

FACTS AND VALUES, STORIES AND NARRATIVES. HERMENEUTIC PERSPECTIVE IN THE FIELD “PSY”

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I. A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP

The complex relationship between language and society, between textualities, discourses, representations, narratives and the constitution of subjects, subjectivities, identities, meanings and shared values, practices, the imaginary, is often eclipsed by the naturalness with which it is thought that through language the “facts” of reality are seen in a transparent way.

Indeed, since the introduction of the so-called “linguistic turn”, resources of language have frequently been the subject matter of theoretical and methodological reflection in the social sciences, and they have promoted the emergence of new critical paradigms that depart from the classical criteria of positivist validation. Thus, new designs of non-linear research and dialogic forms of writing, otherwise rejected as un-scientific, are acquiring a prominent place in academic journals and publications.

The remarkable development that linguistics, pragmatics, language philosophies, theories of discourse, methodologies of analysis, narratology, and other disciplines have achieved in the last decades and their increasing articulation with other fields, such as history, sociology, political theory and philosophy, anthropology, ethnology, cultural studies, psychology and psychiatry, among others, show the relevance and productivity of such an approach because of its multidisciplinary nature.

Among the most analyzed textual resources, the "narrative" deserves special attention. In the second half of the 20th century, a new theory of *sense* with *narration* as its core concept started to develop. The human experience is structured as a narrative program. Taking into account this context, the narratives become new objects of discourse analysis and they acquire great importance for their capacity to describe subjective realities.

The construction of narratives as method-process of research places as the focus of analysis any epistemological dualism sustained in the distinction subject-object and in a naïve realism that postulates the existence of an objective reality which, according to the positivist science, is known from a methodology (hypothetico-deductive method) which allows us to predict its functioning in the future.

Nevertheless, the inadequacy of such a paradigm to respond to the complexity of social phenomena has led us to resort to probability calculus (Stengers) as a mode of correction, in search of false factors that are not involved in the developing process. From this perspective, a good scientist is someone who, disregarding themselves, is able to analyze a fact in an "objective" way and without prejudices. The psycho-social disciplines, eager to be configured as positivist science, have advocated this paradigm reducing the scope of analysis to those characteristics that can be analyzed following these laboratory simulations.

While this positivist paradigm considers that empirical research is divided into different phases that are separated from design, implementation and analysis of data, the new epistemologies propose a continuous dialog of these phases: they inform one another and get involved with one another (Denzin *et al.*). The researcher behaves in a similar fashion as an artist and an activist, who generate, build and share narratives as if they were "bricoleurs", in terms of Lévi-Strauss: the researcher is shaped as a story teller that interprets narratives produced in encounters so that, following the oral tradition, these narratives can be appropriated and re-interpreted by other narrators. This generation of localized knowledge and shared conversations can also offer tools to re-think forms of post-positivist validation of collective knowledge.

II. TIME AND SUBJECTIVITY

Philosophy, especially hermeneutic phenomenology, in privileging the temporal component of narration, has sought to establish bonds

between the structure of subjectivity and the form of the narrative, since the latter presents itself as a form of organization of the facts in time. Historical time becomes human time provided it is articulated through a narrative mode, and, in turn, a narrative achieves significance as long as it describes the temporal aspects of the human experience.

Furthermore, the narrative implies certain “logic of the temporal aspect”; a network of references and implications that connect facts in time in a certain way and from a certain perspective.

Even though in the first half of the 20th century Wilhelm Schapp had already developed a phenomenology theory that is based on the idea that all human experience consists of being involved in stories (*in Geschichten verstrickt*), it was Ricoeur’s hermeneutics which showed that those stories have a narrative structure. Moreover, there is a bond between the constitution of subjectivity and the story narrated. This is what is known as “narrative identity”.

In *Time and narrative*, Ricoeur shows how the narrative sustains the “chain or connection of a life”. To *narrate* is to provide a linguistic frame to the human temporal dimension. The conscience and human experience become comprehensible *in* and *because of* the narrative in a process that Ricoeur calls, following Aristotle, *mimesis*, *intrigue* (plot).

However, the narrative is not just an instrument for intelligibility; it is an ontological mediation. Therefore, identity is narrative; the product of narrative dynamics that is emplotted. Self-knowledge of a human being is never direct; it is always mediated by language.

«The narrative art confirms the supremacy of the third person in the knowledge of man. The hero is whom we speak about». The self is known indirectly through circumlocution by way of cultural signs. Self-knowledge becomes, then, *interpretation of the self* (Ricoeur, 1999, p. 203).

Narrativity, as doctrine of the human being, has the double feature of being historical and fictional at the same time. The narrative that each person makes is framed within different plots around their lives, and in doing so, they select, abstract and distort, that is, interpret the events in order to obtain a version of their self that can be exhibited to their advantage in present circumstances.

Although the subject *learns* to become a narrator of their own life, they do not become entirely its author. Indeed, a subject reaches that narrative because it had already been told by others. In H. Arendt words, «no-one leads a life worthy of consideration if a story cannot derive from it» (p. 169). It is precisely in the others in whom I discover «who I am»: this reflects the transition from biography to auto-biography.

III. NARRATIVITY AND PSYCHOLOGY

Jerome Bruner, promoter of the narrative movement, teaches us that logic is just a dimension of thought, and the narrative mode is a different way that is not antagonistic but complementary. The former is oriented towards the truth of a proposition; the latter is centered on the verisimilitude of a narrative, where what really matters is not the formal causality but the sense the characters build of their own story.

What are narratives, and how different are they from other forms of discourse and other ways of organizing experience? Which functions can they perform and why do they attract the imagination of man? These are questions that Bruner asks himself in *Acts of Meaning*.

The narrative is of sequential character and includes events, mental states and actors that acquire meaning in their mutual relationship. The plot constitutes the process of development of the characters in the development of events.

The narratives can also be real or imaginary and in either case, their structure is not altered; this is what Bruner calls "factic indifference". Bruner thinks that there is a "predisposition" to narrative in man and it is precisely this predisposition which allows us to preserve traditions¹. These can also intertwine the exceptional and the ordinary². The narrative explains the diversion from the usual: «The function of the story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes deviation from the canonical cultural pattern comprehensible».

In addition, the narrative has a "dramatic" character, since it presents actors, actions, goals, scenes and instruments/strategies that are not always in harmony with one another (Burke). The "agentivity" of the subject that performs an action with a certain purpose (structure of the human action) shows that the subject has desires, beliefs and values. In their differences these components convey a dramatic character to the narrative. Finally, there is a "dual landscape" in the narrative, since it is developed in the real world as well as in the conscience of the protagonists, and the tension or drama that is generated can be resolved at the level of events or at the level of conscience. Motivations, desires and beliefs are encompassed in the narrative because they are part of the logic of the events involved in the narrative. The efficacy of a narrative does not depend on its veracity, but on its verisimilitude. The narratives

¹ Bruner supports this idea with the results of observation of the first narratives that children produce. The narrative would be the first mechanism of justification and explanation of what is strange.

² From an early age, the child detects canonicity (what is expected and usual in human condition).

are interpreted by their “apparent true value” – that is to say – by their “similitude to life”.

Bruner also examines the uses of narrative in different cultural settings and shows how they can serve the purpose of controlling, as in law or psychiatry, since we can point out the *normative* component implicit in the narratives. In these areas, the subjects must tell the “right” stories in order to enter the norm and the normal.

Common sense insists in claiming that the narrative represents reality. However, the narrative does not “represent” facts but shapes them; it is a matrix. This “form” is not arbitrary: perspective – essential component of the narrative – means the presence of the subject in the story. No narrative – says Bruner – is narrated from innocence or *naïveté*. All perspectives respond to intentions and objectives.

Bruner mentions that historiography and anthropology as well as literature play an important role in comprehension. «Through narratives we build, re-build, and in a certain way, we reinvent ourselves, our yesterday and our tomorrow. Memory and imagination are fused in this process» (Bruner, p. 130).

IV. THE CLINICAL NARRATIVE BETWEEN MEDICINE AND FREUDIAN FILES

It will be Freud with his files who will take distance from the medical reports of the time, since he created a new type of clinical narrative that presents two features: on the one hand, the scientific ideal; on the other hand, the narration of the story of a particular subject. Freud shows us that a well-chosen reconstruction can fill the void that exists between the narrative of two facts that are apparently not related to each other, and can extract *sense from the senseless*.

Dora, his first important case study, allows Freud to account for the insufficiencies of which he himself is worthy of. On the one hand, the material that the patient offers is incomplete, fragmentary; on the other hand, the analyst could not completely expose the technique and the clinical material at the same time. Yet a clinical case could not by itself account for all the theory: the file is composed of those discourse fragments that a subject brings to the session. The file is not always a clear, orderly exposition devoid of contradictions of the patient’s narrative. There is tension between the demand for scientific clarity and what is incomplete, fragmentary in the clinical material.

Precisely, it will be Freud’s attentive monitoring of his patient’s accounts which will lead him to theorize about the functioning of the un-

conscious, whose discourse expressions are shown through blanks, lapsus, forgetfulness, all of which clearly show rupture in discourse. Where there is a symptom, there is oblivion; blanks in discourse; the effects of repression. The unconscious is separated from the current idea of being a memory that is lost to be the crack of forgetting what is known.

The psychoanalysis experience is then characterized by the experience of the unconscious in the antipodes of the Cartesian *cogito*. We wonder, then, whether there would be an act of solidarity between the unconscious, the fragmentary structure of the narrative and its transmission.

Now, by appealing to recollection and proposing free associations, psychoanalysis is associated to *what is narrative*. There is a psychoanalysis approach that currently proposes a narrative reading of Psychoanalysis (Spence, Schafer, Vidermann), where it is highlighted that a narrative that is well-built has a certain *narrative truth* that operates in a real and immediate way in the process of therapeutic exchange.

If psychotherapy is a *talking cure*, it presents a tension between the two poles of the narrative: the narrative of the subject and the narrative of the therapist. The patient, with their narrative, attempts at organizing in a coherent way the facts of their life through secondary processes. The therapist seeks to dis-organize the discourse and take it to a regression stage towards primary processes. The complexity of the path between the lived thing and its recollection through words shows the diversity of levels in the narrative.

What does the person under analysis do when they retell their narrative and what does the analyst do with that account that is being exposed? The interpretation contributes to un-doing the narrative and re-doing it, so that the person analyzed can have access to new possibilities of reshaping their past, even when the memories recalled are not changed. The narrative interpretations are like "*la mise en intrigue*", "a construction under analysis".

To *analyze* is to detach, to de-construct the associative link by re-constructing the narrative; it is to reconstitute it to the chain of signifiers.

Yet a paradox arises, now: the intention is to reach the psychical functioning and the primary processes through the word (secondary process), and both systems work under a different logic.

The work of the "intellect" claims unification, coherence of everything that it perceives and thinks, and does not worry if there is a false coherence, if certain particular circumstances do not allow it to get the true correlation. The analytical interpretation, however, will proceed conversely: by de-constructing the narrative.

The goal of free association is to foster the emergence of thoughts that are not wanted and that paralyze or distort the narrative or narra-

tives, and the interpretation of the analyst promotes the appearance of their defensive and non-authentic character.

The analysis aims at traumatism, where the early drama could not be engraved in the narrative record (secondary process). The word withdraws, the recollection fails and only affection is manifested with a compulsion to repeat. It will be the construction which will replace the agonizing memory.

Yet it can happen that the narrative fails in the constitution of the narrative identity because of the illusory character of the stories.

V. NARRATIVE AND PSYCHIATRY

In analyzing the question of the subject from the perspective of the subjectivation practices, it is necessary to find out about the production of the psychiatric discourse and its relation to power, for we are immersed in the re-medicalization of Psychiatry.

With the advent of a Medicine and Psychiatry Based on Evidence (MBE; PBE) came a new set of theories which postulate a Medicine and Psychiatry Based on Values (MBV; PBV), which is also called “based on *Narratives*” (Greenghalgh, Jones, Launer, G. Elwyn & R. Elwyn), precisely because the work of the clinician or the psychiatrist comes close to that of the historian, the biographer, and the ethnographer.

These new narrative approaches take a standpoint because they present themselves as an alternative to the dominant discourses. As narratives that disarticulate some of the presuppositions of modern scientificity – and perhaps because of this –, they do not delve into the fixation of truths, but they can become an added value that should not be disposed of.

In the face of verificationism, the aim is to keep in the narrativization the temporal contradictions and incongruence that may appear in the interviews, not with the purpose of stigmatizing them, but because they show that our identities are neither stable nor congruent; they are contradictory and in a constant process of constant redefinition (Tierney, p. 309). The aim goes beyond the verification of facts; the idea is to try to understand the meanings that individuals convey in each historical and cultural situation.

Unlike what happens with the *historiography method*, the *narratives* do not seek to corroborate whether the facts did happen in the way the person narrates them – based on some data supposedly more objective than the words and memories of those who tell us a story; narratives

seek to find the *sense* these facts have in the person's life or the sense generated in others in a dialogic way.

Precisely, when the patient becomes present through their symptoms they do so with a certain discourse that expresses how, why and in which way they are sick, thus taking us to a particular story, a context of *sense*. It will be the clinician who will seek to integrate these narratives. That is why this practice can be compared to the historian's, the biographer's or the ethnographer's. The clinical method as an interpretative act implies the organization of events lived in the synchronicity of a narrative: a narrative that is not the mere repetition of an enlarged past, but a co-creation between the patient and the therapist.

When faced with a factual truth, inner to the adaptation between scientific statements and the so-called "facts", it is essential to propose a "narrative truth" which can get close to the human being, who formulates its existence under the shape of a narrative. (Rovaletti, 2009)

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