

Emotion and Narrative

Emotions have a life beyond the immediate eliciting situation, as they tend to be shared with others by putting the experience in narrative form. Narrating emotions helps us to express, understand, and share them: the way we tell stories influences how others react to our emotions, and impacts how we cope with emotions ourselves. In *Emotion and Narrative*, Habermas introduces the forms of oral narratives of personal experiences, and highlights a narrative's capacity to integrate various personal and temporal perspectives. Theoretical proposals are richly illustrated with oral narratives from clinical and nonclinical samples. He demonstrates how the form and variety of perspectives represented in stories strongly, yet unnoticeably, influence the emotional reactions of listeners. For instance, narrators defend themselves against negativity and undesired views of themselves by excluding perspectives from narratives. Habermas shows how parents can help children, and psychotherapists can assist patients, to enrich their narratives with additional perspectives.

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Perspectives in Autobiographical Storytelling

Tilman Habermas
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Preface

“Tell me about it” – the motive for writing this book is in my curiosity to better understand how sharing experiences with others helps to deal with them, emotionally, intellectually, and practically. Emotions provide a fine system of signals to others and oneself. They call for turning our attention to something that we need to deal with. Often it is not quite clear why a situation makes us feel uneasy or arouses a specific emotion. Often we notice them only later and wonder what they are about. Strong emotional experiences as well as unclear emotional experiences motivate us to share them with others – to share experiences we narrate.

Narrating is a frequent everyday activity. A specialized professional context has emerged in the late nineteenth century which specialized in this activity, psychotherapy. My clinical background is in psychoanalysis. I wished to understand some of the mechanisms by which psychoanalytic and related psychotherapies work. Psychoanalysis has little theorizing and little research to offer that actually studies the moment-to-moment mechanisms of change. Studying the uses of narratives is one possible access to the therapeutic processes.

In psychology, emotions are conceptualized predominantly from evolutionary, biological, and cognitive perspectives. In this book, I argue that emotions are communications, to others and to ourselves. When reacting emotionally, we automatically evaluate something that happens. The evaluation is fast and often informed by more than what we consciously know about ourselves. Therefore, understanding emotions is often not an easy task. Understanding emotions requires a narrative format. It allows for communicating and making sense of them. Most psychological emotion theories ignore this central means for understanding emotions. They also tend to ignore that one of the most frequent elicitors of emotions are not snakes and bears, but other people and the stories they tell. Emotions are a social, communicative phenomenon, and they are processed in a social process.

We have the power to transform emotions by narrating them. We transform emotions by gaining a fuller access to our past selves as well as by integrating others’ reactions and co-narrations into our stories. Therefore, integrating diverse narrative perspectives of self and others, present,

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past, and hypothetical is central for coping with experiences. Coping research is only beginning to study this black box called social support.

Vygotsky's assumption of the social genesis of higher mental functions is also valid for narrative competence. In the final part of this book, I intend to push the borders of the research of Robyn Fivush, Elaine Reese, and Catherine Haden further by exploring specifically how parents help children, and how therapists help patients to learn how to cope better with emotions by narrating them in a more complete and consistent way.

The book reflects the ideas on which I have been working for the past fifteen years. Some chapters use material and elaborate ideas, which I have used in earlier publications. More specifically, Chapters 4 and 6 elaborate ideas first developed in Habermas (2006); Chapter 5 elaborates findings from Habermas and Diel (2010); Chapter 8 develops a taxonomy I first presented in Habermas (2015); Chapter 10 uses some ideas from Habermas and Berger (2011); Chapter 11 contains material also used in Graneis and Habermas (2017); and Chapter 12 elaborates ideas first sketched in Habermas (2013) and Habermas and Döll-Hentschker (2017).

Acknowledgments

This book started as an attempt to think about some contradictions that resulted from studies of emotion narratives. In 2011, the New School for Social Research in New York City gave me the chance to dedicate an entire lecture to emotion and narrative. I thank Bill Hirst, Wendy D'Andrea, and all the other colleagues for their great hospitality. It took me some more years to elaborate these initial ideas into a book.

Many other people also supported me in developing the ideas espoused in this book. My interest in perspective-taking dates back to the 1980s with my academic teachers Carl Friedrich Graumann (Heidelberg) and Bob Selman (Harvard). My early interest in narratives, and especially life narratives, was instigated by autobiographical memory researchers David C. Rubin and Susan Bluck, and it was supported by Christin Paha with whom I looked at autobiographical uses of personal objects and first ventured into studying life narratives; the ongoing longitudinal life narrative study MainLife owes especially Christin Köber and also Cybèle de Silveira, Alexa Negele, Isabel Peters, and Barbara Redlich. Most of the example narratives used in this book were collected by students of seminars in Frankfurt am Main and New York City when I attempted to teach psychoanalysis by studying specific emotions on the basis of autobiographical narratives. Some of the narratives and some of the ideas originate in studies done for diploma theses by Lisa Ott, Merve Schubert, and Beatrix Schneider, by Nadine Berger, Michaela Meier and Barbara Mukhtar, by Josefine Förster and Karin Lingg as well as by Sarah Römisch and Ewa Leban. Without Verena Diel's commitment and help, I would not have begun the systematic study on the influence of narrative perspectives on readers' emotions. Alice Graneist studied co-narrations of mothers with their adolescent children, providing a rich material for new insights into the collaborative nature of coping with emotions.

Robyn Fivush's and Elaine Reese's ideas on emotion narratives by children and on the co-narrative ontogenetic sources of many socio-cognitive competencies were an important inspiration both for studying emotion narratives and co-narrative processes. Robyn's hospitality at Emory in 2008 allowed me to write up the first studies of emotion narratives.

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Adeline Fohn and Wendy D'Andrea shared special emotion narratives with me for further analyses. Volker Hodapp and Stephan Bongard provided helpful comments on studies and articles. Master and doctoral students critically discussed narratives and some of the chapters. Sverre Varvin and Catherine Nye and their publisher as well as Eszter Berán, Horst Kächele, Alice Graneist, and Susanne Döll-Hentschker generously allowed me to use quotes from their material as example narratives. Anasha Kumar diligently and untiringly helped break down long German-style sentences and improve the readability of the text. When I first met Keith Oatley, he encouraged me to continue studying emotion narratives. As a series editor, he supported the book project from the beginning on.

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