Narrative Competence and Constructive Developmental Theory: A Proposal for Rewriting the Bildungsroman in the Postmodern World

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Some of the chief characteristics of the narrative psychology of Bruner, Polkinghorne, Sarbin, Freeman, Howard, and White and Epston are outlined with implications for therapy discussed. Narrative psychology is then related to some current models of adult development, including those of Kegan, Perry, Belenky, Labouvie-Vief, Levinson, Basseches, and Pascual-Leone. Types of narrative competence are discussed and an argument is made that developmental readiness for narrative must be considered if narrative approaches are going to be applied. Different types of narrative approaches are shown to be indicative of particular developmental stages. The social relativism of narrative psychology is addressed and it is argued that developmental models provide a scheme for assessing the maturity of alternative narrative constructions.

KEY WORDS: Narrative; adult development; relativism; dialectic.

INTRODUCTION

Narrative psychology (Bruner, 1990; Freeman, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986; Tappan & Packer, 1991; White & Epston, 1990) is a psychology that adopts a different metaphor for describing human beings than the other metaphors adopted by, for instance, behaviorist or cognitive psychology, which each seem to have adopted metaphors from the physical sciences. The central metaphor of narrative approaches is derived from the arts—literary criticism and hermeneutics—and is a metaphor that holds that people are essentially the writers of the stories of their lives. This means that lives can be understood as constructed out of elements that are similar to those of fiction. These elements may be identified as plot, action, sequentiality, perspective, scene, character, goal, instrument, trouble, resolution, and so forth. The stories told have varying degrees of canonicity. Stories have a beginning, middle, and end. People make sense of their lives by emplotting their actions and the sequences of the events that make up their lives in stories that become the frameworks by which their lives possess coherence, meaning, and purpose. It follows that, when we try to understand the actions of others, we should function as literary interpreters or hermeneuticists, treating actions as texts of possible meaning, and not function as empirical scientists, aiming to map objective reality into our models of prediction.

In this paper, it will be assumed that a narrative approach is a more desirable metaphor to adopt than other metaphors that have been employed by social scientists, such as the metaphor of mind as a conditioned reflex or the metaphor of mind as a machine. Indeed, it is a narrative approach that makes us aware of the role of metaphor in understanding. Psychological approaches are abandoned, which assume implicitly that we are only passive products of our environments or that we are as determined as programmed machines. Adopting a narrative approach

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means that our goals and our purposes as social scientists have to be reevaluated; our objective will not be to accept either prediction and control nor the charting of a flow diagram as adequate paradigms for understanding human lives.

Bruner (1986) has argued for making the distinction between narrative and paradigmatic modes of understanding. Psychology has emphasized the latter, but he has argued that it is time now for psychology to develop the former. The paradigmatic approach works with generalities and universals; the narrative approach works with experiences and particulars. The paradigmatic aims toward causal explanation whereas the narrative approach strives toward interpretive understanding. Knowledge is objective for the paradigmatic while knowledge is infused with the subjective for the narrative.

Narrative approaches have been defined in a number of ways (Bruner, 1986; Freeman, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1988; White & Epston, 1990). While I do not hope to provide a definitive account of exactly what narrative is, I would like to convey a sense of its meaning by discussing it under the following aspects: freedom; temporality; cognitive structures; culture, stories, and symbols; lives as texts; the nature of reality; the nature of breaches and ruptures; and therapy as narrative repair.

Freedom

According to narrative psychology, we can reinvent the stories that structure our lives once we become aware—and only when we become aware of—their storied nature. We can transform our species-specific genetic inheritance and our prescriptive and often repressive social programming. We can rewrite the inheritance of our cultures and see through the one-sidedness of its values and the arbitrariness of the perspectives it has thrust upon us. We can be the authors of our futures rather than the players of scripts. We can see through and expose the fears and prohibitions that we carry with us from our childhoods (Gould, 1978) and that continue to direct the course of our habitual cognitive and affective reactions.

The metaphor of life as narrative means that our lives are written as stories we tell ourselves and others. Our lives are known only as interpreted through the means of a text that we fashion and interpret: our memory, our past, our circumstance, our waking and sleeping states, what we chose to know and what also we choose not to know, who we choose as friends and who we exclude, what societies we identify with as aspects of our selves. These can all be constructed deliberately, perhaps mindfully (Langer, 1989), or optimistically (Seligman, 1990). However, we often proceed without mindful deliberation, mindlessly, sometimes pessimistically, acting on the basis of hardwired programming derived from animal instinct or socially conditioned mindsets that operate without our awareness. While such conditioning can be called religion, or ideology, or even conscience, in reality it is the result of a blind genetic process of mutation inherited from our ancestors who lived in swamps or barren savanna or else it is the hardened sediment of prejudice taught us by witch doctors and priests who have been accepted as authority figures.

Freeman (1991) noted, citing Bakhtin, that we need to understand first how it is that we are externally determined before we can begin to develop our own freedom. For Freeman, this is the beginning of the possibility of a rewriting of the self. It is the act of rewriting that creates the conditions necessary for interpretation, and interpretation leads to reinterpretation, hence rewriting. Interpretation is a creative act, but something created is always created out of something given. Kegan (1994) wrote that authority and freedom have a changing dialectical relationship with development. Authority is earlier, that which is defined by others, and consists of external voices, prescriptions, interdictions, and absolutes. With development of agency (Kegan's fourth-order Institutional self; see below) authority becomes that which comes from within. We speak then of being self-authoring.

Such a conception of freedom to rewrite the self does not mean that we create our identities out of nothing. We work as artists have to: with the materials at hand, including our genetic or social programming and conditioning. In the case of writing ourselves, the materials are essentially language, and the forms and structures it possesses, and our experiential and social worlds, as well as our bodily selves. The authority of tradition, our lived world, and the facticity of our bodies serve as the ground for developing self-authority. Authority is first that which we have to accept and with which we have to identify. Only later can the self objectivize and externalize its identified contents and develop its own forms of self-authority.