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Redefining our Understanding of Narrative

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Keywords

qualitative research

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Redefining our Understanding of Narrative

by

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Abstract

This paper is born out of my concern about the increasing use of narrative as *merely* a different methodology. I argue that narrative as methodology ultimately depoliticizes the potentiality of narratives. Narrative simply becomes one of the many methods that belong to qualitative inquiry. We generally discuss narrative as story-telling. We also focus on doing *good* narrative analysis. In this paper I recast in narrative in language of cosmology so as to highlight the liberatory potentiality that narrative affords persons who strive for a new and different world. I discuss narrative in terms of *being in the world*. I also unpack the implications that attend to this emergent way of understanding narrative for qualitative inquiry. The paper ends with a discussion of how our *narrativeness* complements a world that is increasingly seen as complex and quantum.

Introduction

I have no interest in determining what is *Truth*. I believe that our rigorous and religious pursuit of *Truth* is a futile and ultimately dangerous exercise. In fact, I believe that our religious pursuit of *Truth* is based on many misguided notions and assumptions, such as our ability to get *Truth* to fit neatly within the parameters of our methods. On the other hand, I also have concerns about how narrative is positioned as an alternative methodology. As much as I probably share many political, ideological, and theoretical positions with many proponents of narrative analysis, I believe that looking at narrative as simply a method of *doing* qualitative research-as a method that "allows us to impose order on the flow" of our experiences-depoliticizes our understanding of narrative, and, in so doing, help undermine the evolution of new possibilities of being, specifically possibilities that lend for a more just and humane world. In other words, to reduce narrative to methodology is to help re-legitimize the status quo as it gives us no new understanding of the human condition.

Many sophisticated understandings of narrative abound qualitative inquiry. For example, for Richardson ([1990](#)), "Narrative displays the goals and intentions of human actors; it makes individuals, cultures, societies, and historical epochs comprehensible as wholes; it humanizes time; it allows us to contemplate the effects of our actions, and to alter the directions of our lives" (p. 117). In fact, "Narrative is everywhere; it is present in myth, fable, short story, epic, history, tragedy, comedy, painting, dance, stained glass window, cinema, social histories, fairy tales, novels, science schema, comic strips, conversation and journal articles" (p. 117). According to Hardy, "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative" (quoted in Mink, [1970](#), p. 557). Bruner ([1996](#)) writes, "Narrativized realities, I suspect

are too ubiquitous, their construction too habitual or automatic to be accessible to easy inspection. We live in a sea of stories and like the fish who (according to the proverb) will be the last to discover water, we have our own difficulties grasping what it is like to swim in stories" (p. 147). These emergent understandings of narrative correlate with the growth of what many now call narrative studies.

We find in most understandings of narratives the assumption that we construct and portray our understanding of self through our narratives (e.g., see Atkinson, [1998](#); Czarniawska, [1997](#); McAdams, [1988](#), [1993](#); Riesman, [1993](#)). Narrative analysis is therefore seen as a more heuristic way to understand the construction of self than other approaches that downplay our *narrativeness*. The result being that we focus on learning the techniques of doing *good* narrative analysis. This is no doubt important work and we have learned much from the scholars who do this work. However, in narrative research we find no interrogation, for example, of how the status quo impedes our *narrativeness*, or how our *narrativeness* is intertwined with the condition of the world, or the political implications of being narrative in a society that increasingly strives to strip the world of its inherent conditions-mystery, complexity, and ambiguity-that foster our narratives, or any discussion of our overt hostility to peoples who attempt to be narrative in the face of our western conceptions of *progress*. In short, our popular understandings of narrative build on the social constructionist position that we are fundamentally *language*d beings. We find no premise that through our *narrativeness* we negotiate our potentiality to make for a more humane and just world. That is, there is no suggestion that we can possibly be moral, existential, and spiritual beings who possess a unique capacity to construct rich and complex narratives with the world, and how through the construction of such narratives we realize our full humanity.

New Questions & New Visions

I come to narrative out of my own increasing need to bring all of my humanity to bear on my inquiry. I want more holistic and honest interpretations of the world. I want to understand the world from the standpoint that I am inextricably connected to the world and that through my *narrativeness* I help construct the world that animate and inhabit my being. I no longer wish to pretend in any way, or can any longer withstand the pretext, that I can be detached, even through the most disciplined observation techniques, from the persons or the world that I wish to understand. As Bochner ([1994](#)) so nicely writes, "To embrace the narrative study of lived experience...is to open ourselves to the limits and possibilities of our work, so that we don't merely analyze life but also live it" (p. 36). But I wish to push the matter further. Rather than merely acknowledging our subjectivity and positionality, I want to understand the implications of our *narrativeness* on our potentiality to construct rich and complex narratives. I wish to reframe the ontological, epistemological, and axiological context that situates narrative theory and inquiry.

Acknowledging our *narrativeness* pushes us to do qualitative inquiry as praxis. In changing our relation to the world, we change *not* merely our understanding to it, but also our obligation to it. Consequently, I believe that acknowledging our *narrativeness* allows us to push the bounds on how we do qualitative inquiry. Instead of simply focusing on how narratives shape and constitute us, we also need to look at how different narratives have the potential to shape and constitute us to make for a more just and humane world. It is through attention to the latter that we move

narrative from the realm of methodology to the realms of epistemology, ontology, and axiology. Further, looking at narrative from the standpoint of *being in the world* challenges us to consider new questions. In addition to knowing how different narratives shape and constitute us, we also need to know how different discursive, communicative, and performative practices recursively promote or undercut the evolution of different narratives, how different narratives are resisted, contested, and co-opted, and how different narratives bear on the human condition and the condition of the world.

Instead of Truth, I am concerned with the *compellingness* of narratives-how compellingly do different narratives speak to the human condition and the condition of the world? That is, does the narrative give us new and different vistas of our potentiality and that of the world? Does the narrative give us new possibilities, that is, new and different ways of understanding and experiencing the world? Most importantly, what are the implications and consequences of different narratives on our humanity and the condition of the world? These are the guiding questions that I employ to assess the *compellingness* of different narratives. But of course all narratives possess a level of *compellingness*. The reason being that life is inherently quantum. No narrative is ever devoid of discontinuity, instability, and ambiguity. In fact, no language or communication is ever devoid of ambiguity. Both are premised on approximation and negotiation. What needs to concern us are the discursive, communicative, and performative practices that make some narratives more compelling than others, and how these practices are promoted.

I am deeply concerned about the implications and consequences of our religious pursuit of Truth. What has emerged out of this pursuit is hegemony of methodology. We believe that with the correct methodology we can capture the Truths of this world, force them to reveal themselves to us. If there is any problem, it is with the methodology. In our quest for the best methodology, we have diminished our relation to the world, our relation to other, and our relation to our own humanity by attempting to remove the human element. We have made believe that Truth evolves out of knowing rather than being and, in the process, reduced epistemology to methodology. This kind of reductionism is increasingly apparent in narrative inquiry.

Methodology is now increasingly about technology. We assess the suitability of our methodology by the power of the technology that comes with different methods. We are increasingly relying on power rather than techniques. Even many qualitative researchers are relying on an assortment of computer programs to analyze narratives. In my view, our pursuit of Truth is increasingly being *phallogentrized*. We are deliberately trying to remove more and more of the human element, believing that doing so will increase the objectivity and thus the distilling power of our methodology. We believe that our supposed fallibility undermines the quest for that methodology that will give us objective Truths, ones that will transcend time and space. Our hegemony of methodology is no doubt a tool of neo-colonialization. But what is the cost of our pursuit of this Truth, this methodology, this superior technology, which we so religiously seek? What are the implications and consequences on the world? Is the world devoid of less misery and suffering? Less war, and the possibility of less destructive wars? Less ecological destruction?

The Nature of Compelling Narratives

Compelling narratives push us to act upon the world. They challenge us to understand and reckon with the implications and consequences of our actions and lack thereof. Moreover, compelling narratives encourage us to risk life-to strive to understand and experience the world differently. Such narratives assume that no understanding of the world can be achieved outside of being. Compelling narratives push us to look holistically at the world by urging us to make connections and identify complex and nonlinear relationships. They also force us to understand how our ways of being bear upon the condition of the world. In this way, compelling narratives end the disconnect between epistemology and axiology, which is to say that ethics and politics (justice) are no longer seen as merely the fallout of our Truths-matters to be dealt with by ethicists, theologians, jurists, academics, and legislators.

We are indeed narrative beings. We negotiate the world and our humanity through narratives. Narratives allow us to grapple with the ambiguity, diversity, mystery, and discontinuity that come with being in the world. Compelling narratives strive on this ambiguity and complexity. They use both to make for rich and textured interpretations-interpretations that make for new meanings, experiences, and understandings of the world. In short, compelling narratives privilege no one set meaning, experience, or understanding. Such narratives undercut all strands of fundamentalism, nationalism, and fascism. We are narrative beings because evolution is the order of the world. We are constantly changing and evolving. Disequilibrium and discontinuity are as much the order of the world as equilibrium and continuity. Compelling narratives allow us to ebb and flow to the natural quantum rhythms of the world.

Narrative as a way of being in the world assumes no separation between the world and us. We are as much in the world as the world is within us. As such, compelling narratives assume that we have no power to control and predict the rhythms and movements of the world. They also assume no distrust and suspicion of the world. There is no inherent conflict between the world and us that requires us marshalling our efforts and skills to supposedly order and control the malevolent forces of the world. Compelling narratives help us understand the beauty and harmony that come with the potentiality of the world. In this way, such narratives lessen the threat of our differences. Compelling narratives speak to the commonality and universality of being human. Such narratives draw us together by revealing our common humanness and humanity. Yet, on the other hand, such narratives foster the fullest articulation of the diversity that abounds the human condition. Compelling narratives highlight both our commonality and diversity.

Narratives are meant to be shared. In our *narrativeness* we find our impulse to share our experiences, our understandings, our meanings, our humanity. No narrative is meant to be kept to ourselves. Narratives make us human by binding and weaving us to each other in unique ways.

Compelling narratives are intensely interpretative. No narrative is ever transmitted. We are narrative beings because we are also interpretive, communicative, and performative beings. We change the world by merely being in the world. It is, however, through interpretation that narratives find life and prosperity. Interpretation makes for new and different meanings, experiences, and understandings. It allows different narratives to belong organically to different moments and spaces. The legitimacy of different narratives is derived through interpretation and negotiation.

The interpretive nature of narrative pushes us to reckon with different interpretations and understandings of the world. That is, all narratives have tensions of order and chaos, stability and instability, continuity and discontinuity, meaning and ambiguity, and so forth. Compelling narratives celebrate the quantum rhythms that come from the rich interplay between and among these tensions. As such, no interpretation or meaning is ever complete. There is always a new and different interpretation. Instead of trying to preserve one meaning or interpretation, compelling narratives promote the evolution of many interpretations and meanings. The premise here being that our *redemption* ultimately resides in our openness and compassion rather than in the Truth of any one interpretation or meaning. In this way, compelling narratives undercut the status quo, the hegemony of any one set meaning, interpretation, and understanding. In giving life to our narratives, our being, interpretation makes us human. It allows us to help with the completion of the world and therefore show us with the power to help fashion what the world becomes.

Yet no compelling narrative legitimizes each and every meaning. Compelling narratives have organic mechanisms that guide interpretation. In a word, such narratives are ecological. Compelling narratives strive to promote only those interpretations that affirm life. In ecology and quantum theory, this consciousness that works to maintain the integrity of systems is known as a *strange attractor* (Rodriguez, [2002](#)). It is *strange* because no one apparently knows its origins. It is supposedly a mystery. But we now know from our study of natural systems like oceans and forests that there is a consciousness always inherent in these systems that guide the workings of the different forces that constitute these systems so as to preserve their prosperity. In sum, there is no need for us to be afraid of new and different interpretations and meanings. Those narratives that block the evolution of new interpretations and meanings will always be resisted and contested as evolution is the telos of all natural and organic systems, and evolution always bring diversity.

No narrative can therefore completely belong to us or remain devoid of interpretation. To attempt to hold a narrative constant is to inadvertently work towards its destruction. For such a narrative is a closed system, and from an ecological standpoint, such systems perish. So for a narrative to live and prosper, it must remain open and this requires us to foster ways of being in the world that promote interpretation, that is, the evolution of new and different ways of experiencing and understanding the world. Integral to such ways of being are empathy and compassion, both of which push us to look at the world from the standpoint of the other. Simply put, compelling narratives stretch us, and in doing so, make us open to new and different interpretations of the world.

Narratives In A Quantum World

The popular criticism against our religious pursuit of Truth contends that the problem resides in the inherent nature of language. Supposedly, we are merely *languaged* beings, shaped and constituted entirely through our different languages. The nature of our language is supposedly the nature of our world-language sets forth our understanding of the world. It is also imperfect. It presumably lacks the perfection necessary to perfectly and objectively mirror the world. As such, its descriptions will always be inadequate and imperfect. As a result, there is no understanding of the world that can escape the subjectivity and limitations of our different languages.

But from a narrative as being in the world standpoint, language is incomplete rather than imperfect. Though an integral component of our *narrativeness*, our *narrativeness* exceeds and precedes language. Meaning is found within and between words and symbols. We are, again, discursive, performative, communicative, and narrative beings. It is our *narrativeness* rather than our *language* and *symbolicness* that most uniquely defines our humanness. To believe that we are entirely *language* beings is to believe that language has the power to contain and limit us. But the reality of the world undermines this belief. After all, our languages are constantly evolving and changing. No language is ever in a condition of stasis, stability, or equilibrium, which means that we are never beholden to the view of any one language. In sum, to look at us as merely *language* beings is to diminish the rich complexity of the human condition.

The natural quantum rhythms of life also undermine any stability and constancy that any language strives to foster. Our *narrativeness* constantly pushes up against our best efforts to maintain the status quo by maintaining language stability. It is through the interplay between the rhythms of the world and our own narrative rhythms that new understandings of the world emerge that undermine the status quo. Thus, compelling narratives never attempt to keep us beholden to any one language. Such narratives strive on the energy that new and different languages bring. Language is experiential rather than merely representational. No narrative is ever complete. It is, however, the incomplete nature of narratives that makes continually for new experiences, meanings, and understandings. Compelling narratives assume that the world is fecund. They never attempt to mirror an objective world. An objective world, after all, assumes a finite world. In being inherently incomplete, because human beings are inherently incomplete, compelling narratives push us to be new and different beings by exploring new understandings and experiences of being. Such narratives, in other words, are life catalysts-mechanisms that make for the prosperity of life.

A world devoid of narrative is one without interpretation and creation. Our *narrativeness* locates us at the center of the world. To be narrative is to believe that much is good about the world. There is no inherent conflict between the world and us. As a result, there is no need for us to have any distrust and suspicion of the ambiguity and mystery of the world. Instead, the mystery and ambiguity of the world give us the opportunity to create new expressions of life. A world without such complexity forecloses on such expressions and, in so doing, diminishes what being human means. This is a world of death; a world of domination. Consequently, compelling narratives urge us towards liberation. Such narratives push us to be courageous, to be brave, to be strong. Compelling narratives inspire hope; give us new visions and dreams. We are encouraged to foster new and different ways of being, specifically ways of being that make for a world with less misery and suffering. In celebrating our being in the world with others, compelling narratives urge us to love more, to care more, to give more, to empathize more, so as to make for a humanity that promotes the evolution of new and different interpretations and manifestations of being. In these ways, compelling narratives recursively promote dialogic practices. In compelling narratives we find a deep hope for humanity-that we can be better human beings and therefore make for a more just and humane world. Compelling narratives share a belief that we have been *blessed* with a tremendous potentiality-a potentiality that we are morally, ethically, and spiritually obligated to develop.

To allow our potentiality to go underdeveloped is to aid and abet the making of a world with much misery and suffering. Conversely, to work towards the evolution of our potentiality, the blossoming of our *narrativeness*, is to help make for a new and better world. The possibility of a new and better world is intertwined with the condition of our *narrativeness*. To be fully human is to be fully narrative. Compelling narratives openly connect our being in the world with the condition of the world.

Final Thoughts

Integral to the evolution of a new and different world is the recognition that such a world is possible. The status quo continues to claim that we have no potentiality for such a world. It is outside the realm of possibilities. The status quo uses different Truths to bound us to this world. For example, we are supposedly merely "survival machines", deterministically doing the business of our "selfish genes." Survival is supposedly the telos of life. Any threat to the status quo therefore requires a cosmology that gives us a view of a different world and a path to help us realize this world.

I believe that looking at narrative as a way of being in the world gives us this cosmology. It fundamentally alters our relation to the world, our relation to others, and our relation to our own humanity. It also gives us a compelling ethical foundation. Most of all, it commits us to look critically and urgently at the implications and consequences of our actions on the condition of the world. It intertwines the condition of the world with the condition of our humanity. In sum, this emergent view of narrative makes for a compelling narrative. It enlarges the realm of possibilities.

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