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# 1 Introducing Narrative Psychology

MICHELE L. CROSSLEY

## **Narrative Psychology and the Study of Self/Identity**

Much of what is said in this article derives from my recent book, *Introducing Narrative Psychology: Self, Trauma and the Construction of Meaning* (Crossley, 2000a). In that book, I began with the age-old, perennial question. What is a self? Who am I? C.S. Lewis once commented: ‘There is one thing, and only one in the whole universe which we know more about than that we could learn from external observation. That one thing is ourselves. We have, so to speak, inside information, we are in the know’ (Lewis, 1952). But how true is this? Are we ‘in the know’ about ourselves?

It may seem obvious to turn towards psychology in order to throw light on these complex questions regarding self and identity. After all, most people are drawn towards the study of psychology because they are interested in the ‘human condition’, what makes us human, our loves, passions, hates and desires. But most of us find ourselves only a few months into a psychology degree when we realise that we are dealing with very little of this. Instead, you are enmeshed in statistics, principles of learning, cognition, abstract theories and theoretical models, all of which bear very little resemblance to anything you were originally interested in studying. Somewhat ironically, a great deal of contemporary psychology, supposedly an area devoted to the study of human beings, has become a totally ‘lifeless’ discipline. So where do we look, in the discipline of psychology, if we want to examine these questions of self and identity?

In *Introducing Narrative Psychology*, I suggested four main areas of psychology which address these issues. These included: i) experimentally based social psychology; ii) humanistic psychology; iii) psychoanalytic/psychodynamic psychology; and iv) social constructivist approaches. Highlighting the limitations associated with each of these four areas, I opened the way for a new narrative psychology approach which, although influenced by these approaches (especially humanistic and social constructivist), had the potential to avoid the pitfalls endemic within them.

### **The Central Role of Language and Stories**

Of particular importance to the formulation of a narrative psychology approach is recognition, derived from social constructivist approaches, of the central role played by language and stories in the process of self construction. As Crites (1986), wrote: 'A self without a story contracts into the thinness of its personal pronoun.' And Mair:

Stories are the womb of personhood. Stories make and break us. Stories sustain us in times of trouble and encourage us towards ends we would not otherwise envision. The more we shrink and harden our ways of telling, the more starved and constipated we become (Mair, 1989: 2)

'Always in emergencies', argued Broyard (1992: 21), 'we invent narratives':

We describe what is happening as if to confine the catastrophe. When people heard that I was ill, they inundated me with stories of their own illnesses, as well as the cases of friends. Storytelling seems to be a natural reaction to illness. People bleed stories and I've become a bloodbank of them (Broyard, 1992: 21)

### **Narrative as an 'Organising Principle' for Human Life**

But it is not just the fact that people tell stories in making sense of themselves and others. A narrative psychological approach goes far deeper than that. For, central to this approach, is the development of a phenomenological understanding of the unique 'order of meaning' constitutive of human consciousness (see Crossley, 2000a; Polkinghorne, 1988). One of the main features of this 'order of meaning' is the experience of time and temporality. An understanding of temporality associated with the human realm of meaning is entirely different to that encountered in the natural sciences. This is because the human realm of meaning it is not related to a 'thing' or a 'substance' but to an 'activity' (Polkinghorne, 1988: 4). Everything experienced by human beings is made meaningful, understood and interpreted in relation to the primary dimension of 'activity' which incorporates both 'time' and 'sequence'. In order to define and interpret 'what' exactly has happened on any particular occasion, the sequence of events is of extreme importance. Hence, a valid portrayal of the experience of selfhood necessitates an understanding of the inextricable connection between temporality and identity.

It is in accordance with these basic principles of temporality and connection that numerous authors such as MacIntyre (1981), Carr (1986) and Sarbin (1986) have put forward the idea that human psychology has an essentially narrative structure. Sarbin, for instance, proposes what he calls the 'narratory principle'; this is the idea that human beings think, perceive,

imagine, interact and make moral choices according to narrative structures. Sarbin uses the word narrative as coterminous with 'story':

A story is a symbolised account of actions of human beings that has a temporal dimension. The story has a beginning, middle, and an ending (or as Kermode (1967) suggests, the sense of an ending). The story is held together by recognisable patterns of events called plots. Central to the plot structure are human predicaments and attempted resolutions. (Sarbin, 1986: 3)

Sarbin treats narrative as the 'organising principle for human action'. By this, he means that the concept of narrative can be used to help account for the observation that human beings always seek to *impose structure* on the flow of experience. Such a narrative principle invokes a humanistic image of the self as a teller of stories, of heroes and villains, plots, and images of actors performing and engaging in dialogue with other actors.

Charles Taylor's (1989) work is particularly important to the development of an understanding of self as intrinsically connected to temporality, interactions with others, and ultimately, morality. It is Taylor's main contention that concepts of self and morality are inextricably intertwined - we are selves only in that certain issues matter for us. What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me. To ask what I am in abstraction from self-interpretation makes no sense (Taylor, 1989: 34). Moreover, my self-interpretation can only be defined in relation to other people, an 'interchange of speakers'. I cannot be a self on my own but only in relation to certain 'interlocutors' who are crucial to my language of self-understanding. In this sense, the self is constituted through 'webs of interlocation' in a 'defining community' (Taylor *ibid*, 39; see also Crossley, N., 1996). This connection between our sense of morality and sense of self, according to Taylor, means that one of our basic aspirations is the need to feel connected with what we see as 'good' or of crucial importance to us and our community. We have certain fundamental values which lead us to basic questions such as 'what kind of life is worth living?'; 'What constitutes a rich, meaningful life, as against an empty, meaningless one?' (Taylor *ibid*, 42).

A vision of 'the good' becomes available for people in any given culture by being given expression or articulation in some form or another. This articulation most often occurs through language and symbolic systems such as custom and ritual which reverberate with knowledge of connections and relationships across the generations. (Taylor *ibid*, 91). Such articulation brings us closer to the good as a moral source and gives it further power and potency. Stories have a tremendous force in this process insofar as they have the capacity to confer meaning and substance on peoples' lives, to subtly influence their progression and orientation towards a particular 'good' (*ibid*, 97).

For example, cultures transmit to children knowledge of typical patterns of relationships, meanings and moralities in their myths, fairytales, histories and

stories (see Bettelheim, 1976; Howard, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1988). And we are inculcated from a very early age to seeing connections between events, people and the world in a certain way through the stories and narratives told within our families (Langellier and Peterson, 1993; McAdams, 1993). Moreover, this process does not stop during childhood. As adolescents and adults we are exposed on a daily basis to TV dramas, soap operas, movie blockbusters and talk-shows, all of which play out, in the same way as the fairytale does for the child, eternal moral conflicts (see McLeod, 1997; Priest, 1996).

One of the central premises of a narrative psychological approach then, is of the essential and fundamental link between experiences of self, temporality, relationships with others and morality. We have a sense of who we are through a sense of where we stand in relation to 'the good'. Hence, connections between notions of 'the good', understandings of the self, the kinds of stories and narratives through which we make sense of our lives, and conceptions of society, evolve together in 'loose packages' (Taylor *ibid*, 105).

### **Human Experience and Narrative Structure**

Carr (1986) argues that the reality of human experience can be characterised as one which has a narrative or story-telling character (*ibid*, p.18). What would it be, he asks, to experience life as a 'mere' or 'pure' sequence of isolated events, one thing after another? In order to illustrate his thesis Carr draws upon phenomenological approaches such as Husserl's theory of time consciousness which depicts the way in which humans ordinarily experience time. He basically makes a distinction between three levels of human experience: passive experience, active experience and experience of self/life. At each of these levels, human experience can be characterised by a complex temporal structure akin to the configuration of the storied form (see also Bruner, 1990; 1991). In the following exploration of human time consciousness, we will look at each of these experiential levels in turn.

According to Husserl, even as we encounter events at the most passive level (that is, when we are not consciously aware that we are encountering them), they are charged with the significance they derive from our anticipation of the future ('protention') and our memory of things past ('retention'). His point is not that we have the capacity to project and remember but that we cannot even experience anything as happening, as present, except against the background of what it succeeds and what we anticipate will succeed it. Hence, when we experience time, we have no option but to experience it as an interrelated 'configuration' of past-present-future. Our experience automatically assumes temporally extended forms in which future, present and past mutually determine one another as parts of a whole. Husserl gives the example of a note in a melody. When we are listening to a melody we do not

encounter notes in that melody as isolated elements or components. Rather, the note is encountered and 'understood' as part of a sequence as a whole. It only takes on 'meaning' in relation to the note that has preceded it and in anticipation of that which will succeed it. Hence the 'presence' of the note can only be encountered in relation to a mutually determined retentional-protentional structure. This kind of temporal experience is analogous to the *Gestalt* phenomena often discussed in relation to spatial perception.

Carr proceeds to argue that if this 'configurational' dimension is true of our most passive experiences, it is even more so true of our active lives in which we 'explicitly consult past experience, envisage the future and view the present as a passage between the two'. Carr argues that the 'means-end' structure of action that we experience in everyday life is akin to the beginning-middle-end plot structure of narrative and thus, 'the structure of action ... is common to art and life'. This idea is also central to literary theorist Paul Ricoeur's notion that 'time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode' (Ricoeur, 1984: 85). According to Ricoeur there are two sorts of time in every story told: on the one hand a discrete succession that is open and theoretically indefinite, for example, a series of incidents for which we can always pose the question, 'and then? and then?', much like a chronicle of events. The other sort of time is characterised by integration, culmination and closure owing to which the story receives a particular configuration. In this sense, composing a story involves drawing together a series of events in order that they make sense in relation to one another (Ricoeur, 1991: 121). We tend to experience activities, both short and long term, in relation to this latter mode, sometimes referred to by Ricoeur as the process of *emplotment*. The point is, our present activity only makes sense, and is framed in terms of, a vast array of interrelated memories from times past and anticipations of and for the future. Hence, the temporal configuration characteristic of narrative structure is akin not only to passive but also to active human experience.

If we can talk of narrative structure in connection with individual passive and active experiences, then the notion of a 'life-story' requires yet a further, more comprehensive grasp which brings separate 'stories' together, takes them all as 'mine' and establishes connections among them (Carr, 1986: 75). Although we have argued that there is a past-present-future temporal configuration (a narrative structure) at the level of passive and active experience, it is not difficult too see that at this more complex level (life as a whole), something special is required in the way of a reflexive (looking back) temporal grasp, to hold together the phases of these longer-term phenomena and preserve their coherence. This, of course, is the classic process of autobiography in which there is an attempt to envisage the coherence of a life through selection, organisation and presentation of its component parts. Some authors such as Kierkegaard (1987) have argued that it is through this process of autobiographical selection that we become ethical beings; in the telling of

our life stories, we become responsible for our lives. Literary theorist Paul Ricoeur makes such responsibility central to his concept of 'narrative identity', arguing that the self only comes into being in the process of telling a life story (Ricoeur, 1986: 132).

It is important to point out here that we may be in danger of suggesting that in order to help us understand ourselves and our lives we actually need literary creations such as works of fiction, biography and autobiography. Indeed, Ricoeur, has been accused of placing too much emphasis on the role of 'story' as the instance where meaning is created, at the expense of 'human life' (Widdershoven, 1993). However, if we bring forth the conception of the narrative structure of human experience and action developed by Carr, we can see that the meaning created in the autobiographical act of reflection and that found within everyday experience and action, actually exist on a continuum rather than being radically discontinuous. In Carr's terms 'lives are told in being lived and lived in being told' (ibid, p.61). The actions and sufferings of life can be viewed as a process of telling ourselves stories, listening to those stories and acting them out or living through them. Hence:

It is not the case that we first live and act and then afterward, seated around the fire as it were, tell about what we have done ... The retrospective view of the narrator, with its capacity for seeing the whole in all its irony, is not an irreconcilable opposition to the agent's view but is an extension and refinement of a viewpoint inherent in action itself ... narration, intertwined as it is with action, (creates meaning) in the course of life itself, not merely after the fact, at the hands of authors, in the pages of books. (ibid, p.61)

When Carr refers to narration here, he is not just referring to the fact that a great deal of our everyday conversations are devoted to telling stories (although this is true). His point about narrative is more to do with its role in constituting the *sense* of the actions we engage in and the events we live through, its role in organising temporally and giving shape and coherence to the sequence of experiences we have *as* we are in the process of having them (ibid, p.62). Hence, the notion of narrative structure or the act of narrative structuring does not necessarily take on the form of explicit verbalisation. It refers more to the fact that, as the agent or subject of experience, I am constantly attempting to:

surmount time in exactly the way the storyteller does'. I constantly 'attempt to dominate the flow of events by gathering them together in the forward-backward grasp of the narrative act ... (ibid, p.62)

Carr further argues that our constant attempt to achieve a sense of structure and order in the course of our everyday activities and lives is firmly based on our *practical* orientation within the world. In order to get on in everyday life

we need things to hang together, to make sense, to have some sense of connection. If, for instance, I found myself writing this paper and it bore very little resemblance to anything I had ever done before, I would have great difficulty pursuing it because I would be unable to see the point - why am I doing this? Where will it take me? Where do I go from here? And for the most part it is 'normal' for us to experience such narrative coherence in the sense that for most of us, for most of the time 'things do, after all, make sense, hang together' (ibid, p.90).

It is in this sense that Carr insists that everyday reality is permeated with narrative and that the human experience of time is one of configured time. 'The narrative grasp of the story-teller', he claims, 'is not a leap beyond time but a way of being in time. It is no more alien to time than the curving banks are alien to the river or the potter's hands to the clay' (ibid, p.89). According to this perspective, literary stories such as fiction and autobiography do not in any sense 'impose' a structure and order on human action and life. Instead, they tend to reinforce and make more explicit the symbolisation that is already at work within a culture at the level of practical human action. The function of narratives such as autobiographies then, is simply to reveal structures or meanings that previously remained implicit or unrecognised, and thus to transform life and elevate it to another level.

### **But is Human Life Narratively Configured?**

In characterising psychological life through the concept of narrative, however, are we not overplaying the significance played by the storied form in human experience? At the level of 'personal' experience, some researchers have argued that although human experience may bear some resemblance to the story, the idea that it takes on a narrative structure is mistaken. The core of this argument is that the coherent temporal unity lying at the heart of stories (the connection between beginning, middle and end) is something that is not at all intrinsic to real human events, real selves and real life. As literary theorist Frank Kermode argues, such 'narrative properties cannot be ascribed to the real' (cited in Wood, 1991: 160). The historian Louis Mink argues a similar point: 'Stories are not lived but told ... Life has no beginnings, middles and ends...Narrative qualities are transferred from art to life' (cited in Wood, 1991: 161).

A related point is made by literary theorist Roland Barthes with regard to the selective capacity of the author of the story and his/her ability to create and determine coherence and order within the text. The literary text has a sense of structure and order because the elements and events making up the story have been 'put there' by the author. Disruptive elements have been 'eliminated'. Life, in contrast to the careful manipulation of the story, cannot possibly have

such a structure. Thus, it has been argued, whereas the story has an ‘implicit contract’ towards order, life has no such contract. (Bell, 1990: 174). In this sense, it is claimed, the story differs radically from ‘life’ insofar as in the latter, everything is ‘scrambled messages’, ‘chaos rather than order’ (see Carr cited in Wood, 1991: 161).

There is some truth to this argument. However, is it the case that life admits of no selection, that everything is ‘left in’, a vast array of ‘scrambled messages’? For example, Carr argues that our most basic capacity for attention and following through various activities or projects is premised on our capacity for selection. Hence, just like the author of the literary text, we partially determine the course of our own lives by selecting and omitting certain elements and events. As Carr argues:

Extraneous details are not left out but they are pushed into the background, saved for later, ranked in importance. And whose narrative voice is accomplishing all this? None but our own, of course. In planning our days and our lives we are composing the stories or the dramas we will act out and which will determine the focus of our attention and our endeavours, which will provide the principles for distinguishing foreground from background. (Carr cited in Wood, 1991: 165)

This may be story planning or plotting, but is it story-telling? ‘Most assuredly it is, quite literally, since we are constantly explaining ourselves to others. And finally each of us must count himself among his own audience since in explaining ourselves to others we are often trying to convince ourselves as well’ (Carr cited in Wood, 1991: 165). Hence, through the interrelated processes of story-plotting and story-telling we partially determine the stories of our lives.

The word ‘partial’ is important here, however, because we should not take this point - the self as a teller of her own story - too far. The critical arguments of theorists who dispute the analogy between ‘life’ and ‘narrative’ are important insofar as they emphasise the fact that, unlike the author of fiction, we do *not* totally create the materials we are to form. To a certain degree, we are stuck with what we have in the way of characters, capacities and circumstances. For instance, if a woman is married to a man who batters her every night when he comes in drunk from the pub, the fact that she secretly harbours fantasies of a white knight in shining armour coming to rescue her one day and that everything will turn out OK in the end, will have very little influence on her real life which is likely to be characterised by repeated abuse, dependency and further victimisation.

Likewise, just as we are unable to control the beginnings of our stories, so too are we unable, unlike the fictional author, to describe our already completed lives. Instead, we are in the middle of our lives and we cannot be sure how they will end. Hence, although I may have a plan to write my next book, I do not have any idea what may await me around the corner. As the old

proverb goes, 'There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip' (Crites, 1986: 166). All manner of things could happen to forestall my plan and render it irrelevant. For example, I may be made redundant, in which case I would probably feel there is little point in continuing to write a book. I may fall seriously ill and be rendered incapable of completing the project; or even if I remained capable, my goals and values may change in the face of confrontation with the possibility of death. I may have to rethink my aims and projects, change direction, and start a new story. Hence, the fact that we cannot wholly determine either the beginning or the end of our lives, suggests that our activities and projects *do* lack the formal order and coherence of literary stories. Life, unlike the story, does not have an 'implicit contract' towards order.

However, one of the main aims of a narrative psychological approach is to provide an alternative to certain social constructionist and postmodernist approaches which have considerably overplayed the disorderly, chaotic and variable nature of contemporary human experience (Crossley, 2000c). On a routine, daily basis, there is more order and coherence than such accounts suggest. This is nowhere more apparent than when we examine traumatising experiences, which have the capacity to painfully highlight the 'normal' state of narrative coherence which is routinely taken-for-granted and thus remains 'unseen' within the active experiencing of everyday existence.

### **Narrative Incoherence and the Breach of Trauma**

One good example of disruptive traumatising experiences is that of chronic or serious illness. In recent years numerous studies of chronic illness have illustrated the potentially devastating impact they can have on a person's life. This has been characterised as an 'ontological assault' in which some of the most basic, underlying existential assumptions that people hold about themselves and the world are thrown into disarray (Crossley, 2000b; Janoff Bulman, 1992; Kleinman, 1988; Taylor, S., 1989).

One of the most fundamental building blocks of the perceived world to be destroyed in the experience of chronic illness, is one's basic sense of time. Many phenomenologically and existentially oriented writers have highlighted that time is basic and fundamental to an understanding of contemporary human existence insofar as our normal, routine temporal orientation is one of projecting into the future. It is important to make clear, however, that we are not necessarily consciously aware of the fact that we project into the future in this way. Our taken-for-granted assumptions about and towards time, are only made visible when a 'shock' or a 'disruption' occurs, throwing them into sharp relief (see Schutz, 1962; Garfinkel, 1984). The experience of chronic illness constitutes such a disruption. When a person receives a serious illness

diagnosis, they are immediately shocked out of the complacency of the assumed futurity of their existence and their whole conception of themselves, their life and their world is likely to undergo radical changes. Frank (1995) uses the metaphor of 'narrative wreckage' to characterise such experiences.

In previous research, I have shown how much of the traumatic emotional and psychological impact of living with a HIV positive diagnosis can be traced back to the disturbance and disruption of this fundamentally experienced sense of 'lived time' (Davies, 1997). The threat of chaos, of meaninglessness, is evident in the following quote from Paula, a HIV positive woman I interviewed, whose husband, a haemophiliac had recently died from HIV infection. When I asked her about her plans for the future she said:

I don't think of the future as in what is going to happen in a year's time or whatever. My future seems to have stopped when Mark (her husband) died because I am on my own and I just live from day to day ... I am only 28 and I feel as if I have been put in a shop and left there ... It is as if I am stuck in a sort of bubble and nothing seems to, I can't get out of it ... it's frightening to think that I am going to be like that until I die ... It's terrible when you have got no-one to talk to ... that's a large part of it now for me, it is the loneliness, especially of a night-time when the kids are in bed ... I often keep the baby up just to keep me company, it is horrible, I shouldn't because he needs his rest ... but ... if I do send him to bed, it is so silent, it is just me. Often I go to bed early because I can't stand being on my own ...

Paula's comments make abundantly clear the 'unmaking' of her world, and highlight her previous taken-for-granted sense of identity and projection into the future.

### **Adapting to Trauma: Stories and Narrative Coherence**

Research into the experience of chronic and serious illness illustrates the way in which our routine, 'lived' sense of time and identity is one of implicit connection and coherence. This sense is severely disrupted in the face of trauma and it is in such contexts that stories become important as a way of rebuilding a sense of connection and coherence. As the recent proliferation of autobiographies (especially in relation to diseases such as cancer and HIV/AIDS) and self-help groups suggests, for people suffering the trauma of illness, storytelling takes on a 'renewed urgency' (Mathieson and Stam, 1995: 284). Of course, such a narrative understanding bears a strong affinity with Freud's work, which equated mental ill health with an 'incoherent story' and narrative breakdown. From this perspective, psychotherapy constituted an exercise in 'story repair' and, as Spence (1982) argued:

Freud made us aware of the persuasive power of a coherent narrative - in particular of the ways in which an aptly chosen reconstruction can fill the gap between two apparently unrelated events, and in the process, make sense out of nonsense. There seems no doubt but that a well constructed story possesses a kind of narrative truth that is real and immediate and carries an important significance for the process of therapeutic change.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has aimed to introduce some of the main themes underpinning a narrative approach towards psychology. Drawing on some of dominant theories in this area, it has argued that human life carries within it a narrative structure to the extent that the individual, at the level of tacit, phenomenological experience, is constantly projecting backwards and forwards in a manner that maintains a sense of coherence, unity, meaningfulness and identity. From this perspective, the characterisation of human experience as one of constant flux, variability and incoherence, as manifest in many discursive and postmodern approaches, fails to take sufficient account of the essential unity and integrity of everyday lived experience. In accordance with this theoretical perspective, it has been argued that the experience of traumatic events such as serious illness are instrumental in facilitating an appreciation of the way in which human life is routinely narratively configured. This is because the experience of traumatisation often serves to fundamentally disrupt the routine and orderly sense of existence, throwing into radical doubt our taken-for-granted assumptions about time, identity, meaning, and life itself. When this happens, it is possible to examine the way in which narratives become important in another sense. This is in terms of the way in which they are used to restore a sense of order and connection, and thus to re-establish a semblance of meaning in the life of the individual. Accordingly, narratives of illness are useful because they help to reveal structures or meanings that typically remain implicit or unrecognised, thus potentiating a transformation of life and elevation to another level.

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