The Function of Narrative:
Toward a Narrative Psychology of Meaning

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In this paper, I argue that the most salient aspect of narrative is not the arrangement of speech elements into a particular order but the kinds of actions that can be accomplished with narratives. Narrative is best thought of as a verb, "to narrate," or the derived form, "narrating." It is an expressive action, something that persons do. I argue that one of the primary functions of narrating is to "make present" life experience and interpretations of life in a particular time and space. Narrating brings experience and interpretations into play, into a field of action, in a specific here and now.

At the current moment, there is tremendous cross-disciplinary interest in the narrative concept. Narrative is a hot topic. It seems to be everywhere. This is a positive development. I am convinced that some concept of narrative is critical to understanding the experience and interpretation of life.

But what is "narrative" exactly? Pinning down the concept of narrative is problematic. I find myself coming back again and again to the same questions: What is narrative? And what is narrative psychology? Certainly, these are difficult questions. Narrative is an elusive concept, and narrative psychology is equally elusive. Perhaps this is because the term, "narrative," is so widespread that the sense of the word has become stretched and overextended. Its meaning is diffuse.

In his conceptual history of narrative, Hyvärinen (2010) observes that there are at least four separate narrative turns: in literary theory, historiography, the social sciences, and culture at large. Each of these narrative turns has its own history and distinct understanding of the concept. In the social sciences, the conceptual development of narrative proceeded on its own path. Rather than appropriating the terms delineated in literary theory or linguistics or coming up with a concrete definition of narrative itself, psychology, like the other social sciences, appears to be content with an imprecise metaphor.

Narrative stands in for something else. It is a convenient placeholder, an empty vessel, configured for the purposes of each user who can define the term in any way that he or she likes. As Hyvärinen (2006) argues, in the social sciences, the something else is, often, life; narrative is a powerful metaphor for understanding life.

Hyvärinen's (2006) point is convincing. Personally, I see my own work as contributing to the narrative turn in the social sciences. My understanding of narrative does tend to be metaphorical. Narrative does stand in for something else. Also, I am inclined to agree with Hyvärinen's (2006) observation that the something else is life. How do persons make sense of life? How do they portray life in words? What are the consequences of these representations?

An interesting implication of Hyvärinen's thesis is, if narrative is a metaphor, then, why narrative and not something else? Couldn't another metaphor work equally well? I am not going to argue against the concept of narrative. The narrative metaphor is not, necessarily, incorrect or misleading. I believe that the narrative metaphor is essential for understanding psychological processes and social reality, but it needs some precision.

The theoretical framework that I describe attempts to ground the metaphor so that narrative can be applied productively to describe life experience in more complex and accurate terms. On the one hand, the narrative metaphor should be sufficiently open to include a broad range of research and dissent. But, on the other hand, it should be specific enough such that we know what narrative is and why we are doing narrative, and it should direct us to innovative ways of understanding human lives.

As I see it, the concept of narrative should focus on how narrative works to create meanings. I take this to be the principal mission of narrative, basic to what makes it such an attractive concept. Narrative allows researchers insight into the process of meaning making.

From Narrative to Narrating

But how does it do this? How can narrative be envisioned, such that it allows researchers to describe meaning making in language that is both rich and concrete? These are the critical questions.

In the social sciences, and in other narrative turns, there is a tendency to understand narrative as a structural concept. After all, the earliest narrative turns were in folklore (e.g. Propp, 1928/1968), literature (e.g., Barthes, 1966/1975), and linguistics (e.g., Labov & Waletzsky, 1967/1997), where narrative is often conceived as having basic underlying structural characteristics. The proposed structures vary between disciplines and theorists.

Recent scholarship in literary studies moves beyond simplistic notions of narrative structure. Poststructural narratologists have argued that either/or categorizations of narrative are problematic. Herman (2009) argues that the lines between narrative and other forms of speech events, such as explanation and description, are permeable. Although the prototypical cases seem clear, there is a large middle ground of mixed forms, "narrative explanations," and "descriptive narrations." Differences are subtle, of degree rather than kind (Herman, 2009). Similarly, Ryan (2007) argues for a fuzzy-set definition of narrative that comprises multiple dimensions, including spatial, temporal, mental, formal, and pragmatic. The fuzzy-set excludes some forms of discourse as non-narrative, such as repetitive events or instructions. But the definition becomes very open, a "tool kit for do-it-yourself definitions" (p. 30), in which narratologists can choose to emphasize or de-emphasize certain aspects of narratives.

Even if scholars could articulate a way of marking narrative forms of speech from other forms of speech, I would be skeptical of the significance of such a discovery. To psychologists and others, who are interested in narrative because of the way that narratives are involved in how persons make sense of life, the issue of form is secondary. The arrangement of speech elements into a structure is not the innermost property of narrative.

In order to focus on meanings, I advocate what could be thought of as a functional approach to narrative. This is not because I think the structural, formal, or organizational properties of narratives are insignificant. It must be emphasized that they are very important and complementary, but secondary. Later in the article, I try to flesh out some aspects of how structure and function work together.

However, for now, I want to argue that the structural components of narratives are not what make narrative special and ubiquitous. Rather, I believe that narrative is interesting because of the meanings that we are able to express and articulate through narrating. How does narrating work or function to communicate and reveal aspects of human experience (Fludernik, 1996) and manage meanings? In other words, narrative is important because of what can be done or accomplished with narrative.

A functionalist account of narrative asks: how does narrative work to accomplish meaning making? In asking this question, I conceptualize narrative as a dynamic process (Schiff, 2006). Narrative can be thought of as a verb, "to narrate" or "narrating," rather than the noun form "narrative." To narrate calls forth the conceptual similarities with the related forms "to tell," "to show," and "to make present." Narrating discloses experience. Importantly, we move from understanding narrative as a static entity and begin to view it, more accurately, as a process. Narrative is a doing, a happening, an

eruption. Or, as I like to think about narrating, it is an expressive action, unfolding in space and time.

Such a move does end up including a wide range of expressions in the category of narrative that others would exclude or overlook. Indeed, I would include a wide variety of expressions, verbal but also non-verbal, that make present life experiences and interpretations of life as appropriately narrative.

This is where the notion of narrative functions fits in. Function directly addresses the meaning of narrating. What do narratives do? What can be done or accomplished with narrating? How does narrating work? How does narrative work through and express meaning? How is meaning negotiated by persons in the social world? In a specific time and place? What is the language game that we call narrating (Rudrum, 2005)?

Narrating as Making Present

In what follows, I outline this thesis that narration has various meaning-creating functions that can be described in concrete terms. But I am not going to make the claim that I have all the terms right. I am not going to provide a taxonomy of narrative functions to end up as a pithy chart. My description is not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, the categories are beginning points, which should serve as ways of thinking about narrating to be refined and rethought in narrative research. I hope to provide some tools to describe, in detail, exactly how narratives work as sense-making practices. The power of thinking about narrative functions is to allow for creative ways of describing and researching meaning making.

Despite this caveat, I begin my account with the assertion that a basic function appears to underlie many, if not all, varieties of narrative. As I see it, the foundational property of narrating is to "make present." This is narrating's primary function.

The idea of "making present" is inspired by phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophy, particularly Heidegger and Ricoeur, but also the work of Mark Freeman (1993, 2010). Although I retain some of the meanings emanating from this tradition, I extend the idea of making present to new domains.

The notion that narrative functions to make present has many nuanced consequences for what narrative means and how it works to express and make sense of life. I now turn to a description of three related ways of conceptualizing making present and a discussion of some of the implications of these ideas. I argue that making present has at least three related aspects that can be put together to view narration as a whole. Making present is: 1) *Declarative*: Making present gives presence to subjective experience; 2) *Temporal*: Making present gives meaning to the past, present and future; and 3) *Spatial*

(social): Making present co-creates shared and divergent understandings of the world.

Making Present as Showing

First and foremost, making present can be thought of as a variety of showing. Telling makes known. It is declarative. It establishes: *I am this; I know this; I have seen or experienced these events; these are my thoughts or reflections; this is what I imagined or dreamt*. Even, *this is what I have been told by my friend*.

In narrating, we establish the subjective facts of our life experience. We communicate the feel and texture of our lives. For me, this is how it is or was. When we tell, we make experience and interpretations of life present in a social scene of action, using the terms of some particular linguistic, historical and cultural community.

Presence has the sense of taking shape, of giving corporality: "to give presence to." Narrating puts knowledge into play in the real world. Experiences, feelings, inchoate thoughts take form. They gain substance. They become something other than internal wanderings but become active as they are entered into the here and now of the social world.

There is a certain sense in which telling objectifies our subjective experience and projects it into the world of social life. The words live on past their internal value, beyond the closed-off space of the un-told. In such a way, narrations can be considered by the self and by others. They can be taken as an object and analyzed. They are en-textualized in speech or action and can be commented upon, returned to in conversation and taken to other contexts.

Certainly, an important aspect of narrating is telling experience in order to make known what we have lived through. Memoirs and autobiographies are often primarily interested in making life experiences known. This is especially true in cases of hardship and injustice. For example, the publication of journals and stories from the trenches in World War I is voluminous. But even more exceptional are the stories of concentration and death camp survivors after World War II, who provided written and oral testimony of their experiences. In the language of Holocaust studies, witnesses make present their memories through their testimony. Making present is a claim to truth, of holding on to the reality of the past. This is one of the nuances of the idea. In making present, speakers are making claims about the reality of their experiences or knowledge. Part of the object of making present is to clear a space, to make an argument for, the narrator's understanding of reality.

Of course, cynical performances are always possible. The relationship between telling and experience is complex. Narrating makes present but this presence is always in the context of an absence.

There is always a gap between what we know and experience and what we tell (Josselson, 2004). The gap consists of the inability of words to truly capture and represent events and perhaps sentiments and our inability to speak or write as fast as we think and feel. But also, narrating is restrained by the relevance of our thoughts to the current conversation, their tellability in this context (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Power dynamics constrain or limit the ability to speak (Johnstone, 1996). Unconscious desires, conflicts, or traumas may edit internal processes. People lie or willingly conceal. When we give voice to an idea, the expression is not a direct representation of experience itself.

Despite the disjuncture between experience and telling, narrating is closely tied to lived experience and our reflections on life. Narrating is, arguably, the closest that we can get to experience and our understanding of experience. There is no denying the fact that narrations are constructions but they are constructions which articulate aspects of our lived experience and they become active forces in the field of social life.

Narrative works in presence. And it must. What can be said about absence, except it is not there? Most of the time, there is not a lot more to add. Still, we need to recognize and attend to the limits of narrating and what it can reveal about human experience.

The Fusion of Narratings in Time and Space

Narrating is always making present at some specific time and place. In a very real sense, experience is made present here and now, in the context of a particular conversation, real or imagined, that is taking place at a certain time. Considering the idea of making present in relation to time and space adds additional nuances to this function.

It will be helpful to describe making present in time and space separately. But in a sense, they always go together to form a complete context. Bakhtin (1981) coined the term *chronotope* to describe the fusion between time and space evidenced in literary narratives. But the idea is equally applicable to other varieties of telling.

Young's (2004) analysis of oral narratives makes this point explicit. Beginning from Goffman's analysis of frames, Young argues that there are two frames that surround stories about the past. The widest frame, Young calls *the realm of conversation*. Indeed, storytelling is part of everyday language in use. It is found within dialogues, which have echoes of other previous conversations and projections to future scenarios. The conversation that we are in right now is part of a long chain of conversations and only meaningful because it stands in reference to them. Smaller than the realm of the conversation is the storyrealm, which Young defines as "tellings, writings and performances—that is, of recountings of or alludings to

events understood to transpire in another realm" (p. 77). The storyrealm is the here and now in which tellers use language in order to conjure another world. The taleworld is this other realm. It is the world of characters and actions that we take to have transpired in another space and time.

Although my definition of narrative is somewhat different than Young's, her analysis evokes the embeddedness (Georgakopoulou, 2007) of where telling happens. Taleworlds are made present in a specific time/space horizon. They are made present here/now or there/then—in a definite chronotope. We can begin to imagine and concretely describe the when and where of narrating, when and where narrators make a world present.

In terms of temporality, making present means literally bringing experience and evaluation into the present, in present time. In terms of spatiality, making present means building shared tellings and understandings of self, other, and world.

Making Present in Time

The relationship between narrative and time is a central concern in narrative study. Some researchers argue that narrative is the vehicle for bringing together the present, past, and future into a coherent whole (McAdams, 1996).

Freeman (2010) argues that one of the proper functions of narrative is reflecting on and making sense of the past. For Freeman, understanding is always from the perspective of the present, looking backward, what he calls *hindsight*. Reflection provides the space for creating new and meaningful understandings of the past. Hindsight is a kind of "recuperative disclosure" (p. 44). He writes that hindsight and poetry can be "agent[s] of insight and rescue, recollection and recovery, serving to counteract the forces of oblivion" (p. 44). He continues, a little later, "Or, to put the matter more philosophically, it is a *making-present* of the world in its absence; it is thus seen to provide a kind of 'supplement' to ordinary experience, serving to draw out features of the world that would otherwise go unnoticed" (p. 54; emphasis added). Telling the past, putting it into words, is a way of recovering aspects of our past from forgetfulness.

What we recall from the past, and when we recall it, reconfigures the meaning of the past. The past is reflected upon in new ways, through subsequent life experiences and the present. The past is rewritten by how things have turned out since, how our life is now, who we are now.

Time is never just clock time but it is also human time. The now of the clock corresponds to a point in my lifetime and the lifetimes of others who are co-present with me. Making that past present in this now, we tell a developmental story in which we look

over once again those past experiences and give them new laminations of sense and significance. But we always do this from the present. Time moves forwards and backwards; clock time keeps on moving forward, but retrospective time moves backward (Mishler, 2006).

Ricoeur (1980) compares the act of re-collection to the act of reading a book that we have already read before. Drawing upon Kermode, Ricoeur argues that we can only know the meaning of a story or novel when we know the ending. But in life, we already know the ending, or at least, our current understanding of how events have turned out until the present now. In such a way, interpreting our life from the present becomes an act of "reading the past backward" (Schiff & Cohler, 2001). The past is always colored by our knowledge of the present and becomes something new in the act. As our lives develop, so too do we develop new reworkings of the meaning of the past. The past is never just the past but, as Cohler (1982) argues, it is always "a presently understood past."

Making Present in (Social) Space

The past that we make present and the timing of when we make it present rewrites the meaning of our lives, our identities. However, we are just looking at one part of the chronotope. As I have argued, narrating makes present in time and space. We need to consider both in order to form a complete context. In every "now," there is a "here."

In order to understand the "here," it is critical to highlight that space is highly socialized. Other people are the most salient aspect of where we make present our life experience. We are "here" with others, both real and imagined.

This is one of the profound implications of Bakhtin's dialogical theory. All speech is part of an ongoing dialogue and addressed to others (Bakhtin, 1981; Noy, 2002), from whom we expect a response. Our words seek out an answer and are only really comprehensible in light of the response from others (Gergen, 2009). Narrating is a social activity that is grounded in the actual context in which it occurs and it has very clear and concrete social meanings.

Making present in space implies locating ourselves in a given conversation. The imagery is one of being physically present in an ongoing "scene of talk" (Herman, 2009), a social performance (Bauman, 1986) in which we enter into and exit from conversational turns (Sacks, Schlegoff, & Jefferson, 1974). We gain our "footing" in the conversation at hand (Goffman, 1981). We "position" ourselves in relation to what is being said, to the others present, and to larger identity discourses (Bamberg, 2004; Davies & Harré, 1990; Georgakopoulou, 2007; Wortham, 2000).

There is strong evidence that the ability to tell stories is first acquired through the child's participation in storytelling activities with others who are more expert (Fivush & Nelson, 2006). Miller (Miller, Fung, & Mintz, 1996; Wiley, Rose, Burger, & Miller, 1998) observed that children as young as two years old participate in telling stories of their personal past, but always with the help of a more experienced teller. This is what she terms *co-narratives*. Indeed, these are narratives that could not be told except with the mother's help. No scaffolding, no narrative.

Of course, conversations are not only mine. They are not invented from whole cloth in the present. The words and stories that we possess are social, inherited from our predecessors by virtue of our participation in a world rich with sense and meaning. From the very beginning, we find ourselves immersed in this world. We are born, *in medias res*, in the midst of ongoing conversations that precede our own personal existence. Through participation in this world and in concert with others, we discover the language and stories of life. These conversations are concrete and face-to-face. Through repeated interaction with others, we come to know the stories of our community, what a story is, and how to tell such stories. The stories are enacted, made alive, for us in a certain time and space.

Through the enactment of stories, we learn about the basic facts of our existence: what a self is, the roles and desires of others, how the world works, the meaning and goals of life. These stories are resources for understanding who we are and the meaning of our existence. As MacIntyre (1981) put the matter, "deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions and their words" (p. 216).

Although such co-narrations are, theoretically, a stage in the child's ability to independently tell stories about his or her past, co-narrations are much more prominent than is recognized. There are some sound theoretical and empirical reasons to argue that all narrations, even in adulthood, are co-narrations.

Georgakopoulou (2007) argues that narrative psychology privileges narratives in which there is a single speaker who tells a significant life experience to an interested and attentive listener. According to Georgakopoulou, the problem with this model is that everyday narrative practices are strikingly different, involving multiple competing speakers who negotiate basic issues of story ownership and evaluation. Meaning emerges from the interaction in which multiple persons make present life experience, together, regardless of whose experience it was/is/will be. Speakers take up roles or positions in storytelling to produce a negotiated account. Narrating is a co-narrating, a kind of "co-action" (Gergen, 2009), even in the research interview (Mishler, 1986). It involves balance, mutuality, and negotiation between participants.

The end result is to make present together joint understandings of self, others, the world, the past that are mutually shared between the participants. But this is not the only result. Narrating also gives form to divisions and disagreements in these understandings, making visible aspects of power, status, and authority (Georgakopoulou, 2007; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998). Co-telling doesn't lead necessarily to consensus—far from it. It can also be a vehicle for bringing forward and expressing competing versions of reality that remain unresolved.

Structure…Revisited

I want to return to the opposition that I constructed between structure and function. I have argued that narrative inquiry should be concerned with the process and use of narrative. Although structure should not be thought about as an end in itself, how narratives are formed and told can be critical insights for describing and understanding questions about the meanings of narrating. In other words, structures have functions. In the following, I want to make a couple of brief comments about the relationship between structure and function. Certainly, there is more to be said.

First, structure appears to have a link with the length and complexity of narratives. I have argued that showing or making present experience is essential to narrating and of substantial value in understanding life experience. Making present includes intricate and detailed narratings, such as life stories or autobiographies, and shorter interventions into everyday conversations. At the level of more basic narrations, many elements of narrative convention are not as prominent or, perhaps, necessary. Mediation, artfulness, and structure are still evident, but such articulations of experience have more in common with the structure of speech turns in conversations.

But, once we consider more complex tellings, with multiple actions and characters across time and space, the artfulness of forming a narrative takes on increased salience. To deal with complexity of the kind that life relentlessly presents us, narrative conventions provide the tools for managing and expressing the thickness and density of our experience. As Brockmeier (2012) has argued, narrative is the form of discourse best suited to capturing the complex activities of human action. "No other sign system could handle and communicate the complexity of these syntheses in such a comprehensive, economic, and effective manner" (p. 443). Narrative structure is helpful in dealing with the messiness of human experience in order to infer the meaning of actions, motivations, cause and effect, connections. Such conventions become more evident and necessary as complexity increases.

Second, expressions that are structured using particular conventions, such as those resembling a Labovian personal experience narrative, might possess properties such as repeatability, which in turn have consequences for understanding ourselves. Although stories are responsive to the situation of telling and the audience, substantial portions of narrative structure and content are repeated across tellings (Chafe, 1998; Norrick, 1998; Schiff, Skillingstead, Archibald, Arasim, & Peterson, 2006). In other words, people might not tell exactly the same story twice, but central elements of stories are carried to new contexts and over time. Similarly, borrowed, vicarious narratives, from face-to-face conversations and from the media, are routinely integrated into telling of our personal experiences. Putting words into a structure may help us to remember and use the story in diverse contexts. The longevity of particular stories, and particular aspects of our lives, might be enhanced by our ability to articulate those experiences in a conventionalized and transportable structure.

A third way that structures serve functions is in the ability to create and experience other worlds. Herman (2002, 2009) argues that one of the basic elements of narrative is the capacity to create imagined fictional and non-fictional worlds, or storyworlds. There is something seductive about good storytelling; good stories transport readers/listeners to another place and time. This ability to shift from the here and now and into another storyworld relies upon the listener's, or reader's, desire and interpretive skills, but also on linguistic, structural, aspects of the narrative itself. Narratives, literary and oral, often provide indicators for readers to shift their focal point of consciousness to the storyworld (Herman, 2002).

Then…is Everything Narrative?

A functionalist approach to narrative does include a wide range of verbal and non-verbal practices that would be disregarded in current research. In some ways, the range of possible narrative scholarship does become larger, but it also closes off other avenues. In any case, a functionalist perspective does not imply a radical opening of the narrative concept.

First, one should view the functionalist position against the backdrop of what is currently practised. The current use of the narrative concept is woefully imprecise. "Narrative research" appears to have no meaning outside of the researcher's desire to frame his or her study as "narrative." At the current moment, everything is narrative.

In contrast to current practice, functionalism gives shape and grounding to narrative. It does so in a way that is inclusive, welcoming creative ways of approaching meaning making. Using this definition, researchers can recognize narrating by attending to what an

expressive act accomplishes, and know the reasons why they are studying narrating, to understand the hows and whys of meaning making.

Still, distinguishing between what is narrating and what is not narrating on the basis of function will continue to be tricky because it relies on interpretive criteria. Do these words function to express and make sense of life experience? A given application can be disputed. But I don't see this as particularly problematic. All distinctions break apart under critical scrutiny. A good definition stimulates innovation. Functionalism serves as a guide for research and thinking by orienting us toward what narrating can do and inspiring creative research on meaning making.

Still, not everything becomes narrative. But it does mean that the more we stop and pay attention to expressive acts, the more we can start to see them as narratings. Still, typing loudly on my computer is not, usually, a narrating. But given the right context, it can be. Stepping on the brakes of my car is not, usually, a narrating. But, once again, it depends on the context. A verbal greeting, "hello," buying bread at the bakery, ordering a steak at a restaurant, or many of the habitual expressions that we make present in our day to day lives are not, usually, narratings. But they can be.

In my estimation, the answer to whether or not something is narrative moves from a focus on the text in isolation to the way the text is understood. Whether or not something is narrative depends on whether or not we understand it narratively. The burden is as much on how the expressive action is constructed and produced as on how it is interpreted and consumed.

Conclusion

I have argued that the primary function of narrating is making present. Narrating is an expressive act in which life experiences and understandings of life are articulated and made meaningful through their declaration in our present circumstances and in collaboration with co-actors. Making present is not the only function of narrating. To give just a few other possibilities: narrative functions to establish close bonds, to organize past events, to give color and pathos to our lives, to attribute cause and agency to our experiences, to establish social identity, and even to lie and conceal. But I would argue that all of these functions are related to, perhaps even require, making present at their core.

What are the implications of this theoretical analysis for narrative research? Where does it suggest that narrative research should go? I firmly believe that narrative scholars should focus on the process of meaning-making—on what narrative does and how it accomplishes this—in the concrete circumstances in which meaning-

making happens. How do persons, in time and space, make sense of life experience?

In my opinion, this is what narrative research is all about. This is the unique contribution that narrative research can make to the advancement of psychology and the social sciences at large. Narrative allow us to take an inside path to understanding how persons connect together aspects of their life and world. Quantitative methods using statistical analysis can't study how persons construct a world, think about themselves, and connect themselves to their social world. This is what narrative does best. And I believe that it can do so in a way that valorizes the complex experience of persons while holding true to the kind of systematic observation required by science.

Although my description has been theoretical, narrative should not be. Further work on narrative functions should be grounded in actual observations of interviews and other conversations. Once again, the goal is not a taxonomy but to use the idea to think through the problem of how meaning is accomplished in time and space, turning toward the concrete circumstances in which life experience is made present and closely tying our observations to human lives in context.

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