

# NARRATIVE IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

*Molly Patterson and Kristen Renwick Monroe*

Department of Politics and Society, University of California, Irvine, California 92697;  
e-mail: mpatterson@uci.edu, KRMonroe@Orion.uci.edu

KEY WORDS: psychology, cognition, perceptions, interpretive methodology

---

## ABSTRACT

Narratives—the stories people tell—provide a rich source of information about how people make sense of their lives, about how they construct disparate facts and weave them together cognitively to make sense of reality. Narrative analysis is particularly useful in providing insight on the cognitive process and on the role of culture in shaping any human universals.

We begin by defining narrative as a concept and as a methodological tool in social science. We provide intellectual background on how narrative developed in literary theory and how it has been applied in cognitive analysis. We then discuss narratives as sites of cultural contestation and the role of narrative in the construction of social theory. We conclude on a note of caution, suggesting the need for care when interpreting narratives.

---

## WHAT IS NARRATIVE?<sup>1</sup>

A narrative is essentially a story, a term more often associated with fiction than with political science. Yet narrative also refers to the ways in which we construct disparate facts in our own worlds and weave them together cognitively in order to make sense of our reality. Since these narratives help us understand ourselves as political beings, narrative becomes an invaluable tool in navigating the myriad of sensations that bombard us daily. Insofar as narratives affect our perceptions of political reality, which in turn affect our actions in response to or in anticipation of political events, narrative plays a critical role in the con-

<sup>1</sup>This section draws heavily from Monroe (1996).

struction of political behavior. In this sense, we create and use narratives to interpret and understand the political realities around us. We do this as individuals and we do it as collective units, as nations or groups.

As a research methodology, narrative finds many applications in a multitude of disciplines, from anthropology and literary theory to history and psychoanalysis. Narrative is utilized as one of the most widespread and powerful forms of discourse in human communication. It differs from other modes of discourse and other modes of organizing experience in several important ways. (a) Narrative generally requires agency. It involves human beings as characters or actors. These human beings have a place in the plot, a role in the story. When narrative emphasizes human action that is directed toward goals, it provides insight on how different people organize, process, and interpret information and how they move toward achieving their goals. (b) Narrative suggests the speaker's view of what is canonical. What is ordinary and right is discussed as the matter of fact. The unusual and the exceptional are what is remarked on. Narrative thus provides data for analysis not only in spoken responses but also in the spaces and silences. (c) Narrative requires some sequential ordering of events, but the events themselves need not be real. The story constructed may be indifferent to extralinguistic reality; it is the sequence of the sentences, the way events are recounted (rather than the truth or falsity of any of the particular sentences or of the events recounted), that reveals the speaker's mode of mental organization. How the speaker organizes events to give meaning to them is what becomes important, for it is the process of organization that reveals much about the speaker's mind. (d) Narrative requires the narrator's perspective. It cannot be voiceless. It thus moves beyond mere reporting; it suggests how the speakers make sense of the commonplace. It reveals how the speakers organize experience and reveals the distinctions people make in their everyday lives. The speakers create the context to be analyzed by drawing in what they consider relevant cultural influences. This makes the narrative contextually thick. It provides a sense of speakers' cognitive maps of themselves, both in relation to others and in the specific contexts of their described behavior.

Narrative is especially useful in revealing the speaker's concept of self, for it is the self that is located at the center of the narrative, whether as active agent, passive experiencer, or tool of destiny. In at least one sense, narratives function as autobiographical accounts given by the narrator in the present about a protagonist who bears the same name, who existed in the past, and who blends into the present speaker as the story ends. The story explains and justifies why the life went a particular way, not just causally but, at some level, morally. The narrator uses the past self to point to and explain the present and the future. This is as true on the individual level as it is on the macrolevel, when groups of people describe a common past suggesting why they have a collective identity that should be recognized as legitimate by others.

When we interpret narratives, we can perform the kind of linguistic analysis that a cognitive scientist or linguistic scholar might perform, focusing on lexical and grammatical usages or counting types of structures. Alternatively, our interest in interpretation may be less technical, focusing primarily on how people conceive of themselves and of themselves in relation to others. The narrative thus becomes an invaluable tool for political scientists concerned with how such issues as identity—group or individual—influence behavior.

## LITERARY THEORIES OF NARRATIVE

Because narrative is inextricably intertwined with the idea of story, as a methodological tool it became unavoidably imbued with the aura of fiction. This position can be uncomfortable for political scientists, because the drive for scientific rigor can serve as a wedge between the discipline of political science and innovations in the humanities. Nonetheless, narrative has been gaining a foothold as a useful concept in the social sciences in recent years, providing both insight into how knowledge is constructed and a methodology for rigorous research.

Martin (1996) traces the emergence of recent theories of narrative from attempts establishing the novel as a valid area of literary study. During the earlier half of this century, the dominant theory argued that the aesthetic value of a literary piece lay in the perfection of its form and technique. Poetry and drama were seen as valid areas of literary study due to their attention to form and technique, whereas novels were not, because of their apparently haphazard and disorderly nature. The attempt to overturn that dominant line of thought and to establish the literary value of the novel led to theories of form, structure, and technique in the novel. If the value of poetry and drama lay in form, it was argued, then the way to demonstrate the value of the novel was to show that it, too, could be subjected to critical analysis of form and technique. As this perspective took hold in the late 1940s and 1950s, other scholars argued that the value of the novel lay not in its form, but rather in its content and effect on the reader. From either perspective, however, the realism of the novel was paramount. Accomplished novels were judged to be those in which the world or the mind was portrayed accurately and in which the author did not intrude or make his/her presence known. The distinction between form and content was thus generally accepted, even as their relative importance was being disputed.

Challenges to the primacy of the realistic novel and its emphasis on impersonal narration opened the way for a shift from theories of the novel to theories of narrative. During the 1960s, the study of narrative became both international and interdisciplinary. French structuralism (see Barthes 1968, 1974; Greimas & Courtés 1976) drew on linguistics as a model for theorizing a basic underlying set of principles connecting all narratives. One of the most influential scholars to demonstrate the applicability of linguistics to other social sci-

ences and other forms of narrative was anthropologist Levi-Strauss (1967). Levi-Strauss distinguished between surface structure (the unique details of particular action sequences) and deep structure (universal oppositions, such as life/death, that are manifest in the surface structure in particular ways depending on culture and context). In addition to linguistics and anthropology, influences came from Russian formalists, notably Propp (1958), Bakhtin (1981), and Shklovsky (1990). Structuralist work in a variety of disciplines demonstrates that narratives contribute to our understanding of subjects as disparate as anthropology and history or theology and psychoanalysis, even though the narrative forms in these areas differ significantly from those in the novel. Despite theoretical differences, many structural anthropologists (Campbell 1949, Levi-Strauss 1967), French structuralists (Frye 1957), and Russian formalists (Propp 1958) argue that all stories are variations on a few universal plots and that the study of such narratives can provide insight into universals of human nature and experience.

The idea that there are universals governing narrative structure, as well as the structure of language or the structure of consciousness, has been challenged by post-structuralists such as Lyotard (1984), Derrida (1976, 1981), and Foucault (1980, 1984). Post-structuralism largely rejects any attempt to seek out universal structures of human nature, culture, history, or language. Derrida, for instance, uses the method of deconstruction to argue that spoken or written language (signifier) is never a perfect reference to a knowable object (signified), because neither signifier nor signified remains fixed or stable; they are always shifting. Foucault challenges historical methodologies that provide coherent and seamless narratives, especially those viewing history as the story of progress toward some final goal. His alternative—genealogy—is a method of history that allows for ruptures without explanations and that emphasizes history as an assemblage of moments rather than an unfolding, unbroken chain of events in which one link leads necessarily to the next. Hence, Derrida and Foucault challenge narrative in all its forms, to the extent that narrative suggests a coherent, unbroken, and totalizing theory (i.e. a depiction that appears “total,” without lapses, discontinuities, erasures, or contradictions).

So why is narrative so frequently associated with postmodernism? Because narrative is also associated with a kind of knowledge that post-structuralists champion. Post-structuralists seek to subvert grand, universal, totalizing theories through reference to knowledge that is local, specific, and popular. One of the characteristics of postmodern cultural practices is a blurring or rejection of lines that divide popular and high cultures. Theoretical practices echo this maneuver by drawing on popular forms of knowledge to challenge more officially sanctioned ways of scientific knowing. Narrative, which plays an important role in local, everyday knowledge, becomes part of the challenge to universal theories. Hence, post-structuralism, which cannot propose a totalizing theory

of narrative, nonetheless makes use of narrative in various ways. It challenges the illusion of coherence created by narrative form, and it uses knowledge that often takes the form of narrative in culture.

Theories that emphasize the recurring and critical role of narrative in the construction of meaning challenge the distinctions among such narrative forms as novels, folk tales, and histories. They also challenge the assumptions that separate true narratives from fictions, higher forms of literature from common folk tales, scholarly writing from popular writing, and social sciences from humanities. Despite such challenges, the usefulness of literary theories and insights for the social sciences often remains obscure. While noting the applicability of theories of narrative to provinces other than literature, theories of narrative nonetheless remain overwhelmingly directed toward fictional prose, masking the connection between the often esoteric literary theories and the broader applications they suggest.

One of the most important and persistent areas into which narrative theories do cross academic boundaries is the discipline of history (see White 1981). The immediate applicability of the puzzles of narrative theory to history makes sense because history is concerned with assembling events into meaningful sequences, with all of the concomitant problems of deciding where those sequences begin and end, what events are to be included, and what sequence counts as the most accurate. However, the many connections between narrative theory and other disciplines remain to be fully developed.

## NARRATIVE AND ORDINARY DISCOURSE: A COGNITIVE VIEW

Narrative plays a central role in cognition, in organizing our perceptions of reality into a coherent and meaningful pattern. Bruner, one of the founders of artificial intelligence, has recently (1996) criticized psychology and cognitive science for underemphasizing the role of narrative in human affairs, arguing that narrative is critical in the meaning-making of everyday life. He connects narrative with the project of finding one's own place in the world. Both Bruner and Martin (1996) underscore the human need to locate oneself in a story about how the world progresses and how one fits into it. This need is clearly illustrated by how children play at being grown up and suggests both how children enter into a culture and how they use stories to wrestle with the emotional difficulties accompanying maturation. Children act out difficulties with toilet-training or adjustment to school or the birth of a sibling. They imagine growing up, finding jobs, leaving home. Child's play thus becomes a rehearsal of stories and their variations, and those stories are about fitting into the world.

We never stop telling ourselves stories, because it is how we make sense of our place in the world, what came before, where we are now, and where we are

headed. Even as adults, we continue to imagine our futures, families, careers, retirements, and major transitions. In a series of award-winning books, Coles has utilized stories to create a kind of psychiatric ethnography in which stories are employed to capture and explicate the reaction of children and adults to a wide variety of stress, sometimes induced by political situations such as the Civil Rights movement in the South (1967), sometimes by economic disaster such as endemic poverty (1971), and sometimes merely by everyday adjustment to the demands of professional life (1989).

The stories we tell are profoundly influenced by what is possible and what is valued within our culture. In a high-tech media age, an array of possible stories is provided by television shows and movies that display glamorous, exciting, and naughty alter-egos or, for those weary of the fast pace, bucolic pastorals where life is simpler and more peaceful. Bruner (1996) notes the critical psychological function provided by alternative narratives—and thus alternative selves—within a culture where some people are excluded or mistreated by the dominant modes of imagining lives and progress. When narratives of culturally acceptable success are not available or are beyond imagination for a particular group, subcultures provide alternative ways to make sense of one's place in the world. (Folk tales provide one obvious instance of this. Indeed, nationalist movements often make use of folk stories in their attempts to unify a people.) The importance of having such culturally available narratives, and the danger of not having narratives of success available, partially explains the insistence of marginalized groups that their stories also be represented within the mainstream media.

Bruner is aware of the skepticism with which social scientists may view something as apparently imprecise and dependent on interpretation as narrative. He addresses this skepticism in a discussion of narrative's role in epistemology by contrasting the process of interpretation with that of explanation. Bruner argues that although explanation and interpretation are not synonymous, neither can exist without the other. Explanation involves causal statements that can be proven or disproven, such as scientific hypothesis testing. Interpretation, on the other hand, is concerned with understanding, which Bruner defines as "the outcome of organizing and contextualizing essentially contestable, incompletely verifiable propositions in a disciplined way" (1996, p. 90). What can be explained through falsifiable hypotheses is necessarily limited. What can be explained also must be interpreted and understood. One of the most important tools for interpretation is narrative.

Bruner defines narrative as a sequence of events that carries meaning and is justified, at least in part, by the fact that it somehow violates what is normal or expected. We do not narrate all the details of any circumstance; what we choose to narrate is generally noteworthy because it stands out by posing a problem or exception. The point of the narrative is to resolve the imbalance or

uncertainty of the problem and to restore equilibrium. As such, all narratives are essentially normative, even when the voice of the narrator is well hidden. By suggesting both what is a norm and what is a departure from the norm, all narrative suggests an interpretation of what the state of the world ought to be. Using a similar argument, historian White (1981, p. 23) makes an even stronger claim, suggesting that all narrative moralizes judgments.

When the subject of narration deals with the common or everyday, narrative serves to both highlight and call into question what we take for granted in our daily lives. It provides a way to see from a new perspective what we otherwise overlook. This attempt to discuss the tacit assumptions underlying a historical period and how the shifts in such assumptions are critical to social science is illustrated by Hirschman's (1977) splendid analysis of the cultural shift preceding the European transition to capitalism or, in a shorter historical time period, Kracaur's (1947) creative use of films to trace the deterioration in bourgeois values in Weimar Germany and the growth of Nazi power.

## NARRATIVES AS SITES OF CULTURAL CONTESTATION

Narratives are important in providing both individuals and collectives with a sense of purpose and place. The shared stories of a culture provide grounds for common understandings and interpretation. But as such, they may become sites of cultural conflict when those common understandings are challenged. If narratives provide a way of understanding the world and locating oneself within the broader culture, then a movement that seeks to alter the structure of society also seeks to challenge the understanding of people within that society and, necessarily, the narratives that underpin those understandings. Challenges to such stock narratives are common as society reassesses its position on critical issues (note the challenge by Native American groups to the 1950s cowboys and Indians game or feminist rejection of many traditional fairy tales that depict women in passive roles). These challenges may occur at the individual level long before the group itself shifts its view on the preferred narrative; for example, the lyrics Paul Robeson sang to "Old Man River" shifted as Robeson himself became less willing to accept the role society offered him as a black man.<sup>2</sup> And within the group challenging the narrative perceived as dominant, members may differ as to how the narrative should be redefined. (Sometimes these disagreements or ambivalences can focus on particular words. Witness the shift over time as "Negro" became the preferred term, designating

<sup>2</sup>Robeson originally sang, "I gets weary and sick of trying, I'm tired of living and scared of dying." He modified these words in different ways at different points in time; perhaps the most significant modification was, "I keep trying instead of crying, I must keep fighting or else I'm dying."



respect, and then later became a pejorative, as “black” came to be associated with the power of the group. The contemporary confusion and disagreement over whether “black” or “African-American” is the desired narrative label illustrates the ongoing nature of the political aspect of linguistic terminology.)

The above examples illustrate how people use folk narratives to modify and challenge particular ways of interpreting history and the existing relationships among people. Nowhere is this more starkly and politically demonstrated than in narratives of national identity. Stories about the origin and development of a nation provide a shared sense of who we are, where we came from, and how we fit together. These narratives permeate culture and are essential to any kind of collective functioning. They are passed on through the formal education system and play a significant role in the broader popular culture, as is evident in the United States. (There are, for example, clear differences among a rigorous course in US history, a dramatic reading of “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere,” and a viewing of *How the West Was Won*, yet all three illustrate how a narrative conception of history constitutes a significant part of our socialization, via both formal and informal education.)

The political importance of commonly shared narratives means they often become the focus of political debate. The importance of the American story is reflected, for example, in the bitterness of disputes over the content of school curricula. Movies and poems are important manifestations of the American story, but schools are seen as the keepers of the most true and official versions. The drive to make school curricula more inclusive of diverse peoples and histories, or to emphasize or interpret historical moments differently, emanates not only from the desire to increase historical accuracy but also from a more fundamental challenge to that sense of who we are and how we relate (and have related) to each other. What might otherwise seem a clear-cut question of facts becomes vastly more complicated when we recognize that no history is without an implicit sense of protagonists and antagonists, no set of facts is without interpretations of what is important or relevant and what is not. Challenges to the standard curriculum are made with a sense of necessity and urgency, and these challenges are often met with a defensive and resentful reception. The particular narratives of US history and identity that will prevail have profound implications for how we will proceed, because those stories produce serious material consequences. How we make sense of the world and our place in it guides how we act and how we understand other actors in our world. What is at stake in the telling of the American story has as much to do with the here and now—who we are today and where we are going—as it does with events and people long past.

Barber (1992) offers an intriguing analysis of the American story and the ways in which it is contested. He suggests that nearly all versions of the American story share an emphasis on liberty. Although different versions portray the achievement of liberty, the failure to keep the promise of liberty, or the strug-



gle toward a free society, the competing interpretations, Barber argues, are all built on one common theme. The narrative of America thus is central in struggles for rights and the formation of group identities. Indeed, the single most important strategic decision faced by those who have felt left out of the American way of life has been whether to accept or reject the exceptionalist story; to buy into or spurn the rhetoric of rights; to try to possess the American founding, understood as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, as a story that belongs to us all—or to unmask and discard the founding as the hypocritical and deceitful strategy of the powerful seeking to legitimize their tyranny (Barber 1992, pp. 71–72).

Hochschild's (1995) work on racial tensions employs a similar logic, arguing that a vaguely articulated but deeply held sense of the American dream provides a common identity for Americans, both black and white. When this dream is questioned, and in particular when certain groups feel the dream will never be attainable for them, the underlying unity of the country becomes threatened. In this sense, both political identity and political stability emanate from the sharing of a common narrative—the belief that in the United States all groups can eventually, with hard work, achieve some kind of success.

The relation between shared narratives and national history and identity extends far beyond the shores of the United States; it is evident in the developing of nationalist movements worldwide, as politicians often consciously rewrite history to achieve the political goals of the new national unit. Bruner (1996, p. 88) describes a visit from Russian officials struggling with questions of how to teach Russian history in the aftermath of the Communist regime. Did it make sense to portray the years of Communist rule as a mistake or deception? How should they understand and present the relationship between the telling of history and the construal of future possibilities? Post-colonial writings are full of questions about how to reconstruct historical narratives that were written to fit the purposes of colonial rulers. Spivak (1988, p. 198) says of the subaltern studies group, a collective of Indian historians, "They generally perceive their task as making a theory of consciousness or culture rather than specifically a theory of change."

A theory of consciousness perhaps must be implicit in any history of social change, because such a history not only tells what people did, but also suggests some of the reasons why they did it. The "why" can become important and contested, especially if part of the project is to document a sense of agency and self-determination on the part of the formerly colonized. Is the history told from the perspective of resistance to colonial rule? From the perspective of the occupiers? As a story of will to self-determination? As a tale of international forces conspiring to push the occupiers to withdraw? Many versions could be accurately and meticulously documented but still be the source of contention, precisely because of the inherently interpretive nature of the undertaking and

because of the interpretation's repercussions for how people understand themselves in relation to their history and the rest of the world.

## NARRATIVES IN SOCIAL SCIENCE THEORY

Narratives circulate in more narrowly academic arenas just as they do in the broader culture, and they provide the foundation on which social theories are constructed. Somers & Gibson (1994) offer an argument about the role of narrative in social theories of action that is broadly applicable to the role of narrative in social science theorizing. They point out that the language and concepts of social science narratives are so embedded in our understanding that we fail to recognize them as historical products rather than as universal givens. As Somers & Gibson suggest, "Social theory is as much history and narrative as it is metatheory. In its construction all theory presumes a prior question to which the theory is designed to be an answer" (1994, p. 45). In other words, they argue that theory is built on a narrative of a problem to be solved. By tracing the emergence of the concepts by which we currently define our problems and shape our solutions, we gain new insights and possibilities.

This argument fits with the definition of narrative, offered by Bruner and others, as a sequence of events arranged around a problem and designed to restore equilibrium. In particular, one is reminded of Bruner's (1996) and White's (1981) observations about the normative or moralizing aspects of narrative. The concepts we use to build theory are themselves narratives, or the symptoms of narratives. Development, industrialization, the Cold War, and class conflict are all built on stories about how the world has grown and changed, and they are infused with strong normative implications. This does not undermine the theoretical rigor of theories that use these concepts, but it should remind us that concepts on which we rely are themselves dependent on assembling events and interpreting them in a particular way. We cannot do without this kind of understanding, but we do better when we are able to reflect on how we come to understand in the particular ways that we do. (Pateman's 1988 feminist critique of social contract theory is one of the best-known illustrations of this.)

Building on the insights of such contemporary theorists as Ricoeur (1981) and Lyotard (1984), Somers & Gibson suggest a definition of narrativity with particular relevance to the social sciences. This definition contains four features. The first feature, "relationality of parts," describes the need to make sense of events by placing them in relation to other events; isolated events by themselves tell us nothing. "Causal emplotment" elaborates the relationship between elements. The cumbersome word emplotment simply refers to locating the elements of the narrative in a plot so that there is a causal relationship among them. "In fact, it is emplotment that allows us to construct a significant network or configuration of relationships" (Somers & Gibson 1994, p. 60).

The third feature of narrative, “selective appropriation,” indicates that one chooses to incorporate some potential elements into the narrative and omit those that are less germane. The narrator must evaluate what is appropriate to include and what should be left out. Taken together, “temporality,” “sequence,” and “place” form the fourth element of narrative, emphasizing how the elements of the plot are located with respect to each other. Somers & Gibson (1994, p. 59) summarize their definition as follows:

Narrativity demands that we discern the meaning of any single event only in temporal and spatial relationship to other events. Indeed the chief characteristic of narrative is that it renders understanding only by connecting (however unstably) parts to a constructed configuration or a social network (however incoherent or unrealizable) composed of symbolic, institutional, and material practices .

Somers & Gibson’s definition is similar to others’ but offers the advantage of being explicitly suited to the social sciences and compatible with the kinds of narratives found in political science.

In addition to the above four features of narrative, Somers & Gibson differentiate among four separate kinds of narrative. (a) “Ontological narratives” are those we use to function as social actors. Although these ontological narratives are a social product, they are also our own particular stories. They help us make sense of who we are. Somers & Gibson argue that understanding ontological narratives is essential for any theory of agency. This suggests a connection between identity (understanding of self) and agency (the conditions for action). In other words, a theory of how people act to change their world requires an understanding of how people understand themselves. (For example, do they understand themselves as autonomous individuals acting to uphold a principle, or as agents of some greater power?) (b) “Public narratives” are narratives of institutions or social formations. Ontological narratives build on public narratives. Who I understand myself to be will depend in part on how I understand the institutions in which I am embedded. (For example, do I understand my community as a voluntary association from which I can withdraw, or do I feel bound by a greater sense of obligation?) (c) “Conceptual narratives,” more narrowly, are those constructed by social researchers. In particular, social scientists create narratives of social forces such as path dependency, political institutionalization, and economic growth. Our challenge as social researchers, according to Somers & Gibson, is to construct a vocabulary that “can accommodate the contention that social life, social organizations, social action, and social identities are narratively, that is, temporally and relationally constructed through both ontological and public narratives” (Somers & Gibson 1994, p. 63). In other words, our conceptual vocabulary should reflect an awareness of its historical and contingent nature. (d) “Meta-narrative,” the fourth and final type, is

sometimes called master narrative. Meta-narratives are the grand narratives of our time in which we are embedded as social actors and social scientists—especially narratives of mastery and progress, such as economic development or the expansion of human rights. They also include epic dualities, such as the individual vs society or order vs chaos/anarchy. Meta-narratives are so ingrained in our common understanding that they are difficult to recognize and are often uncritically adopted as the central organizing concepts of our theories. Meta-narratives lack the self-awareness of conceptual narratives. They appear as abstractions and universals, erasing their own history and particularity. We can perhaps best see these master narratives by viewing distant historical times; the divine right of kings provides one example of a politically significant meta-narrative.

Somers & Gibson provide a vocabulary and taxonomy for making sense of the role of narratives in social theory. Because they are interested in the problem of turning theories of social action from meta-narrative into conceptual narrative, their vocabulary allows for both subjective and social forces by including ontological and public narratives, articulating both the distinction and the connection between narratives of the self and narratives of society. One might question the implicit distinction between lay narratives and the narratives of social scientists. Public narratives and conceptual narratives seem very similar except that conceptual narratives are the province of those who theorize about society professionally. However, this distinction can be useful to encourage social theorists to be more aware of the meaning-making activities in which we are engaged.

## THE NEED FOR CAUTION: THE PERILS OF INTERPRETATION

The power of narrative carries with it the potential for abuse and manipulation, which suggests why social scientists interested in value-free, objective scientific analysis often find narrative suspect as a methodological tool. Understanding and interpreting a narrative is perhaps as much an art form as a methodology and must be attempted with extreme care.

Narrative as a research method usually involves the use of personal accounts of particular events or of one's entire life. The teller is given wide latitude by the researcher in the telling of the stories. While the researcher may ask guiding or probing questions, the teller retains great discretion in deciding what to include and how to relate the story. Narrative methods therefore differ from interview methods that seek short answers to relatively specific questions or that closely structure the answers given by the speaker. Some of this unexpected aspect of narrative is what makes it so exciting for the analyst. (For a book on moral choice during the Holocaust, for example, Monroe began an interview with a former Nazi soldier by asking him to tell her a little bit about

himself. He told her he was a Goth and launched into an extended account of how his people had sacked Rome, information that no predesigned survey questionnaire would have elicited.) Interviews are not the only source of narratives; research has been done using autobiographies, letters, and other kinds of personal narratives. Narrative interviews, however, are useful both as an alternative to other kinds of interview or survey research and because they do not require the researcher to rely on currently retrievable documents. Narrative offers a potentially rich resource for research, but careful thought is required to determine what exactly narrative tells us and how it should be used.

Some use of narrative in research has challenged dominant modes of theorizing that either theorized badly about people's lived experience or, more likely, focused on the experience of a narrow band of the population and excluded the experience of others. Feminists (see Personal Narratives Group 1989) and other theorists from often-excluded groups have referred to narratives of personal experience to show how dominant modes of theorizing are inadequate to account for the experiences of members of the excluded group. In addition, feminists and others have studied personal narratives to seek out patterns of experience that can be used for building more adequate theories. And they have challenged assumptions about the authority of the academic to speak for, or to speak better than, non-academics. Narratives have given voice and authority to those who may not otherwise be regarded as "qualified" to speak in academic discourse. Hence, narratives of experience have been a powerful resource for challenging established theories and methods and providing insight into the particulars of lived experience.

This is exemplified by Gilligan's (1982) reanalysis of Kohlberg's (1981) work on moral reasoning. Like most other psychologists at the time, Kohlberg used male subjects to examine the cognitive developmental process. On the basis of these studies, Kohlberg argued that the highest stage of moral reasoning comes with the ability to think in terms of abstract justice. Gilligan's work included women subjects and demonstrated that men and women think differently about moral issues; for the women in Gilligan's research, compassion had a higher value than did justice. This difference reflected a choice, however, not a less developed ability to reason about moral issues. Feminists have properly argued that this is but one of many instances in which the male narrative is used to establish a "scientific" norm for all, ignoring the significant gender differences that then affect the substantive research.

The above example illustrates why narrative cannot be taken for granted as evidence. The use of personal narratives in research is sometimes comparable to the earlier realist impulse in literature, the attempt to capture the world "as it really is." From this perspective, the words of the narrator could be unproblematically appropriated as evidence, an eyewitness account of the truth, when actually the influences of many factors should be accounted for.

Scott (1991, p. 779) offers a critique of the attempt to make experience visible without analyzing the conditions producing that particular mode of experience. "The project of making experience visible precludes analysis of the workings of this system and of its historicity; instead, it reproduces its terms." The fact that a group exists and has distinctive experiences does not, in itself, tell us anything about how it is constituted or its relationship to other systems. The experience itself does not explain anything; rather, the experience itself is what requires explanation.

It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience by this definition is not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is to be produced (Scott 1991, pp. 779–80). Hence, Scott argues that experience is not the irreducible bedrock on which theory can be built. It is a starting point, something that requires explanation.

Scott points out that there are two levels of interpretation involved in making sense of experience. One, as suggested above, is an explanation of what makes that experience possible. The other level of interpretation is built into the very act of experiencing itself. An experience is not an unmediated interaction with the world, imprinting itself clearly and directly in the brain of the experiencing person. Rather, part of any experience is itself an interpretation, a recognition that something happened and the construction of a theory about what that something was. "Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political" (Scott 1991, p. 797). This, in part, reflects the tendency of the human brain to be an imperfect witness, to distort facts and details, to remember partially or to forget altogether. But more importantly, it reflects the extent to which our experience is necessarily mediated by our understanding of the world. If we experience an encounter with a stranger on the street as threatening or intimidating, that experience can have as much to do with our assumptions about modern urban life as it has to do with the particular qualities of the stranger. That does not change the fact that we experienced fear; the experience can be said to be genuine. But the experience contains a split-second interpretation of the stranger and the situation, hence Scott's contention that experience is both already interpreted and in need of further interpretation.

In addition to experiences being reflective of, or perhaps constituted through, our understanding of how the world works, personal narratives also reflect a drive to render experience cohesive and coherent. One feature of narrative is causal explanation (or causal emplotment, in the language of Somers & Gibson). Hence, it is a matter of definition that personal narratives also contain within them causal explanations. However, the need for coherent narra-

tives and causal explanations can lead narratives to create coherence where none may necessarily exist.

When Allport, Shaw, or Lewis reported life histories—how one episode of a life leads coherently into another—that coherence was assumed to dwell within the events themselves. It is precisely this assumption which modern narratology suspends.... The logic with which one event leads into another is not simply “out there,” waiting to be recognized by any disinterested observer. Instead, coherence derives from the tacit assumptions of plausibility that shape the way each story maker weaves the fragmentary episodes of experience into a history. (Rosenwald & Ochberg 1992, p. 5)

Creating coherence is part of creating a narrative; this coherence can be instructive, but it cannot be assumed unproblematically. The idea of telling an experience, or a life history, imposes the form of a narrative. It calls for the teller to decide on beginnings and endings, select events, describe relationships, and seek out causes and effects. It is unlikely that we would be able to say anything meaningful without such a form. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that the form is in the telling, in the act of making sense and rendering experience intelligible, rather than necessarily in the events themselves.

What can be said is shaped not only by the form of narrative, with its beginnings and endings and coherent causal relationships, but also by culturally available meanings and understandings. Somers & Gibson's taxonomy is useful here. What we have been calling personal narrative would correspond with what they call ontological narrative. Ontological narratives (or life stories) depend on public narratives—culturally available explanations of institutions, systems, and relationships. Hence, what is told in the course of personal narrative draws, at least in part, on what is available in culturally shared understandings.

A final element to remember when considering narrative as a research method is what Somers & Gibson call selective appropriation, or what the speaker selects to include in the story and what she or he leaves out. Silences and gaps can be as telling as what is included. What is left out is often what the teller takes to be literally unremarkable, so commonplace or obvious that it is not worth remarking on. While the precise reasons for exclusion cannot be simply assumed, omissions do provide insight into the teller's assumptions about shared meanings or about the way the world inevitably functions.<sup>3</sup> What

<sup>2</sup>An alternative explanation for such exclusions is provided by schema theory in psychology. Schema theory suggests that people organize information in related chunks or cognitive templates (schemas), which provide a way of taking in and organizing information and enabling it to be retrieved again. They are organized around stock cultural characters or situations. One might, for example, have a schema for schoolteachers or for how to behave in a restaurant. People are inclined to remember those aspects of a situation that are consistent with their schemas and forget those that are inconsistent (although details that are radically dissonant with the schema may be remembered for their peculiarity). This alternative understanding of possible silences or gaps merely highlights the need for caution when interpreting what is not said, as well as what is said.



is included in the narrative is what is exceptional or what stands out for some reason. In Bruner's words, what is included somehow violates our expectations of canonicity (1996, pp. 139–40). A detail that is included is generally taken to contribute to our understanding, and it does so because the speaker assumes that that detail could have been otherwise; had that detail been otherwise then perhaps the outcome would have been different. Like Sherlock Holmes's silent dog—which did not bark because it knew the intruder—the absence of comment may speak volumes. The challenge for the analyst is to interpret what this silence signifies.

## CONCLUSION

Narratives—the stories people tell—can provide a rich source of information about how people make sense of their lives, put together information, think of themselves, and interpret their world. Narratives can be indicative not only of the experiences that people have, but also of the means of interpreting those experiences that are available to them in a given culture. Narrative allows room for the teller to provide information the researcher would not generally expect or think to elicit in a more structured interview situation. Although the assumptions of the researcher still play a powerful role and necessitate both extreme sensitivity and caution in the analyst, especially in the interpretation of a narrative, these assumptions perhaps constrain the interview and the resulting information less than they would if the teller could provide only short answers to specific questions, questions that are themselves constructed on the researcher's assumptions. Despite its problematic aspects, narrative provides such a powerful research tool in the hands of the scrupulous analyst and its benefits are so great that it is an invaluable part of the research methodology in political science, as in other disciplines in social science.

Visit the *Annual Reviews* home page at  
<http://www.AnnualReviews.org>.

## Literature Cited

- Bakhtin MM. 1975. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Transl. C Emerson, M Holquist, 1981. Austin: Univ. Texas Press. 444 pp. (From Russian)
- Barber B. 1992. *An Aristocracy of Everyone*. New York: Ballantine Books. 307 pp.
- Barthes R. 1968. *Elements of Semiology*. Transl. A Lavers, C Smith, 1968. New York: Hill and Wang. 111 pp. (From French)
- Barthes R. 1971. *Structural Analysis and Biblical Exegesis: Interpretational Essays*. Transl. AM Johnson Jr, 1974. Pittsburgh, PA: Pickwick. 164 pp. (From French)
- Bruner J. 1996. *The Culture of Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press. 224 pp.
- Campbell J. 1949. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New York: Pantheon Books. 416 pp.
- Coles R. 1967. *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear*. Boston: Little, Brown. 401 pp.
- Coles R. 1971. *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers, Vol. II of the Children of Crisis Series*. Boston: Little, Brown. 653 pp.
- Coles R. 1989. *The Call of Stories*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 212 pp.
- Derrida J. 1967. *On Grammatology*. Transl. GC Spivak, 1976. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press. 354 pp. (From French)
- Derrida J. 1972. *Dissemination*. Transl. B Johnson, 1981. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press. 366 pp. (From French)
- Foucault M. 1976. *The History of Sexuality*. Transl. R Hurley, 1980. New York: Vintage Books. 168 pp. (From French)
- Foucault M. 1984. Nietzsche, genealogy, history. In *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P Rabinow, pp. 76–100. New York: Pantheon
- Frye N. 1957. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press. 383 pp.
- Gilligan C. 1982. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press. 184 pp.
- Greimas AJ, Courtes J. 1976. The cognitive dimension of narrative discourse. *New Lit. Hist.* 7:433–47
- Hirschman A. 1977. *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press. 153 pp.
- Hochschild JL. 1995. *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class and the Soul of the Nation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press. 412 pp.
- Kohlberg L. 1981. *The Meaning and Measurement of Moral Development*. Worcester, MA: Clark Univ. Press
- Kracauer S. 1947. *A Psychological History of the German Film from Caligari to Hitler*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press. 361 pp.
- Levi-Strauss C. 1967. *Structural Anthropology*. Transl. C Jacobson, BG Schoepf, 1967. New York: Basic Books. 410 pp. (From French)
- Lyotard JF. 1984. *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Transl. G Bennington, B Massumi, 1984. Minneapolis: Univ. Minnesota Press. 110 pp. (From French)
- Martin W. 1996. *Recent Theories of Narrative*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press. 242 pp.
- Monroe KR. 1996. *The Heart of Altruism: Perceptions of a Common Humanity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press. 292 pp.
- Pateman C. 1988. *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press
- Personal Narratives Group, ed. 1989. *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press. 277 pp.
- Propp VI. 1928. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Transl. L Scott, 1968. Austin: Univ. Texas Press. 158 pp. 2nd ed. (From Russian)
- Ricoeur P. 1981. Narrative time. In *On Narrative*, ed. WJT Mitchell, pp. 165–86. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press
- Rosenwald GC, Ochberg RL. 1992. *Storied Lives*, pp. 2–4. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press
- Scott J. 1991. The evidence of experience. *Crit. Inq.* 17:773–97
- Shklovsky VB. 1929. *Theory of Prose*. Transl. B Sher, 1990. Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Arch. 216 pp. (From Russian)
- Somers MR, Gibson GD. 1994. Reclaiming the epistemological “other”: narrative and the social constitution of identity. In *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, ed. C Calhoun, pp. 35–99. Oxford, UK: Blackwell
- Spivak GC. 1988. Subaltern studies: deconstructing historiography. In *In Other Worlds*, pp. 197–221. New York: Routledge
- White H. 1981. The value of narrativity. In *On Narrative*, ed. WJT Mitchell, pp. 1–23. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press



## CONTENTS

Models of Government Formation, <i>Michael Laver</i>	1
Does Democracy Cause Peace?, <i>James Lee Ray</i>	27
Social Capital and Politics, <i>Robert W. Jackman, Ross A. Miller</i>	47
Compliance with International Agreements, <i>Beth A. Simmons</i>	75
The Intellectual Legacy of Leo Strauss (1899-1973), <i>Nasser Behnegar</i>	95
Federalism, Federal Political Systems, and Federations, <i>Ronald L. Watts</i>	117
The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace, <i>Jack S. Levy</i>	139
Communication and Opinion, <i>Donald R. Kinder</i>	167
Social Science and Scientific Change: A Note on Thomas S. Kuhn's Contribution, <i>Nelson W. Polsby</i>	199
The Party Family and Its Study, <i>Peter Mair, Cas Mudde</i>	211
Reinventing Government, <i>Frank J. Thompson, Norma M. Riccucci</i>	231
Social Choice Theory, Game Theory, and Positive Political Theory, <i>David Austen-Smith, Jeffrey S. Banks</i>	259
Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, and Theories of International Relations, <i>James D. Fearon</i>	289
Narrative in Political Science, <i>Molly Patterson, Kristen Renwick Monroe</i>	315
Gendering Research in Political Science, <i>Joni Lovenduski</i>	333
The Decline of Parties in the Minds of Citizens, <i>Harold D. Clarke, Marianne C. Stewart</i>	357
Neglected Aspects of the Study of the Presidency, <i>John Hart</i>	379
Contending Theories of Contentious Politics and the Structure-Action Problem of Social Order, <i>Mark I. Lichbach</i>	401
Justice and Fairness, <i>Jack Knight</i>	425
Reflections on British Elections and Their Study, <i>David Butler</i>	451