

Stories of Psychologists

Narrative Identities: Psychologists Engaged In Self-Construction

Edited by George Yancy and Susan Hadley

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Review by Kristen Hennessy

What is the story of becoming a psychologist? How does one's narrative of self interact with – perhaps even create – one's theoretical position as a psychologist even as that theoretical position simultaneously creates that very narrative of self? Yancy and Hadley set out to explore these and other questions in their 2005 edited collection *Narrative Identities: Psychologists Engaged in Self-Construction* inviting prominent psychologists to present narratives of their evolving individual and professional selves. Exploring the narratives of psychologists holds particular coherence as psychologists deal in narratives! However, the psychologist's own narrative is typically conspicuously silent, with the impact of the psychologist's narrative on his or her interactions with clients left unexplored.

Psychologists are known for the work they do exploring the lives of others. They help to weave and reweave meaning in the lives of individuals whose lives have been fractured in some way. This process of weaving and reweaving meaning is a co-authored journey; a journey of shared meaning, shared discourse, and shared insight. However, we rarely hear the psychologist's story (p. 9).

Thus, this collections offers the reader the rare opportunity to listen to the stories of psychologists, offering the narratives of prominent psychologists (Sarbin, Scheibe, Leary, Monk, Holzman, McAdams, Aanstoos, Shotter, Vande Kemp, Jenkins, Halling, Sloan, and Serlin) representing varied theoretical orientations including: “narrative, social constructionist, feminist, postmodernist, poststructuralist, hermeneutic, existential phenomenological, humanistic, critical, psychoanalytic, performative, and social therapeutic” (p. 11).

The collection stems from the editors' mutual interest in psychology and respect for the power of narrative to both inform and transform (p.

9). Yancy and Hadley are theoretically sophisticated in their requests for narrative and thus do not ask contributing authors to present a cohesive and stagnant reified self.

Narrative identities: Psychologists engaged in self-construction is not in search of an alleged transcendental ego or an ontologically self-subsisting entity, a thinking substance, that is said to exist beyond the dynamics of historical contingency. (p. 10)

Rather, they acknowledge the importance of narrative in the process of continuous self-becoming in a socially embedded context. “The process of being ‘positioned by’ and ‘positioning ourselves within’ bespeaks the ‘facticity-possibility’ dynamic that each of us are as makers of meaning” (p. 10). Yancy and Hadley set the stage for prominent psychologists to present dynamic narratives of evolving selves.

Reflecting on Narratives

In a book review such as this, a reviewer might typically glean common themes from across the various contributions, clustering the articles into cohesive groups. It seems, though, that to do so in this case would involve a kind of violence towards the narratives. I do not wish to co-opt the narratives that the authors themselves have provided. I will, however, reflect on my own reactions to these texts as well as examine the function and worth of this collection of narratives.

Narrative Styles

Each author’s approach to the narrative tells the reader something about the story, author, and theory. This can be examined in much the same way as the client’s narrative of his or her presenting complaints. Sarbin used a straightforward account that reflected in a somewhat traditionally academic manner on his evolving “whoness.” Jenkins describes the evolution of his thinking to a humanistic perspective. Scheibe narrates creatively by opening with a description of a picture of himself as a young boy dressed up as a small girl, immediately throwing the reader into a stance of questioning the presentation of self (p. 37). Scheibe uses the objects and artifacts within his office to guide the reader through the story of his evolving self. Leary,

too, orients the reader to his narrative through objects, shifting from the literal things of his office to narrating the influence of various philosophers, authors, and psychologists on the creation of his selves. Others make use of metaphor to ground narrative, such as in Aanstoos' chapter entitled "Life as a Symphony," Vande Kemp's emphasis on literal and metaphorical kaleidoscopes in "Living with Authority in 'The Between,'" and McAdam's description of his situation as a "Psychologist without a Country." Sloan refers to himself as nomadic subject, while Serlin reflects on autobiography itself. The way that each psychologist approaches the project of narrating lets the reader come to know the author.

Responding to Stories

I found several of the narratives to be inspiring while others struck me as disappointingly devoid of radical thought. Holzman's work with what she terms social therapy in the context of Marxism was creative and transformative, taking psychotherapy out of the office and onto the street and radically altering what 'therapy' itself means. Monk's work with post-modernism and narrative therapy offers a refreshing enactment of such a position as he both narrates and seemingly performs his position through his stance towards readers. Shotter's connection of small moments to large scale cultural analysis – such as the placement of windows in a factory bathroom placed in the context of classism – points to the power of psychology to connect the personal and the collective.

Conversely, I felt disappointed with some of the authors. Given Yancy and Hadley's sophisticated understanding of historicity and contextuality, I was surprised by some of the author's naïveté regarding these very concepts. Sarbin's description of his passionate work as a member of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation to debunk the claims of women who say that they have been sexually abused is the most glaring example. I was troubled by his chapter both because of his problematic dismissal of claims of abuse and to his dismissal of the accounts on the grounds that it is a narrative. Less overtly troubling was Halling's self-definition as a 'pre-modernist', seeing himself as never having "quite subscribed to a modernist view of the world..." (p. 208). This view strikes me as a vast underestimation of the power of a cultural context, a context that can be transcended but never merely sidestepped.

I sometimes had strong emotional reactions to these authors, which ironically points to the strength of the collection as they compelled me to intellectually and emotionally engage with the authors. My anger with Sarbin points to the collection's effective integration of knowledge and emotion just as much as does my joy when reading Holzman or Monk. The theoretical and personal are intertwined. At times, I felt excited and inspired and wanted to hear more. At other times, I felt compelled to confront them with my perception of the damage caused by their theories. The narrative form of the articles fostered such responses and I found myself holding each author accountable for his or her theory. Part of this accountability is a sense of transformation that persists throughout the collection. I find myself trusting that the very process of writing prompted a shift in identity.

Final Comments

Insofar as the editors hope that the collection “invites students and professional psychologists (and those outside the field of psychology) to journey with prominent psychologists as they delve into who they are as psychologists” (p. 11), the collection is a resounding success. This collection is well suited to a variety of audiences. Because the authors describe their journeying towards their theoretical homes, they explain the terms related to their philosophies of self in some detail. The personal style of the articles assures that such explanations are accessible, although undergraduate students may miss implied references to other texts such as Scheibe's reference to Nietzsche's eternal return of the same. Nonetheless, the collection is readily accessible to undergraduate students and can serve as an introduction to several theoretical orientations while also guiding students towards texts providing the philosophical foundations of various theories. The collection is also rightly aimed towards philosophers and psychologists, particularly those with an interest in narrative. The collection raises interesting questions regarding the nature of theory, narrative, psychology and of the self. Yancy and Hadley's collection provides a valuable glimpse of the narratives of the becoming selves of psychologists.