

Narrative and the politics of meaning

Phillip L. Hammack

University of California, Santa Cruz

In a renewed call for interpretive psychological science, this paper argues for narrative as an integrative concept to interrogate mental experience and human development in social and political context. Master narrative engagement is defined as the process by which individuals engage with and internalize competing storylines of history and identity perceived as socially compulsory. Narrative science is concerned with individual responses to these master narratives and the extent to which elements of them become integrated into autobiographies. A narrative approach is posited as better able to capture the reality of lives in context and to enable possibilities for social and political transformation than variable-centered experimental science, which continues to dominate psychology.

Keywords: narrative, interpretive, transformative, politics, meaning

The power of narrative

On the left side, the poster read, “Israel Victorious Over Arab Enemy Invaders.” On the right, “Israel Rapes the Virginity of Palestine and Seizes It in Total.” In the center, “1967.” In the summer of 2003, Israelis and Palestinians were locked in a campaign of mutual delegitimization, and I was conducting fieldwork among Israeli and Palestinian youth engaged in intergroup contact. The poster was the outcome of a “Walk through History” exercise in which participants had the opportunity to present their group’s historical narrative to the other. The conflict of interpretation revealed in the poster was striking for its insular framing and its affective tone. These words were intended not just to provide an interpretive lens of the 1967 war but also the motivational force to engage in acts of mutual destruction. These narratives could provide the “passion” needed to imbue acts of mutual

Requests for further information should be directed to: Phillip L. Hammack, Department of Psychology, University of California, 1156 High Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95064 USA. Email: hammack@ucsc.edu

destruction with meaning. That youth motivated to pursue contact could so easily reproduce these narratives may not have bode well for the course of this conflict, but it revealed their active participation in a world of meanings and, in that sense, their role as cultural actors.

The conflict of interpretation between Israelis and Palestinians, or between any rival groups, is not merely a matter for textbooks or political rhetoric. Rather, interpretive frameworks of history have considerable relevance for the meaning individuals make of their lives. The “redemptive” structure (McAdams & Bowman, 2001) of many Jewish Israeli life narratives seems bizarre amidst the backdrop of historical persecution and anti-Semitism, until one considers the fulfillment of the Zionist narrative of national regeneration realized in Israel’s existence (Hammack, 2009, 2011; Zerubavel, 1995). The “contaminated” structure (McAdams & Bowman, 2001) of many Palestinian life narratives achieves its interpretive sensibility when one considers the way in which stories of loss and dispossession proliferate Palestinian society (Hammack, 2010, 2011; Said, 1994). Personal narratives say a great deal about culture, history, and collective intention as they catalogue life events. They represent texts of social and psychological *integration*, and thus they fulfill both an individual psychological and sociocultural *purpose*. Personal narratives confer meaning, coherence, and purpose (Bruner, 1990; Cohler, 1982; McAdams, 1997), while they simultaneously reproduce or repudiate a collective status quo (Hammack, 2011).

In this paper, I develop two arguments about narrative. First, narrative as *psychological concept* offers an integrative prism through which to interpret lives in their social and political complexity. The meaning individuals make through narrative is not simply personal or idiosyncratic but rather *political* in nature, for it always possesses implications for a particular configuration of social categories and, hence, social competition. Second, narrative as *research tool* offers a transformative method that reveals processes of social stasis and change in social categorization and its consequences for individual self-understanding. I consider human development as a lifelong process of *narrative engagement* — a consistent encounter with the world of stories about the social categories we inhabit, such as nationality, gender, sexual identity, class, ethnicity, and race. I echo the call to narrative that many before me have made (e.g., Bruner, 1990) and specify how this type of scientific practice can produce knowledge that might challenge a status quo of inequality, cultural or political subordination, or other forms of injustice for groups.

The integrative prism of narrative

Narrative exists at two interrelated levels of analysis. At one, individuals use narrative constantly to make sense of the empirical world. They make meaning of daily experience by calling upon the “canonical forms” (Bruner, 1987) or “narrative structures” (Sarbin, 1986) to which they are exposed. The narratives individuals construct then serve as motivational forces for particular sets of actions in the world — *intentional* acts that support the meaning they make within a given surround (Bruner, 1990).

At another level reside the master narratives which serve some collective political interest with regard to social categorization. A *master narrative* represents a collective storyline which group members perceive as compulsory — a story which is so central to the group’s existence and “essence” that it commands identification and integration into the personal narrative. Master narratives exist at the level of all social categories — including gender, race, nationality, class, and sexual identity — and are predicated on a doctrine of essentialism or primordialism about these categories which serves to imbue them with a “natural” rather than “social” character (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Suny, 2001). They are deployed not just in personal narrative construction but also in conversation (e.g., Bamberg, 2004). Cultures are made and remade as individual navigate the discursive waters of these master narratives and make decisions about which aspects of them to appropriate and which to repudiate. This is the central premise of the theory of *master narrative engagement*.

Narrative represents an ideal integrative prism through which to make sense of the social and the psychological because of its ability to connect these two levels of analysis through a single interpretive method. Recognizing that narrative exists at both the personal and political levels of analysis requires a concern not just with individual psychological processes but also the political, social, and economic structure within which those processes occur, as well as an analysis of the interests that particular configuration might serve. Narrativists thus reject the compartmentalization of method to posit that the entirety of the sensory world is “data” and hence must be recorded — through conversations in the field, formal and informal interviews with individuals, graffiti on walls, posters in the city center, political speeches, textbooks, and so on. Narrativists also reject the twentieth-century concept of “objectivity” in method in favor of an epistemological standpoint that views all knowledge as positioned. In the narrative approach, the investigator does not assume a mechanistic role in the collection and analysis of data but rather an active, critical role that embraces the complexity of the social and psychological and does not seek to reduce them into isolated components. For investigators of meaning, there are no boundaries, and there is no end to data collection, only

intermediate decisions to “pause” and communicate what one knows about the historical moment one has just documented.

The process of narrative engagement

The central idea of *narrative engagement* is that individuals are exposed to multiple, sometimes competing master narratives about history, identity, and the meaning of social categories, and that they make decisions, conscious or otherwise, about which aspects of these narratives to appropriate and which to discard (Hammack & Cohler, 2009). We inherit a world of meanings we may blindly reproduce, forcefully reject, or respond somewhere in between. The task of the narrative scientist is to document and interrogate these responses.

Narratives of sexual identity in the US offer a good example. As the master narrative of same-sex desire shifted from the *clinical* category “homosexual” to the *social* category of “sexual minority” in the late twentieth century, forms of autobiographical understanding changed radically (Cohler, 2007). Silence and suffering turned to redemption through “coming out” and active participation in the gay and lesbian community. Gradually, this master narrative has been challenged for its own brand of compulsory identity through a new master narrative of *emancipation* from sexual identity categories (Cohler & Hammack, 2007). Rather than supplanting the redemptive narrative, however, this new narrative competes for appropriation as contemporary youth construct autobiographies (Hammack, Thompson, & Pilecki, 2009), revealing the world of discourse as inherently *polyphonic* (Bakhtin, 1984) as individuals engage with received storylines about self, society, and the meaning of social categories (Hammack & Cohler, 2009). The experience of contemporary sexual identity development among youth is better captured through the dynamism of a narrative perspective than an approach that renders experience static through variable-centered methods.

The idea of master narrative engagement provides a theoretical orientation and methodological approach that maintains the integrity of the complex world of meaning through the analysis of *texts* rather than *variables*. The life stories of Israeli and Palestinian youth, captured at the particular historical moment of their narration, produce texts for interpretation and analysis. At the core of that interpretive analysis is an examination of how these texts relates to other texts — other life stories, political speeches, history textbooks, and so on. The point is to interrogate the discursive content which individuals are constantly navigating as they make sense of the social world. The intertextual analysis of the personal and the political, the individual and the collective, the seemingly idiosyncratic and the apparently shared, is the gem of narrative, for such an approach transcends

false dichotomies to embrace the challenging task of simultaneously understanding the social and the psychological. The idea of narrative engagement provides the would-be narrative scientist with a basic bedrock principle to legitimize the rejection of methods that divide and compartmentalize that which the individual experiences as a complex whole.

From interpretation to transformation

The idea of narrative engagement calls into question the continued emphasis on decontextualized studies of human cognition, development, and social behavior, typically conducted with extremely “WEIRD” (i.e., individuals from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic settings; see Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) populations. The aim of those studies is typically to isolate “causation” of events in such a way as to obscure “the social and political richness of lives in a culture” (Bruner, 1990, p. 137). A narrative stance reorients the question away from “causation” toward the interrogation of individual meaning-making in context. This, in short, is the call to interpretive science in psychological inquiry — a call which is hardly novel (e.g., Richardson & Fowers, 1998; Tappan, 1997) but which can too often be muted by the fragmented nature of scientific inquiry in our time (Valsiner, 2006).

A narrative approach to the study of lives in context stands to elevate the significance of psychological science in the twenty-first century, reoriented toward the larger social and historical forces that bear upon individual lives — forces like globalization, decolonization, and the decline of particular political configurations such as communism in Eastern Europe and authoritarian secular nationalism in the Arab Middle East. Rather than continuing to document the behaviors and viewpoints of “WEIRD” populations (Henrich et al., 2010), I propose we embrace Bruner’s (1990) audacious vision for a revitalized psychology grounded in narrative — a psychology concerned with “acts of meaning,” the consequence of which is a concern precisely for an integrated understanding of “culture” and “mentality.”

An interpretive approach to the study of lives affords two outcomes marked by their absence in the history of psychology — *representation* and *transformation*. By representation, I refer to the provision of voice for our research “subjects.” Narrative approaches address the historic silence of some groups within the discipline of psychology — most notably women and ethnic and sexual minorities (Fivush, 2010). Interrogating experience directly through the words of participants goes a long way toward addressing the oversight in representation of silenced voices.

By transformation, I refer to the possibility that the knowledge we produce might serve some end toward making the world a better place for all. Far from

a noble ideal, I suggest that knowledge production has tremendous potential for social transformation once scientists recognize the inherently moral and political implications of their work. Just as psychological knowledge has been historically used to support a status quo of pernicious cultural ideologies such as racism or heterosexism, it can be reclaimed as a tool for social transformation through a narrative approach (Frost & Ouellette, 2004; Hammack & Windell, 2011). For example, the dramatic shift in narrative understanding about homosexuality which US psychological science formally embraced in 1975 has resulted in the production of knowledge intended to both understand same-sex attracted individuals on their own terms, rather than through the lens of heterosexism, and to advocate for their individual and collective well-being. This knowledge is increasingly being considered among judges and policy makers in the US context (Hammack & Windell, 2011), which has served the interest of justice and recognition for this population.

These ideas about the nature and possibility of knowledge production are not intended to antagonize the vast majority of psychological scientists who, particularly in the US, are engaged in an ever-expanding quest to isolate the fundamental principles of “psychic unity” (Shweder, 1990) through increasingly costly machines. Rather, I aim to demonstrate how the method of narrative can produce knowledge that serves the ends of representation and transformation and how, thus, interpretation reorients psychological knowledge toward a potentially higher place of import to other disciplines and to the world at large.

To return to the case of Israelis and Palestinians, the conflict of interpretations regarding master historical narratives of 1948 or 1967 is embodied in the collective acts intended to achieve recognition and justice for members of these rival national groups. Participation in these acts — typically assertions of exclusive legitimacy — commands a particular form of autobiographical understanding in which personal narratives converge upon key themes of insecurity, victimization, and outgroup delegitimization, among others, to provide acts of aggression with interpretive sensibility and motivational force (see Bar-Tal, 2007). Understanding the endurance of social and political entanglements such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or the strained relations between immigrant and non-immigrant populations in Europe, or the continued subordination of sexual and ethnic minorities in liberal democracies such as the US, is best achieved when the social scientist considers the process of narrative engagement. The knowledge produced through a narrative paradigm exposes lived experience in its most “authentic” form, for it necessarily assumes a holistic stance toward the person in context. This kind of knowledge stands to challenge not only our status quo of scientific understanding, but also of political configurations, for the “raw” data of narrative cannot hide behind the comfortable confines of disembodied “variables” which have too often

created canyons of silence for some groups, in the interest of aggregation and the provision of “laws” of human experience and behavior.

I propose, like many before me, to reorient psychological science toward the study of meaning in context, best accessed through an understanding of the social and psychological as “texts” for holistic, integrative interrogation. Such a science must, however, challenge its own master narrative of identity to reconsider its values and assumptions as a form of productive activity in the business of knowledge production. I fear the fragmented nature of our scientific discourse will, like many calls before mine, result in the failure to provoke the intended reaction, but the attempt to rupture the comfortable confines of our received master narrative seems still worthwhile and all the more necessary as psychologists continue to struggle to find a credible voice within the social sciences in an age of increasing global awareness of social and psychological struggle. Because of its ability to construct a holistic account of individual lives in context, narrative stands to provide just such a voice for psychological science.

References

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* (C. Emerson, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bamberg, M. (2004). “I know it may sound mean to say this, but we couldn't really care less about her anyway”: Form and functions of “slut bashing” in male identity constructions in 15-year-olds. *Human Development*, 47(6), 331–353.
- Bar-Tal, D. (2007). Sociopsychological foundations of intractable conflicts. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 50(11), 1430–1453.
- Bruner, J. (1987). Life as narrative. *Social Research*, 54(1), 11–32.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cohler, B. J. (1982). Personal narrative and the life course. In P. Baltes & O.G. Brim (Eds.), *Life span development and behavior* (Vol. 4, pp.205–241). New York: Academic Press.
- Cohler, B. J. (2007). *Writing desire: Sixty years of gay autobiography*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Cohler, B. J., & Hammack, P.L. (2007). The psychological world of the gay teenager: Social change, narrative, and “normality.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 36, 47–59.
- Fivush, R. (2010). Speaking silence: The social construction of silence in autobiographical and cultural narratives. *Memory*, 18(2), 88–98.
- Frost, D. M., & Ouellette, S.C. (2004). Meaningful voices: How psychologists, speaking as psychologists, can inform social policy. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 4, 219–226.
- Hammack, P. L. (2009). Exploring the reproduction of conflict through narrative: Israeli youth motivated to participate in a coexistence program. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 15(1), 49–74.
- Hammack, P. L. (2010). The cultural psychology of Palestinian youth: A narrative approach. *Culture & Psychology*, 16(4), 507–537.

- Hammack, P. L. (2011). *Narrative and the politics of identity: The cultural psychology of Israeli and Palestinian youth*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hammack, P. L., & Cohler, B.J. (2009). Narrative engagement and sexual identity: An interdisciplinary approach to the study of sexual lives. In P. L. Hammack & B.J. Cohler (Eds.), *The story of sexual identity: Narrative perspectives on the gay and lesbian life course* (pp. 3–22). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hammack, P. L., Thompson, E.M., & Pilecki, A. (2009). Configurations of identity among sexual minority youth: Context, desire, and narrative. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 38, 867–883.
- Hammack, P. L., & Windell, E.P. (2011). Psychology and the politics of same-sex desire in the United States: An analysis of three cases. *History of Psychology*, 14(3), 220–248.
- Henrich, J., Heine, S.J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33, 61–83.
- McAdams, D. P. (1997). The case for unity in the (post)modern self: A modest proposal. In R. D. Ashmore & L. Jussim (Eds.), *Self and identity: Fundamental issues* (pp. 46–80). New York: Oxford University Press.
- McAdams, D. P., & Bowman, P.J. (2001). Narrating life's turning points: Redemption and contamination. In D. P. McAdams, R. Josselson, & A. Lieblich (Eds.), *Turns in the road: Narrative studies of lives in transition* (pp. 3–34). Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association Press.
- Reicher, S., & Hopkins, N. (2001). Psychology and the end of history: A critique and proposal for the psychology of social categorization. *Political Psychology*, 22(2), 383–407.
- Richardson, F. C., & Fowers, B.J. (1998). Interpretive social science: An overview. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 41(4), 465–495.
- Said, E. W. (1994). *The politics of dispossession: The struggle for Palestinian self-determination, 1969–1994*. New York: Vintage.
- Sarbin, T. R. (1986). The narrative as a root metaphor for psychology. In T. R. Sarbin (Ed.), *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct* (pp. 3–21). New York: Praeger.
- Shweder, R. A. (1990). Cultural psychology — What is it? In J. W. Stigler, R.A. Shweder, & G. Herdt (Eds.), *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development* (pp. 1–46). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Suny, R. G. (2001). Constructing primordialism: Old histories for new nations. *Journal of Modern History*, 73, 862–896.
- Tappan, M. B. (1997). Interpretive psychology: Stories, circles, and understanding lived experience. *Journal of Social Issues*, 53(4), 645–656.
- Valsiner, J. (2006). Dangerous curves in knowledge construction within psychology: Fragmentation of methodology. *Theory & Psychology*, 16(5), 597–612.
- Zeruvabel, Y. (1995). *Recovered roots: Collective memory and the making of Israeli national tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.