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The narrative organization of social representations in life stories



ABSTRACT

Introduction: This paper explores the evolving landscape of narratives, distinguishing it from the traditional approaches of classical cognitive psychology and social psychology. While cognitive psychology strictly models interpretations based on causal relations, narrative psychology perceives memory, thought, and perception as story construction processes, asserting that individuals contextualize experiences within narrative structures.

Aim: The primary objective is to identify the factors shaping narratives, specifically within the context of referentiality, temporal structurality, and their implications for subjective well-being interpreted through social representations.

Methodology: The research framework adopts a sociology-influenced lens to interpret narratives, emphasizing the determinacy of social situations and specific time periods. The narrative schemata is dissected, viewing it as an organizational tool for past events. To bring depth to the exploration, various life stories such as „*the never tired worker*” and „*the photojournalist*” serve as illustrative examples.

Discussion: Exploring the role of referentiality and time within narratives, the essentiality of temporal structurality is emphasized. By juxtaposing distinct life stories, the nuances in social representations and their confluence in shaping narratives is underscored - reflecting to sources of subjective well-being.

Conclusion: Personal narratives offer a fresh perspective in the field of sociology, opening doors to understanding how individuals create meaning through stories influenced by their social surroundings and temporal contexts. This framework promises insightful avenues for analyzing subjective well-being through the unique lens of social representations.

KEYWORDS

personal narrative, social representation, narrative organization

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, not only the positive psychology movement has emerged as a new approach in the field of psychology. Undoubtedly, its influence is not only felt within psychology, but also in other disciplines and borderlines (sociology, social psychology and anthropology). The new paradigm of narrative psychology can be contrasted with the approach of classical cognitive psychology, which, as a corollary of the affective revolution, opened doors in the field of research that, although with the historical background of previous attempts, represented a new direction. Sabrin detects a contrast between the two trends by drawing an analogy between the modeling and interpretation of phenomena¹. Whereas cognitive psychology models the interpretation of the environment and the processes of meaning-making in a non-constructive way, subject to strict causal relations, narrative psychology approaches the processes of remembering, thinking and perception through processes of story construction. It assumes that individuals weave their experiences into narrative structures. Events that are connected in time and space can be detected along plots in narrative, in which the context of events is determined by intentions, decisions and emotions. Accordingly, the interpretive framework of actions encompasses the meaning and significance of events.

In this paper I will attempt to identify factors that influence the narrative within the framework of the narrative orientation mentioned above. In discussing the role of referentiality, I will highlight the determinacy of social situations and time periods, while also describing temporal structurality as an essential feature of narrative. I interpret narrative schemata as the organisation of events of the past. The aim of this work is to establish a framework for the applicability of a narrative psychology approach to the analysis of subjective well-being through social representations.

¹ SABRIN 2001. 59–76.

THE FRAMEWORK FOR INTERPRETING NARRATIVES

Narratives have always been present in human daily life, since the linguistic, visual and auditory formations of our individual and social actions are as old as humanity itself. Our narrative stories can be communicated in myriad ways, but for the social researcher a different perspective is required. Narratives reveal a broader and deeper understanding of the world, showing not only what an individual or group is interested in and the subject of its interest, but also the context in which it is interpreted, the interactions along which it is interacted with, and the actions it is linked to. One's narrative manifestations bring to the surface one's subjective experiences of the world, of society, which, when presented through experience, can be latent – that is, unconscious. Accordingly, one of the salient aspects in interpreting narratives is the separation of cognitive and affective content².

Bruner describes two basic forms of thinking when he argues for a narrative orientation³. These are the pragmatic and narrative modes, neither of which can be traced back to the other. With regard to the pragmatic mode, he described how it is possible to infer generally valid causal relations when observing events. The abstract conceptual tools can be used to map causal relations in order to understand the objective picture of reality in the analysis. The narrative mode is specific in that its tools are of a different nature. In this mode, events can be used to formulate an interpretable historical framework rather than an objective reality. The intentions and actions of people are then brought to the fore, which can contribute to an understanding of psychological reality.

As the distinction between affective and cognitive content suggests, „narrative knowledge” is a set of intersubjective experiences, since whether it is an individual or a group interpretation of reality, a differentiated approach serves to deepen the understanding of content. Thomas and Znaniecki identified the interpretation of the thought and emotional content objectified in the communicated meaning as an objective component of social life, since the members of an individual or (social) group have subjective characteristics that they share - a pillar of the construction of their common reality can be found in this. Two perspectives can help the researcher in exploring this phenomenon: the complementary theoretical and the ‚eidetic’ perspectives. Complementary theoretical perspectives refer to the contextual interpretation of the subjective perspective, while the ‚eidetic’ perspective refers to the imagined base of social knowledge (which complements the concrete, real and perceived reality)⁴.

In the following, I will present interpretative frameworks that can provide a basis for exploring narrative contexts. One such approach is narrative schemas, which show the ways in which individuals and groups operate by functionally simplifying reality. The other context highlights the role of time, which is prominent in narrative analysis. By incorporating these two perspectives, I will explore the interpretation of social representations.

² HARDY 1968. 5–14.

³ BRUNER 2001. 27-57.

⁴ PÁSZKA 2009.

WAYS OF ANALYZING NARRATIVE SCHEMAS

The concept of schema has a long history in cognitive psychology. It is intended to bridge the epistemological gap between the changing nature of reality and the system of human experience. Schema is the active organization of reactions and experiences in the past. The narrative nodes used to recall the past play a restructuring role in defining the interpretive framework of events by shaping the experience of the present. During active organization, changes in constructs can occur through processes of abstraction and incorporation⁵.

In the process of remembering events, contextual information can be modified for interpretability. The purpose of interpretation in biographical memoir is to reconcile past and present in order to maintain interpretive coherence⁶. In this reading, stories act as a memory organizing force that gives the narrative its schematic character. This view is consistent with the narrative principle, which understands the construction of narratives within the framework of the individual.

The elements of the schema were described by János LÁSZLÓ (2008), in which he emphasized that historicity and causality make sense in temporality. The individual's personal cognition in role integration with his reference group and the ideologies that affect the individual determine the individual's self-interpretation both in the present and in the process of remembering the past⁷. According to Hardy⁸, narratives provide opportunities for the expression of a range of cognitions and emotions. Among others, he cites dreams, hopes, beliefs and remembering as examples. A pattern is characterised by a beginning, a climax, a nadir and an end. In relation to the aforementioned temporality, other researchers have also argued that narratives cannot always be considered linear, because in most cases they are characterised by cyclicity. Schemata can be spoken of as phenomena in a system of social relations as summations of shared knowledge. Within the narrative schema theories, Bluck and Habermas⁹ have developed a theory of theoretical schema. According to them, autobiographical memories are not always life story memories, as life story memories can be associated with memories that have an emotional charge and either influence the development of the individual or explain the motivations for development. These are not simply significant life events in themselves, but are organised in a structure where the context carries a meaning that extends to the life story as a whole. The authors call this a life-history schema. On this basis, we can say that the elements of mental representations of life stories can be associated with cognitive, affective and motivational components. The organizing power of coherence can be described along the lines of temporality, thematicity, cultural and causal relations.

⁵ SZOKOLSZKY 1998. 209–235.

⁶ KOLOSAI 2012.

⁷ ERIKSON 1991. 455–472.

⁸ HARDY 1968. 5–14.

⁹ BLUCK – HABERMAS 2000. 121–147.

THE ROLE OF REFERENTIALITY AND TIME IN NARRATIVE

Both the role of referentiality and the role of time are key to the approach to narrative. In an earlier work, Bruner¹⁰ argued that the narrative can construct its own reality. He describes the existence of social situations that can predetermine the structure of content. Such as the appearance of corruption stories in the narratives of individuals. However, there are cases that are conditional on narrative truth. In these cases, stories with positive outcomes may help individuals to activate coping modes¹¹.

At the intersection of time and referentiality may be the narrative of history, since in narratives about history not only the condition of narrative truth may be fulfilled, but also fictional realities may appear. White¹² distinguishes three forms of historiography, which are annales, chronicles and historical texts. In annales and chronicles, there is no connection between events, apart from chronological order. The chronicle differs from the annales in that it has a central concept around which the content is woven. In contrast, the historical text also reveals the context. According to László¹³, the intentional states of narratives, whatever form they take, do not contain causal relations, since they cannot appear in descriptions of the past as the cause of events because of their temporality. In this sense, if we want to define the hermeneutic composition of narratives, we cannot speak of clarity, only of contradictions or consistency of the constituent elements. In hermeneutic analysis, the main question may therefore be what is the reason why the narrator mentions the story in question.

The temporal structure of narratives is shaped by events, and therefore narrative time is relative in this sense¹⁴. The devices of condensation and omission are at the expense of the intelligibility of calendar time, but at the same time, according to Labov and Waletzky¹⁵, it is through narrative nodes that narrative can become clear. This is also possible because the relationship between past and present is not unidirectional. Events of the past influence the narrative of the individual or group, while the present content is reinterpreted. Connerton¹⁶ has articulated that our knowledge of the past is a shaping factor in our perception of the present, but at the same time, interpreting the past can provide answers to ways of interpreting events in the present. Representations of historical events thus reveal subjective readings of group narratives that appear objective¹⁷. Through functional selection, the social construction of the past reflects the emotional and cognitive needs of the present¹⁸, which allows the past to be rewritten. The construction of new constructs may be true not only for the perspective of time, if we think of generations¹⁹, but also for social groups that, due to their segregation from the majority society, do not adapt their own interpretations to the social realities of the majority society due to a lack of interaction.

¹⁰ BRUNER 1996. 93–105.

¹¹ LÁSZLÓ 1999.

¹² WHITE 1997.

¹³ LÁSZLÓ 1999.

¹⁴ RICOEUR 1884.

¹⁵ LABOV – WALETZKY 1967. 12–44.

¹⁶ CONNERTON 1989.

¹⁷ LIU – HILTON 2005. 537–556.

¹⁸ LÁSZLÓ 2003. 180–192.

¹⁹ RIMÉ et al. 2015. 515–532.

The social representation of history cannot be understood as a group-level process only, as the identification of individuals with the group is a prerequisite for the construction of social reality²⁰. Volpato and Licata²¹ identify pride as a means of identification for the reception of group constructs. Emotions with negative content, on the other hand, form the opposite relation²². If we look at the process from the group's point of view rather than the individual's, we can say that identification can lead to group identity and the adaptation of social reality when positive emotions are expressed. Negatively charged emotions, on the other hand, often preserve the narrative representation of events^{23 24 25}.

USING THE NARRATIVE APPROACH IN SR RESEARCH

Narrative thinking and methodology can also be found in the tradition of social representations. Halbwachs²⁶ has written about the important role of narratives in translating social experiences into language - stories are constructed and shared, which can provide a sense of community and identity.

If we return to the roots of social representation theory, we can also discover claims for a reading of narrative in Lévi-Strauss's theorisation of myth. The normative content of myths as narratives can determine the constructs that preoccupy society. They can also be understood as a classification scheme because they can provide an understanding of the social world. They provide integrity and continuity at the level of society²⁷.

Bahtyin²⁸ describes the discursive character of narratives. He sees their intersubjectivity in the fact that, in addition to their storytelling capacities, narratives function as public bearers of experience. According to another author, the social character of narratives is revealed in the fact that they carry elements of social knowledge rather than individual experience. The intra- and inter-group exchanges of narratives reflect the conclusions of theories on the epidemiology of representations. The nature of representations is reflected in the exchange processes. Back and forth shaping characterizes the process between individuals and groups.

In social psychology, the concept of attitude is highlighted by László²⁹. Thomas and Znaniecki³⁰ argued for a position against Durkheimian foundations in their factual approach, rejecting objectivist foundations by conceiving of attitude as a controlling factor in cognitive processes and behavior. This perspective shares a common intersection with social

²⁰ LIU – HILTON 2005. 540–550.

²¹ VOLPATO–LICATA 2010. 4–10.

²² KURTIŞ – ADAMS – YELLOW-BIRD 2010. 208–224.

²³ BAUMEISTER–HASTINGS 1997. 277–293.

²⁴ KURTIŞ – ADAMS – YELLOW-BIRD 2010. 208–224.

²⁵ ROCCAS – KLAR – LIVIATAN 2006. 698–711.

²⁶ HALBWACHS 2021.

²⁷ LÁSZLÓ 1999.

²⁸ BAKHTYIN 1981.

²⁹ LÁSZLÓ 1999.

³⁰ THOMAS – ZNANIECKI 1918.

representation theory. Nowadays, narratives are mainly used in ethnographic studies using interviews³¹. Interviews are also commonly identified as pseudo-narratives. The methodological orthodoxy stems from the fact that the interviewer also has an influence on the formulation of the narrative. This is not a uniform position among researchers on social representations, with some trends recognizing the narrative genre of the interview and others advocating a positivist approach.

Social representation theory assumes that the use of stereotypes about thinking in terms of categories, the assignment of value to constructs, and possible stereotypes is a given. Social representations also represent an understanding of reality on another plane, since they are at the same time knowledge domains³².

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS IN LIFE STORIES

After presenting the theoretical background related to social representations in narrative stories, I will outline the units of analysis identified in the literature using two life stories. The two life stories share a number of similarities, the potential of which I will make visible in the domains of knowledge and emotion.

The audio material was recorded in the summer of 2023. The monologues were 2-2.5 hours in length. In terms of method, it is a life history interview, which I explored by asking the individuals a single question: please tell me about your life! Both interviewees live in a village in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county. In my research, the aspect of place of residence is important because I wanted to understand the past of individuals belonging to a (socially and geographically pejoratively) segregated social group. I have identified work as the main dimension of the analysis, which I examine along two sub-dimensions: first job and job change. These life events can be interpreted as rites of passage that become visible through social acts and interactions. The analytical toolkit is provided by McAdams' life history model of identity³³, according to which I analyze the interviews in terms of ideological background, imagos, nuclear episodes and generatively scenarios.

The never tired worker

The first interviewee (Z.) is a 61-year-old man who has spent a good part of his life in the municipality in question. He linked the success of his first job to his profession, which also reveals the ideological background of the time. Before the change of regime, the role of skilled work as a social status marker took on a different meaning than it does today. The description of his first work reflects the presentation of his knowledge along cognitive processes, which is a linguistic formulation of social representation³⁴. The positive label of skilled work could be associated

³¹ JODELET 1989.

³² MOSCOVICI 1984. 3–70.

³³ MCADAMS 2001. 100–122.

³⁴ HALBWACHS 1925.

with positive emotions, but looking at the text we see nothing but a listing of events in a strict chronological order. These nuclear episodes are functional selections of the recollection of the past³⁵. In the text, we can notice a McAdamsian imago in the rural-capital contrast pair in the context of the periodic change of the place of work. It can also be interpreted as a scenario in which the individual tries to perceive through the enumeration that he has been entrusted with more and more tasks, involved in more and more work processes, which can be interpreted as a latent attribute of pride³⁶.

„I’m a qualified machinist. I worked as a machine setter at MOM in Mátészalka. The machine operator was about being a machine operator on a press, but I also worked on a press, so we were casting aluminum. From there I was sent to MOM in Budapest for further training. From MOM I was up in Pest for a year. I came home as a hot press operator. I went back to work. The gay press was brought home from Pest, and I became a gay press. After the gay press I was a galvanizer.”

Z.’s memories of changing jobs were varied and made up a large part of his recollections. In mentioning the change of job, she first of all draws attention to the fact that she had to make changes to improve her life situation, which suggests negative emotions and thus presents a process of distancing³⁷. Mobility also appears in this narrative passage in organisational and geographical terms, which also appears as an imago according to McAdams’ categories.

„I worked in Galván. And my last job, so at MOM... Oh, sorry. Even outside of MOM, we were short on wages. We went to a foundry in Kocsord. I was there in Kocsord for a year, 9 months. Because the conditions there were very bad, and I came back to MOM, they called me back. That’s when I became a heat handler.”

Geographical mobility is also reflected in the context of positive emotions, including a sense of pride, in other parts of the life story. While geographic mobility for employment has positive connotations, the risk factor of disease becomes more pronounced with age. Thus, an intra-individual image emerges, with health and disease at the center of the contrast and the positive contextual link between geographical mobility and employment. However, a coping strategy to resolve the internal conflict appeared, which was evident through leisure activities: folk dance. Folk dancing was one of the most prominent positive factors in the interviewee’s life, through which he subsequently met friends, partners and had traveled.

„I spent two months at the Király György Technical College studying to be an airplane technician. After that I went to Kecskemét. I did my military service there. Then I got sick in 2000. A lot of steam and fumes, working in a hot factory, and all the irrigation. And so now I’ve got asthma... I’ve got asthma and allergies. I’ve got 3 or 4 allergy crosses. I’m allergic to everything. I’m allergic to dust. I left out that when I came home from Pest in the ,80s, in the ,80s, I wanted to study English. Well, you need something to keep you busy. I was so bored in Pest, so to say. We took English classes. I studied it for a month. We went for a month, but we had no books, we had nothing. So I saw them dancing in the big hall. It was folk dancing. So I said I’ll try that.”

Self-evaluation through work is described by the word creativity in the case of the interviewee. Whereas in the first stage of his life he considered quantitative factors through his ability to perform a wide range of activities. Nowadays creative work is a source of personal pride. At the same

³⁵ LÁSZLÓ 2003. 180–192.

³⁶ VOLPATO – LICATA 2010. 4–10.

³⁷ KURTIS – ADAMS – YELLOW-BIRD 2010. 208–224.

time, the sources of pride in this case include childhood memories of his father. This memory, by breaking the chronological order, highlights the importance of the parent's attitude in shaping value dimensions and thus the range of emotions.

„I'm ten... After eight years of primary school, I've been working since... Oh, ,89! Since ,79. Since ,79, I've been working ever since. I still have a job, because I make philagorias. So in my spare time I go to someone else's. I went to work there today. Well, I do little jobs like that. But I prefer wood. My profession is a metalworker, a mechanic, but when I was little, my father used to take me to work on the roof. So I still had this sense of carpentry (...) Well, I am the most proud that I found out how I can solve it? I'm proud of all of them, except that somewhere above my head is a dwelling, and let's say we made the roof. We made the roof. So it's my handwork. My poor father-in-law. I just remembered. My poor father-in-law and I put a coke roof up. You know what that is? So it's gabled, and the gable has this connecting piece. We put that on. It must have been 35 degrees outside. That's when we installed it.”

The photojournalist

The second interviewee (Cs.) is a 66-year-old man who has lived in the settlement for many years, but has spent most of his life in the capital. He recalled his first job, like Z., as a result of completing his studies. The coherence was thus fulfilled in the temporality, to which causality was attached. We will see later that the presence of these structures paints a more complex and integrated picture in terms of narrative complexity, reflecting the individual frame of reference³⁸.

The recollection of the payment has several functions in interpreting the context of the story. On the one hand, by providing accurate information, the narrator provides himself with clues that are valid on a cognitive and affective level. As the initial salary was placed in a positive context by the interviewer, its quantitative visualization allowed placing it on the cognitive level in relation to today's salaries and in the system of the time. On the other hand, the affective domain is also presented as positive, as the ability to earn is shown behind the lines. The latent image of relating to others allows the individual to stand out especially in the community of the past.

In this life story, the need for a second job also appears which testifies to the ideological background. Within it one can find normative values of work and livelihood. The interviewee described, in a summarizing way, the lengths he had gone to in order to create a better life for himself, which paints a generatively scenario that suggests the coping mechanisms of the time. What makes the actions and the way in which they are carried out specific to the age is the way in which the process, i.e. the aim, was achieved. A sense of individual responsibility and the willingness to take action also appear in this narrative as a driving factor.

„The point is that after two years, at the age of 20, I got my certificate as a photographer. But in the meantime I was already working for the county paper: Kelet Magyarország. I remember they paid 79 Forints for a published picture. That was the price of about ten pints of beer if we convert the rate now. Now that would be about 4500 Forints, or 4900. Let's leave the finances for now. The fact is that the editor-in-chief, János Kolka, asked me to come in and he hired me as a journalist intern at the age of 20. I started working from 1 August 1977... I started working more or less

³⁸ LOEVINGER 1976. 265–297.

correctly in Kelet Magyarország. We travelled all over the county, I made a lot of friends. In the meantime I was a guest drummer because my brother needed a drummer for his band. Well, I got a B category at the OSZK. And we played at the Hotel Szabolcs for about two years. Before that, at Domino's. Then the Krúdy Hotel. And then we figured out that it's better to play gigs, because it pays better and you don't have to work Saturday and Sunday and in the bar until 4 in the morning. A wedding was profitable, or a ball, or whatever. And then we'd have a gig almost every weekend. And then what does God give? Well, I got married."

The change of occupation, as a transition rite, was caused by a reason outside the individual's control, brought about by the „lapse of his skills". The emotionally intense memories of the previous quotation, which were related to playing music („part-time job"), are contrasted in the following interview with the armed security guard job. This imago can be linked to the emotional basis of one's fulfilment, which assigns the enjoyment of work to having fun and entertaining others. The hidden financial necessity behind the passages has created a narrative intersection³⁹ that draws attention to the relative nature of time. The negative connotation of short-lived necessity serves as a means of alienation. It demonstrates that the existence of troughs and peaks in life is functional to both the domains of knowledge and emotion.

"When photography was no longer so popular, because every household had a camera, and photographic equipment, or whatever you want to call it. The point is, I was enrolled in Group Securita. This was after the change of regime, in '91. Because I was a soldier and I had a license to carry a gun. So Group Securita was a Dutch-Hungarian company. Then I was hired as a group leader there. We protected the rubber factory. It had 3500 employees at that time. And we protected various objects like that. It was a very well-paid job, because I earned more than my father and mother, including pension. And 12-hour duty, and the responsibility. We protected billions and millions of dollars. And it was not a popular one, because we replaced the police. The policemen were dismissed from the factories and plants, and then this company, Group 4, protected the assets and people and everything. And I worked there for two or three years, and then I got my, well, freelance, but I had to get an industrial license as a photojournalist, advertising and broadcasting. That was my... And my license number and my address and so on. And then I did that for about six or seven years."

SUMMARY

In this study I have attempted to demonstrate the narrative organization of social representations through the work-related life events of two personal narratives. The basic aim of narrative psychology can be formulated as the exploration of the narrative nature of thought and action in order to reveal the narrative systems that transform lived experiences into memories.

Three conclusions have emerged from the personal narratives along the variables of the McAdams identity life history model, which are consistent with the theoretical hypotheses listed in the original work. The first is that those with high levels of intimacy motivation among the McAdams' primary factors, i.e., their social relationships play a prominent role in the formulation of their positive life events, demonstrate an identity imago. Along with the life events of the first interviewee,

³⁹ LABOV – WALETZKY 1967. 12–44.

it was evident that folk dance provided the basis for positive emotions and thus identification, as well as the opportunity to live a social life. Pride in the profession was reflected in an appreciation of creativity, which was shown in the light of hopes linked to geographical mobility.

The other hypothesis of McAdams refers to the imago of power-motivated individuals, which operates with a center of efficiency and emphasizes its self-validating character. This form of self-actualization requires a different type of mechanism, more characteristic of the strategy of a freelance photojournalist than of a factory worker's strategy for labor market prosperity. The differences in narrative complexity were also apparent in this sense, as self-expression is well delineated through the examples of the two individuals. The domains of knowledge and emotion became visible in the narrative through awareness and pride. The cognitive field showed the value of the knowledge domain as the existence of 'something' (good job, decent working conditions, high salary) or the lack of it. The affective field drew out positive and negative emotions, i.e. pride and need, which described the emotion domains.

In conclusion, White's⁴⁰ category of story modes, historical text, was well observed in both individuals' narratives, as they presented, through their employment, the values, motivations and social interactions that interpreted both the pre- and post-change of regime from the perspective of the present.

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⁴⁰ WHITE 1997.

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