

# Narrative Explanation in Psychotherapy

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It is the storyteller who makes us what we are.<sup>1</sup>  
—Chinua Achebe

*This article examines the field of psychotherapy as an interesting and illustrative example of human science inquiry. Three approaches to understanding human intentionality and action that have appeared in theories of psychotherapy over the years are distinguished. Naturalist approaches assume explanation involves describing underlying causes operating beneath the surface phenomena of thought and action. In recent years, difficulties this view encounters in doing justice to human agency have given rise to constructionist conceptions of psychotherapy. In this view, action is structured by narratives or stories understood as free creations that swing free of any facts and do not involve discovering any truth about a person's life or history. The author suggests that this approach involves a number of excesses and shortcomings and argues for a more moderate, narrativist viewpoint that draws on the ideas of ontological hermeneutics.*

## CAUSAL EXPLANATIONS, NARRATIVES, AND CONSTRUCTIONS

How do we make sense of the things that people think and do? The field of psychotherapy seems to provide an interesting example of how this project of making sense of people is carried out. A central aim of therapeutic dialogue is to arrive at an account of why the client experiences things and acts in the ways he or she does. Even in forms of psychotherapy where understanding why people do what they do is played down—for example, in approaches that focus directly on behavior modification—practitioners still operate with a set of theoretical assumptions about how humans are to be understood. It would seem, then, that looking at psychotherapy should cast some light on what is involved in understanding human phenomena in general.

We might start by distinguishing three different approaches to understanding humans that have appeared in theories of psychotherapy over the years. The first

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approach, which is drawn from the methods of the natural sciences and so might be called the naturalist model, aims at providing causal explanations of human phenomena. Following Miller (1987), we can define the scientific conception of explanation as an attempt to give "an adequate description of underlying causes helping to bring about the phenomenon to be explained" (p. 60). Although this definition is designed to cover all forms of explanation, it has some characteristics that make it distinctively naturalistic. First, it assumes that there are underlying causal mechanisms operating beneath the surface phenomena, and that explanation is a matter of identifying and describing these mechanisms. Second, these underlying causes generally are seen as reflecting lawlike regularities in nature, and so it is often assumed that explanation involves subsuming particular events under general laws.<sup>2</sup> Finally, this model assumes that explanations can be based entirely on objectively specifiable facts—that is, on data or evidence discernible by all researchers who share a particular scientific paradigm—and that they can be tested in ways that are replicable by others working in that field.<sup>3</sup>

As has often been noted, this naturalist model of explanation clearly lies at the root of Freudian psychoanalysis. In his central writings, Freud posited the existence of basic forces in humans—the drives or instincts—and he tried to show how psychic events result from the vicissitudes of these forces as they work their way through a complex, self-contained energy system. From its inception, psychoanalytic theory was criticized for being excessively mechanistic and for failing to account for the meanings things have for agents in their goal-directed undertakings. These criticisms have led such thinkers as Jürgen Habermas and Paul Ricoeur to recommend that we replace Freud's mechanistic metapsychology with a narrativist approach that sees therapy as aimed at producing narrative accounts of human agency.<sup>4</sup>

It is of course true that narratives also play a central role in the causal explanations put forward in the natural sciences. Evolutionary biology and geology, for example, often contain stories about the underlying causes that have led to the appearance of, say, a new species or a rock formation. But exponents of narrative accounts in psychotherapy generally use the word *narrative* in a sense that is designed to distinguish it from genetic accounts in the physical sciences. Ricoeur, for example, draws on Aristotle's claim that a narrative is "an imitation or representation of action," and tries to show that, understood as a story about human action, the paradigmatic narrative will have the same structure as human action.

To understand what is distinctive about narratives, on this account, we need to get clear about some of the features of human action that distinguish it from mere physical movement. The first and most characteristic feature of action is that it is directed toward realizing projected outcomes that constitute the agent's goals in acting. Because it is goal directed, action has a unity of intention, and this makes it possible to see the flow of events constituting the action as cumulative and as having a point, two essential features of any narrative. It is

also characteristic of action that the circumstances and turns of events that characterize the context of action must be grasped in terms of how such factors count or matter for the agent—that, for example, adversities for this person are experienced as overwhelming blows rather than as temporary setbacks. Finally, because human action generally involves interaction with others, and because action takes place against a backdrop of standards and conventions accepted by a social group, seeing an occurrence as an action usually presupposes a grasp of the evaluative significance things have for people: actions present themselves as proper or improper, honorable or shameful, ordinary or shocking. What these characteristics of action show is that narrative accounts of action always presuppose a background understanding of what things mean to agents as well as of the evaluative import agency has in a particular life world. Because of the meaning- and value-laden nature of action, giving a full account of a person's action calls for the kind of “thick description” best provided by dramatic narratives.<sup>5</sup>

This kind of reasoning has been used to argue that naturalistic accounts can never do justice to human agency, and that narrativist approaches alone can make sense of what people do. However, the shift to narrative has led to the appearance of a third conception of psychotherapy in recent years. This third conception of therapy arises because of the awareness that narrative always involves an element of construction that goes beyond what is determined by the data. As narrative studies have shown, narrativizing involves a “fictive” element: It is a composing or configuring of events according to certain aesthetic criteria, and it therefore necessarily goes well beyond what is determined by the facts alone. This awareness of the role of artistic construction in telling stories of our lives has led to what I will call a constructionist conception of psychotherapy. According to a constructionist view, the stories we tell are free creations that swing free of any facts we might be able to find, and this is taken to mean that it is an illusion to think that psychotherapy is concerned with discovering the truth about a client's life history in any familiar sense of that word. On this view, then, the aim of psychotherapy is to come up with a good story, where the “goodness” of the story consists not in its being “true” but in its being compelling and useful to the person who hears it.<sup>6</sup>

My aim in what follows is to defend the narrativist conception of psychotherapy against some of the excesses of constructionism. I begin by examining some of the arguments in favor of a narrativist approach in recent writings by Schafer, and I then try to show how these writings seem to pave the way to a constructionist outlook. After indicating why I think that such a view is too extreme, I conclude by sketching out the framework for a more viable conception of narrative that draws on the ideas of ontological hermeneutics. I believe that this analysis helps explain the need for an interpretive social science of the sort explored in this issue of the *American Behavioral Scientist*. Also, the narrativist view I outline helps elucidate the kind of account of human action sought by such an interpretive approach to human science inquiry.

## ROY SCHAFER: PSYCHOANALYSIS AS STORYTELLING

Schafer (1980a) described his conception of psychoanalysis as a "hermeneutic version of psychoanalysis," an approach that treats psychoanalysis as "an interpretive discipline rather than a natural science" (p. 82). Acknowledging his debt to Habermas,<sup>7</sup> he rejected Freud's mixed discourse of force and agency as an "incoherent" story that makes personal change through psychoanalytic insight incomprehensible. In Schafer's view, psychoanalytic theory consists not of causal hypotheses but of narrative structures for retelling life stories.

In developing his revisionary approach to psychoanalysis, Schafer recommends some striking innovations. He encourages us to get rid of the idea of the mental, where this is understood as a realm of conscious contents discovered by introspection. In his view, the introspective model of self-knowledge tends to reinforce the assumption that experience is something that occurs within our minds, something that happens within us. This conception of experience as inner happenings leads to the idea "that far from creating our lives, we witness them," and it therefore makes it easy for us to disclaim responsibility for what we do. In addition, the introspective model leads to a picture of the human self as a "container of experience" whose contents can be observed by "mental eyes located outside this container." Once this sort of picture is in place, according to Schafer (1980b), there is a tendency to see the self as split into two components: (a) a spectator who is doing the introspecting and (b) a mental realm in which experiences occur. Once again, the outcome is a view of the self as essentially passive—a thing to which events just happen (see p. 49).

One of Schafer's (1992) central goals is to get rid of the traditional objectifying view of the self as either a material mechanism or a field of consciousness filled with experiences. On his view, "Experience is made or fashioned; it is not encountered, discovered, or observed." When we see that experience is something we construct rather than find, we will also see that "[i]ntrospection does not encounter ready-made material" but instead creates those materials according to its current expectations and interpretations (p. 23). On this account, then, a self is not an object that can be investigated and understood but is first and foremost an agent that is engaged in an ongoing process of self-creation and self-composition. As Schafer (1978) stated, "the self is a kind of telling." It is "a telling rather than a teller" (p. 86).

If the self is an ongoing process of telling, it follows that there is no object with determinate characteristics that is simply "there" prior to the various sorts of tellings and retellings through which we give shape to our lives. Schafer (1992) goes a step further and claims that there are not even any data or facts we need to be true to in composing our stories. This claim is based on the familiar observation that "actions exist only under one or another description" (p. xiv). What this means is that one and the same physical movement can be described in very different ways, and there is no way to specify an action independent of some description of it. Thus, raising my hand at a meeting can be described as

flexing my biceps, calling attention to myself, displacing air molecules, voting for a candidate, displaying my knee-jerk liberal tendencies, getting even with my wife, and so on. Because the specification of an action is underdetermined by the physical events, there is no interpretation-neutral specification of an event that describes the action "as it really was."

If this is the case, however, then what can count as a fact is determined by the procedures of selection and the ways of deciding relevance that make up the process of narrativizing our lives. But if the stories we tell first provide the descriptions in terms of which actions and events show up in some specific way, then there are no story-independent data that could serve as a basis for devising stories that are true to the facts. In this sense, "the data of psychoanalysis [are] constituted rather than simply encountered" (Schafer, 1980b, p. 30). Facts are "what the analyst makes them out to be; they are a function of the specifically psychoanalytic questions that guide the narrational project" (Schafer, 1980a, p. 83). Roth (1991) summed up Schafer's point this way: There is no life of someone to be told *wie es eigentlich gewesen [ist]*; hence, histories of that life may be better or worse, relative to some purposes, but no history is the true one" (p. 188).<sup>8</sup> Our stories are therefore optional to the extent that they are not constrained by anything that exists outside those stories that could be taken as criterial for the stories.

The fact that reality is always mediated by narration leads Schafer to conclude that psychoanalytic practice should be thought of as a matter of retelling the stories analysands tell in the therapeutic dialogue. An analysand initially might present a personal narrative that is filled with gaps, contradictions, and discontinuities. The aim of analysis, then, is to retell that initial story in such a way that "the past is expanded, reorganized, corrected, and told more coherently and convincingly" (Schafer, 1981, pp. 38-39). What is distinctive about the psychoanalytic dialogue is the fact that the analyst is guided by the aim of retelling the individual's life story "along psychoanalytic lines" (Schafer, 1980b, p. 35). Schafer grants that there are a number of different narrative strategies available in the psychoanalytic tradition for this purpose. In his own practice, retelling along psychoanalytic lines means that his modes of emplotment conform to "the story lines that characterize Freudian retellings." In this mode, "events or phenomena are viewed from the standpoint of repetitive re-creations of infantile, family-centered situations bearing on sex [and] aggression," and they are organized "around bodily zones . . . particularly the mouth, anus, and genitalia" (Schafer, 1980b, pp. 39, 50). But, consistent with his view of the nature of narrative strategies as matters of choice, Schafer admits that the narrative structures dictated by Freudian theory are only "optional way[s] of telling the story of human lives" (Schafer, 1980b, p. 41).

There is one feature of psychoanalytic retellings that Schafer does not regard as optional, however, and that is the need to transform the analysand's descriptions of experiences into an "action language" in which they are treated as things the individual does rather than as things that happen to him or her. Schafer (1981) believes that this reallocation of activity and passivity has the advantage of

making personal change possible, for when the past is seen as “a matter of what one has been doing all along, it is a matter that is amenable to change” (p. 49). Where before there had been stories about the self as a victim of circumstances, there are now stories about being master of one’s own fate.

As analysands incorporate this new action language into their ways of narrating their lives, they “become increasingly dissatisfied with regarding themselves simply as products of their backgrounds” and they gain “the freedom to conceive of the new and the different” and to assume “responsibility where they have not done so before.” The effects of recognizing personal responsibility “are liberating”: analysands experience “the joyfulness of acknowledging personal agency” as they “begin to tell new or drastically revised stories of their past and present lives and . . . enact them in the present with considerable benefit” (Schafer, 1981, p. 49). Over and over again Schafer points out that what is important is not the accuracy of the story but how “useful” this transformed mode of storytelling can be in liberating individuals.

The aim of the therapeutic dialogue, according to Schafer, is to produce a “jointly authored work,” an “interweaving of texts” that will expand the analysand’s capacities for self-understanding and self-transformation. When we inquire into the criteria of validity of psychoanalytic tellings, however, we find only the aesthetic standards applicable to stories in general: “The criteria of validity of psychoanalytic interpretation,” Schafer (1980a) wrote, “are those of coherence, consistency, comprehensiveness, and ultimately, conformity with refined common sense” (p. 83). There could be no other support or evidence.<sup>9</sup> The conclusion to draw is that “narrational methodology is intrinsically relativistic” (Schafer, 1981, p. 35). One of the central aims of psychoanalysis, according to this account, is to help the analysand to understand and embrace this relativity. The aim of analysis is to help people “learn through analysis to become more versatile, sophisticated, and *relativistic* historians of their own lives” (Schafer, 1981, p. 43; emphasis added). The fundamental assumption is that becoming more relativistic and flexible will give one a richer sense of the possibilities of change. The jointly authored narrative creates a “second reality” in which “an analytically coherent and useful account of the past” paves the way to an “anticipated future” that is no longer “imagined fearfully and irrationally on the model of the past” (Schafer, 1980b, p. 52).

### THE LIMITATIONS OF SCHAFER’S REVISIONARY APPROACH

Schafer’s revisionary account of therapy breaks with naturalist models in some important ways. Where mainstream scientific approaches tend to think of a human being as an object of a particular sort (whether mental, physical, or some combination of the two), Schafer thinks of a human as an event, as a telling that unfolds over time. And where naturalist accounts see explanation as a matter of correctly describing the causal mechanisms lying below the surface phenom-

ena, Schafer sees his own approach as hermeneutic in its emphasis on grasping what things mean to people and helping them compose new versions of their life stories.

The assumption that therapy can help people compose new versions of their life stories leads to Schafer's unflinching acceptance of relativism. Relativism is unavoidable, Schafer believes, once we acknowledge that any specification of an action is underdetermined by mere physical events. In his (1992) words,

We have only versions of the true and the real. Narratively unmediated, definite access to truth and reality cannot be demonstrated. In this respect, therefore, there can be no absolute foundation on which any observer or thinker stands; *each must choose his or her narrative or version.* (p. xv; emphasis added)

The fact that narrative accounts are ultimately optional led Schafer (1980a) to write that "only a radically relativistic conception of psychoanalysis will do" (p. 83). And for the same reason, he holds that psychoanalysis should help analysts to be more clear-sighted relativists in narrating their own lives.

Schafer's conclusions are in accord with an influential way of thinking about narrative found in such fields as historiography and literary studies in recent years. White (1978) summed up much of the thinking about history when he wrote, "We do not *live* stories, even if we give our lives meaning by retroactively casting them into the form of stories" (p. 90). In the flow of real life, no events come earmarked as "beginnings" or "endings," and no set of events is intrinsically tragic or comic. Beginnings and endings, genre and mode of emplotment, these all depend on the choices made by the storyteller. There is nothing in the events that could compel us to interpret them one way rather than another.

Spence (1982) advanced this line of thought in his study of the difference between what he called "narrative truth" and "historical truth." Spence pointed out that an agent's self-understanding always depends on his or her self-interpretations, and interpreting invariably involves embellishing and editing according to the interpreter's own personal interpretive schemes. This means that there is no way to get at the actual historical truth of what happened in an individual's life. Psychoanalytic interpretations therefore should be thought of as "artistic and pragmatic creations" that have "their own kind of truth" to the extent that they are helpful to the patient (Spence, 1982, p. 171). They can be "compelling" and "plausible" if they organize a set of events into a whole and serve a genuine need. But it is an illusion to think that the stories we tell are capturing the truth about what really happened in our lives.

From these observations, it is a short step to the view, expressed in Sherwood's (1969) *The Logic of Explanation in Psychoanalysis*, that in the end all that matters is that one tells a story, and that any story will do so long as it has "therapeutic benefits." In Sherwood's words,

There seems to be a definite and very basic "rationalizing drive" in human experience, a need to see one's own behavior as forming a reasonable and coherent

pattern. The adequate psychoanalytic narrative, by providing such a pattern, by giving reasons for 'unreasonable' behavior, satisfies this need and thereby allays anxiety. [These therapeutic benefits] will result from a patient's acceptance of a psychoanalytic narrative, whether or not that narrative does in fact outline the true cause of the patient's neurotic behavior. Therapeutic efficacy, then . . . will depend solely upon the ability of the analyst to persuade the patient . . . to accept his narrative as being true. (pp. 250-251; quoted in Roth, 1991, p. 188)

The criteria for evaluating such rationalizations are aesthetic appeal (does it give the events coherence, continuity, familiarity, etc.?) and usefulness (does it produce therapeutic benefits?). The question of whether they are in fact true does not arise—indeed, cannot arise given the claim that facts are constructed by narratives and interpretations.

It seems, then, that Schafer's "radical relativism" about narratives leads to some surprising conclusions. If we accept the view that all narratives reflect the idiosyncratic interpretive schemes of particular interpreters, then we seem to be left with the conclusion that there are only conflicting stories with no basis for reconciliation or adjudication. As Roth put it, "Narratives represent . . . the interests of narrators; these interests can generate inconsistent accounts which can neither be ruled out nor reconciled" (p. 459). In other words, there can be innumerable, mutually inconsistent stories told by different narrators with their different interests and perspectives, and there will be no way of saying that one narrative is more true than another.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, given this account of narratives, even the idea that usefulness or therapeutic benefit might serve as a criterion for selecting interpretations is undermined. First, since what is useful or beneficial is defined by the particular sort of narrative strategy being employed, any attempt to provide a pragmatic justification for a narrative will lead to a vicious circle. Moreover, we can talk about the pragmatic value of an interpretation only on the assumption that we can compare the interpretation against what actually happens to see how well it is working. But if all facts are constituted by our interpretations, then there is no interpretation-neutral fact we can examine to see how our interpretations are working. Here, whatever seems better just is better, and it is quite possible that our interpretations could be having devastating effects while we blithely assume they are working beautifully.

Once one moves toward a constructionist account of narrative, there is a natural tendency to start raising general doubts about the value of narrativizing itself. Loewenstein (1991) argued that the project of narrativizing experience reflects a desire to attain mastery over the unknown by "expunging from our awareness the ambiguous, overdetermined, and contradictory aspects of our lived experience." On this view, the analyst's "all too smooth, polished, and conclusive psychoanalytic constructions offer the analysand yet another false sense of unity," and they undermine the ability "to withstand the ambiguity, contradiction, and discontinuity that marks our present experience and our past" (pp. 5, 26). In the same vein, Gergen and Kaye (1992) recommended replacing the old ideal of narrative coherence and unity in a life with "a thoroughgoing

relativism in expressions of identity," a stance that invites "a multiplicity of self-accounts . . . *but a commitment to none*" (p. 171; emphasis added). In the place of a therapeutically constructed narrative, there will be a recognition of "the multiple and varied forms of connectedness that make up a life," and a deeper respect for the "various modes of relationship in which one is enmeshed" (pp. 179-180).

As this evolution of ideas makes clear, Schafer's revisionary conception of psychoanalysis seems to slide easily into a constructionist view of therapy as a free-floating play of creative interpretations unconstrained by any prior standards concerning how we should understand our lives. In the place of the scientific naturalist's commitment to discovering the truth about the causes of a person's actions, we find an ideal of negotiating meanings, with no illusions about finding the truth about a person's life. For constructionists, verisimilitude is seen as a side effect of textual composition, not as a relation between a text and an independently existing reality.

We might ask why constructionist accounts seem so appealing. Part of the appeal, no doubt, lies in the exhilarating sense of freedom we get from thinking that there are no constraints on the stories we can create in composing our own lives. Now anything is possible, it seems. As has often been noted, however, this conception of freedom as abstract possibility seems to undermine real, meaningful freedom, for it effaces the sorts of guidelines and boundaries we need in order to see what is really at stake in our choices.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, constructionism turns out to be self-defeating. It ends up undermining the very ideal of freedom that motivated it in the first place.

Constructionism looks attractive to many psychotherapy theorists because it promises to provide an alternative to naturalism. But, oddly enough, on a closer inspection it appears that the rather extreme claims made by constructionists can get off the ground only because thinkers like Schafer, despite their explicit rejection of naturalism, still cling to some of the core assumptions of the naturalist outlook. Constructionists maintain that there is an unbridgeable gap between our meaning-laden stories on the one hand and prenarrativized reality on the other. But it seems that they can draw this sharp distinction between story and fact only because they assume from the outset that reality as it is in itself—the flow of actual life—cannot possibly consist of anything other than inherently meaningless events that only retrospectively come to be emplotted and endowed with meaning. What is the source of this assumption that reality in itself must be a meaningless series of events? The idea is plausible, I suspect, because it is derived from one of the core beliefs of naturalism: the belief that reality at its most basic level consists of nothing but brute physical stuff in mechanistic causal interactions. Once we accept the distinction between uninterpreted reality and human-generated meanings so central to naturalism, then it is natural to assume that we must accept the anti-realist and relativistic conclusion that, insofar as reality is radically underdetermined with respect to possible interpretations, innumerable interpretations of any set of physical

events are possible, all of them equally consistent with the data, yet none truer or better than the others.

This suggests that constructionism can get started only if it buys into the ontological assumptions that define the naturalist tradition. Mainstream naturalist thought assumes that humans are subjects, centers of experience and action, who are set over against a world of brute physical objects, and that they interpret and evaluate those objects according to their own desires and needs. Nothing in the world of objects exercises any essential constraints on our purely subjective activities of storyizing and fantasizing. This subject-object distinction is presupposed by both naturalism or constructionism. What I am suggesting is that the only difference between naturalists and constructionists is found in their views of the implications of this subject-object dichotomy. Whereas constructionists invite us to celebrate the fact that the meanings we create swing free of any ties to reality, naturalists encourage us to expunge all meaning vocabulary from our theories so that we can be sure we are getting in touch with reality as it is in itself.

### RETHINKING NARRATIVIST APPROACHES

The hermeneutic tradition has tried to overcome both naturalism and constructionism by working out a different ontological account of human existence and its relation to the world. Heidegger's (1962) description of humans as temporal "happenings" enmeshed in a world lays the ground for this alternative outlook. For Heidegger, a human being should be thought of not as a subject set over against objective reality but as a unified totality of what he called "being-in-the-world." In our prereflective, everyday lives as agents, Heidegger suggested, our being is bound up with contexts of equipment that are functioning in familiar ways in relationship to our goals. In the course of our everyday affairs as being-in-the-world, we usually do not experience any gap between the self and the familiar work world in which we find ourselves. For example, in hammering boards together in a workshop, what we encounter is not a hammer-thing to use on nail-things but rather the ongoing business of hammering in order to build a bookcase. In such contexts, there is no way to drive in a wedge between the self-component and the equipmental context in which we realize our ends. When everything is running smoothly in such activities, what is "given" is not a subject distinct from objects but a meaning-filled totality in which the context of agency and the activity are interwoven into a unified whole. Here, meanings are not in our heads, they are in the world.

Heidegger's description of our normal activities also shows how human existence has a kind of distinctive, tripartite temporal structure—the lived temporality of a life story. This account of lived time is based on the fact that our lives are always future directed in the sense that we are under way in trying to realize some goals in our activities. According to Heidegger, in moving toward

accomplishing specific aims, we exist as “projections” into the future. This way of being projected into the future in turn defines the past. Our goal directedness in acting determines how preceding events count as contributing to the realization of the action in question. That is to say, the goal gathers together what came before under the unity of an intention, with the result that earlier events are experienced not as the “factuality” of a causal sequence but as a meaningful “facticity,” which makes it possible to experience the flow of events as cumulative in moving toward the projected outcome. Finally, actions in the present are defined by the anticipated completion and by the unfolding flow of what has come before. Thus, action has a dynamic temporal structure in which future directedness gives shape to the past, and the undertakings in the past give sense to what one is doing in the present.

Just as action has a distinctive temporal structure, so does life as a whole. Heidegger makes it clear that each action gains its meaning from its place within the agent’s entire life story. My hammering in the workshop counts as building furniture for my study, for example, only in the light of my ongoing project of realizing myself as a home craftsman. Throughout the course of my life, as I engage in this and similar sorts of undertakings, I am making myself a person of a particular sort. The overarching life story that is unfolding in this way provides the frame of reference in terms of which my actions have the specific meanings they have: buying wood, selecting tools, reading crafts magazines, and so forth. The events of my life are given a determinate meaning by what Gadamer (1975) called the “anticipation of completion” that organizes my existence as a whole, my “being-toward-the-end” or, in Heidegger’s words, my “being-toward-death.” The fact that my life presents itself as a relatively coherent story connecting past accomplishments and projections into the future is what first makes it possible for me to experience, and to attribute to myself, something like personal identity.

Heidegger’s conception of life as embodying a distinctive temporal structure confirms the view, found in a number of studies,<sup>12</sup> that life has a narrative structure before there is any explicit attempt to put that life into the form of a story. Life’s inherent narrativity is described by MacIntyre (1981) in this way: “[H]uman life has a determinate form, the form of a certain kind of story. It is not just that poems and sagas narrate what happens to men and women, but that in their narrative form poems and sagas capture a form that was already present in the lives which they relate” (p. 117). Because life has a narrative structure, we can see a person’s actions at any time as enacting a narrative—as playing out the unfolding story of his or her life (p. 197).

The story-shaped structure of life follows from the basic future directedness of human existence. It is because our lives are characterized by futurity—because we are always moving toward the culmination of our lives as whole—that what we do and what happens to us can show up as mattering to us in some way in terms of where we are heading in our lives. The futurity of our lives therefore opens up an arena of meaning in terms of which events in a person’s life can show up as actions. From this it follows that there are no plain facts about

a person's life distinct from the meaning-laden stories in which they play a role.<sup>13</sup> But even though the meaning of those facts can change with shifts in the direction of the person's life story, it does not follow that we can identify a set of meaningless basic events distinct from the defeasible meanings things have for people in their lives, for it is fundamental to this view that human action is intelligible to us only as part of a life story.

If our lives are always story shaped, then narrating the events in a person's life must be thought of as a matter of making articulate the often inchoate and tacit stories that already inform that life. It follows, then, that stories grow out of and reflect the flow of our lives, and storytelling makes explicit what is already there in life. Yet, at the same time, our lives are storyized in intelligible ways only because our actions for the most part reflect and manifest familiar sorts of story lines that circulate in our culture. Art imitates life, certainly, but life also imitates art. In much of what we do, we live out the kinds of story lines that are told and enacted within our own historical culture.

We can see why this is so if we reflect on Heidegger's claim that human existence is characterized by "historicity" (*Geschichtlichkeit*). At one level, historicity refers to the happening or event structure of a person's life as a future-directed and cumulative story (*Geschichte*). At another level, however, the concept of historicity refers to the fact that our lives are always already embedded in the ongoing story of a particular cultural history (or histories). In Heidegger's view, the particular possibilities of self-understanding we absorb as we grow up into the public world are themselves products of a particular historical tradition, and this means that we are always products of our history. Our sense of who we are and of what is at stake in living is defined for us by the historical context in which we find ourselves.

We can distinguish two main ways that stories inhabit and shape our lives. At the deepest level, there are the all-pervasive, core story lines that shape the background understanding of a particular community. These are the stories that are embodied, for example, in the enduring art forms of a culture—the tragedies, comedies, historical tales, and ritualized enactments familiar to all participants in a historical culture. We might call these story lines the exemplary stories of a culture. They are made manifest not just in tellings and theatrical performances but also in the symbols that punctuate the lives of a people—for example, the crucifix, the menorah, the V for victory, battlefield monuments, and symbols associated with holidays and festivals.

Exemplary stories are similar to what Crites has called "sacred stories," the sediment of inarticulate and perhaps ineffable stories that lie in the background of a culture's practices. In Crites's (1971) view, many of the familiar, mundane stories we live out in everyday life are structured and given meaning in advance by certain background stories that determine how things can be intelligible for us. Such stories, he wrote, are "like dwelling-places. People live in them. . . . They are moving forms . . . which inform people's sense of the story of which their own lives are part, of the moving course of their own action and experience" (p. 295). What counts as an exemplary story often differs from one culture to

another. The upbeat, optimistic Polyanna or Horatio Alger stories so dear to Americans, for instance, are profoundly different from the stories of noble defeat of the Poles and Serbs, and both of these differ from the exemplary stories of ritual suicide in Japan. It is because of the role of these generally tacit stories that ways of living that have a meaning in one culture can make no sense in another—for example, the Russian stories of selfless suffering that are so hard for us to understand.

A second type of story line is found in the mundane stories that inform our everyday ways of talking about the things we do. In ordinary conversation, we tend to cast our narrations into the mold of standardized stories accepted within our culture. These story lines are often marked by specific narrational devices that cue the listener to the type of story being told. Thus, one might begin a story by saying “I had quite an adventure last night” or “A crisis came up at work yesterday” or “A funny thing happened to me on the way to the theater.” Because stories of this sort are so familiar within our culture, the listener knows exactly where he or she stands when presented with openings like this. Mundane story lines of this sort are so crucial to finding our common “footing” with one another that we are astonished when we encounter people who are not tuned in to such ways of articulating things.

My claim is that exemplary and mundane stories constitute much of the background of intelligibility that we share as coparticipants in a public life world. As a child is brought up into the forms of life of a community, he or she becomes initiated into these deeply ingrained story lines, and on that basis comes to understand others in terms of the ways they manifest the stories. By getting a handle on standardized story lines about “going out to have a good time” or “making a tough decision,” the child learns how to deal with the typical situations he or she encounters in its world. As we come to master these stories, we come to enact them in our own lives, with the result that much of what we do is story shaped in the sense that our agency manifests the background stories we have soaked up from our culture.

Thus, we do not just have adventures; we take off for adventures and go looking for adventures. Crises do not simply befall us; we sometimes manufacture crises, and in some cases we become crisis junkies who cannot live without them. We prepare for a painful confrontation, and lo and behold there is a painful confrontation. The same is true for flings and heartbreaks, lucky breaks and failures, escapades and wasted time. Events typically turn out a certain way because we throw ourselves into specific types of stories with plot lines that are familiar to everyone who participates in our social context. For the most part, we tend to slip into the grooves laid out by such stories in our everyday activities, and most of us tend to “stay in character” as this is defined by the stories we have become.<sup>14</sup> In Crites’s (1971) words,

The stories people hear and tell, the dramas they see performed . . . shape in the most profound way the inner story of experience. We imbibe a sense of the meaning of our own baffling dramas from these stories, and this sense of its

meaning in turn affects the form of a man's experience and the style of his action.  
(p. 304)

Given the fact that these stories are all-pervasive in shaping our sense of who we are, it does not seem quite right to say that we make these stories. On the contrary, as the background of intelligibility to which we first awaken as we become conscious beings, these stories make us the people we are.

### IMPLICATIONS OF THE NARRATIVE APPROACH FOR PSYCHOTHERAPY

The tight interconnection of life and story we have been examining shows how the stories composed in the therapeutic setting can be seen as being true in the sense of capturing and remaining faithful to the integrity of the individual's life story. Given this conception of the narrativity of life, there no longer seems to be any basis for global doubts about our ability to get at the truth concerning a person's life. To the extent that the therapist and client are both attuned to the shared background of understanding they pick up as participants in a common life world, they will always have a basis for making sense of the already narrativized story lines the client is living out at any given time.

Thus, in a straightforward sense, we can say that one of the aims of the therapeutic dialogue is to get at the truth about a person's life. But it should be obvious that truth here cannot be thought of simply as a correct representation of a reality that exists totally independent of the story told about it. On the contrary, the concept of truth in psychotherapy will differ from the kinds of truth idealized by naturalist approaches in a number of different ways. First, it should be obvious that, although life events are always story shaped, they generally fit into multiple overlapping and interlocking stories in a person's overall story. This suggests that, whereas scientific theories are said to be underdetermined with respect to the data, life stories are overdetermined in the sense that they admit a variety of different true accounts depending on the different aspects of the life that are brought to the fore. Second, like all narratives, the stories we tell about a person's life require a process of selection in which certain events and relationships are highlighted while others are treated as insignificant, and this process of selection is always guided by some anticipation of where the story is going as a whole—its projected outcome or culmination. And since one's understanding of where one's life is going is something that is constantly being revised in the light of new developments, this means that the business of storyizing a life will always be open ended to the extent that new events within and outside the therapeutic setting will almost certainly call for transformed narratives.

These observations point to the need to formulate a concept of truth that will capture the specific kinds of disclosure characteristic of therapeutic narratives—a conception of "being true to" that is not reducible to a static correspondence

between statement and fact. I believe we can move toward such a concept of truth by considering what Gadamer says about the relation between tragedy in life and tragedy as it is presented on the stage. Gadamer (1975) called attention to the fact that the meaning of a person's life is always uncertain and inconclusive at any time because the future is open ended and lacking closure.

"Reality" always stands in a horizon of the future of observed and feared or, at any rate, still undecided possibilities. Hence it is always the case that mutually exclusive expectations are aroused, not all of which can be fulfilled. The undecidedness of the future is what permits such a superfluity of expectations that reality necessarily falls behind them. (p. 101)

It is only in those rare cases when life events flow into a completed totality of meaning, "such that no lines of meaning scatter in the void," that life has the form of a drama. For the most part, however, everyday existence points outward into a misty and undecided future, and so lacks a determinate form and meaning.

What is distinctive about a theatrical presentation of tragedy is its ability to make manifest the tragic dimension of life by transforming the confusing and overdetermined events of life into the form of a unified, meaningful whole. The work of art, on this view, is a "transformation into form" through which what is initially only potential and inchoate in life now comes to presence in a way that reveals a determinate structure. In Gadamer's view, such a transformation into form is an "event of truth" to the extent that, in it, what was originally only latent in life comes to be realized and fulfilled in its true underlying meaning. "The transformation is a transformation into the true" (Gadamer, 1975) wrote. "In the presentation of the play, *what is* emerges. In it is produced and brought to the light what otherwise is constantly hidden and withdrawn" (p. 101). Through the work of art, what is presented comes to be defined and realized for the first time, and in this process it now *is* what previously it was only potentially. "From this viewpoint 'reality' is defined as what is untransformed, and art as the raising up of this reality into its truth" (p. 102). The fact that a truth is brought forward by the work explains the familiar experience of recognition we have in watching the play on the stage. By means of the work, Gadamer (1975) wrote, "everyone recognizes that this is how things are" (p. 102).

We might call Gadamer's conception of truth in art an "emanationist" view because it conceives of art as emanating out from and fulfilling what is implicit in the reality it brings to presence.<sup>15</sup> On such an emanationist account, a story does not simply mirror pregiven events as they are independent of the story. Instead, the narrative brings to light and makes explicit a story that previously was inchoate because it lacked the kind of closure and unity of meaning characteristic of a well-formed story.

Of course, any disclosure of this sort will light up the agent's life story from some specific point of view, and so cannot be thought of as the last word about that life. But it would be wrong to suppose that just because we can grasp things only from some perspective or other, we are not seeing the things themselves,

as if the perspectives were a barrier standing between us and the things we want to see. For in seeing a life from various perspectives, we are after all encountering that life itself. There is no such thing as the reality of a person's life distinct from the various aspects we may uncover in narrating that life. Thus, although it is a mistake to suppose that our stories simply map onto a preexisting reality, it is equally wrong to think that in narrativizing we are arbitrarily spinning off stories that have no essential ties to reality. What Gadamer's emanationist account suggests is that, in telling stories in the psychotherapeutic setting, we are realizing and defining a meaning and structure that was there all along.

Gadamer tried to clarify the nature of this sort of "emerging-into-presence" of the truth through his discussion of effective history. The conception of effective history is designed to bring out the way our interpretations both grow out of and feed back into the unfolding history of our community. The recognition of effective history reveals that the very being of a person's life story is preshaped by the background of stories and interpretations that constitute what Gadamer called the "tradition" of a shared life world. But it also shows that our interpretations of our lives—the ever-evolving readings we give to our existence—feed back into and reshape the wider context of tradition in which they appear.

When we see our interpretations as part of an unfolding history of effects in this way, we will also see that the truth of the interpretation will depend in part on the way that interpretation is taken up and applied to new situations. This is why Gadamer says that the truth of an interpretation is inseparable from its application in the future. Here, we see another way in which the notion of truth in narrative differs from the ideal of truth in naturalism. Whereas naturalism assumes that a causal explanation is either true or not true—that its truth depends solely on the state of affairs it depicts—the narrativist concept of truth assumes that our causal accounts are constantly subject to revision depending on how we come to apply them in living out our lives.

A brief example might make it clear how stories can be true to the reality they portray even though they are always subject to revision. Consider the case of Paul, a young man who began using marijuana when he was 15 and had developed an expensive cocaine addiction by the time he was 18. Paul's parents, having made every effort to help him quit, finally threw him out of the house, and he ended up dealing cocaine to support his growing habit. Before he was 20 he was in jail. On leaving prison, he was sent to a social worker for counseling. The story Paul presented in the opening sessions with his counselor focused on his unhappy home life and his difficulties with his parents. Although he regretted the pain he had caused his parents, he insisted they deserved it because of the way they had treated him. As a result, he was unable to integrate his feelings of regret into his story, and he was filled with rage about perceived injustices he had suffered.

The social worker's goal was to help Paul retell the story of his life in a form that would be both more realistic and more viable as a basis for action in the future. Because this retelling had to make sense of both the past and the future

(Paul's facticity and his projectedness toward future goals), it had two components: (a) a recovery of what happened that made sense of the past and (b) an estimation of what it all meant that could serve as a basis for action in the future. At this initial stage of Paul's development, the best story he and his counselor could compose was one in which he came to see his parents as also being victims of dysfunctional parenting, and thus as not really responsible for what they had done. With this story, Paul's rage was alleviated, and he was able to go on living without being consumed by the need to blame anyone for his unhappiness. The outcome of this joint reauthoring of his life story was a view of the world as a morally neutral arena inhabited by a community of victims where no one is really at fault. A rather dreary and constricting story, perhaps, but one that helped him stay clean and sober.

In prison, Paul had been involved in Narcotics Anonymous (NA), and after his release he continued to attend meetings. As a result of these meetings and further work with his counselor, he began to transform his story of what had happened and what it all meant. Hearing speakers recount their stories of addiction and recovery, Paul began to think of his past pain as a source of experience and strength that enabled him to help others who were dealing with substance abuse. Thanks to his experience, he learned, he could be helpful to others because he had been there and knew what it was like. As he listened to the speakers' accounts of rising from the depths of despair and becoming able to live constructive lives, Paul became attuned to one of the exemplary stories of our culture: the story of a dark night of the soul followed by redemption through a life dedicated to helping others. As he became more involved in the NA program, he began to enact this exemplary story line in his work with other addicts, and in this process came to experience his life as serving a higher purpose. This new way of narrating his life story let him embrace his past as a basis for serving others, and he came to experience his overall life project as a kind of spiritual quest.

This rather sketchy composite story points to a couple of conclusions about the role of narrative in making sense of human beings. First, it seems evident from this example that the idea that "any story will do" in helping people live rich and meaningful lives cannot possibly be right. At each stage of Paul's life, it was crucially important for maintaining his integrity as an individual that the stories he composed actually reflected the reality (or realities) of his life. Second, we can see how the stories we tell about our lives can be radically transformed even while they remain true to the facts of our lives. Third, this example shows how the stories we tell gain their meaning from the specific way they envision a future outcome of the course of events. In the context of a narrative, causal events in the past can stand out as significant and relevant to the account only in the light of some prior projection of where the story is going as a whole. Thus, what counts as a correct causal account will depend on the overall meaning events are seen as having in the person's life. In this sense, causality is determined by narrative meaning.

Finally, it should be clear from this example that there is no single, fixed set of criteria that can be used to determine the superiority of one story over another. Deciding which story is the best or truest will depend on such factors as the scope of what is explained; the quality of the future it implies; its applicability to new situations; its ability to display past events and actions as meaningful in relation to the agent's unfolding projects; the way it presents the person's life as having coherence, continuity and direction; and its plausibility in comparison with other possible stories. But even though there is no single criterion for validating a narrative, it is noteworthy that generally this does not present any major problems in practice. As beings whose very being is shaped by stories, we are remarkably good at spotting the truth in the stories we tell.

## NOTES

1. Interview with Chinua Achebe on Bill Moyer's *World of Ideas* (September 29, 1988), a production of Public Affairs Television, Inc.

2. In his classic formulation of this point, Hempel (1965) wrote, "When an individual event *b* is said to have been caused by another individual event *a*, then surely the claim is implied that whenever 'the same cause' is realized, 'the same effect' will occur." Because explanation involves seeing particular phenomena as instances of general regularities in nature, Hempel concluded that "all scientific explanation involves, explicitly or by implication, a subsumption of its subject matter under general regularities" (pp. 349, 488). At the turn of the century, an attempt was made to distinguish the natural and human sciences by claiming that the natural sciences are nomothetic (concerned with general truths), whereas the human sciences are idiographic (concerned with understanding concrete, particular occurrences). But this distinction fails to distinguish the two types of science, for geology is concerned with explaining particular, "concrete" rock formations, and even the most concrete biographies and histories always contain an element of the general in the ways they cast light on the human situation as such.

3. Most naturalistically inclined thinkers recognize that there are no theory-neutral data, but they generally hold that researchers working within a shared paradigm (as Kuhn defines that term) will agree for the most part about data and appropriate methods of explanation.

4. For Habermas (1971), psychoanalytic theory consists not of laws expressing regularities but of "narrative schemes" that provide a basis for articulating a person's experience into a coherent narrative (see Chapter 11). Ricoeur (1981) argued that one of the central functions of a psychoanalytic explanation is raising a case history "to the sort of narrative explanation we ordinarily expect from a story" (p. 273).

5. The term "thick description" has become familiar through the writings of Geertz. It is because we feel that we understand action better through narratives than through descriptions of underlying causal mechanisms that we can see the point in the old cliché, "You can learn more about humans from the plays of Shakespeare than from a psychology textbook."

6. A powerful argument for the view that narrative truth is to be evaluated on the basis of pragmatic and aesthetic criteria is found in Spence's (1982) influential book, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis*. For a general discussion of the epistemological problems in narrativist and constructionist approaches to psychotherapy, see the introduction to Grünbaum (1984) and the excellent study of these issues by Strenger (1991). As should be apparent, these broader epistemological concerns are not at issue in this article.

7. For references to Ricoeur and Habermas, see Schafer (1981, p. 15; 1980b, pp. 48-49).

8. The ideal of reporting the past "as it actually was" comes from the German historian Leopold Ranke.

9. Schafer (1981) also wrote, "To the extent that the debate over the therapeutic action is carried on in terms of 'evidence,' to that extent it is meaningless. The debate should be conducted in terms of the advantages of one narrative strategy over another" (p. 40).

10. I am assuming, of course, that when Spence uses the expression "narrative truth" to refer to what is plausible or compelling, he is simply misusing the word *truth*. Any use of that word that implies that outright lies, deceptions, and falsehoods might be true simply robs the concept of all of its meaning.

11. Taylor (1985) originally developed this line of argument.

12. See Crites (1971), MacIntyre (1981), Carr (1986), Ricoeur (*Time and Narrative* [1984, 1992] and *Oneself as Another* [1992], especially the fifth and sixth studies: "Personal Identity and Narrative Identity" and "The Self and Narrative Identity"), Kemp (1989), and Dunne (1995).

13. This is MacIntyre's (1981) point when he says that "the concept of an action is that of a moment in an actual or possible history abstracted for some purpose from that history" (p. 202).

14. In the contemporary world, story lines of fragmentation, floundering, and angst-ridden confusion are among the most familiar in our culture. As Gadamer (1986) remarked, "The only thing that is universally familiar to us today is unfamiliarity itself" (p. 79). This is why we feel comfortable with works of art that are "symbols of the unfamiliarity in which we encounter ourselves and our increasingly unfamiliar world" (p. 82). But this merely demonstrates the fact that we always operate with a background of intelligibility that serves to insure that what we encounter is familiar. This is what Gadamer meant when he noted that, in our current fascination with "making strange," the shared background of intelligibility is constantly being evoked in the act of being revoked. As Loewenstein's (1991) reflections suggest, many people now turn to standardized stories of incoherence and discontinuity in order to impart a familiar form to their lives.

15. Gadamer explicitly compares his own philosophy to ancient and medieval emanationist views. On this topic, see Carpenter (1994).

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