

**Narrative and Psychology
Symposium Proposal, BPS Centenary Conference,
Glasgow, March/April 2001**

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Formulating a Narrative Psychology: Dr Michele Crossley, University of Manchester

Learning Lines of Narrative: Professor Ian Parker, Discourse Unit, Manchester Metropolitan University

Narratives of 'Experience' and Pedagogical Practices: Dr Erica Burman, Manchester Metropolitan University

Free Association, Narrative Analysis and the Defended Subject: Professor Wendy Hollway, Open University, and Professor Tony Jefferson, Keele University

Narrative Subjects: Dr Shelley Day Sclater, Centre for Narrative Research, University of East London

Discussant: Professor Mark Freeman (Holy Cross, USA), with Dr Molly Andrews and Dr Corinne Squire (Centre for Narrative Research, University of East London)

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Theme: This symposium explores the possibilities for a 'Narrative Psychology'. The contributions provide a range of perspectives that point to the value of narrative work for generating new ways of conceptualising and investigating personal worlds.

Objective: The symposium aims to bring together 5 interdisciplinary papers that each address the possibilities for a 'Narrative Psychology'. Questions of methodology, reflexivity and research ethics that arise in relation to the project of building a narrative psychology will be discussed. The symposium will elucidate how narrative theories and methods can be used to understand and investigate human subjectivities, in ways that permit an acknowledgement of the fundamental significance of society and culture but which, at the same time, do not lose sight of a specifically psychological realm of experience.

Relevance of Individual Contributions: Increasingly, psychologists are invoking 'narrative' in their theory and research. For some, narrative work is part of the linguistic turn in the social sciences associated with postmodernism: with an interest in the dispersion of subjectivity, the impossibility of reading of identities, politics and powers from social position, and the multiplicity of meanings. Others take a more modernist approach, regarding narratives as expressors or even transformers of lives. The contributors offer a diverse range of papers, but a unifying theme to which they all contribute in their different ways is found in the 'psycho-social' approach to narrative adopted - an approach that unsettles traditional disciplinary boundaries and that challenges the old individual/society dualism. The papers all locate 'the self' as a psychosocial phenomenon, and explore the complex relations between external and internal worlds.

Formulating a Narrative Psychology

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to provide an outline of the theory, method and potential applications of narrative approaches within contemporary psychology. What is narrative psychology?

Background: The paper presents concrete examples of applications of narrative psychology, including childhood sexual abuse, serious physical illness such as HIV/AIDS and cancer, and mental illness. All of these experiences have potentially devastating effects on an individual's sense of temporal coherence and order and, as such, are fruitful areas of study for the narrative psychologist.

Method/Key Points: Narrative approaches offer novel takes on old questions and generate new ones. How is the experience of self and personal identity linked to language and narrative? What is the role of time, morality, power and control in the construction of identity? How does the choice of one narrative over another have implications for the construction of images of self and others?

Conclusions: This paper gives an overview of the issues involved in formulating a narrative psychology, and provides a framework for the other papers that take up the issues in different contexts.

Learning Lines of Narrative

Purpose: The paper discusses different theoretical approaches (including psychoanalysis) concerning the functioning of social systems, internal objects and symbolic space and explores the appropriateness of narrative methods for understanding the teaching and learning environment.

Background: The paper discusses narratives in institutions as teaching and learning environments, and focuses on the relationship between those who are (fantasised to be) the containers and the owners of knowledge, and those who are (fantasised to be) the recipients and supplicants in the pedagogical apparatus. Examples of the transmission of knowledge through narrative - which includes here abstract instrumental knowledge which it is the explicit task of the teacher to impart, and grounded reflexive knowledge concerning the implicit shape of the teaching relationship - are discussed.

Methodology/Key Points: The paper explores the appropriateness of narrative methods for understanding the processes of teaching and learning.

Conclusions: Narrative psychology is an approach that permits the researcher to make connections between the inner world and the social realm, and which reflexively grounds the researcher in the space that constitutes both.

Narratives of 'Experience' and Pedagogical Practice

Purpose: This paper explores the relevance to teaching and learning practices of recent methodological and interpretive shifts within qualitative feminist research, from eliciting and analysing personal 'experience' to attending to the crafting of situated stories.

Background: Drawing on three distinct theoretical frameworks, the author analyses examples from women's studies and psychology class groups, and argues for the value of elaborating both 'experience-close' and 'experience-distant' arenas within the teaching and learning contexts.

Method/Key Points: The paper illustrates the value of a feminist approach to narrative psychology in relation to teaching and learning practices.

Conclusions: A narrative approach permits innovative and exploratory practices to be supported within academic contexts without posing difficulties for either individuals or groups.

Free Association, Narrative Analysis and the Defended Subject

Purpose: The paper uses a case study of an agoraphobic woman to illustrate the authors' distinctive approach to narrative psychology.

Background: Qualitative psychological research, including some narrative interviews, assumes a unitary, rational research subject, a coherence of identity, and a transparency of meaning. These assumptions give rise to particular methodological and analytical practices and interpretive procedures. The authors argue against these premises and propose an alternative framework for narrative research that utilises insights from psychoanalytic theory and practice.

Method/Key Points: The paper reviews the theoretical assumptions about the research subject that inform much qualitative research, including narrative approaches. The authors' own premise of a defended, rather than a unitary, rational subject is presented, and the implications for methodology and research ethics are explored.

Conclusions: The case study illustrates the 'gestalt' principle of working with the whole data and prioritising making links, as opposed to fragmenting the data for analytic purposes. The authors conclude that narrative methods need not be restricted to the traditional life history method, and that encouraging 'free association' can guard against the artificial production of a coherent subject.

Narrative Subjects

Purpose: The concluding paper in the symposium explores some theoretical, methodological and ethical implications of adopting a narrative paradigm in psychology.

Background: What are psychologists doing when they are working with personal narratives? There are few guidelines for scholars embarking on narrative work. How should researchers proceed when they are called upon to 'justify' their work by other members of the social scientific community?

Methodology/Key Points: This paper foregrounds questions of 'validity' and the nature and ethics of interpretive practice in narrative work. These are important issues, but there is as yet no consensus about the value and the limitations of narrative work in psychology.

Conclusions: Narrative work has great potential to transcend the habitual individual/society dualism, and presents both promises and challenges for the future. The main challenge lies in the need to develop new languages of theory and method, including ways of talking about reflexivity that can address the ethical issues that arise in narrative research. The promise of narrative for psychology lies in its potential to be the means whereby we articulate what it is to be human, in all our complexity and diversity.