The Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology

Edited by
Jaan Valsiner
CHAPTER 20
Narrative Scenarios: Toward a Culturally Thick Notion of Narrative

Jens Brockmeier

Abstract
This chapter investigates the role of narrative in the relationship between individuals and their cultural worlds. Drawing on assumptions of interpretive cultural psychology and a Wittgensteinian concept of narrative as a cultural form of life, it proposes a culturally thick notion of narrative. At the heart of this notion is the idea of narrative as a cultural practice, a practice of meaning construction. This argument is developed in discussions of five traditions of research that have explored the nature of narrative (1) in contexts of cultural traditions and (2) socialization, (3) as a "form of life," (4) with respect to fictional and nonfictional genres, and (5) as an instrument and practice of folk psychology. The resulting outline of a culturally thick notion of narrative is further elaborated by arguments from narratology, discussions on narrative in the light of evolutionary anthropology, and interpretive approaches to narrative in philosophy and the social sciences.

Keywords: narrative, narrative psychology, narrative practice, meaning, intentionality, socialization, folk psychology, narrative as a form of life

Introduction
An inquiry into the nature of narrative that aims to situate its subject in the context of culture and psychology reasonably draws on two different families of theories. One is a family of cultural approaches to human psychology, the other a family of psychological approaches to culture. Essential to both is the effort to understand the relationship between individuals and the cultural worlds in which they live. In this chapter I make the case that language—particularly narrative—plays a crucial role in this relationship. I therefore also consider a third family of theories, namely, theories of narrative that emphasize its cultural nature and allow us to conceive of the great variety of narrative practices to be found in all human societies as a variety of cultural practices.

There is a twofold reason why narrative practices play a central role in humans' cultural existence: they are pivotal in binding the individual into a cultural world and in binding the meaning of this world into the individual's mind. To explore this dialectic is the main purpose of my inquiry.

To do so, I first need to qualify the meaning of culture and narrative. As both are subjects of high complexity, it is not surprising that they come with an array of different conceptual definitions reflecting diverse points of view from which they can be considered. The point of view underlying my discussion is that of a cultural psychology. Cultural psychology investigates the relationship between individuals and their cultural worlds from a perspective that, in some respects, differs from, say, cultural or social and psychological anthropology. It also is different from sociology or social psychology, cultural studies, narrative studies, and hermeneutic philosophy. At the same time, however, cultural psychology draws on all of these traditions and uses...
The notion of narrative as a cultural practice takes
we have experience-distant
of narrative as cultural practice and performance. 1
The important point here is that ernie concepts
concept are used in the description and analysis of
disciplines and that will become sharper as my
discussion proceeds.

The qualification of culture and narrative, outlined
in the second section of this chapter, leads to what I
call a culturally thick notion of narrative—a notion
of narrative as cultural practice and performance. 1
The notion of narrative as a cultural practice takes up
Geertz's (1973) suggestion that an interpretive
study of humans' cultural reality is to be based on
experience-near concepts. Such concepts, sometimes
called emic, are as close as possible to the experiential
discourse of the individuals whose, in this case, narrative
practices are at stake. Of course, "closeness" to experience is relative. All human experiences are
generalized, but some are more and some are less so;
some echo common sense and conventional everyday
psychology, others give way to more reflected,
individual, and deviant ways of making-meaning.
The important point here is that emic concepts
are concepts of a cultural world seen from within.
They reflect the subject's point of view, the perspective
from which people themselves consider their experiences to be meaningful. On the other hand,
we have experience-distant "or etic" concepts. Etic concepts are used in the description and analysis of
emic experiences—for example, by psychologists,
philosophers, anthropologists, and narratologists.

When, in everyday life, people tell stories about
themselves, they are typically concerned with issues
that matter to them, with things they did, or with events affecting their actions, thoughts, feelings,
and relationships with others. In telling their stories, they are arguably not concerned with the distinction
of "story" and "discourse," as important as it may be in narrative studies, or the way their "storylines" and "plot structures" unfold and (together with other narrative, discursive, grammatical, and semantic registers) are shaped by and give shape to
their sense of "narrative identity." Giving center stage
to experience-near concepts not only enables us to become aware that people engage in very different
stories about themselves (which is to say that there is no single "narrative identity" narrative)—irrespective
of the fact that these narratives can be subject to the same categorial distinctions of "story," "discourse,
"plot," and so forth. It also makes us more attentive
to the "local" specifics of the cultural models and vocabularies of self and identity on which these narratives draw. Further, we may recognize that their narrators do not necessarily have "a sense of having
a narrative identity," perhaps not even a sense of having a personal identity at all. To be sure, even
most people in traditions as obsessed with self-talk
as European and North American ones would use a different language than that of "narrative identity" to talk about themselves.

Yet the proposition of a culturally thick notion of
narrative does not only rely on the multidisciplinary
resources just mentioned. There are more traditions of
knowledge and thought that have contributed, in one way or another, to a notion of narrative as a
cultural practice, which will be reviewed in the
third section of this chapter. But before that—in the second part, after this introduction—I outline three
assumptions about culture and narrative that orient
my ensuing discussion of the scholarly and scientific
traditions relevant here.

The fourth section then takes a closer look at what
is the quintessence of the notion of narrative put forward in this chapter: the idea of narrative as a cultural
form of life. This idea centers on an emic notion of
narrative that, rather than postulating universal components or ontological characteristics of storytelling, is based on a culturally situated mode of meaning-making. This notion also comprises how people give meaning to what they consider to be a "story." The fifth and final section offers an anticipatory look at important developments in the field: prospects of a culturally thick notion of narrative that permits us a fuller understanding of the intricate relations between
the actions and minds of individuals and the cultural
worlds that they create, populate, and change.

Culture and Narrative: The Basics

Culture As Perspective

In recent years, our concepts and theories of
culture have undergone radical changes that also
affect our understanding of the cultural charge of
narrative. People have always been viewed as cultural beings, yet today many theorists have come to emphasize that people do not just live in a culture,
but in a variety of cultural worlds. They are simultaneously embedded and entangled in distinct cultural realities, and these realities are often divergent
and conflicting among each other.

Take people in a so-called "individualist culture" who, irrespective of this label, can live in a
very social and relational supportive family, a close
be good team players at a so-called "collectivist culture" on
their own and are with
also behave and think individu­
istically. In addition, experi­
cences differently by diverse
cultural worlds and people,
tradi tions. Observations and
theses in cultural and cross-cul­

Moreover, although
ontology the existence of cul­
ture is seen as constitutive or
as conditions or dispositions. A good example, a
at Mt.
the Caribbean in the conflict
different cultural and social
ries and conflicts are typically;
divergent powers and in
controversies and conflicts
are often at the very heart of

All of these conflicts as their underlying political and
economic interests, tend to
rise to refer to context—a meaning that is
ative (not least, in quan-
titative social and relati oru
havior and minds of indi
people of a own cultural worlds on

This argument has been
nator that in the wake of two influential
ones written with Michael
with James Clifford (1988),
that anthropologists have
ions and thoughts as
according to categories. Many anthropologists
credging the idea that