

The Case for Narrative and Persons

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Narrative and Time

The implication of time for narrative is in its perception as circular or linear: myth is in the former and history in the latter (Freeman, 1998). Mythical time refers to beginnings where ritual first produced by mythical figures brings to mortal beings denouement. Human actors as those so endowed are afforded participation in its “ancient archetypes, gestures, and stories” that lead to meaningful events. Acts, then, become real as they repeat an archetype (p. 32). In this circle of time and life, community is drama repeating the pattern of an earlier eon. Mythical time, then, presents a sociocentric view of personhood, one where life and time are viewed through a repeating circularity and we find attachment in the continuity of past, present, and future. As the image of a circle potently presents the repetition of mythical time, historical time also appeals to geometry for representation and embraces the line as the best expression of sequence. Freeman (1998) quoted Plessner and stated,

The transition from a world without beginning and end to a world of extreme limitations is clearly connected with a release of man from nature... Thus the discovery of the linear time that makes possible a directed consciousness of limits and plunges everything into the light of the unique and unrepeatable raises man’s conceptions to a new plane. World and man become worthy of being remembered in tradition, monuments, and documents. Past, present, and future become distinct. The more deeply this temporal consciousness takes hold of a living community, the more it will be drawn into the individualization of its members and feel death as a threat, whose gravity depends on the mode and measure of the individual’s delimitation against the world and the chain of the generations. (p. 34)

Plessner’s limits bears directly upon our conceptions of the narrative-self. In the replacement of the archetypal pattern embodied in the circle with the historical trajectory embodied in the line (Freeman, 1998), what was once non-ending now terminates evoking images of death. The result is that shorn of the sense of sameness across past, present, and future, humans seek the coherency of an earlier epoch in the hope of achieving meaning and by it personal coherence.

In human actors this produces a desire for coherence that is captured through anticipation of a future. It is this fundamental feature of human temporality that leads us to act and in the acting move through time. However, the anticipation of action can force a comparison of personal experience against the remembered past and call into question what the past may mean for the present and the future (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Anticipation or future

potential then is held in tension within temporality but aided by the ordering inherent to narrative expression, the same expression that establishes a sense of sameness across past, present, and future. In this way narrative time (Mishler, 2006) or the experience of time through the plot and congruence of well told narratives unites time while giving cohesion to life's moments (Fivush, 1994).

Foundationally, these observations build upon Augustine's decoupling of time from movement (Augustine, trans. 2007). Ricoeur (1980) further refined the thought in his statement that "time as a linear series of 'nows' hides the true constitution of time (p. 170). Rather than the unity of narrative being in linearity of beginning, middle, and end (Mishler, 2006), a greater organizing principle is needed. It is found in plot or "the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in any story" (p. 171). The necessity then that narrative time track with clock time is lessened as plot enables what occurs in one scene to be chronologically misplaced but still congruent overall. Likewise the stories of our lives can be misplaced chronologically yet made sense of by the ability of narrative to subordinate time to plot. Narrative, then, finds temporality both in chronology and in conveying connections that are meaningful. Mishler (2006) summed up this double standard of time when he said,

"It appears that the work of narrativization alters the standard, common-sense view of temporal ordering as representing a chronological sequence where events that precede others are independent, and potential causes or explanations of those that follow" (p. 31).

The restatement of time as meaningful connections is necessary due to the inherent variability of the human subject in memory and consciousness. It is these qualities, among others, that make for actors who themselves decouple time from event in the desire to reinterpret what has past. In the search for meaning we routinely recast ourselves as we restate our life stories (Mishler, 2006).

Temporality in human narrative identity construction will bear similar qualities to the narrative of literature yet diverge in its approach to time (Schechtman, 1996). Although both adhere to a patterning of practice and formal acts (Ricoeur, 1988), individual self-narratives and their non-dependence on linearity make possible an accounting of events related in content but not in time (Gergen & Gergen, 2001). The ability to move in and out of remembered events without regard to chronology enables narrative to provide identity and makes possible the sense of a continuous self as through it we integrate what has been lived with what is told (Ezzy, 1998). In this way we fashion a sense of coherence where our lived experience comports with what is remembered (Linde, 1993).

Time and coherence is first seen in literature as the parts of story connect through sequence to the plot as a whole. Then onto life narrative where life story is an account of order and not a collection of random acts. In this ordering Linde (1993) saw a connection for human actors between a sense of time and a sense of coherence, albeit coherence formed within community. Linde stated,

The process of social correction of the coherence furnished by an individual is an extremely important aspect of discourse as a socially constructed rather than an individually constructed phenomenon (p. 17). The speaker works to construct a text whose coherence can be appreciated, and at the same time the addressee works to reach some understanding of it as a coherent text and to communicate that understanding. (p. 12)

Therefore, coherence dawns upon us not because of what is said but because of what is agreed. The communal import of telling is in the agreement that our life stories are meaningful to someone and in that response are the echoes of coherence. In this view the connective ability of narrative to bind past to present is fundamental to personal identity as well as constructive of community and a personal sense of coherence. However, in the outcome of postmodern influence, temporality may not at all times be perceived as coherent.

Postmodern narrative thought emphasizes the decoupling of sequence from story (Currie, 1998; Dautenhahn, 2002; Herman & Vervaeck, 2001; Lowe, 2000; Martin, 1986, Scott, 1995). Nonetheless, the cultural underpinnings of narrative are grounded in the typical chronological-sequential-movement of time (Abbot, 2002; Bennett, 1990; Berthoff, 1970; Bruner, 2001; Ricoeur, 1984, 1985, 1988). However, since narrative is more than a timing of events but a mnemonically infused past and present, this grounding is not slavish but referential (Cobley, 2001). Freeman (1998) warned of a strict adherence to linearity lest our modern lives become formless “like beads in bare sequence.” Yet the ordering linearity provides is needed to “give form to the flux, to make it all seem like there is a point, a purpose, a meaning” (p. 29). Here, Ricoeur (1984) provided a key understanding in his statement, “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience” (p. 3).

For humans time is meaningless without narrative to reveal it. Far from a literary genus alone, narrative finds its source in the human experience with its expectation and memory. In this way time and narrative form halves of a hermeneutic circle and find mutuality, not opposition, in their reference (Ricoeur, 1984). Freeman (1998) provided an example of the hermeneutic circle when he said, “in coming to terms with the past, I can only do so

from the present, through the act of interpretation” (p. 42). The postmodern turn and its privileging of interpretation (hermeneutics) is picked-up in the recognition that linearity’s locating events in time cannot fully contain narrative meaning but expands to include time in ways that transcend fact as exegesis is transcended by hermeneutic: one finds meaning in the period of an occasion, the other in that it has been so. In other words, the ends of our stories are connected to their beginning not necessarily in time but in human comprehension that it be so (Hinchman & Hinchman, 2001).

Our stories, then, not only recount events but also organize them into an understandable whole (Ricoeur, 1984). We look for the selves-of-meaning in memory and expectation while holding these in the tension of actions comprehended over time. However, within these expanded bounds of linearity, narrative is still expressed individually before corporately (Bastos & de Oliveira, 2006). The expression can be autobiography or as McAdams (1993) had it, our making time “a storied affair” (p. 30). In autobiography actors are aware that what is at hand is different from what has been and what will be. In response to the finiteness of linearity, Freeman (1998) quoting Gusdorf, said the autobiographical person, “has become more aware of differences than similarities” and wishes “to fix his own image so that he can be certain it will not disappear like all things in this world.” Eliade, in Freeman (1998), called this the “terror of history” and underscored a collective sense of urgency that we collect our segmented memories and fragmented lives lest they too soon leave us (p. 34).

Narrative in Autobiography and Memory

In a contrast of ancient Greek literature with modern literature, Freeman and Brockmeier (2001) noted the relative newness of focusing upon one’s self as center of meaning. They stated,

There emerges at a certain juncture in European history, in line with the erosion of the mythical thought and a more institutionalized way of life, the historic personage, which is to say, a being-a self in time-who finds in his or her own unique history a means for understanding and coming to terms with existence. It is precisely at this juncture that we begin to see autobiographical memory serving as vehicle for tracing the trajectory of a life and, via narrative, giving it meaning. Historicity, autobiographical memory, and narrative identity therefore emerge in an interlocking discursive configuration. The idea of inwardness serves well to capture its essentials.” (p. 79)

The inwardness of autobiography masquerades as the center of experience (Bruner, 2001). Thus speaking the rhetoric of self-consistency, a rhetoric that attempts to establish the self as distinct, the self of narration (Bastos & de Oliveira, 2006; Freeman

& Brockmeier, 2001) becomes the “representational horizon for presence and personal agency” albeit “within an interpretative community” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 71). So that while the narratives of autobiography are attempts at self-location (Georgakopoulou, 2006), they ultimately reveal our connections to a “complex web of social institutions and interactions” all the while subtly refuting the self as independent (Schechtman, 1996, p. 95). Autobiography, or what Bruner (2002) called “tales from life,” finds its purpose in holding past and present in the tension of a dialectic (p. 14). This gives rise to the construction of the life story where self and memory are interrelated (Fivush & Haden, 2003, vii) and revealed through story.

“We remember by telling stories. Storytelling is not something we just happen to do. It is something we virtually have to do if we want to remember anything at all” (Schank & Abelson, 1995, p. 33). Miller (1994) said much the same thing when he indicated that we remember not to be precise about the particulars of an event but so that we can include the event in a story. Memories, it appears, are the stories of autobiography. In this thought, Denzin (1989) held that autobiographies are “narrative expressions of life experiences” (p. 17). Such experiences are where narrative inheres and its storylines formed so that each telling produces an “integrated logic of personal experience” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 201).

The interconnectedness of our memories and the narratives we use to express them is such that a search for human memory becomes a search for stories (Schank & Abelson, 1995). Although this can involve the selective retrieval of stored events (Ross & Buehler, 1994), our memories, said Schacter (1996), “are rooted in the ongoing series of episodes and incidents that uniquely constitute our every day lives” (p. 16). At a primal level, then, we tell stories to remember. However, there are other reasons why we narrate experience. Blum-kula (1993) held that we tell stories as a way to package experience and Dennett (1989) said telling stories provides self-protection. Schank & Abelson (1995) saw all that we know is deposited in stories while Baumeister and Newman (1995) viewed storytelling as the particular spin we wish to give to an event. Regardless the facet of narratizing, central to narrative tendency is the structuring of human action in an integration of experience (Ezzy, 1998; Read & Miller, 1995): Something we fashion after the crafting of a story.

As we craft our stories we do so “linked to an underlying cultural-historical fabric” whose demands for conformance binds the self through a stock of story forms that determine “who tells which story, when and where, why and to whom” (Brockmeier & Harre, 2001, p. 41). Therefore autobiography affords a presentation of ourselves to others as “typical or characteristic or culture conforming in some way” (Bruner, 2001, p. 41) rather than a totalizing inwardness. So while we do individualize our life as distinct, by use of narratives that are themselves part and parcel of the larger human understanding, we allow

greater access to our story instead of greater privacy (Bruner, 2002). In this sense our autobiographies are a balance between autonomy and the social requirement of being in relation to a world of others, a world where culture, though specific, is receptive to personalization (Schiff & Now, 2006).

Self Construction

Whether narrativizing is a fact of our existence or a language-based strategy, humans are universally inclined to narrative (Blum-kula, 1993) and by it make the self an exchangeable commodity while constructing and ratifying identities (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Linde, 1993; Ribeiro, 2006). In this narrative world we undertake the process of constructing a self that is recognizable through time, coherent in its ability and ordering, and representative of our perceptions. We are never entirely free of the cultural milieu in which we function. Instead, the stories we tell are determined by how “other people narrate us” and the “genres of storytelling inherited from our traditions. Indeed, much of our self-narrating is a matter of becoming conscious of the narratives that we already live with” (Kirby, 1991, p. 6). This agrees with Holstein and Gubrium (2000) and their idea that our stories are formed as we draw from cultural norms. As a stock of plans for lives, culture effectively guarantees its self-perpetuation by making of us variants of its forms (Bruner, 1994; 2004).

The plans and forms of culture deliver a self that is approved (Linde, 1993) and serve as the material of our self-narratives (Gergen & Gergen, 2001). Johnson (2006) said our identity is “represented and shaped through the social and discursive practices” of culture as they are imposed upon us through its institutions (p. 213). This however, is not detrimental but aids human cognition and recognition, a point that McAdams (1996) stressed in his life-story as psychosocial construction. Here as we construct our life-story we do so using elements meaningful only within the culture that jointly authors it. These are the causes, explanations, and events with which we’re familiar and that become the basis of our knowledge (Linde, 1993; Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995). This personalized but narrative self is a perceptive self, one of consciousness, a self that is so to the extent it is conscious of itself. Created of and by narrative this self seems to await only the cloak of story to reveal its character (Dennett, 1989; Ezzy, 1998; Kirby, 2001; Linde, 1993).

In this view consciousness is a product of narrative and not its source. Much as the characters of novel have human properties of strength, character, looks, etc. but are not real, so too the selves of narrative exist only in stories and like other novel creations, bear the properties with which the story has endowed them (Mishler, 2006). Mediated, then, into the social world through narrative (Baynham, 2006; Dennett, 1989; Schiffrin, 1996; Williams, 2001), the conscious self is “more like a piece of necessary cultural equipment than an ultimate psychological reality, something we need in order to get on with the business of life as we have been socialized to understand it” (Eakin, 1999, p.

127). Narration, then, is powerful (Bell, 2006) as well as essential, necessary as well as convenient; for we do not function without telling our story and by it gaining a sense of who we are, where we fit, and what we do (McAdams, 1996).

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