Public and Private Narratives[1]

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Conference Essay:

Conference on Narrative, Ideology and Myth. Second Tampere Conference on Narrative. University of Tampere, Finland, 26-28 June 2003, organized by Matti Hyvärinen

Abstract: This essay examines a conference on narrative. The field of narrative studies is by nature interdisciplinary, which leads to certain strengths and weaknesses, both of which were evident during the conference. On the one hand, as a result of the myriad approaches to and definitions of narrative and narrative analysis, the conference perhaps lacked a sense of coherence. However, the conference showed that overriding this weakness in narrative studies is the fruitful cross-fertilization that can occur when a field is truly interdisciplinary. Thus, concepts and theories can and do travel from one discipline to another, gaining new meaning and providing new insight on the way.

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1. Introduction: The Field(s) of Narrative Studies

It is perhaps difficult to define "the" field of narrative studies because it is both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary. It is multidisciplinary in the sense that narratives are analyzed in many different disciplines and interdisciplinary in that often the various disciplines will borrow concepts and methodologies from each other. However, the defining characteristic of narratives and narrative analysis is that not only are they used in various ways across the different disciplines, but also within one discipline they are employed differently. [1]

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1 The conference website (http://www.uta.fi/conference/narrative/) includes the full program of the conference. About half of the papers are also to be found there and can be downloaded free of charge.

To begin with, there are varying definitions of what a "narrative" is or of what constitutes "narrative analysis." However, there are some basic elements that most can agree on. First, a narrative is constituted of a sequence of connected events (LABOV, 1972, p.360; GENETTE, 1980, p.25; RIMMON-KENAN 1983, pp.2, 15; TOOLAN, 1988, p.4). A narrative requires the presence of a story, thus narratives must have a point. The sequence of events is ordered temporally and bound together in a logical fashion. In other words, a narrative is made non-random by help of a plot (RICOEUR, 1985, p.8). A narrative has a beginning, a middle, and an end (TOOLAN, 1988, pp.4-5) and also tells of becoming. There is in other words a "before" and an "after" in a narrative, where the initial state of affairs is disrupted. Thus a narrative not only travels through time but travels from point A to point B. [2]

For many years narratives were studied almost exclusively in the humanities. Narrative analysis has a far-reaching tradition within humanistic disciplines such as linguistics and history, while the social sciences regard narratives as "the epistemological other" (SOMERS, 1994, p.606). Beginning in the 1960s and continuing today, the social sciences have experienced a "narrative turn," to the point where in some fields narratives have become quite fashionable. This trend began with psychology and medical sociology, but now spans all the social sciences. Today, narratives are used from linguistics to political science to business studies. The social sciences have not only adopted the concept of narrative, but have also reconfigured it to suit their own disciplines. [3]

The contemporary understanding is that there is a relationship between text and social reality. It is understood that not only are social relations embedded in linguistic practices (FRANZOSI, 1998, pp.547, 550), but also that conversely, narrative accounts are embedded in social action (GERGEN & GERGEN, 1988, p.18). Thus narratives speak to social epistemology and social ontology (SOMERS, 1994, p.606). It is through narratives that we know the social reality and ourselves. Individuals in other words live storied lives (CARR, 1985; RIESSMAN, 1993) and it is through stories that we make sense of the world and construct our identities. [4]

It is exactly this interplay between the social and the individual that is one of the key concerns of narrative analysts of today. The focus of much work is on the collective narratives that exist within societies, in the form of ideologies and myths, and on how these narratives play out both on a collective and on an individual level. There can be myths about a nation state that are employed not only by politicians and ideologues but also by individuals. There are also collective narratives concerned with what it means to be a woman or a man, middle-class or working-class, black or white, mother or father, plumber or banker, and so on. It is in dialogue with these that individuals construct their sense of self in relation to others. These collective narratives can act both as a resource and as a restrictive or oppressive force. [5]

2. Narrative, Ideology and Myth: Conference Overview

The interdisciplinary nature of narrative studies lends both to its strengths and weaknesses. A strength is the wealth of approaches and analytical tools, as well as the productive "cross-fertilization" that can occur when two or more disciplines meet. A weakness is the difficulty to pin down what exactly narrative analysis is doing and to what aim. Both of these were apparent in the conference "Narrative, Ideology and Myth," held on 26-28 June 2003 at the University of Tampere in Finland. [6]

The call for papers for this conference on "Narrative, Ideology, and Myth" emphasized the relation between ideology and narrative, which in turn leads to questions of power, normativity and emancipation. Narratives can enable all three. The call for papers envisaged that the conference would explore the diversity of the field, with a focus on the "social, cultural and political circulation of narratives, and the different forms narrativity takes, and the significance it assumes, within social action." The conference was meant to address the issues of myth and persuasive stories. The call for papers also asked for papers to address the tension between partiality and universalism and to explore narrative theorizing. The call stated that

> "We will ask whether narrative can help to understand subjectivity as a form of social and political agency always in relation with others, as agency that can exist outside the traditional boundaries of Politics"

> and asked

> "What is the relationship between narrative and social, political, and cultural identities in times of global, de-terrorialized times and spaces. What is the relationship between myth, storytelling and political identity in times of globalization?" [7]

The were 149 participants at the conference. During the conference, 75 papers were presented, including the plenary sessions. The presenters hailed from all over the world, with only under a third from Finland. The rest of the presenters came from the United Kingdom, Israel, Canada, the United States, various Western and Eastern European countries, Russia, Nigeria, Mexico, New Zealand and Australia. There was a refreshing mix of established academics and younger researchers. [8]

3. Conference Content: The Plenary Sessions

There were three plenary sessions during the conference. The first, "Stories in a narrative frame: working from the perimeter of memorial spaces" was given by Professor Liz STANLEY who is Research Chair of Sociology at the University of Newcastle in the UK. In her talk, she examined the (visible) traces that the South African war (Boer War) in the late 19th century has left on South African society. STANLEY based her talk on an analysis of public remembrance and war commemoration, and the role that the state, the mass media, and propaganda have played in this. She showed how the various acts of remembrance have

created canonical versions of the past that have supplanted direct memory. With the help of the concept of legendary topography she examined the temporal and spatial dynamics of how memory is reconstructed post hoc. STANLEY discussed political mythology and how ideology is cast in the form of a story, in this case, the political mythology of Apartheid. STANLEY pointed to the problem that exists in defining narrative and story. In her view, the lack of precise definitions in this interdisciplinary area (although in specific fields they may be defined), is a problem. [9]

The second plenary talk on "Prophetic narratives and political theory" was given by David GUTTERMAN who is Visiting Professor of Politics at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon in the US. GUTTERMAN focused on the role of narratives in politics. He explored how narratives play a part in the reforming of history and as a tool for defining collective identity. Narratives can aid comprehension and create boundaries. Narratives are also used to create sacred stories. There are thus hard to break narrative patterns, but narratives can also open the past to new possibilities of meaning. On the question of meaning vs. truth, GUTTERMAN laid stress on meaning rather than unitary truth. Related to this, he discussed the threat that is currently posed to contingency and plurality by aiming for "mastery" of truth in US politics. [10]

Professor Mark FREEMAN from the Psychology Department at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts in the US gave the third plenary talk entitled "Myth, memory and moral space of autobiographical narrative." FREEMAN highlighted that memories are not set in stone but change over time. Later events determine in part the significance of what came before, but this does not mean that our memories are infinitely malleable. The past is only flexible or changeable to a degree, as some stories cannot be rewritten or reconstructed, and some experiences cannot be escaped. Memory expressed in a story can become mythical in a negative sense, leading to convenient, self-serving, and ideologically driven myths of the self. Narratives can open up space for new possibilities, whereas myths can act as barriers for new interpretations. The past is historical, which allows us a view "from above," whereas we are partially blind when it comes to the "now." Narratives are a way of bridging the disjointed experience of the now, being caught in the moment. "What really happened" is inseparable from narrative—we understand our experiences in narrative form. Interpretation is unavoidable, but interpretations are always contestable. Truth is not absolute, and narratives can help us rethink what "truth" is. [11]

The three plenary talks mirrored the general focus of the conference on both the collective and the individual. We saw how collective myths are used to shape a nationality's understanding of itself and how narratives of various forms are used to reshape the past to fit certain ideological ends. The three presenters also discussed the fascinating question of truth and memory in narrative from various angles. To what extent are narratives "true"—to what extent can a narrative ever "truly" convey an event, a person, or a sequence of events? We understand the world through language, and hence interpretation is in-built in how we convey social reality. Thus it is important to be mindful of who the author of a narrative is,

and in which social context the narrative has been constructed. There are many aspects that come into play when we construct narratives: ideology, myth, memory, situation, audience, etc. Narratives therefore inevitably offer fragmented "truths" or pictures of "reality," but they are the best we have and should therefore not be discarded as the focus of serious study. There are perhaps even dangers associated in searching for "the Truth," as meaning can never be set in stone and must always be open to new interpretation. [12]

4. Conference Content: The Paper Sessions

The paper sessions were organized around four core sections: "Narrative, self and (collective) identities," "Politics and the arts," "Narrated professions," and "Mythic, normal and normative stories." Already the titles for these sections give a flavor of the conference and the themes and topics that emerged during it. One area of focus was on "public" and collective narratives that were largely analyzed from a political perspective. A second focus was on "private" or personal narratives. Of course these two are not mutually exclusive, as collective narratives speak to and are employed in the construction of personal narratives. It was indeed common for the papers to consider these two together. Below, I will give a short commentary on the topics that were discussed under each of the four sections. [13]

4.1 Narrative, self and (collective) identities

The four sessions under this section were entitled: "Self and identity in (late) modernity"; "Traces of the past: the Israeli identity"; "Narrative formation of identity; and Reflective, personal narratives." The papers mainly focused on how individuals perform identities and construct narrative selves. The researchers showed how individuals construct their identities through narrative practices and with the help of reflexivity. One central argument was that individuals do so in the context of collective cultural and national narratives or identities. The paper "Performing identity and the touristic discourse of authenticity" by Chaim NOY, for example, focused on the narratives told by young Israeli backpackers. He examined not so much the text but the telling of it, thus pointing to the narrative devices used by the narrators in order to convey to the audience the authenticity of their experiences. In implicating the audience in the telling, the narrators used shared cultural narratives. In a paper entitled "An overview to women's 'self-development' narratives," Anne-Maree SAWYER examined the central ingredients of "self-development" narratives as told by Australian women. She showed that these narratives employed similar shared collective narratives such as the self as project, the "inner self," and therapeutic narratives. These narratives were based on notions of individualism and were told by younger middle-class women, whereas older working-class women told stories of struggle and survival. SAWYER thus pointed out that structural inequalities place constraints on an individual's ability to narrate a self. [14]

Another focus was on research methodology: how researchers define the concept of narrative and how narratives are constructed, and conversely how

these definitions affect how narratives are analyzed. In his paper "This strange peculiarity: A tale about listening with mother," Raymond HICKMAN artfully laid bare the process of constructing a narrative. He argued that a narrative requires structure and forward momentum. He also showed how a narrative can never fully convey a situation, and how the telling of this situation is a process of distilling memories into one narrative. Thus the boundary between fact and fiction is always blurred. [15]

4.2 Politics and the arts

The six sessions under this section were entitled: "Myth and method: social, political and artistic narratives"; "Myth, memory and method"; "Political theory and narrative I"; "Political theory and narrative II"; "Myth, narrative and literary fiction"; "Narrating nation and class." The papers in this section were mainly focused on collective identities and political myths. The papers showed how myths are often used to reshape the present and the past to fit an ideology and hence offer a way of transmitting ideologies. Indeed, ideology cannot exist without narrative. Mahmoud EID examined in his paper "Representations of the Egypt Air flight 990 crash in American and Egyptian newspapers" how the mass media on either side employed certain cultural myths in producing a positive self-representation and a negative other-representation. [16]

Many of the papers were in some way connected to the events during or after the Second World War, for example the use of myths by the fascist regimes, among Holocaust survivors, and during the Cold War. For example in the paper "A mythopoetic approach to the Italian Fascist regime," Xavier GUILLAUME argued that the Italian fascists employed recurrent ideological mythemes in order to legitimize the regime's power. Understandably, the issues of memory and remembering were pertinent in the papers, many of which focused on the acts of remembering and re-constructing the past. This can be done either to validate an ideology or to make sense of one's own identity after the destruction of the Holocaust. Eros FERENC argued in the paper "Identity discourses and narrative reconstructions after the Holocaust" that the identities of the offspring of Holocaust survivors are also affected by memories of the Holocaust. Their identities were still constructed on notions of loss and suffering. [17]

Another area of focus was the use of narrative in political theory. There was also a focus on the arts such as literary fiction. The papers discussed not only how ideologies are transmitted through movies, for example, but also how fictional writing can offer a way of opening up political theory, history, and nationalism to new meanings and understandings. [18]

4.3 Narrated professions

The six sessions under this section were titled: "Teacher's professional identity"; "Struggles in narratives"; "Narrative and implementation of new practices"; "Teacher in personal narratives"; "Narrative, profession and power"; "Professional narratives." The teaching profession was prominent with papers examining

teachers' professional identity as viewed from the outside by pupils and from the inside by teachers themselves. [19]

The paper "Facing ethical problems in studying teachers' stories" by Eila ESTOLA and Freema ELBAZ-LUWISCH raised the issue of research ethics. They asked to what extent criteria such as trust, openness, and authenticity can be met in narrative research. They also raised questions concerning the ownership of narratives and the transforming effect that research has on the narratives told by research participants. An interesting question that arose during another session had to do with whether narrative analysis can only be used to study individuals we as researchers "like" and approve of. If one as a researcher is unable to fully approve of the research participants (e.g., murderers or rapists), does that mean that one should not study such individuals? [20]

Theoretically and methodologically, the papers in this section were not unlike those presented in the following section. The common denominator among the papers was the intermingling of the personal and the collective. [21]

4.4 Mythic, normal and normative stories

The five sessions under this section were titled: "Illness narrative and the institutions of care"; "Struggling with illness narratives"; Violence in family context"; "Resisting the grand narratives of family"; "Cultural versions of family narrative." This was the most explicitly "personal" of the four sections, focusing on the individual and on how individuals craft their identities. Individuals use cultural tools such as collective narratives and identities when doing so, but they are also met with cultural narratives that can act in an oppressive way. Thus there were papers that focused on how, for example, individuals with an illness or individuals whose lives were in other ways "non-normative" use various strategies when dealing with the normative narratives that abound in each society. For example Laura CAMFIELD showed in her paper "Narrative of Dystonia" how individuals use public templates to provide acceptable ways of presenting their condition. It is not surprising that the issue of illness narratives was prominent in the conference as medical sociology was one of the first fields in sociology to embrace narrative studies. [22]

The papers also drew the audience's attention to the importance of context: that individuals create narratives and identities in a social context at particular historical periods, using collective tools to make themselves understood and accepted. These cultural narratives of course vary from one society to another, but also within a country there are different narratives available for women and men, for the working-classes and the middle-classes and for people of various ethnic or cultural backgrounds. In her paper "Single women's narratives" Jill REYNOLDS showed how single women, who are faced with stigmatizing public constructions of singleness, through rhetorical work are able to construct a more positive narrative. They emphasize that while they do not have a partner or a husband, they have been successful in reaching other "goals," while at the same

time idealizing interpretations which represent singleness as a form of independence. [23]

Individuals with limited narrative resources can find themselves stuck in the sense of seeing no escape from a negative or oppressive situation or identity. In other instances, narratives can play an emancipatory role. Brett SMITH provided examples of circumstances where narratives can act in a restrictive way. Some of the men with spinal cord injury that had been interviewed for his paper with Andrew SPARKES "Men, sport and spinal cord injury" told "restitution" stories where the focus was on restoring the old able-bodied self at the expense of developing other identities. In contrast, other men told quest narratives where they accepted their disability as permanent and sought to use it in narrating the self. [24]

5. Conclusions

As mentioned above, there was almost a clear binary division between the collective and the personal in the paper sessions that comprised the conference. The sessions that dealt with the public and collective aspects of narrative tended to be theory-driven and de-gendered, whereas the sessions dealing with personal narratives were of a more empirical nature and explicitly addressed the issue of gender. [25]

A wide array of topics and issues emerged, all in some degree connected to the issue of how narratives shape experience. The sessions explored the power of narrative to define "reality": who has this power and who does not, and how this power is reflected in narrative. Narratives can also have the power of persuasion. Narratives are used to make sense and to make meaning. Narratives are always told from a particular perspective and thus always contain "bias." Three main themes were distinguishable in how narratives were examined during the conference: first, how individuals use narratives; second, how narratives are employed collectively; and third, how researchers study narratives. [26]

The first theme has to do with narratives on the individual level. Here identity becomes central—how individuals use (collective) narratives to construct identity. Identity is situational and narratives of the self are embodied. Rhetorical work is required to deal with dominant cultural narratives. The audience also has expectations to hear certain kinds of narrative from certain kinds of individuals. Narratives are often judged on the basis of their authenticity and credibility. This is where the power of myths becomes visible, in how they guide our understanding of "reality" and how it can be told. The violation of this expectation leads to emotion; and emotion in narrative is an often overlooked aspect. The transgression of cultural narratives can lead to a loss of tellability, in other words, to the inability to tell one's life story. A number of the papers explored such identity loss and the resulting attempt to create coherent identities in the face of change. Identity construction is often grounded in the wish for recognition, hence the use of collectively recognizable narratives and identities. At times this can lead to institutionalized selves and the ritualistic use of language. There is also

such a thing as narrative capital in that some individuals have more scope in defining their own experiences and situation. To sum up, individuals do not have free range when constructing a self, as structural and other constraints exist. [27]

The second theme deals with collective narratives, such as social and cultural myths. The papers explored how these collective narratives are present in the media, in literature, in political narratives, and in ideology (as well as in personal narratives). There were links made between the global and the local. Narratives offer a clue as to how individuals in a particular culture experience and organize "reality." "Reality" is hence cultural and context-dependent. Another issue was the use of collective master narratives in identity construction and in identity politics. The papers also explored how myths as well as other narrative tools and concepts are used collectively and individually. There are links between myths and the individual. Myths can place constraints on the individual, leading to narrative struggles or an attempt to re-narrate myths. Another important issue is that of memory in the form of the politics of memory (for example regarding the Holocaust). Narratives are also used in international relations and in nation-building. [28]

The third theme had to do with methodology: first of all, the construction of narratives. This conference continued with the question of what is needed for a narrative. On an epistemological level, the question of to what extent a narrative can convey a situation was raised. Memory plays an important part here in distilling memories into one narrative. Who creates the narrative is also important, and whether the narrative reaches its final form in the telling or in the listening/reading. Ethical questions were also raised, such as trust, the ownership of narratives, and how analysis transforms these narratives into something else. Narratives not only convey emotion but also create an emotional response, and hence emotion is an important aspect of fieldwork. As with emotion in narratives, emotion in fieldwork is also often overlooked. [29]

In sum, the questions posed by the call for papers were thoroughly discussed, analyzed, and reflected from various angles: from the individual to the social and back again. The diversity of the field was clearly evident, with representatives from sociology, political science, business studies, health sciences, media and communication studies, psychology, education, linguistics, history, literature, international relations, peace research, musicology, philosophy, women's studies, anthropology, exercise and sports science, geography, and IT. This was a truly interdisciplinary conference, with few if any spats between the disciplines. There was a genuine tolerance for "other" ways of doing narrative analysis. This is perhaps the best result of the lack of commonly shared definitions and methodologies. Although the delegate may have left the conference none the wiser as to what "narrative" is or how it should best be studied, the lasting impression is that this perhaps goes to the heart of the nature of "narrative." Just as there can be no single "True" narrative of "reality," there can be no "True" definition of what narrative is about. [30]

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