Interdisciplinary SNF research project (2009-2013)

Life (Beyond) Writing: Illness Narratives
Participants

- Alexander Kiss, Psychosomatic Medicine, University Hospital Basel (with Claudia Steiner and Julia Notter)
- Miriam Locher and Regula Koenig, English Linguistics, University of Basel
- Victoria Tischler, University of Nottingham Medical School, psychologist
- Franziska Gygax, American/English Literature, University of Basel
Project: History and aims

• Function and role of *narrative*: has affected almost all academic disciplines and scientific research communities.

• Dominant topic in:
  - literary and cultural studies: *life writing*
  - linguistics: *narrative*
  - medicine: *illness, doctor-patient communication*
Outcome:
- literary studies
- linguistic studies
- medical student training
- training of communication skills / didactics

Figure 1: Visualization of research design (red arrows = interdisciplinary exchange; purple arrows = flow of results)

http://illness-narratives.unibas.ch/
Outcome/Aims:

Contributions to

- literary studies in the field of Life Writing
- linguistics studies in the field of narrative and identity research
- the study of doctor-patient interaction, as reflected by students / patients / doctors
- the training of communication skills of medical students

Figure 1: Visualization of research design (red arrows = interdisciplinary exchange; purple arrows = flow of results)
Subproject literary studies

- **Representations of the (sick) body** (foregrounding of the deteriorating body): What about the relation between this body and the *self/selves*? → Concepts of *subjectivity/embodiment, gendered body*

- **Empowerment:**
  - What is the aesthetic impact of such *literary* illness narratives?
  - In what ways do they address realms that are not expressed in everyday discourse?
Subproject B linguistics

- linguistic analysis of narratives by fourth-year medical students of the University of Basel on a case history (encounter with patient during internship with GP and after intensive communication skills training) and the study of comparative corpora of such texts from English students (University of Nottingham)
- offers crucial information on the specific ways in which future doctors respond to and interpret a patient’s narrative and reflect on their own situation and response
Subproject medicine

• Results of literary and linguistic analyses discussed with Alexander Kiss, in charge of medical humanities and communication skills → medical students improve their narrative competence

• Medical humanities course “Literatur und Medizin: Autorenlesung und Diskussion: Input by literary scholar on narrative
Subproject medicine

• Controlled randomized study: Is student satisfaction with the feedback to their reflective writing assignment greater when tutors are instructed?

• MA thesis by medical student: When empathy is lacking
Interdisciplinarity/Exchange

• Exchange literary and linguistic studies with medicine based on reflective writing:
  - three main themes as part of complex doctor-patient communication
• Exchange psychology (international visit Prof. Victoria Tischler) and literary studies
  - input on narrative writing, enhanced student feedback from literary and linguistic perspectives
Interdisciplinarity/Exchange → Results

• Doctor-patient communication:
  - Language and identity: medical students reflect their role as students AND as future doctors
  - Awareness of pragmatics: manner of communication influences perception of doctors (group identity)
  - Coping with emotions (both of student/doctor and patient)
• Teaching transfer:
  - Seminars/lectures in literary and linguistic studies
  - Seminar papers/MA thesis on illness narratives
  - MA thesis in medicine on reflective writing
Final interdisciplinary conference:

“Narrative Matters in Literature, Linguistics, Psychology, and Medicine”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker/Authors</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brigitte Boothe</td>
<td>Illness narratives in the psychotherapeutic session</td>
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<td>Gabriele Lucius-Hoene,</td>
<td>Narrative matters and narratives that matter. Illness stories in</td>
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<td>interaction: reporting, constructing, creating</td>
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<td>Michael Bamberg</td>
<td>The roles of personal disclosure and narrative in the trust-</td>
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<td>building business</td>
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<tr>
<td>Femi Oyebode</td>
<td>Illness and illness metaphor in Chekhov: Medicine and storytelling</td>
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<td>Annette Kern-Stähler and Anna Thiemann</td>
<td>“We are, after all, expecting them to live the American Dream”:</td>
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<td>Cure and recovery in the American autobiography</td>
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<td>Lisa Diedrich</td>
<td>Graphic heterotopias: Treating epilepsy in L’Ascension du Haut-Mal</td>
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<td>(on Epileptic by David B.)</td>
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<td>Franziska Gygax</td>
<td>“Woundable, around the bounds”: Life (beyond) writing and</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>terminal illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miriam Locher and Regula Koenig</td>
<td>Reflective writing texts by medical students: A genre analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alexander Kiss and Julia Notter</td>
<td>Medical Humanities in Basel: General aspects and medical student</td>
</tr>
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<td>narratives – When empathy is lacking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria Tischler</td>
<td>‘It’s something a bit different’ – Reflections on introducing</td>
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<td>narrative writing into a medical curriculum</td>
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Interdisciplinary book project

*Narrative Matters in Medical Contexts across Disciplines.* Ed. Gygax, Franziska and Miriam A. Locher (John Benjamins, forthcoming)
• **Part I: Narrative texts on medicine and illness**

- “Against compassion: Attending to histories and methods in medical humanities: Or, doing critical medical studies” Lisa Diedrich (Stony Brook University)

- “We are, after all, expecting them to live the American Dream”: Cure and recovery in the American autobiography Annette Kern-Stähler (University of Bern), Anna Thiemann (University of Münster)

- “Woundable, around the bounds“: Life (beyond) writing and terminal illness Franziska Gygax (University of Basel)

- “Syphilitic pain and redeeming narratives of the 16th century” Dominique Brancher (University of Basel)
• **Part II: Narrative practices in medicine and psychology**
  - *Illness narratives in the psychotherapeutic session*
    Brigitte Boothe (University of Zurich)
  - *Narrative matters and narratives that matter. Illness stories in interaction: reporting, constructing, creating*
    Gabriele Lucius-Hoene (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg)
  - *The roles of personal disclosure and narrative in the trust-building business*
    Michael Bamberg (Clark University)
  - *A genre analysis of reflective writing texts by medical students: What role does narrative play?*
    Regula Koenig, Miriam Locher (University of Basel)
• **Part III: Narratives in the medical humanities**
  
  - **Applying narrative to medical education: medicine and storytelling**
    Femi Oyebode (University of Birmingham) and Victoria Tischler (University of Nottingham)
  
  - **Epilogue**
Challenges/difficulties of (our) interdisciplinary work

• Theory and practice: Different relation to theory

• Theoretical concepts like *narrative* may differ greatly

• “Thinking outside the box”:  
  – outside one’s discipline  
  – outside of social and identity categories (sick vs. healthy)
Challenges/Difficulties

• Lack of expertise in discipline of partners becomes more obvious
• Necessitates more explanations by the respective experts
• Reading texts written in another academic discourse
• Different academic traditions regarding publishing (e.g. citation index)
Recommendations

- Continuous dialogue between disciplinary teams (frequent meetings!)
- Interdisciplinary workshops with participants from abroad
- A certain consensus of aims → participants must be able to gain insights from research for their disciplinary field
Recommendations

• Integrate junior researchers/MA students/PhD students
• Integrate project into your own teaching
• Attend disciplinary courses/lectures of project team members
• Collaborative writing (joint work for publication)
Interdisziplinarität: Begutachtungen über Fächergrenzen der DfG

Workshop Medical Humanities March 25, 2014