religious texts interact with the individual stories in such a way that justification, critique, validation and development are possible and needed. This should be considered a dynamic process.

In presenting this method of reading, I try to prove that a narrative approach is not necessarily fuzzy or intuitive. It can be elaborated in a highly sophisticated method. With scientific rigor and the employment of strict procedures (assisted by qualitative and quantitative computer-software), narrative methods can yield understanding of the individual construction of reality. For empirical theology it might be even more interesting that the individual religious construction can be traced in an integrative way. As a method of research, there is no direct contribution to theological theory or ecclesiastical practice. Results obtained through this and other methods may be useful though, and narrative theory may be influential in rethinking the relation between theology, scripture, church, human subject and tradition.

APPENDIX 1: DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The narrative analytical technique proposed here has been developed as part of the research programme on religious dynamics in sexually abused men. The first purpose of this programme is to offer insight into the interaction of sexual abuse and religious beliefs and experiences. In the future, more attention will be given to the question how adequate pastoral care can be provided. Because of the lack of attention for male victims, I chose to focus on their experiences.

The first study in this programme uses qualitative (narrative) methods to discover how these men construe their lives and where religion has a place (if any) in their stories. In it, I have conducted twelve narrative interviews, inviting the men to tell their story in their own way. The role of the interviewer is limited to evoke further exploration of the story, and if needed, to invite the men to talk about religion. Following the interview, the subjects were asked to complete and return a questionnaire with additional data. This questionnaire (revised on the basis of this first study) will be used in the second study. My analysis of the interviews is based on the understanding that the subject construes and reconstructs his story in a way perceived as meaningful and adequate for interaction with others (including the interviewer). The method of reading proposed here has been developed primarily for this study.

The second study to be executed will turn to quantitative methods to discover more precisely which specific aspects of sexual abuse and religion interact. Here the purpose will be to discover as precisely as possible correlations between factors in sexual abuse (e.g., age of onset, frequency of abuse, severity, coinciding dysfunctions in family of

origin), religion (e.g., religious upbringing, church affiliation, positive and negative religious experience, images of God, perception of the relation with God, religious behavior), and possibly mediating factors like therapy and pastoral attention received, psychosocial effects and functioning.

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