

Narrative Epistemology:
Intersubjective Questions of Identity and Meaning

by Alexander Belser



Submitted in part fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of M.Phil.,
University of Cambridge Institute of Criminology

“By nature's kindly disposition, most questions which it
is beyond a man's power to answer do not occur to him at all.”
-- George Santayana (Vassall 2004)

The project of social science is to ask and find ways of answering questions about the human experience. Our research questions address some of the most fundamental and nuanced realms; they are questions of meaning, selfhood, and transformation. These questions are asked and answered within a psychosocial context that recognizes the research participants as agentic constructors of knowledge. These story tellers construct realities with their words, and those realities are worthy of our study. These topics defy reductivist statistical analysis, and so the challenge remains to develop a methodology up to the task of answering these questions, one that

is also cognisant of the interpretive authority of the participants to make sense of their experiences. Narrative methodology takes up this challenge by developing an epistemological framework that focuses on knowledge creation, and a methodology that is intersubjectively negotiated in order to gain access to the difficult questions of identity, transformation and meaning (McAdams 1999: 492).

Quantitative, positivist approaches are successful at answering a wide swath of research questions, especially when dealing with data that is causative and lends itself to numeric analysis. However, proponents of narrative methodology are cognisant of the limits of quantitative research and are critical of its inability to answer questions of meaning, subjective truth, and biographical paradox. For example, psychologist Wendy Hollway critiques positivist methodology for failing to explicate the complex and sometimes irrational workings of the human mind (Hollway 2000, 2001). In her work on society's fear of crime, she points out that Likert scales and other traditional quantitative survey methods suffer from a variety of shortcomings. Positivist methodology limits the collection of data to discrete and easily quantifiable information. Additionally, positivists fail to problematise their research questions, and avoid dealing with data that is not operationalisable (*ibid.*).

In the field of psychology, 'evidence-based practice' is the dominant research methodology, which Hollway assails as part of positivistic science's misguided appropriation of the legitimate forms of knowledge. It "implies that practice was not based on evidence before" (Hollway 2001: 9-10). This epistemological critique is central to the credibility of narrative methodology as a valid form of knowledge creation and analysis. Hollway continues her diatribe against positivist methodology:

"it isolates clients from their contexts, positions the therapist outside the phenomenon being changed (the "individual"), reproduces a mechanistic and rationalist view of behaviour change which ignores affective states and their part in meaning and action...Criteria for what constitutes success are limited to what is operationalisable and measurable"(Hollway 2001: 11-12).

Hollways emphasis on context, affective states, meaning, agency, and the complexity of biographical experience characterise the larger qualitative project as well as the salient hallmarks of narrative methodology. Those who employ narrative methodologies operate within a paradigm that recognizes the contours of intersubjective meaning and embrace an epistemology where knowledge is not ‘found’ but constructed by the participants.

Each narrative is unique—each story, each telling of the story, and each audience member’s interpretation of the story is a novel reconstruction of events in time and space. Ragin laments the inability of social science research to accommodate this uniqueness: social science research gives uniqueness short shrift “by lumping people together, generalizing about them, and ignoring their individuality” (Ragin 1994: 159). Through quantitative analyses, cases “lose their complexity and their narrative order” (Abbott 1992: 53). Alternatively, narrative analyses avoid methodological oversimplification and are concerned with the framing of events, the agentic aspects of historiography, and the recognition of the actor’s reflexive engagement with his own self-story. Also, narrative research methodology is not necessarily limited to qualitative analysis. For example, when examining the context of a subject’s self-story, narrative research methodology may incorporate empirical approaches in its examination of the “cognitive mediators between these environmental influences and individual behaviour” (Maruna 2001: 8). Narrative methodology is better suited to preserve the unique richness of a self-narrative.

The telling of one’s life story is an exercise in “sense-making” and is integral to the identity creation process (Maruna 2001: 7). McAdams stresses the integrative aspect of story-telling; he states that “one of the main things that stories do is to integrate disparate elements of human experience into a more-or-less coherent whole” (McAdams 1999: 481, 492-293). The result of this sense-making is the adoption of a “personal myth” that seeks internal coherence, but may or may not conform to standards of external validity (Maruna 2001: 7). This constructed identity exists in its own right; Sacks asseverates that “each of us constructs and lives a ‘narrative,’ and...this narrative *is* us, our identities” (Oliver Sacks, cited in Eakin 1999: 39).

The presentation and communication of identity exists dynamically somewhere between the poles of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction.’ Eakin claims that although we take the self to be a fact, it “is also finally a fiction, an elusive creature that we construct even as we seek to encounter it” (Eakin 1999: 40). Giddens has weighed in on this debate with his notion of reflexivity. He argues that self-identity is “something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual” (Giddens 1991:, 1991, p52). A person should be able to embrace a consistent notion of biographical continuity, and must have a capacity to keep a particular narrative going” (Giddens 1991:, cited in McAdams 486). This active construction of selfhood and identity within a dynamic ontological framework poses a variety of theoretical and methodological challenges to narrative research. It requires the narrative analyst to refrain from the temptation to characterize a subject’s identity as a discrete datum of analysis.

If narrative is a process of creating subjective truths, how should a narratologist handle self-reporting inaccuracies, or untruths? In his research of the life stories of ‘reformed’ ex-cons, Maruna found that his interviewees had ‘recast’ and “fashioned” their biographies to conform to an over-arching and coherent life trajectory (Maruna 2001: 8; Lofland 288). He describes the process of “wilful, cognitive distortion as ‘making good’” (Maruna 2001: 9). The need for “congruence” and integrity of personal plot incentivizes the storyteller to falsify the parts of his or her own history that don’t fit in the newly minted tale (Lofland 1969: 288). Reliance on self-reported data always entails the risk of falsification, in both qualitative and quantitative research. However, this ‘falseness’ may be instrumental to the individual’s construction of identity and may even prove beneficial to the individual.

The implicit goal of social research is still, oftentimes, ‘objective’ truth. Bakan is concerned with the ethics of narrative research, and addresses the issues of hurt and harm in a volume edited by Josselson. Ultimately, though, he believes narrative has the power to evoke “real truth” as distinguished from literal truth. He states: “There can be a truth in madness, dreaming, poetry, or prophecy, which is higher than literal truth. A metaphor or a fiction might

open a door that cannot be opened by approaches that are too weighted down by duty to literal truth” (Bakan 1996: 7). Referencing Bruner’s distinction between paradigmatic and narrative thought, McAdams remarks that “stories seek not so much truth in the paradigmatic sense, but rather verisimilitude, or life-likeness” (McAdams 1999: 480). McAdams coins the term “psychosocial constructivism” to characterize the dynamic reality constructed within a socially negotiated framework (McAdams 1999: 492).

Knowledge is generated through the interaction of storyteller and his or her audience within a particular socio-cultural context. The telling of the story is like editing the past, and this “reconstruction of biography” occurs within a given framework of socially sanctioned roles (Lofland 1969: 149). Redemption narratives and claims to a “new me” cannot be attributed purely to the agent’s willful capacity to change—he or she must have a “*special* history that *specially* explains current imputed identity” (Lofland 1969: 150; Maruna 89)(emphasis in original). Lofland posits that “moral heroism,” such as the adoption of an evangelical Christian hypermorality, is one way to transmogrify a deviant narrative into one of redemption (Lofland 1969: 282-288). McAdams’ coding framework recognises the importance of these “turning points” and is sensitive to agency codes in a narrative (Maruna 2001: 174).

Maruna raises the problem of roles and “preferred stories” as limiting the available identities reforming deviants may adopt “within existing paradigms of public discourse” (Maruna 2001: 8, also citing Foote & Frank 1999 and Henry & Milovanovic 1996). When choosing participants in his study, Maruna was careful not to oversample members of Alcoholics Anonymous or other rehabilitative organizations because these therapeutic programmes offer “somewhat prepackaged narratives and interpretations” (Maruna 2001: 177). This point is also made by Lofland, who argues that it is “ironic” that self-help groups sponsor the same identity categories as “the social control establishment” (Lofland 1969: 287). The degree of narrative choice of the transforming agent is seemingly limited to a set of predefined and socially sanctioned identity roles.

Another way to address the believability of transformation narratives is to use the language of social performance. Goffman is concerned with the genuineness of an individual's performance of his or her role. Like Lofland, his contemporary, Goffman addresses the issue of role performance, which he likens to an actor assuming a role in a theatrical production. The actor who assumes this new role (e.g. reformed addict, born again Christian) will find "that there are already several well-established fronts among which he must choose" (Goffman 1969: 24). Take for example the reintegrative shaming ceremonies studied by Braithwaite and Mugford. In these new rituals, the offender, usually a young man, is shamed in a circle that includes friends and family, as well as the victim and community members. They argue that "[I]n this ceremony, identities are in a social crucible. The vision" each participant in the circle has of the other is "challenged, altered, and recreated" (Braithwaite 1994: 141). However, the audience in these shaming ceremonies is not asked to critically reflecting on the performative aspects of the offender's assumed role. Goffman argues that this is because "Anglo-American" culture leads us, as audience members, to see the front not as a performance at all, but as an unconsciously generated product resulting from the events that make up a life (Goffman 1969: 61).¹ Goffman goes on to claim that "the very structure of the self" is rooted in the social arrangement of performances (Goffman 1969: 222).

The telling of self-stories produces meaning through intersubjective sense-making. Kvale calls interviewing a "basic mode of constituting knowledge," which sees "the participant as the expert in meaning making" (Kvale 1996: 31, 37). This recognition of the authority of the participant is a central tenant of narrative theory, but there is also the issue of the narratologist's authority to perform a secondary (or tertiary) hermeneutic analysis of a participant's narrative (Josselson 1999: 1999). In any case, it is first and foremost the participant's privilege to interpret his or her own biography as a series of causal, meaningful events. The process of speaking or

¹ Contrast Goffman's cynical cultural framing of the unconscious with Diamond's enthusiasm for his concept of "narrating the unconscious," whereby an individual writes letters to his or her addiction, expressing in words unconscious affective states (Diamond 2000: xxi).

writing is important because it reifies amorphous, pre-lingual notions of selfhood. Abma, thoroughly convinced of the supremacy of sense-making, concludes that “without stories, our lives and practices would be meaningless” (Abma 1999: 170).

One of the challenges of narrative methodology is the multi-case comparison of unique stories. Abbott addresses this issue directly in discussion of the “ontology of cases” (Abbott 1992: 64). Firstly, he defines a “case” as an agent with a unique ‘plot’ (Abbott 1992: 53). Abbott then critiques positivist, analytic approaches for adhering to a single ‘plot’ hypothesis and forcing each case, or ‘unit of analysis,’ to fit within the bounds of that plot. The analyst’s allegiance to his or her particular hypothesis, or, to use Abbott’s language, to “the theoretical dominance of the narrative plot,” results in case homogenisation (Abbott 1992: 65). Abbott champions the formalised utilisation of narrative methodology as a more appropriate approach to the agentic case. He dichotomizes the two approaches as follows:

“Thus the ontology of cases differs sharply in population/analytic and case/narrative approaches. The former requires rigidly delimitable cases, assigns them properties with trans-case meanings, builds cases on the foundation of simple existence, and refuses all fundamental transformations. The latter, by contrast, assumes cases will have fuzzy boundaries, takes all properties to have case-specific meanings, analyzes by simplifying presumable complex cases, and allows, even focuses on, case transformation” (Abbott 1992: 64).

However, despite the advantages of narrative methodology, Abbott bemoans its sloppy and informal application. Abbott argues the need to formalise the discipline², moving beyond the single case narrative approach to “create narrative generalizations across cases” (Abbott 1992: 79). He champions the ontological and epistemological advantages of narrative theory, and advocates the construction of new forms of population studies based upon narrative (*ibid.*).

Abbott argues that there is a long sociological tradition of “universal narratives,” and that a new multi-case narrative method holds is a promising alternative to homogenising positivism (Abbott 1992: 68). There exists a spectrum of the forms of universal narrative, which Abbott delinates into three main groups: (1) stage theories, which posit a common sequence of unique

² See also Josselson’s “methodological commandments” (Josselson 1999: ix)

events, for example Piaget's developmental psychological theory; (2) career theories, which have fewer regular patterns and allow for greater subject agency, for example Goffman's processes for the labelling of deviants; and (3) interactionist theories, which emphasize structure but paradoxically herald the agency of the individual to "reshape, often through cultural redefinition, not only the future of a narrative, but its past as well" (Abbott 1992: 74).

The interviewing process provides a dialogic exchange between the teller and the audience. Each comes to the exchange with a set of static characteristics (e.g. race, age, gender, class), a set of preconceived expectations regarding the interviewing process itself, and, of course, conceptions of the other. Ragin advocates for the narrative analyst to embrace a fluid analytic framing of the narrative participant, as "a fixed analytic frame might prevent researchers from hearing the voices of the people they study" (Ragin 1994: 75). Nevertheless, even in an ideally fluid narrative dialog, there will be baggage, and this baggage will alter the telling of the story. It may even preclude the telling of some stories (McAdams 1999: 481). When the audience is a narratologist, he or she is engaged in what Ragin characterizes as a "process of reciprocal clarification of the researcher's image of the research subject...and the concepts that frame the investigation" (Ragin 1994: 82). This reconstituting image endures the end of the interview, and resurfaces days, months, or years later when the the narratologist re-engages the interview's transcript and begins to unpack its material.

Josselson, an experienced narratologist, is troubled by her subjects' responses to seeing their lives in print. She adopts Kohut's idea of 'mirror transference,' an adaptation of psychoanalytic transference that places the narrative interviewer and analyst in the role of the therapist and the interviewee on the psychoanalyst's couch (Josselson 1999:, 64). Through the dialogic creation of meaning and the reification of self, the participant in narrative methodology may come to regard the analyst as carrying "core aspects of themselves," complicating an already complex scenario (Josselson 1999:, 64). As self-objects, the narratologist's writings "evoke the

vicissitudes of powerful self-object transferences...evoking the dynamics that emanate from the unconscious grandiose self (Josselson 1999:, citing Kohut, 64).

The development of narrative methodology is inextricably joined to the the development of a new epistemolgy. This is a more substantial claim than just saying that theory and method are inseparable: because the creation of narrative is essentially an intersubjective and contextual process of perspectival knowledge creation, the dialogue itself constitutes generates new knowledge, which in turn influences the methodology employed by the researcher. If the narrative method is altered, it alters what knowledge is created in the first place. Narrative enquiry does not shy away from the daunting questions of the individual and collective human project. These questions of selfhood, transformational power and meaning can best be asked and answered within the dialogic exchange of speaker and audience. The hermeneutic meta-narrative seeks to find shared human experiences. The narratologist must strive to explicate these commonalities in a language that satisfies the criteria of scientific validity, while remainig 'true' to the voices and interpretations of the research participants.

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