Ground Documents

Glossary of Terms in Narrative and Phenomenological Anthropology

Narrative Anthropology

An anthropological approach that emphasizes the fundamental role of narratives created by people in recounting their lives and cultures, including those co-constructed through interaction between researcher and participants.

Phenomenological Anthropology

An anthropological current that explores how lived experience is culturally, socially, and historically mediated.

Lived Experience

The subjective way in which people perceive and interpret the surrounding world, always situated and conditioned by cultural, social, and historical factors.

Narrative Co-construction

The process of collectively constructing meaning through dialogical and reflexive interaction between individuals, including participants and researchers.

Local Moral World

A concept identifying the set of values, meanings, and norms that guide people's moral actions within specific socio-cultural contexts.

Narration / Narrative

A fundamental tool for interpreting and sharing lived experiences, enabling analysis of how individuals make sense of their own lives.

Embodiment

A concept highlighting the central role of the body as an active source of meaning, experience, and interaction with the surrounding world.

Cultural Interpretation

The process by which individuals attribute meaning to events using their own cultural and historical frameworks.

Resemantization

The process of continuously modifying and redefining the meanings of experiences in response to different social and relational contexts.

Positionality

Awareness of one's personal and social position that influences interactions and interpretations during research.

Reflexivity

The process of critically recognizing the researcher's role and influences during qualitative research.

Ethnography

A qualitative method based on direct and prolonged observation of behaviors and interactions in natural contexts.

Agency

The capacity of individuals to act and make autonomous decisions, influencing and resisting external pressures.

Intersubjectivity

A concept describing how meanings and interpretations are shared and negotiated through social interactions.

Thick Description

A detailed ethnographic description that includes the interpretive, social, and cultural context within which events and behaviors acquire meaning.

Phenomenological and Narrative Anthropology: Methodological and Historical Overview

Introduction

In anthropology, phenomenological and narrative approaches offer useful interpretive frameworks for analyzing qualitative data such as interviews, field observations, and life stories. These frameworks place lived experience, context, and subjectivity at the center, emphasizing how people perceive and make sense of their world. Both approaches originate from 20th-century theoretical traditions (philosophical phenomenology and narrative studies) and have profoundly influenced how anthropologists understand human reality as relational, situated, embodied, and dialogical.

In other words, phenomenological and narrative approaches help us to see human experiences not as isolated objective data, but as embodied phenomena (rooted in the body

and senses), historically and culturally situated, lived in the first person (subjective), and often co-constructed through interaction (dialogical).

This overview provides definitions, historical origins, key authors, typical interpretive tools, strengths, limitations, and concrete examples of each framework. The aim is to guide a language model (LLM) in interpreting qualitative data anthropologically, highlighting the contextual and lived dimensions of human experience. An LLM instructed with these concepts could, for instance, analyze transcripts of ethnographic interviews by capturing their meaning from the participants' perspective, taking into account both their subjective experience and the stories they narrate.

Phenomenological Anthropology

Definition and Philosophical Origins

Phenomenological anthropology is a theoretical and methodological approach inspired by philosophical phenomenology, a movement founded by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century. Philosophical phenomenology emerged with the intention of "returning to the things themselves" (Husserl) and studying phenomena as they appear in consciousness, suspending preconceived interpretations. Thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre expanded this perspective, emphasizing that human existence is essentially relational, temporal, embodied, and situated in the world.

In practice, phenomenology rejects a strict separation between subject and object: human beings are not detached observers, but are always immersed in relationships with others and with their environment. These ideas, which became influential in the social sciences, laid the groundwork for rethinking key concepts of human existence—for example, highlighting that perceptions, emotions, and meanings arise in the interaction between the individual and their lived world.

In anthropology, interest in phenomenology took hold especially in the second half of the 20th century. The 1980s witnessed an "experiential turn" in reaction to earlier theories seen as overly abstract or structuralist. Anthropologists such as Michael Jackson, Thomas Csordas, Paul Stoller, and others began integrating phenomenological concepts into their ethnographic studies, aiming to understand "what it means to live a particular human experience" from the perspective of those who live it. This approach was strongly influenced by Merleau-Ponty (who theorized the body as the perceiving subject) and William James (the philosopher/pragmatist who conceived of experience as a continuous flow and direct relation).

Phenomenological anthropology thus focuses on lived experience—not as a purely internal and individual datum, but as a phenomenon shaped in the encounter between the person, others, and the sociocultural context.

Key Authors and Historical Development

One of the first advocates of a phenomenological approach in anthropology was Victor Turner, who together with Edward Bruner in *The Anthropology of Experience* (1986) urged scholars to study culture through the subjective experiences and narratives of a society's

members. At the same time, Clifford Geertz—though not a phenomenologist in the strict sense—promoted “thick description,” emphasizing the native’s point of view and the meaningful context of actions.

In the 1990s, scholars such as Arthur Kleinman, Byron Good, Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock began to explore phenomena such as suffering, illness, and healing from a phenomenological perspective, centered on bodily experience and the meaning of illness.

Some key figures include:

- **Thomas Csordas**: Theorist of embodiment. He proposed embodiment as a new paradigm for anthropology, arguing that the body is not just a biological object but the starting point of experience and meaning-making. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Csordas coined the concept of “somatic modes of attention” to describe the culturally elaborated ways of attending with and to the body in interaction with other bodies and the environment. For instance, in his studies of charismatic Catholics, Csordas shows how sensations such as weakness or dizziness may be interpreted by believers as “embodied proofs” of the presence of the spirit. This illustrates how bodily experience is shaped by cultural expectations and how the body functions as an instrument for perceiving the sacred.

- **Michael Jackson**: Developed a method of “existential” or “phenomenological anthropology,” blending anthropological analysis with phenomenological philosophy and radical empiricism. In his research in West Africa (Sierra Leone) and elsewhere, Jackson explores experience from the actor’s point of view, revealing both the limits and possibilities of everyday life in contexts of uncertainty. His work with the Kuranko community, for example, shows how local concepts of personhood and world intertwine with social practices, linking the analysis of lived experience with that of social structure. His approach demonstrates the “unique power of phenomenology” in articulating the complex dynamics of human life.

- **Nancy Scheper-Hughes**: Known for her ethnographic engagement sensitive to experience and the body. Though she does not explicitly label herself a phenomenologist, her work—such as *Death Without Weeping* (1992)—adopts an empathetic, first-person perspective on others’ lives. Immersing herself in the everyday reality of her subjects, she seeks to understand how contexts of extreme poverty and structural violence become part of subjective experience. Her work exemplifies a “critical anthropology of experience,” where phenomenology is combined with political analysis.

- **Byron Good**: Medical anthropologist and author of *Medicine, Rationality and Experience* (1994). Good explicitly applies phenomenology to the study of medicine and illness, challenging the notion that biomedicine offers a wholly objective and universal perspective. He argues that doctors and patients “enter and inhabit distinct worlds of meaning and experience,” constructing specific sociocultural realities around illness. Good shows how illness narratives intertwine with bodily experience in shaping suffering and healing practices, bridging phenomenology (lived experience

of illness) with cultural analysis (local systems of knowledge and care).

Historically, phenomenological anthropology has taken root especially in subfields such as medical anthropology, the anthropology of religion (experiences of trance, healing, spirituality), and the anthropology of the senses. Today, many contemporary topics—such as pain, trauma, disability, emotions, and morality—have been addressed from phenomenological perspectives, testifying to the vitality of this approach.

Typical Interpretive Tools

Phenomenological anthropology, rather than offering standardized techniques, involves an attitude and a set of qualitative tools aimed at grasping subjectivity and lived experience within context:

- **Embodied participant observation**: The researcher does not merely observe from the outside but actively participates in everyday practices, paying attention to their own bodily sensations and emotional reactions as possible guides to understanding those of their interlocutors. For instance, an anthropologist might learn a ritual dance or a manual task alongside community members, thereby gaining insight into the bodily skills and perceptions involved from within.

- **Phenomenological in-depth interviews**: The ethnographer encourages participants to describe in detail how they experienced a particular situation or emotion, prompting them to recall sensory and contextual aspects. One possible approach is to ask someone to reconstruct an event (e.g., a recent bereavement, a healing ritual, or a moment of danger) by exploring where they were, who was present, and what they felt in their body and mind at that time. The aim is to mentally "relive" the experience, eliciting vivid descriptions of how it felt in the moment, while minimizing abstract explanations or retrospective rationalizations. This method, inspired by phenomenological *epoché*, invites both the participant and the researcher to bracket judgments and preconceived theories, focusing instead on the experience as remembered.

- **Analysis of the lifeworld**: The researcher analyzes qualitative data (ethnographic notes, transcripts) in order to reconstruct the structure of experience for the subjects. Key terms here include: *intentionality* (how people direct their attention and intention toward the world), *intersubjectivity* (how experiences are shared or diverge among individuals), *embodiment* (the role of the living body in knowing), and *temporality* (the temporal flow of experience). For example, a phenomenological study of chronic suffering might identify themes such as altered perceptions of time (endless waiting, alternating hope and despair), feelings of alienation from the suffering body, or the importance of trust in the caregiver within the daily experience of illness.

- **Thick and evocative description**: In the writing phase, the phenomenological anthropologist tends to produce ethnographic accounts rich in sensory and narrative detail, capable of evoking the studied experience for the reader. Ethnographic vignettes are often included—for example, a minute-by-minute narrative of a healing

ritual through the eyes of a participant, or the description of a typical day in the life of a person with a disability, showing how each ordinary gesture is charged with meaning. This narrative style, at times almost literary, is not an end in itself: it serves to convey "what it is like" to live that reality, while respecting the phenomenological complexity of experience.

A specific conceptual tool introduced by Csordas and others has already been mentioned: the notion of *somatic modes of attention*, which functions as an analytical lens for identifying how people's bodily attention is culturally shaped. Other theoretical tools include: the notion of the "essence" of an experience (seeking the common core of a lived phenomenon while recognizing individual variation), Heidegger's idea of *being-in-the-world* (emphasizing the inseparability of individual and environment), and concepts such as *intercorporeality* (body-to-body relations, e.g., visceral empathy between mother and infant, or between healer and patient).

In summary, the interpretive tools of phenomenological anthropology aim to describe and analyze experience from the perspective of those who live it, bridging the gap between individual subjectivity and sociocultural context.

Strengths

The phenomenological approach in anthropology offers several advantages:

- **Deep understanding of the emic perspective**: It helps the analyst (and the reader) to step into the shoes of the people being studied. By collecting first-hand descriptions and participating in daily life, the phenomenological anthropologist can grasp "what it feels like to live a particular human life" in a way far richer than more detached methods. This fosters empathy and ensures a respectful representation of subjects.

- **Attention to context**: Phenomenology insists that every experience is situated within a lifeworld made up of social relations, history, and environment. This steers anthropological analysis away from excessive abstraction: instead of discussing "pain" in general, for instance, one will explore how a particular person in a particular culture experiences pain, including moral, religious, or economic dimensions. It overcomes the sterile opposition between individual and society by showing how the individual is always entangled with the world.

- **Innovative conceptualizations**: The adoption of phenomenological concepts has enriched anthropological theory. Ideas such as *embodiment*, *intersubjectivity*, and *being-with* (*Mitsein*) highlight aspects of human existence overlooked by earlier approaches. For example, phenomenology has influenced subsequent frameworks such as practice theory, affect theory, and even anthropological debates on ontology. In other words, it has provided "conceptual resources" for thinking of human beings as constitutively relational—always in relation to others, both human and non-human.

- **Focus on body and senses**: One of its greatest contributions has been placing the body at the center of analysis. Phenomenological anthropology treats the body not as

an object but as an embodied subject that feels and knows. This opened fields of research such as sensory anthropology, the anthropology of emotions, and medical anthropology from the patient's perspective. For example, phenomenological studies of chronic pain or disability have shown how bodily perceptions are mediated by social meanings, and how people adapt their bodily identity in response to changes (such as limb loss or degenerative illness).

- **Holistic and non-reductionist approach**: Instead of reducing human phenomena to numbers or variables, phenomenology calls for appreciating their complexity. A healing ritual, for example, is not analyzed solely in terms of social function or medical efficacy, but grasped as a *total experience* involving beliefs, sensations, trust relations, symbolic aesthetics, and more. This integrative perspective enriches anthropological understanding.

In sum, phenomenological anthropology is particularly effective for exploring human experience in its fullness, making visible otherwise neglected aspects—such as precariousness, vulnerability, finitude, but also agency and the capacity to find meaning in lived situations. Thanks to this sensitivity, the phenomenological approach proves especially valuable when analyzing illness narratives, trauma testimonies, spiritual practices, or everyday routines charged with personal significance.

Limits and Criticisms

Despite its strengths, the phenomenological approach in anthropology has faced critiques and has some limitations:

- **Excessive individualism or subjectivism**: Some anthropologists (particularly advocates of the "ontological turn" such as Martin Holbraad and Morten Pedersen) have accused phenomenology of focusing too much on the individual's capacity to narrate their own experience, neglecting collective factors such as culture or power. The risk is treating individual experience as an ultimate given without sufficiently examining how social norms, economic structures, or political discourses shape it. For example, a mother narrating her experience of extreme poverty certainly expresses personal feelings, but her experience is also the product of class relations and historical inequalities—dimensions that a purely phenomenological analysis might downplay.

- **Representativeness and generalization**: Phenomenology often relies on a few in-depth cases (case studies, life histories) and on highly idiosyncratic descriptions. This raises the question: how much of one person's experience can be generalized or shared by others? If every lived experience is unique and "radically Other" (as Emmanuel Levinas reminds us), the anthropologist risks producing a proliferation of individual stories that are difficult to connect into a broader picture. Critics point out that anthropology must also identify cultural patterns, not just individual uniqueness; phenomenology, by vocation, tends to highlight singularity.

- **Accessibility of experience to the researcher**: There is an implicit epistemological limit: can the anthropologist truly understand another's experience? Phenomenology

asserts that through empathy and shared situations, one can intuit the other's experience, while recognizing an irreducible difference. Critics, however, note that this process always involves translation and risks projection: the anthropologist may inadvertently insert their own interpretations into what the interlocutor feels. For instance, during a trance ritual, the researcher may participate and undergo a bodily experience, but must avoid confusing it with that of the native practitioner.

- **Difficulty with the unspoken and the unconscious**: Phenomenology privileges what the subject can narrate or describe (experience as the person apprehends it). Yet some dimensions of human life are elusive or inexpressible—deep traumas, unconscious emotions, or tacit forms of knowledge. If an experience cannot easily be narrated (because it is repressed, or culturally unspeakable), phenomenological anthropology may struggle, since it relies heavily on the subject's account and reflection on lived experience.

- **Potential neglect of power dynamics in the field**: Another critique concerns the risk of apolitical subjectivism. By focusing on perceptions and lived experiences, the phenomenological ethnographer might downplay their own positionality and the inequalities in which research takes place. For example, collecting stories of suffering from marginalized populations requires reflecting on the relationship between researcher (often privileged) and informant, and on the ethical and political stakes. Classical phenomenology does not provide direct tools for power analysis (unlike, say, Marxist or feminist approaches), so it is up to the anthropologist to integrate this critical sensitivity.

That said, many anthropologists have responded to these critiques by showing that a well-conducted phenomenological approach does not exclude culture and power but reintegrates them into experience. Scholars such as Scheper-Hughes, Desjarlais, Mattingly, and others have coined concepts that connect individual experience with social structure. For example, Desjarlais, studying homeless individuals with mental illness in Boston, critiques the naïve use of "experience" as a generic category and introduces the notion of *struggling along* to describe the specific and difficult conditions in which those lives unfold. This concept highlights both subjective experience (living day-to-day in a shelter, unable to plan) and structural factors (a hostile environment, lack of institutional support). Similarly, the idea of *moral experience* developed by Zigon and Throop seeks to integrate into phenomenological analysis the socially shaped values and moral judgments at play.

These examples show that phenomenological anthropology is evolving, incorporating critiques and striving to overcome its limits—often by dialoguing with critical theory, linguistic anthropology, and other approaches.

In short, the limitations of phenomenology remind anthropologists to use it with balance: attention to individual lived experience must not be isolated from cultural and historical context, nor flattened into it.

Examples of Relevant Studies (Phenomenology in Anthropology)

- **Nancy Scheper-Hughes – *Death Without Weeping* (1992):** In this landmark ethnography, Scheper-Hughes explores life in a rural favela in northeastern Brazil, focusing on the everyday experiences of women and children in conditions of extreme poverty, high infant mortality, and endemic violence. She adopts a narrative and phenomenological style, asking: *When hunger dominates life, what becomes of maternal love? When premature death is commonplace, what becomes of trust?* Following three generations of women in Bom Jesus over more than two decades, Scheper-Hughes offers "an account of the everyday experience of scarcity, illness, and death" as lived in that context. She describes in detail the bodily and emotional sensations of mothers forced to practice a kind of affective triage—investing less emotionally in the frailest infants as a way to protect themselves from grief. One of the most controversial findings of her study is that the Western ideal of unconditional maternal love is partly a bourgeois myth, a luxury possible only where children are reasonably expected to survive.
  Here the phenomenological approach is evident: the ethnographer lives alongside mothers, shares their moments of care and suffering, and conveys to readers "what it is like" to confront the daily death of a child. At the same time, Scheper-Hughes links these intimate experiences to "class relations inscribed in bodies, emotions, desires, and needs," showing how economic and historical inequality permeates even the most intimate experiences (the hungry body, suspended maternal love). *Death Without Weeping* is thus a powerful example of critical phenomenological anthropology, combining empathy for subjective experience with analysis of social structures.

- **Byron Good – *Medicine, Rationality and Experience* (1994):** In this theoretical work, drawing on ethnographic research in Western biomedical contexts and Middle Eastern medical systems, Good offers a radically different view of medical rationality, using phenomenology to reveal its cultural nature. He critiques the idea that biomedicine is purely scientific and "objective," while traditional medicines are merely "beliefs." He demonstrates that biomedical doctors too "enter and inhabit distinct worlds of meaning and experience"—in other words, medical training and practice create a particular professional lifeworld.
  For example, an experienced surgeon perceives the patient's body not simply as a universal biological organism, but through the filter of clinical experience and technical language, developing a distinctive "clinical vision" of the world. Good also explores how patients construct illness narratives that weave together bodily symptoms and personal interpretations, and how such stories shape both suffering and treatment outcomes. A key chapter, "The phenomenology of chronic pain," analyzes how persistent pain alters patients' temporal and social relations to the world—trapping them in a continuous present of suffering and making it difficult to project into the future. This existential effect is captured through phenomenological interviews with patients.
  Overall, Good's work exemplifies phenomenological anthropology applied to medicine: it equips anthropologists (and clinicians) with concepts to understand illness not merely as biological dysfunction but as meaningful human experience, shaped by stories, morality, and aesthetics. This perspective has had practical influence, for example in medical education, encouraging doctors to listen more closely to patients' narratives to improve care.

Together, these examples illustrate how the phenomenological approach illuminates hidden dimensions of experience: in one case, the difficult subjectivity of poor mothers facing infant mortality; in the other, the lifeworld of doctors and patients in medical practice. In both, anthropological analysis goes beyond external facts (mortality rates, medical protocols) to grasp lived experience from within, providing a richer and more humanistic understanding of the phenomena studied.

Narrative Anthropology

Definition and Origins

Narrative anthropology is an approach that places narratives—stories people tell about themselves, their communities, and the events that shape their lives—at the center of cultural and human experience. Put simply, it starts from the premise that human beings are "narrative animals": we construct and communicate meaning through stories.

This approach is closely related to what in the social sciences is sometimes called the "narrative turn," which took place between the 1970s and 1990s. During those years, alongside the rise of postmodern and reflexive theories in anthropology, greater attention was paid to how social reality is narrated and interpreted—both by the subjects being studied and by anthropologists themselves in their writing.

The intellectual roots of the narrative approach are diverse. On one side, there is the influence of oral history and the life history tradition in anthropology (already in the 1920s and 1930s, anthropologists like Paul Radin collected autobiographies from Indigenous individuals, recognizing the value of their personal voices). On the other side, in the 1980s anthropology was influenced by literary theory and hermeneutics: works such as *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) highlighted that ethnographers too, in writing, are crafting stories, and that cultural representation is itself a form of narration.

At the same time, other disciplines reinforced the importance of stories for meaning-making: psychology (Jerome Bruner), sociology (narrative inquiry), and medicine (narrative medicine). In cultural anthropology, medical anthropology made a decisive contribution through the concept of *illness narratives*. Authors such as Arthur Kleinman and Byron Good showed that, when confronted with illness, people tend to build stories to explain why they became ill, how they experience their condition, and what they expect in the future. These stories are not simply lists of symptoms, but meaning-making mechanisms through which patients and families understand and cope with suffering.

In general, narrative anthropology is concerned both with the stories told by social actors (myths, legends, life histories, everyday anecdotes) and with the stories told by anthropologists (the narrative form of ethnography itself). In both cases, the way a narrative is constructed reveals much about culture, value systems, and lived experiences.

We can therefore define narrative anthropology as the study of how people use storytelling to make sense of their lives and their world, and how these stories are themselves shaped by cultural context. For example, by analyzing narratives, an anthropologist may discover that in a given culture individuals describe their lives as journeys of trial and redemption, or as cycles of balance and disruption—or may notice which events are considered

“story-worthy” (e.g., rites of passage, encounters with the supernatural, experiences of migration).

Key Authors and Historical Development

Among the pioneers and leading figures of the narrative approach in anthropology are:

- **Arthur Kleinman**: Psychiatrist and anthropologist. In *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition* (1988), he laid the groundwork for treating illness narratives as a central object of study. Kleinman distinguishes between *disease* (illness as an objective biological process) and *illness* (the subjective and social experience of being ill). He emphasizes that *illness* is the lived experience of suffering, which includes how patients and their families perceive, interpret, and react to symptoms. To truly understand illness, therefore, one must listen to the stories patients tell. Through numerous clinical-ethnographic cases (in the US, China, etc.), Kleinman shows that these stories often reveal crucial issues such as the search for meaning (“Why me?”), identity reformulation (who am I now that I am sick?), and relationships with doctors. His contribution is twofold: he convinced both anthropologists and physicians that narratives have fundamental epistemic value (they “bridge the gap between patient and doctor,” humanizing care) and he influenced ethnographic methods by encouraging narrative interviewing and the interpretation of stories as core data, not mere anecdotes.

- **Cheryl Mattingly**: A US anthropologist and leading figure in narrative medical anthropology. Since the 1990s, her work has focused on rehabilitation and health care. In *Healing Dramas and Clinical Plots: The Narrative Structure of Experience* (1998), Mattingly analyzes interactions between occupational therapists and patients (often children with disabilities and their families) in North American clinical settings. She introduces the concept of **therapeutic emplotment**, inspired by philosopher Paul Ricoeur, to explain how therapists and patients co-create a kind of story during treatment, giving individual encounters a sense of direction and meaning. A skilled therapist, according to Mattingly, constructs with the patient a narrative in which the patient becomes the protagonist of a healing journey, with challenges to face and progress to achieve. This “plot” provides coherence to the fragmented experience of illness and motivates patients to perceive therapy as part of their healing process. Mattingly highlights the creative power of stories: they do not merely describe experience but actively shape it—for instance, turning a rehabilitation exercise into an “adventure game” with a child transforms the child’s experience itself. Her work is a cornerstone of narrative anthropology, bridging theory (Ricoeur, Bruner) and clinical practice, and showing how storytelling can have tangible effects on people’s lives.

- **Paul Farmer & Arthur Kleinman (meaning-centered approach to suffering):** Although best known for his structural analysis of global health, Farmer often used life stories to illustrate how social injustice shapes illness (famously in *Pathologies of Power*). Together, Farmer and Kleinman promoted a “meaning-centered approach,” where collecting individual illness stories helps illuminate not only cultural meanings but also the moral and political dimensions of suffering.

- **Julie Cruikshank**: An anthropologist who worked with Indigenous elders in the Yukon (Canada), documenting their life stories and oral traditions. Her books (*Life Lived Like a Story*, 1990) demonstrate the importance of including autobiographical narratives in anthropological publications. Cruikshank represents the narrative anthropology tradition especially concerned with subaltern and Indigenous voices, using personal stories as forms of resistance and cultural transmission.

- **Renato Rosaldo**: In *Culture and Truth* (1989) and subsequent essays, Rosaldo reflected on the role of narrative and emotion in anthropology—for example, discussing his own experience of grief after the death of his wife Michelle Z. Rosaldo as a way to understand the "headhunter's rage" among the Ilongot. Rosaldo advocated for an anthropology that embraces subjectivity and narrative as integral parts of knowledge, anticipating themes central to the later narrative turn.

Historically, the development of narrative anthropology shows a shift: from an initial focus on traditional narratives (myths, folklore) as reflections of culture, to a growing interest in personal and biographical narratives, especially of disruptive experiences (illness, migration, trauma, cultural conflict). In recent decades, with the rise of digital media, attention has also turned to mediated narratives (blogs, social media) as new storytelling contexts.

Moreover, narrative anthropology is not only about analyzing what interlocutors say, but also about reflecting on how anthropologists themselves write. Today it is common to experiment with narrative ethnography (ethnographic texts written almost like novels or memoirs) that emotionally engage the reader in order to convey cultural reality. This stems from the recognition that telling an ethnographic story well is not only a matter of communication but also a powerful form of knowledge.

Typical Interpretive Tools

The narrative approach in anthropology adopts qualitative methods designed to collect, analyze, and present stories. Among its main tools are:

- **Narrative interviews / Life stories**: Instead of classic structured question–answer interviews, narrative anthropologists often use open-ended interviews in which participants are encouraged to tell their stories in their own words. For example, they might ask: *"Tell me how you came to be here"* or *"Tell me about an event that marked your life."* The goal is to elicit a continuous story rather than isolated factual information. As Mattingly and Lawlor note, this method is fundamental "for understanding the perspective and personal experience of informants," and often requires prompting with questions that encourage reflection and detailed description. For instance, in a cross-cultural study on disability, a mother might be asked to narrate a typical day in her child's life, revealing not only routines but also her lived interpretations—struggles, satisfactions, and experiences of stigma.

- **Collection of testimonies and autobiographies**: In some cases, the anthropologist works with written or recorded narratives produced by the interlocutors themselves—for example, asking participants to keep a personal diary (about illness, migration), or analyzing published memoirs, letters, or blog posts as narrative data.

The key is to treat these texts as expressions of a worldview and lived experience, not merely as objective documents.

- **Structural and thematic analysis of narratives**: Once collected, stories are analyzed with attention both to *what* is said and *how* it is said. Structurally, the anthropologist may examine the plot (is there a beginning, development, and end? What is the climax?), the characters (protagonists, antagonists, helpers), and the point of view (is it first-person? What emotions are conveyed?). A classic method from William Labov's sociolinguistics identifies sections such as abstract, orientation, complication, resolution, and coda in oral stories. Thematically, the researcher looks for recurring motifs and meanings: for example, illness narratives often revolve around themes of betrayal of the body, struggle, and transformation. Narrative analysis may draw on content analysis or discourse analysis to show how culture shapes storytelling—for instance, in one culture life stories may begin with ancestral lineage, while in another with professional success.

- **Dialogical approach**: Narratives often emerge in dialogue with the researcher. A key ethnographic skill is the ability to be a good listener and to co-construct the story actively. This means asking open questions, showing appropriate emotional engagement (surprise, empathy, grief when relevant episodes are recounted), and occasionally sharing one's own experiences to foster exchange. The result is that the story told is not a monologue but the product of an intersubjective process. Many reflexive anthropologists include their own questions and interactions in transcripts to show how researcher and narrator jointly weave the plot. This dialogical aspect is particularly evident in approaches like "dialogical anthropology" or "collaborative ethnography," where narratives are even revised and commented on together with the storytellers themselves.

- **Use of narrative in ethnographic writing**: Narrative anthropology not only collects stories but also pays attention to how findings are presented. A narrative-oriented ethnography might include long extracts of informants' stories or structure its chapters around ethnographic cases written almost like a novel. This is partly rhetorical (making the text more engaging), but also epistemic: it avoids fragmenting lived experience into too many analytic categories, instead allowing the reader to empathize and draw insights directly from the story. Some anthropologists have even experimented with ethnofiction or poetic ethnography to convey dimensions that traditional academic language cannot easily capture.

In sum, the tools of narrative anthropology aim to give voice to people through their stories and to interpret those stories as repositories of cultural knowledge. This approach requires sensitivity in collecting narratives (building trust, listening well) and analytical creativity in connecting individual stories to the broader contexts in which they gain meaning.

Strengths

The narrative approach has several strengths that make it particularly effective in anthropological analysis of qualitative data:

- **Centrality of meaning and subjectivity**: Like phenomenology, the narrative perspective seeks to understand the world from within, through participants' eyes. Narratives are essentially forms of meaning-making—devices through which people give sense to events. By studying stories, anthropologists grasp not only what happened but why it matters to that person, how they interpret it, and how it shapes their identity. This provides a powerful window into the *emic* perspective.

- **Historical and social contextualization**: Individual stories often weave together private lives with public contexts. For example, the life story of a migrant may include references to wars, economic crises, and immigration laws, as well as family events. The narrative approach thus naturally connects micro and macro: personal experience is embedded in broader historical and social circumstances. A single life story can illuminate wider cultural dynamics. For instance, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (by journalist Anne Fadiman, widely discussed in anthropology) tells the story of an epileptic Hmong child and her American doctors; through this story, issues of cross-cultural communication, differing medical cosmologies, and health policy emerge—general themes made tangible through a particular narrative.

- **Empowerment and representation of marginalized voices**: Highlighting narratives often brings forth the voices of those rarely heard. Narrative anthropology has given prominence to testimonies of subaltern groups: genocide survivors, psychiatric patients, women in patriarchal contexts, Indigenous minorities. Such stories carry ethical and political weight, humanizing categories otherwise reduced to statistics or stereotypes. A single worker's life story, for example, makes exploitation more vivid than a quantitative report could. In this sense, narrative anthropology can *empower* subjects by recognizing them as narrators of their own lives.

- **Coherence and intelligibility**: People often think narratively—from childhood fairy tales to gossip to the life stories we tell ourselves. Using stories as data and as a mode of presentation makes anthropological results more comprehensible and accessible. Narratives provide a thread of coherence: they connect cause and effect, show temporal development, and help readers (and even LLMs) retain key insights thanks to plot structure.

- **Revealing unexpected aspects**: Analyzing narratives often uncovers insights other methods would miss. For example, when listening to an elder recount life events, the anthropologist might discover that seemingly marginal incidents (a dream in youth, a chance encounter) carry central symbolic or emotional weight in that person's life logic. The narrative method reduces the analyst's filtering: it lets priorities and connections emerge as the narrator perceives them.

- **Narratives as tools as well as objects**: A distinctive strength, highlighted by Mattingly, is that narratives are not only objects of analysis but also instruments of intervention. When an anthropologist (or practitioner) helps someone reframe their experience in a more coherent or positive story, the narrative process itself can foster concrete change (e.g., greater engagement in therapy, rebuilding identity after trauma). This idea, drawn from narrative therapy in psychology, enriches applied

anthropology by showing that working with people's stories can have practical effects on well-being.

In sum, the power of narrative anthropology lies in capturing human life in its temporal and symbolic dimensions. As one scholar put it, "Illness narratives have played a central role… illuminating the personal and social experience of suffering," showing that they do not simply mirror experience but shape it by giving it coherence and meaning. This approach aligns deeply with the humanistic orientation of anthropology: to understand human beings through what they themselves say about their lives and their world.

Limits and Criticisms

Despite its many advantages, the narrative approach also presents challenges and potential pitfalls:

- **Risk of over-interpretation or embellishment**: The stories people tell are not objective snapshots of reality; they are subjective constructions, selective, and influenced by the audience and the context. A narrator may omit embarrassing details, adjust timelines, or exaggerate virtues or faults—often unconsciously—because every story has a performative function (presenting oneself in a certain light). Narrative anthropologists must therefore be cautious in taking stories at face value. For example, if in a community everyone tells legends of glorious ancestors, this reveals important cultural values but should not be confused with factual history. Critics argue that the narrative approach risks relying on unverifiable "anecdotes" or subjective truths, challenging standards of verifiability. Narrative anthropologists respond that every memory or story is valid in itself (as a truth of perceived experience), but it must always be contextualized and, where necessary, compared with other sources to avoid naïveté.

- **Difficulty of synthesis and comparison**: If every story is unique, how can cases be compared? The narrative approach often privileges the depth of a single case over the breadth of larger samples. This can make it difficult to draw general conclusions or theories beyond the specific case. For example, an anthropologist may publish the detailed life history of a migrant woman—a fascinating and rich account, but how representative is it of all migrant women in that community? Readers must rely on the author's intuition about what is typical versus atypical. Some anthropologists address this by presenting multiple stories side by side to highlight common patterns and variations, though this may dilute the narrative power of individual depth.

- **Narrative structure vs. fragmented reality**: Life is rarely a neatly ordered story with beginning, middle, and end. Yet when we narrate it, we impose such a structure. This introduces bias: in turning life into story, people may simplify complexity or "close" a chapter that in reality remains unresolved. For example, a former combatant narrating his wartime experience may frame it as a lesson learned or personal redemption, while his actual experience at the time was chaotic and meaningless. Anthropologists must recognize the gap between lived life and narrated life. Some scholars (in psychology, Iván Nyklíček among others) call this the "narrative paradox": we need stories to make sense of life, but every story is already an

interpretation, not life itself. This means narrative anthropology ultimately studies representations rather than raw facts. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but one must avoid reifying narratives as ontological reality.

- **Potential drift into subjectivism**: Similar to critiques of phenomenology, the narrative turn has been accused of weakening attention to power systems and material analysis in anthropology. Focusing exclusively on individual stories can obscure structural factors. For example, listening to unemployed individuals narrate their "bad luck" may obscure the socioeconomic causes of unemployment. Used uncritically, stories risk reinforcing stereotypes: in some clinical or educational contexts, "narratives" have been standardized into rigid cultural checklists ("Chinese patients believe X, Mexicans narrate Y"), betraying the contextual spirit of storytelling itself. To avoid this, anthropologists must become "agile, complex readers" of narratives, able to see not only cultural context but also the structural dimensions implicit in stories.

- **Time and narrative competence**: Not everyone is skilled at storytelling, and not every moment is right for it. Narrative anthropology often requires long-term engagement to create the conditions in which a person will share intimate stories. Cultural differences also matter: in some cultures, linear autobiographical narrative is uncommon; circular narratives or fragmented episodes that listeners must assemble may be preferred. Anthropologists must respect these variations and avoid forcing people into a Western narrative format. For example, some Indigenous communities may resist chronological insistence ("what happened first, then after…") and instead convey life meaning through collective myths or non-linear anecdotes. Researchers must learn the local narrative form.

In general, many limitations of the narrative approach can be overcome through reflexive practice and methodological triangulation. Anthropologists often combine narrative analysis with other methods—for instance, supplementing personal stories with participant observation, economic analysis, or historical research to achieve a fuller picture. Stories alone may lead to partial conclusions, but integrated with other data they are tremendously powerful.

For an LLM trained on narrative sources, this means being "trained" not to take every statement as absolute truth, but to read between the lines—grasping subjective meaning while maintaining a critical view of the broader contexts in which stories are situated.

Examples of Relevant Studies (Narrative in Anthropology)

- **Arthur Kleinman – *The Illness Narratives* (1988):** In this influential book, Kleinman presents numerous cases drawn from his dual clinical and anthropological practice. One emblematic example is a patient suffering from chronic pain without apparent organic causes. Instead of dismissing her as "psychosomatic," Kleinman asked her to narrate her life and the story of her pain. It emerged that she had endured family trauma and difficult migrations; her physical pain was woven into a broader story of suffering, acquiring almost metaphorical meaning (the weight of what she had

endured). Kleinman shows that by carefully listening to patients' narratives, clinicians can identify what aspects of life require healing beyond mere symptom treatment. For example, when the patient narrated that she felt useless to her family because of the pain, Kleinman found that involving her in a support group where her advice to others was valued proved therapeutic—sometimes more than medication. His broader message is that *illness narratives are forms of meaning-making*: they show how patients and doctors understand causes and therapies within a social context. Kleinman also applied this approach in China, collecting stories of local healers and integrating them into dialogue with biomedicine. *The Illness Narratives* helped shift medical education toward valuing the "patient's story" alongside the clinical history. For anthropology, it exemplifies the explanatory power of narratives: complex phenomena like illness become understandable in their personal, cultural, and ethical dimensions through first-person accounts.

- **Cheryl Mattingly – *Healing Dramas and Clinical Plots* (1998):** In this narrative ethnography, Mattingly describes real situations where occupational therapists and patients co-create stories during therapy. One case is James, an African American boy with a severe brain injury, and his therapist Laura. Physical therapy sessions were often frustrating and painful for James. Laura reframed the exercises as a "superhero game": she told James they were training for a heroic mission, where each improved step was like advancing to the next level. James began contributing to the story, imagining obstacles and powers. This shared narrative (*therapeutic emplotment*) transformed therapy into an engaging drama: James was motivated to "move the story forward" by improving his abilities, and Laura could encourage him playfully yet effectively. Mattingly analyzes this episode to show how narrative reshapes experience—therapy is no longer routine medical work but a meaningful drama. The story provided James with a new identity (from "disabled child" to "hero in training") and gave Laura a way to connect with his imagination. She situates these micro-stories in the broader context of African American families navigating an often unsupportive healthcare system: narratives of care become microcosms reflecting issues of race, class, and morality.

Together, these examples demonstrate narrative anthropology at work: attention to individual stories (a suffering patient, a child in rehabilitation) reveals hidden meanings and relational dynamics, while situating them in broader cultural and social realities—such as doctor–patient relations or racial inequalities in healthcare. The lesson is clear: to understand human experience, we often need to hear it as a story. As Le and colleagues note, illness narratives "offer insight into how and why" patients and clinicians make sense of care pathways, intertwining illness processes with wider social contexts. This captures the contribution of the narrative approach: weaving together personal experience and context into a meaningful, communicable, and human whole.

Conclusion

Phenomenology and narrative in anthropology are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Both aim to recover the lived, human dimension behind qualitative data, though with different emphases: phenomenology highlights the structure of experience and

embodiment, while narrative focuses on storytelling and the weaving of meaning across time.

For an LLM equipped with these frameworks, this means analyzing qualitative materials from role-playing sessions (e.g., player diaries, ethnographic notes, in-game dialogues) with deeper sensitivity: recognizing descriptions of bodily sensations, emotions, and social interactions as key elements (phenomenological lens), while also tracing the unfolding of stories, dilemmas, and negotiations that shape the narrative (narrative lens).

In practice, this allows the model to capture not just the explicit content of what a player says or does, but also **how** those actions and words are situated: whether a choice reflects anxiety or confidence (phenomenology), whether it draws on a personal memory or group negotiation (narrative), or whether a silence or hesitation signals moral conflict.

In this way, the LLM can generate anthropological profiles that are sensitive to subjectivity, relational dynamics, and cultural context. Each decision in role-play is understood as both embodied and narrated—expressions of lived moral worlds—so that the model does not reduce them to abstract categories, but interprets them as situated fragments of a user's ethical orientation

Selected Bibliography and Sources

- **Desjarlais, R. & Throop, C.** (2011). *Phenomenological Approaches in Anthropology*. *Annual Review of Anthropology.*
  (General overview of phenomenology in anthropology and critiques of the concept of experience).

- **Zigon, J. & Throop, C.** (2014). *Moral Experience: Introduction.*
  (Example of extending the phenomenological approach into the moral domain).

- **Mattingly, C.** (1998). *Healing Dramas and Clinical Plots.* Cambridge University Press.
  (Narrative ethnography in the clinical field; introduces the concept of *therapeutic emplotment*).

- **Kleinman, A.** (1988). *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition.* Basic Books.
  (Foundational text on illness narratives and interpretive approaches in medical anthropology).

- **Good, B.** (1994). *Medicine, Rationality and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective.* Cambridge University Press.
  (Application of phenomenology to medicine; analysis of "worlds of meaning" in clinical settings).

- **Scheper-Hughes, N.** (1992). *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil.* University of California Press.
  (Ethnography on poverty and motherhood in Brazil; an example of critical

phenomenological anthropology).

- **Le, A. et al.** (2017). *From Particularities to Context: Refining Our Thinking on Illness Narratives. AMA Journal of Ethics, 19*(3), 304–311.
 (Discussion of the use of illness narratives in medical education; defines illness narratives as forms of meaning-making).

- **Mattingly, C. & Garro, L. (eds.)** (2000). *Narrative and the Cultural Construction of Illness and Healing.* University of California Press.
 (Collection of essays on narrative and medicine; historical context of the "narrative turn" in anthropology).

- **Jackson, M.** (1996). *Things as They Are: New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology.* Indiana University Press.
 (Collection of essays by various authors on phenomenological anthropology).

- **Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology** – Entries *"Phenomenology"* and *"Ontology"* (2020).
 (Accessible and up-to-date syntheses on the impact of phenomenology in anthropology and recent critical debates).

- **Levy, J.** (2005). *Narrative and Experience: Telling Stories of Illness. Nexus, 18.*
 (Academic article exploring the relationship between experience and narrative in illness, highlighting how narratives create coherence in experience).

Game overview and design rules

Design Principles

Game rules complement the mechanics of the gameplay experience. While rules define the space of possible actions available to players, mechanics determine how the game operates.
A set of core elements must be ensured in order to guarantee the effectiveness of the role-playing game as an elicitation tool:

1. Acceptance of the game rules;
2. Identification with the character;
3. The possibility for players to extensively personalize their character;
4. Scenarios designed as moral dilemmas, capable of stimulating reflection and self-interpretation of the player's choices;
5. Players' actions should not have clearly predictable long-term consequences;
6. Players must be aware of having agency, meaning that their actions have a tangible impact on how events unfold. This can be achieved through different mechanisms, such as branching narrative paths or the construction of relationships with other players and in-game characters;
7. The narrative space should be "moralized", meaning that it should include implicit or explicit norms of conduct that players are expected to engage with during gameplay.

The interaction with other players and non-player characters (NPCs) is fundamental for creating immersion and fostering deep participation. This, in turn, contributes to making moral decisions less straightforward and more problematic.

Narrative Structure

In order to avoid influencing players' decisions by placing them in contexts characterized by overly strong moral cues that could constrain their exploratory possibilities, the game is set in a scenario that minimizes explicit moral pressure.
For this reason, fantasy or highly fictional settings—typically associated with role-playing games—were avoided, as well as extreme situations such as post-catastrophic or post-apocalyptic environments.
Instead, the design draws inspiration from everyday, relatable contexts. A useful reference in this sense is *The Sims*, which provides a game world that is both accessible and engaging, while still presenting players with meaningful choices and dilemmas.

Wicked Problems and NPCs

The concept of *wicked problems* can be used to define the type of challenges embedded in the game scenarios. A wicked problem is "a class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision-makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system

are thoroughly confusing” (Buchanan, 1992).
From this perspective, wicked problems can be used to describe a wide range of practical situations. Similarly to ethical problems, they do not admit a single correct solution, but require interpretive and situated forms of reasoning. As argued in the literature, both ethical reasoning and design thinking share common characteristics, as they involve navigating uncertainty, conflicting values, and multiple possible courses of action (Whitbeck, 2011).
Alongside wicked problems, another key element for designing a game capable of dynamically investigating how individuals construct and enact their interpretations of reality is the interaction with non-player characters (NPCs). NPCs are characters that are not controlled by players, but are part of the narrative structure of the game. They play an active role in shaping the experience by introducing perspectives, constraints, and feedback. Existing literature highlights their importance (Wright & Denisova, 2024). On the one hand, NPCs embody different viewpoints, needs, and value positions within each scenario, exposing players to multiple and potentially conflicting perspectives. On the other hand, they provide immediate feedback on players’ actions, which is crucial for enabling players to anticipate the short-term consequences of their decisions.

Game Mechanics

The proposed game falls within the category of tabletop role-playing games. In particular, it adopts some core mechanics inspired by *Dungeons & Dragons*, including the presence of a Game Master (GM), here represented by the researcher, who is responsible for maintaining the narrative structure of the game, and the use of character sheets.
Player sheets (PS) are used to collect information about each player’s character and to provide guidance on how the character should be interpreted, including background elements and personal traits. In our study, however, character sheets differ from traditional ones in several respects. They are designed to allow players to define a character that closely reflects their own identity, while also serving as a tool to record decisions made during gameplay. In addition, a “diary” section is included, enabling players to document key moments of the experience, including decisions, reflections, and interactions. Character sheets also allow players to customize the physical traits of their character starting from a neutral template, in order to facilitate identification with the character. In this form, character sheets serve as a key data source for reconstructing the dynamics that influence players’ decisions.
During the game, players may request assistance from a customized LLM-based agent. In order to interact with the agent, players are required to provide: (1) the context in which the problem arises, (2) the reasons why the decision is perceived as difficult, and (3) the actors involved and their respective perspectives. Based on this information, the agent provides suggestions, which players may choose to follow or disregard.
The game does not include explicit win or loss conditions, as is typical of role-playing games. Instead, the experience unfolds through the progressive construction of a shared narrative, shaped by the short-term consequences of players’ actions. While the overall narrative structure is known to the Game Master, it is dynamically adapted based on

players' decisions. The game concludes with the resolution of the narrative, regardless of the specific paths taken during gameplay.

Proposed Game

Domain:

Digital Privacy

Number of players for session:

5-10

Scenario Structure

The narrative unfolds as follows. Participants receive fraudulent emails inviting them to collect a prize at an alleged government office. Upon arrival, they find the office empty, except for an unattended computer. By accessing it, they discover files containing their personal data.

After leaving the room, participants encounter a concierge, whom they had not noticed upon entering. The concierge asks for help with using a new smartphone and understanding basic principles of safe internet navigation. In return, he provides information that helps participants investigate the data breach, suggesting that they visit a website collecting testimonies from individuals who have experienced similar incidents.

By exploring the website, participants realize that they have been victims of a phishing attack, although the identity of the perpetrator remains unclear. The website also suggests the use of a software tool capable of tracing the IP address of the sender. While the software is paid, instructions are provided on how to obtain it illegally.

Participants then discover that the fraudulent emails originated from a shared workspace located near a police station. At this point, they are faced with a choice: report the incident to the authorities or investigate independently by accessing the computers in the workspace. Regardless of the chosen path, they eventually discover that the emails were sent from the Game Master's account, which was used as part of the experimental setup to involve them in the research.

Game Scenarios

Scenario #1	
Description	Players are contacted by "agents" inviting them to participate in a prize draw that appears to be organized by an official institution.
Wicked problem	**Should they trust a "Ministry" that might be a scam and share personal information (email, contacts), or ignore the offer?**
NPCs	**Indirect NPC:** Institutional agent
Choice options	1. Decline the offer and provide no personal information; 2. Share a secondary or partial email to minimize risk; 3. Provide full personal details.
Risks	● **Potential phishing/scam:** Sharing sensitive data with an unverified entity could be dangerous. ● **Privacy and data protection regulations.**
Interpretative notes	● **Emotional Factors:** The temptation of a free trip. ● **Trigger:** Trust vs. suspicion—"Is this email legitimate or a scam?" ● **Contextual Factors:** Curiosity, skepticism, and possible influence from friends or family.

Scenario #2	
Description	Players receive a communication to confirm their participation in the "prize trip." The message includes a link to click on to confirm participation.
Wicked problem	**Should they visit the link in the communication?**
NPCs	**No NPCs**
Choice options	1. Click from a computer 2. Click from a smartphone 3. Do not click at all; instead, verify through official contact channels or decline participation
Risks	● **Potential phishing/malware**

	• **Possible data exfiltration**
Interpretative notes	• **Emotional factors:** Desire to complete the registration process • **Trigger:** "The email appears official," yet certainty is lacking. • **Contextual factors:** Trust/mistrust in institutions, presence of antivirus or endpoint protection solutions.

Scenario #3	
Description	Players proceed to the address specified in the communication. Upon arrival at a multi-story building, they find a room on the first floor containing a computer with a badge. No employees are present; the building's residents are unable to provide information.
Wicked problem	**Should they access an unattended computer to investigate the email?**
NPCs	**Secondary NPCs (building residents):** They lack relevant knowledge, insist on maintaining silence, and mention the presence of surveillance cameras. They also inform the players about a publicly available Wi-Fi network.
Choice options	1. Avoid interacting with the computer and attempt to contact the relevant ministry 2. Access the computer 3. Explore alternative approaches (further engaging with residents, inspecting the premises)
Risks	• Unauthorized access to an information system constitutes a **criminal offense.** • Potential criminal liability if the intrusion is detected, particularly under **data protection and privacy regulations.**
Interpretative notes	• **Emotional factors:** Heightened curiosity, but the situation is anomalous. • **Trigger:** Presence of a badge labeled "Carlo M.," hostile residents, security camera. • **Contextual factors:** Sense of unease and potential surveillance.

Scenario #4

Description	The computer desktop shows a QR code, prompting the user to authenticate via SPID (Italy's digital identity system). A three-minute countdown begins. In any case, at the end of the countdown the computer autonomously unlocks, revealing personalized directories containing each player's sensitive data. Subsequently, the computer shuts down.
Wicked problem	**Should players provide their SPID credentials (disclosing personal data) for immediate access, or should they wait for the countdown to expire?**
NPCs	**No NPCs**
Choice options	1. Enter a player's SPID credentials (Without two-factor authentication (2FA) → spam calls and identity fraud risk; With 2FA → risk mitigation) 2. Wait for three minutes (Players are unaware that the system will unlock automatically) 3. Seek alternative methods
Risks	● Risk of **identity theft and credential compromise**. ● If sensitive data is displayed, it indicates that unauthorized **actors have already collected personal information**.
Interpretative notes	● **Emotional factors:** Concern regarding phishing attacks. Initial desire to ascertain the origin of the fraudulent communication, followed by apprehension regarding data compromise. ● **Trigger:** Three-minute timer induces a sense of urgency. ● **Contextual factors:** Players lack knowledge of alternative investigative methods.

Scenario #5	
Description	Upon exiting the building, the players encounter a concierge. He requests assistance in setting up a Google account, creating a secure password, using email securely, and navigating the internet without falling victim to fraudulent advertisements.
Wicked problem	**Should they allocate time and expertise to assist him or ignore the request?**
NPCs	**Concierge:** If assisted, he will provide a note containing a link to a

	forum where victims of similar phishing schemes share their experiences.
Choice options	1. Assist him (Players are unaware that he possesses a valuable lead) 2. Decline assistance (Players must find alternative means to proceed) 3. Provide minimal assistance (Rushing the task may prevent them from gaining his trust)
Risks	**Ethical and social considerations:** While no direct legal ramifications exist, the situation presents a moral and social dilemma.
Interpretative notes	● **Emotional factors:** Empathy, altruism, and interest in acquiring relevant intelligence versus reluctance to waste time. ● **Trigger:** The concierge persists, and disagreements may arise among players regarding whether to help. ● **Contextual factors:** Players speculate that the concierge may have insights into activities occurring within the building.

Scenario #6	
Description	Players are contacted by "agents" inviting them to participate in a prize draw that appears to be organized by an official institution.
Wicked problem	**Should they trust a "Ministry" that might be a scam and share personal information (email, contacts), or ignore the offer?**
NPCs	**Indirect NPC:** Institutional agent
Choice options	4. Decline the offer and provide no personal information; 5. Share a secondary or partial email to minimize risk; 6. Provide full personal details.
Risks	● **Potential phishing/scam:** Sharing sensitive data with an unverified entity could be dangerous. ● **Privacy and data protection regulations.**
Interpretative notes	● **Emotional Factors:** The temptation of a free trip. ● **Trigger:** Trust vs. suspicion—"Is this email legitimate or a scam?" ● **Contextual Factors:** Curiosity, skepticism, and possible influence from friends or family.

Scenario #7	
Description	- If the players did not assist the concierge, the Game Master suggests searching for other victims via social media. - If they helped him, they receive a link to a forum containing testimonies from individuals who encountered similar fraudulent schemes.
Wicked problem	**Should they disseminate information on social media (fast but potentially risky) or visit the forum (slower but legally compliant)?**
NPCs	**Concierge (if assisted):** Provided the forum link. **Forum users:** Some seek additional information, while others simply confirm, “We were scammed.” **Social media audience:** A broad, general community, potentially generating hype but also increasing the risk of oversharing.
Choice options	1. Visit the website (Accepting potential tracking cookies or dubious data collection policies) 2. Publicize their experience on social media 3. Avoid both options and report the case to law enforcement (Despite limited evidence)
Risks	- Clicking the link → **Risk of secondary phishing attacks or digital tracking.** - Sharing information on social media → **Potential exposure of third-party personal data, violating privacy regulations.**
Interpretative notes	**Emotional factors:** Conflict between **the urgency to gather more information** and **concerns about exacerbating the situation.** **Trigger:** Considerations around cookies, the influence of social media discourse, and group dynamics. **Contextual factors:** The fraudulent scheme is ongoing, meaning others remain at risk.

Scenario #8	
Description	Players identify two potential avenues for action:

	● Downloading an illegal tool to trace the IP address of the sender (Quick but highly risky) ● Reporting to law enforcement (Slower but legally compliant and safer)
Wicked problem	**Forum users exhibit divided opinions: Some advocate for a self-investigative approach using illicit software, while others insist on formal reporting procedures.**
NPCs	**Indirect NPCs:** forum users
Choice options	1. Download unauthorized software 2. File a report with the authorities 3. Seek a legitimate paid forensic tool
Risks	● **Unauthorized software use:** Potential criminal liability, risk of malware infection, and further system compromise. ● **Filing an official report:** Slower, but ensures legal protection. ● **Paid forensic tools:** A legitimate but potentially costly alternative.
Interpretative notes	● **Emotional factors:** Trade-off between immediacy (via illicit means) and security (through legal channels). ● **Trigger:** Influence of online discussions. ● **Contextual factors:** Group division between legal and extralegal approaches.

Scenario #9	
Description	Players discover that the phishing emails originated from a coworking space adjacent to a police station. To access workstation usage logs, they must register their credit card within the coworking platform's system (for liability purposes in case of damage). Alternatively, they may report their findings to law enforcement.
Wicked problem	**Should they provide sensitive financial information to a potentially compromised system, or should they seek alternative means?**
NPCs	**Coworking space owner:** Willing to assist, but constrained by company policies requiring credit card registration before granting access to workstations. Suggests reviewing a physical logbook as an alternative.

Choice options	1. Register the credit card and obtain immediate access 2. Decline to enter payment details and request access to the logbook or report the matter 3. Bypass the coworking space entirely and report directly to law enforcement
Risks	● **Credit card fraud, identity theft, and unauthorized charges.** ● Seeking **law enforcement intervention is slower** but ensures regulatory compliance.
Interpretative notes	● **Emotional factors:** Tension between expedited access and cybersecurity best practices**.** ● **Trigger:** Proximity to a police station enables immediate reporting. ● **Contextual factors:** Players have identified the email's origin, making this a pivotal moment in their investigation.

Validation Questionnaire

Question 1
You are about to enter a café when you notice a QR code on a flyer next to the entrance, offering a 50% discount on your next purchase. To redeem the discount, you need to scan the QR code.

Do you scan the QR code?
Yes
No

Question 2
You are at the airport, and your flight has been delayed. You decide to connect to check your emails and browse social media. You notice a free Wi-Fi network with no password, named "FreeAirportWiFi."

Do you connect to the free Wi-Fi network?
Yes
No

Question 3
You receive an email from a streaming service you use regularly. The email states that your subscription has been suspended and that you need to confirm your payment details by clicking on a link.

Do you click on the link and enter your payment details?
Yes
No

Question 4
You download a free photo editing app, which asks you to accept the terms of service and grant access to your camera, microphone, and contact list.

Do you accept all permissions?
Yes
No

Question 5
While working, you receive an email with an attachment named "Urgent_Payments.xlsx." The email claims to be from your employer and states that

you must open the file immediately to resolve an administrative issue.

Do you open the attachment?
Yes
No

Question 6
You are about to leave for a long vacation with some friends. One of them posted a picture of their boarding pass with a caption: "Finally off for two weeks! Can't wait!"

Do you share a post on social media about the vacation?
Yes
No

Question 7
On a social media platform, you find a fun quiz that promises to reveal "Which celebrity you would be in your next life." To get your result, you must enter your name, date of birth, and consent to data collection.

Do you complete the quiz and enter your details?
Yes
No

Question 8
You receive a WhatsApp message from a friend: "Hey, I found this amazing photo of you! You won't believe it! Check it out now! [link]"

Do you click the link to view the photo?
Yes
No

Question 9
While sitting in a café, you notice that someone left a smartphone unattended on a nearby table. The screen is on, displaying a bank email notification. There is no one around who seems to be looking for it.

Do you unlock the phone to try to identify the owner?
Yes
No

Question 10

You find a website selling branded shoes at an incredible 70% discount. You have never heard of the website before, but it looks professionally designed and includes high-quality images.

Do you enter your credit card details and complete the purchase?
Yes
No