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Real Stories or Storied Realism?

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Review Essay

Michele L. Crossley (2000).
**Introducing narrative psychology: Self, trauma
and the construction of meaning**

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1. Context

Ever since SARBINS (1986) seminal work on narrative psychology the influence of narrative studies has grown considerably, no more so than in gaining an understanding of the nature of self and identity. Indeed, the use of narratives within psychology is nothing new, and is probably as old as psychology itself. Psychoanalysis would not exist without recourse to the telling of, and listening to, stories. However, there has been a significant increase in the interest shown in studying narrative for its own sake rather than as a purely therapeutic tool in recent years, not least in the area of self and identity. [1]

CROSSLEY's book, then, is aimed at introducing the reader to this complex and contentious field of study. In the main it achieves this aim, but overall, I suggest that it does little to advance any particular aspect of it. The book is divided into 3 main parts. The first concentrates on the theoretical positioning of narrative thought within psychology both as a burgeoning influence within social constructionist psychology, and as an increasingly influential field of study in the understanding of "real" human experience. The second concentrates on the nature of narrative analysis and how to begin to make some kind of sense of what is presented within interviews. It also provides some guidelines on beginning to analyse one's own life story. Finally, in the third section of the book, CROSSLEY focuses on the lived experience of individuals who have suffered the problems of childhood sexual abuse or the trauma of being diagnosed as HIV+, and develops themes based on her empirical work over the last few years. [2]

2. Narrative and the Self

The relationship between self and narrative is a complex one, which entails exploring and analysing aspects of authenticity, authorship, time and emplotment to mention only a few. HEIDEGGER (1962) suggested that we have two possibilities, to author one's own story or to traverse life according to a script composed by others. However, as MACINTYRE (1981) pointed out, self-authorship is a myth arising out of modern individualism and the increasingly narcissistic

nature of modern Western society. Indeed, it might be said that individuals are only the narrators, not the authors of their life story. [3]

And therein lies the rub. The continuing problem of narrative studies of the self involves constantly trying to grapple with the issue of how much the self is helping to construct the story (to author it) in an agential fashion, and how much of a persons story is a construction influenced by the social, cultural and historical environment of the narrator and the telling. And it is here that in her book CROSSLEY does not take the opportunity to outline sufficiently the variety of narrative approaches on offer to psychology. For example, the issue surrounding the nature of authenticity is not addressed head on. Whilst overtly espousing a postmodern and feminist epistemology, she covertly adopts a more pragmatic, realist one, favoured so much by those such as POLKINGHORNE (1988) who tend towards a psychoanalytic view of the self and its construction, which itself tends towards a unity of the self rather than the postmodern multiplicity of selves espoused by social constructionists such as GERGEN (1991). [4]

KERBY's (1991) important study of narrative and the self explores at length the relationship between language and individuals, and he argues that the self arises out of language, and is construed as a character not unlike those we encounter almost everyday in novels, plays and other story media. By appropriating, interpreting and retelling past events from the perspective of the here and now, the self constructs itself. In a similar fashion to the above, KERBY is focusing on a key issue in postmodern psychology, which is that of addressing how language shapes and influences the self, in terms of understanding the relationship inherent between power, politics, authority, and meaning in human life. It is into this maelstrom of theoretical issues that one has to place CROSSLEY's book "Introducing Narrative Psychology". She has avoided much of the foregoing theoretical problematic in favour of outlining the point where she thinks the field of narrative psychology should be placed. A brief introduction to the theoretical standpoints related to the self in psychology is offered. But it seems a shame that in an attempt to look at, however briefly, the foundations of narrative approaches to understanding the self, CROSSLEY does not even consider KERBY's work worthy of attention. [5]

She suggests the notion that narrative studies can bridge the gap between social constructionist approaches to the self and the more phenomenological approaches, both of which, she argues are flawed. For CROSSLEY, social constructionist approaches concentrate on language to the extent that the subject is lost, and phenomenological approaches tend to romanticize the subject to such an extent that the cultural influences are forgotten. Narrative approaches, on the other hand, acknowledge the need for a realist epistemology which is able to accord sufficient respect to the experiences of specific individuals (p.40). CROSSLEY, then, sees narratives as a kind of bridge between realism and idealism. [6]

However, it has been argued that the concepts of individualism, individuality, autonomy, and individual uniqueness are social constructs (SAMPSON 1993). They are peculiar to a Western cultural understanding of what it is to be a person. But they are not universal constructs, as so many ethnocentric authors would imply. [7]

3. Analysis, Authorship and Authenticity

CROSSLEY's second part is quite well handled, and does indeed make the novice feel that narrative analysis is achievable. However, one point that I would raise in this context is that considering much of conversation for individuals is composed of narratives themselves, then it is perhaps comes across as a little basic. It acknowledges the influence of culturally derived narrative stories as important in the construction of the self and one's sense of identity, but still the impression is of someone who cannot let go of the ultimate belief in the unity of the self concept. Not for the author is the option of a multitude of selves, or a self which is continually changing in the light of the context in which it finds itself, but a self which is fundamentally the same. I quite like the attempt to get the reader to analyse, or at least think about analysing, ones own life story, although it has to be said that this is likely to be fraught with difficulty if attempted seriously. But this does behove the reader to "experience" their life story as research participants are likely to. And

it is equally important to remember that in carrying out the activity suggested will not give the researchers any greater insight into the world of the participants themselves, but it might make them much more reflective analysts, which is no bad thing. [8]

The positioning of the text here is quite important in the third section of the book, which focuses on the lived experience of individuals who have suffered the problems of childhood sexual abuse or the trauma of being diagnosed as HIV+. It has to be said here that the subject material is handled sensitively, and despite the foregoing discussion, CROSSLEY deals with the issues in a manner which highlights the advantages of a narrative approach to understanding the meaning of trauma within peoples' lives. The issue of how an individual comes to terms with, for example, such a life changing event is treated with respect and empathy and the lived experiences do come through the narratives presented. [9]

There is some sense in which CROSSLEY's approach to the subject material is useful, especially when considering an individual's response to trauma, the main subject material for the book. It does allow for an individual to present his/her own version of events. It acknowledges the primacy of the spoken word of the individual sufferer, but this in itself, for me, presents another problem which CROSSLEY avoids, namely that of the "truthfulness" of the story presented to the researcher. How authentic is it? What is the relationship between what is told and what is experienced? How do we as researchers know when something happened and when the "something" is a faction, or indeed a fiction. Above all, does it matter? If one takes CROSSLEY's approach, then yes it does. Authenticity is assumed so that coherence can be maintained over time. If an individual's outlook and future directedness changes, then it is the self which changes its story, not that the narratives told are in any way indicative of that change. However, it is quite appropriate to consider that the two aspects of this, namely the self and its narratives have symbiotic relationship. Separation of the two may not be that simple. If one acknowledges that the context of the narrative telling is important (so that different contexts will produce different narratives), then narratives can be used as an analytical tool of the self and identity. [10]

What is important here is not (strange as it may seem) whether someone is actually retelling "real" events, but what purpose the telling is promoting, whether true or not. To claim, as CROSSLEY appears to do (but by no means the only one) that what one says is a version of what really happened is to miss an opportunity to explore other ways of analysing narrative and self construction. [11]

In grappling with this issue, one question which is raised however, is to what extent an individual controls the narrative(s) of his/her life? In other words how does an individual construct their sense of self, their identity, and how much of that sense of identity is shaped and influenced by social and cultural factors? Indeed, over the last 30 years, theorists within the social sciences have begun to see the individual less as an object which merely reacts to external stimuli, and more as an agential subject, actively participating and acting upon the environment itself. [12]

However, alongside these theories, there has been an increasingly influential theory which posits that the individual is so intertwined with a socially constructed and constituted environment that the self is seen to have very little sense of unity at all (GERGEN 1991; LASH & FRIEDMAN 1993). Indeed, a life narrative is a social construct, a "sociobiography" (GERGEN 1991), partly selective and partly fictitious, but at the same time is a means by which the individual interacts with others. [13]

One way of coming to terms with these apparently disparate theories (essentialism vs. constructionism) is to try to encapsulate the essential self into a unity which is determined through early development (e.g. HARRE & GILLET 1994), where society helps the individual to develop through experiences with the world in order to be able to function in a variety of social contexts. RICOEUR (1992) for example posits that there is a need for a sense of narrative unity or coherence in order to function in the world, and that the unity so constructed must inevitably be "an unstable mixture of fabulation and actual experience." (p.162) This is akin to FISCHER's (1987) notion of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. What becomes important is the verisimilitude of the story. [14]

But an emphasis on narrative study does not, of itself, imply an emphasis on autonomy, freedom and choice. DENNETT (1991) goes as far as to say that there is a need for a "centre of narrative gravity" with the autonomous self being a myth or story perpetuated for the sake of social or moral accountability. This is at odds with the general tone of CROSSLEY's book. Individuals are both agents who exercise free choice, but who are also subject to the influences of the cultural stock of stories to which we all succumb. Unfortunately, this is untenable in the view of realist epistemology. An individual cannot be both an agential self and at the same time be a product and producer of a cultural stock of narratives. [15]

4. Conclusion

Clearly CROSSLEY's book is aimed at those people who have little or no prior knowledge of the place of narrative within a psychology dominated by realist epistemology. In doing this, it inevitably attempts to cut corners, as it were, trying to be all things to all men engaging the audience in a quest for a new way of discovering knowledge about the world, but at the same time trying desperately not to upset the dominant position of positivism within mainstream psychological thinking. As an introductory text to the exciting world of narratives, it does succeed. Anyone wanting to engage in a radical exploration of the place of narrative within the broader field of postmodern studies of what it means to be human, or of the self, will be sadly disappointed. [16]

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