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The Telling Moment: Narrative as a Discursive Act

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As a work of interdisciplinary dialogue, Mary Jean Walker (2012) successfully straddles the fields of neuro- and cognitive science and social psychology in addressing key questions on the role, value and truth claims of narrative as a mode of self-understanding. However, in the context of neuroethical debate her article raises a set of parallel conceptual and epistemological concerns which confuse and conflate what it is to tell stories. I suggest that Walker's perspective is philosophically limited in that she does not explicitly acknowledge narrative as a discursive activity. In this, Walker is not alone – the neuro- and cognitive sciences frequently make assumptions about what narrative is and what it is not. This is significant because a theory of narrative which is blind to narrative as a discursive activity risks diminishing important social contexts involved in the construction of human self-understanding and truth.

One of the most striking features of the disciplinary border-crossings which have resulted in narrative gaining conceptual prominence in fields such as psychology and neuroscience is the degree to which the term narrative is left undefined, or the degree to which it is conflated with pre-discursive structures of action, experience or underlying neurobiological or cognitive substrate capable of being read in the same way we read narrative texts (Bamberg, 2006). While Walker acknowledges that narrative is interpretive, selective, relational and contextual, she subordinates the very object of narration itself – social discourse – to the neuropsychological structures and processes which underlie it.

The implications of an approach to narrative which privileges neurobiology and cognition are twofold. First, it assumes that narrative is best understood through examination of past actions or experiences or the way they are organized, rather than through discursive actions *per se* (Bamberg, 2006). This is problematic because while narrative makes it possible to talk about our experiences and actions as if they were physical entities, they cannot be said to exist in an ontological sense in the way that other physical matter does, but rather, they are brought into being by the act of narration itself (Bracken & Thomas, 2005).

This points to a second interrelated problem of this approach which is the assumption that there exists a 'hidden truth' prior to the act of narration. This representational model of narrative has been the focus of three fundamental critiques. The first challenges the view that narrative is a transparent medium through which we can directly access the world of human experience (Nietzsche, 1979; Wittgenstein, 1968). The second challenges the idea that one narrative can be more or less true, or more or less accurate than another, and that the source of a narrative's truthfulness is related to individual practices of introspection and self-reflection rather than to the social, historical and cultural contexts in which these truths are produced (Bamberg, 2006).

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According to this critique, the idea that a narrative can be more or less true than another is nonsensical. For events, actions, experiences and lives are fragmented, formless and inchoate, and narrative does not represent reality as much as it does construct and constitute it (Brockmeier & Harré, 2001).

The third critique of the representational model of narrative is that it restricts our understanding of what we take narrative to be insofar as it considers narrative to be meaningful only to the extent that it relates to factual states of being in the world (Bracken & Thomas, 2005). Being able to apprehend and represent events through narrative, however, is only one of its functions. Narrative serves a number of other important ends – to convince, educate, entertain, gossip, mock, lament, embarrass, criticise, and so forth.

These critiques have led to a more radical (at least in terms of biomedical explanations of brain and mind) view of narrative as a discursive activity. According to this approach, analysis is concerned not so much with the cognitive structures of the self-reflecting narrator as it is with the activity of narrating itself, thus focusing attention on the dialogical and discursive aspects of narrative self-understanding and the contexts in which narratives are produced.

What might this dialogical and discursive approach add to the discussion of narrative, self-understanding and truth overlooked by Walker's article? First, in the case of narrative self-understanding, it calls attention to the fact that human beings do not have complete interpretive freedom over their lives and that our ways of narrating our lives are governed as much by discursive norms and structures as they are by autobiographical memory, without which human lives remain unintelligible and uninterpretable. For a narrative's intelligibility or truthfulness is more likely to be an effect of these discursive norms, which provide persons with the means for describing the richness of their lives including the random, uncertain, and chaotic events which they may not fully grasp, than with their ability to represent them.

Second, discursive formulations of narrative make explicit the fact that narrative self-understandings are also shaped by the situational and interactional contexts in which they are produced. Narrative may provide structure and meaning, particularly when events are being recalled, but narratives are also dynamic, unstructured and emergent – particularly in situations that are threatening, contested or unresolved. Different interlocutors may also exert different kinds of authority on the narratives produced during these interactions (Ochs & Capps, 2001). For example, the narrating of past events may involve the employment of new knowledge or language not available at the time events took place as persons seek out new ways of articulating their experiences (Bernstein, 1990). While this challenges the idea that there is a single true narrative or a 'more true' narrative, it does not mean that narrative cannot reflect an important truth. A discursive formulation of narrative does not contradict Walker's perspective, but builds upon it – highlighting the discursive and dialogical features of narrative, self-understanding and truth and providing a better explanation for its provisional and indeterminate quality.

There is a view, supported within both science and philosophy that the social relations involved in the production of narratives are of little importance (Levinas, 2003). Either language is derided for its inadequacy to the needs of scientists, or it is reified as evidence of experience or cognition. But narrative involves more than the assigning of temporal and causal order to past events, it is also a social activity through which narrators and their conversational partners collaborate on a story and participate in the establishment of shared truths.

The view that narrative is dependent on internal neuropsychological structures and processes has had a marked influence on theories of mental illness, its diagnosis, and the development of new

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psychological therapies (Bracken & Thomas, 2005). Norms governing the intelligibility and coherence of narrative exert considerable authority on the interpretation and evaluation of narrative in relation to its structure and content. While Walker acknowledges that inaccuracies in narrative self-understanding inevitably occur as a result of interpretive and selective biases, she appears to hold to the notion that narratives are reflective of hidden pre-discursive truths. According to this view, disjointed, fragmented or bizarre narratives are an error of representation or recall. An alternative reading is that disjointed, fragmented and bizarre narratives may be the product of disjointed and fragmented lives. There may be little point in seeking to establish whether a narrative is more or less true, however, as narrative truth is, as Walker notes, fleeting, blurry and indeterminate.

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