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# Narrative in Post-Rationalist Cognitive Therapy

by Alfredo Ruiz

Translated by Susana Aronsohn F.

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I believe narrative is one of the most fascinating issues in contemporary psychology. The interest that narrative has evoked in many authors proceeds from the fact that a non-empirical, constructivist or post-modern psychology considers the influence of human experience on world perception as a fundamental problem.

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## THE NARRATIVE MOVEMENT IN PSYCHOLOGY

One of the most important authors in narrative psychology is Jerome Bruner. In his two main books "ACTUAL MINDS, POSSIBLE WORLDS" and "ACTS OF MEANING" he solves the fundamental theoretical problem of the functioning of the human brain in a simple and exhaustive way. Bruner proposes two different ways of knowing, i.e., two modalities of cognitive functioning, thinking, each one of which allows us characteristic ways of constructing reality. These two modalities of thought can not be reduced to one another without the evident risk of losing the richness produced by the diversity of thought. More so, these two ways of knowing are autonomous, both in the principles of functioning as in the verification criteria of the knowledge achieved.

The modalities of thought distinguished by Bruner are: paradigmatic and narrative. The paradigmatic or logical- scientific modality attempts to be a mathematical, formal system of description and explanation. Here, the computer stands as a metaphor. At present we know much of this paradigmatic thought and of its function in adults as well as in children. It allows us to solve the majority of practical problems in everyday life. For most people, it is the only type of thought there is. Up to 10 or 15 years ago, psychologists also used to think this way.

The narrative type of thought-note that Bruner also refers to it as thought-is certainly less well known. However, it is the most ancient in human history; it probably preexisted paradigmatic thought. Narrative thought consists in telling stories of oneself to oneself and to others. By telling these stories we start to construct a meaning with which our experiences gains sense. The construction of meaning arises from the account, from the continuous actualizing of our story, of our narrative plot. It is a fundamental human activity we all do.

In his last book "The Origin of the Human in the Intimacy Biology" (in press), and in personal communications with the author of this article, Humberto Maturana has also described these two modalities of thought. In his BIOLOGICAL THEORY OF KNOWING he calls them linear and systemic reasoning.

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## TYPES OF THOUGHT AND TYPES OF ABSTRACTION

Paradigmatic thought comes to be abstract because it is interested in the more universal or general conceptual aspects, whereas the abstractive capacity of narrative thought comes from its interest for the particular. As Bruner says "it attends to the intentions and human actions and to the vicissitudes and consequences which mark its course". For Joyce "the

particularities of the story are epiphanies of the ordinary". Telling stories is a procedure opposed to paradigmatic thought, since the story arises from what is absolutely particular, from what is surprising, unexpected, irregular or abnormal. Things which should not happen, but which do. Events which depart completely from what is established. The abstraction of narrative thought arises from images which do not follow a linear logic. It is analogic and functions by analogies, by similarities. The images are put together with one another and are put in sequences by similarities of contents or emotive tonality. In his poem "The imaginary man", Nicanor Parra shows us this narrative abstraction. The images which are contained immediately evoke the story of a whole life.

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## NARRATIVE PLOT AND POST-RATIONALIST COGNITIVE THERAPY

In the post-rationalist cognitive approach of the Italian author and psychotherapist Vittorio Guidano, the narrative modality is implicit in the conceptualization of psychopathology as well as in psychotherapy. In his last book *THE DEVELOPMENT OF POST-RATIONALIST COGNITIVE THERAPY* he attempts to formally introduce the subject of the narrative plot in his therapeutic model and faces the problem of relating human change, personal identity and personal narrative.

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## NARRATIVE AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

For a better understanding of personal identity we have to refer to what a self-organized system is, a system determined in its structure, as Maturana says, which organizes its experiences of reality. Guidano says that a system of this type maintains the unity of the self as a system along all the life cycle, i.e., the system maintains what is called its identity. For this author, identity is not static, identity is precisely a construction and not a representation, as the rationalist approaches would assume. For Guidano, the construction of personal identity implies the work of individualizing and differentiating from a world, which always implies a way of perceiving the world and, most important, a way of feeling in it. Guidano says that, from the first moment on, each act of identity, each act of individualizing from another always implies the elaboration and construction of personal meaning. How does this occur?

Guidano says that "the construction of personal meaning is an activity which from the beginning of human development corresponds to a process of sequentialization of significant events, i.e., to connect sequences of clusters of prototypical events which are significant from the point of view of the emotional activation of the subject. By putting into sequence these clusters of events -the images, combined and recombined between them- a unitary configuration is developed, by means of which we can perceive a world and feel in it. The way in which the construction of a vision of the world is perceived is not something purely intellectual, each sequencing of events and scenes also comprises an activation of the emotional events world and the reverberating of prototypical events corresponds to the reverberating of specific emotional modulations. This unitary configuration of sets of events, images, etc., from the very beginning starts to transcribe all characteristics inherent to a story. To sequentialize event is to interpret them. To sequentialize events in images and scenes means to interpret them, to assign new terms to them, to assign them a narrative plot.

McIntyre in his book "AFTER VIRTUE" uses the expression "narrative unity of life" when referring to this narrative plot which is the unitary continuity of the sense of oneself. The sequence of images which constitute it is nothing but the maintenance of the coherence and

continuity of one own's life story. For Guidano, the sense of oneself coincides with the internal coherences of this unique life story of which one is the main character and which one interprets and lives every day.

Guidano says that this character changes according to what happens in his story, the character has to modulate according to the events which characterize his life. It is inevitable in any person's life that unpredictable events occur each day and every moment. Any of these change our way of life, change our expectations and this event continues to be disturbing until we manage to integrate it in the history of our lives. As Ricoeur says in his book "THE SELF AS AN OTHER" "the casual turns into destiny". For Guidano, the casual has been involved in the sequence of life events and at the same time the disturbing sense which has been experienced when the unpredictable event occurred, has been transformed into a further tint from which to experiment the sense of continuity and of uniqueness of my life history.

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## NARRATIVE PLOT AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

In the life of a person it may occur that an event or a series of events can not be assimilated in his life history. This event will transform into a psychopathological symptom. For example, the non assimilation of an experience of deception from her father, may trigger an acute anorectic episode in an adolescent. Another example, unrecognized experiences of rejection in a man in his midlife may trigger a severe depressive reaction.

From this approach we can consider psychopathology as perturbations in the continuity of the narrative plot, which implies that events which trigger emotional perturbations remain without being integrated in the life history of the subject.

From a post-rationalist perspective, psychopathology is not considered in terms of contents. If we participate of the idea that the human system is a self organized system we can not consider normality, neurosis or psychosis with reference to categories which point to an objective external reality. From a constructivist and post-rationalist position, normality is seen as a capacity of people to adapt as a function of their flexibility in the different life situations. Neurotic will be those persons with a decreased flexibility, which maintain rigid points of view and which do not generate theories which allow them to integrate the disturbing events in their narrative plot. In psychosis we observe an absolute interruption of the continuity process of the narrative plot.

Psychotherapy should be visualized as a process in which the person, by means of repeated reconstructions may be able to integrate events which are experienced as extraneous, as in the case of the neurotic or the psychotic, the later having completely interrupted the continuity of the narrative plot. In this way the reorganization which the person makes of his life history is enabled. This therapeutic work is done in sessions in which the patient works and actively collaborates in the reconstruction of the sequence of events and disturbing situations. But, over all, therapy does not include drugs since these contribute nothing to the reorganization of the way in which the person is constructing his personal meaning. On the contrary, in almost all patients they are incompatible with psychotherapy, psychotics included.

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## El Hombre Imaginario

## Nicanor Parra

*El hombre imaginario  
vive en una mansión imaginaria  
rodeada de árboles imaginarios  
a la orilla de un río imaginario*

*De los muros que son imaginarios  
penden antiguos cuadros imaginarios  
irreparables grietas imaginarias  
que representan hechos imaginarios  
ocurridos en mundos imaginarios  
en lugares y tiempos imaginarios*

*Todas las tardes tardes imaginarias  
sube las escaleras imaginarias  
y se asoma al balcón imaginario  
a mirar el paisaje imaginario  
que consiste en un valle imaginario  
circundado de cerros imaginarios*

*Sombras imaginarias  
vienen por el camino imaginario  
entonando canciones imaginarias  
a la muerte del sol imaginario  
Y en las noches de luna imaginaria  
sueña con la mujer imaginaria  
que le brindó su amor imaginario  
vuelve a sentir ese mismo dolor  
ese mismo placer imaginario  
y vuelve a palpitar  
el corazón del hombre imaginario*

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