CHAPTER I

Introduction

There are arguments over what it is to be human. Aristotle argued that it is the power of speech and the sense of good and evil or justice and injustice. Descartes, with his ‘cogito ergo sum’, argued in his Meditations that humans were the only animals with minds. Kant argued that with our technical, pragmatic and moral skills that we can join our minds with mechanics to manipulate things, we can treat other people pragmatically for our own purposes and we can treat each other according to principles of freedom under a set of laws. Linked to this is the idea that the opposable thumb gives us the ability to use tools in ways no other animal can. For Charles Darwin, the difference between humans and other animals was one of degree rather than kind, that things such as emotions, curiosity and reason are just better developed in people than they are in other animals.

All these have some truth, but while language is a critical component of what it means to be human, our narrative ability is what makes us stand out from other animals, our ability to tell stories, not just stories that are fictional, but stories that tell us something about the world, whether through the arts, the humanities or the sciences. Aristotle was right about the importance of speech. Other animals use speech to some degree, but they don’t have complex systems of semantics and syntax, or the complexity of memory that we have for stories. Narrative is a universal human activity. We are intrinsically story creators, story tellers and listeners to stories. It is what we do every day. Roland Barthes, in his classic essay on narrative (Barthes, 1975), said ‘There are countless forms of narrative in the world…. Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all those substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, drame [suspense drama], comedy, pantomime, paintings, stained glass windows, movies, local news, conversation. Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very
history of mankind; there is not, there never has been anywhere, any people without narrative’ (p. 237).

Barthes was writing from the perspective of art and literature. The comments are applicable to the science of psychology. What is difficult to understand is why, in the 150 or so years of the history of psychology, so few psychologists have concerned themselves directly and explicitly with narrative. It is discussed in several areas such as language development, some aspects of reasoning and some memory studies, but its general absence is inexplicable. Narrative is at the heart of human endeavour. Jameson (1981) describes narrative as ‘the central function of the human mind’ (p. 13), and he is right. Memory, attention, perception and so on all depend on us putting information together in narrative form.

One of the problems with studying narrative is that many psychologists believe it is non-scientific. It falls into the area of qualitative psychology which many psychologists still believe is beyond the bounds of science. This is something that needs to be addressed. There are narrative researchers who exclude themselves from traditional notions of science and have strong views about the importance of the political imperative when conducting human research using qualitative methods including narrative. I don’t want to get into those arguments here. My perspective is that narrative is, or should be, central to the scientific study of people, central to psychology. Science in its broadest form is about the systematic development of knowledge through the use of systematic methods and the development of testable theory. While narrative and qualitative methods generally may create some difficulties relating to both method and theory, there is no good reason why they should not be firmly in the camp of good science. It is about the ways we do narrative research, which I will return to throughout the book. The focus here is on applied narrative psychology, which is a particular perspective, but if we are going to apply narrative psychology, then we need to know that it is having a positive effect, or why bother with it? We need evidence that it works in the real world. The problem is, as we shall see, that while there is good evidence for some aspects of narrative work, in particular narrative exposure therapy (NET) and expressive writing, the evidence for several other applied approaches is often limited, or in some cases virtually absent. This means that you are reading a book that claims to base itself on science, yet the science for many of the claims is limited. My argument is that we are at an early stage of narrative science – partly because many narrative psychologists have not obtained the appropriate evidence – but that does not mean that what we do is of no use, it means we should start collecting some good data to provide support.
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for our ideas on narrative so that we can develop narrative theory, method and application.

What is narrative? This is part of the problem. When doing science, we need clear definitions of our constructs. We do not have good agreement about the construct of narrative. There are different definitions, for instance, about whether a very simple language structure can be called a narrative or whether language needs a number of characteristics to be called a narrative. Abbott (2008) makes the point that the basic narrative could be just putting a verb and a noun together (‘Drink tea’), which young children achieve when around 3–4 years old, which is the age from which we retain our earliest memories, so perhaps memory itself may depend on basic narratives. Mnemonic systems often rely on creating meaning by putting information into some form of story (e.g. making a list and putting the items along an imaginary walk, or turning them into the components of a story). Memory is usually improved for information that has some meaning attached to it, and narratives provide meaning. It is also difficult to look at a picture without imparting some meaning. We don’t just process information; we make sense of it. If we look at the Mona Lisa, a picture most people in the West are at least somewhat familiar with, we don’t just look at a head and shoulders picture of a woman. We wonder whether she is smiling, why she appears to be looking at us. We wonder where she is from, what the background represents. We wonder what her story is.

Herman (2007) has a slightly more complex definition of narrative. Informally narrative is a synonym for a story, but she proposes more formally that a narrative is a representation of (a) a structured time course of particular events that (b) introduce conflict into the storyworld (whether actual or fictional) conveying (c) the qualia – what it is like to live through the disruption. This is a helpful definition as it has a place, a series of presumably interconnected events and – which is important to make fiction interesting and to provide psychologists with a role – there is conflict which somehow needs to be resolved.

Are stories the same as narratives? We often use the terms interchangeably but there is no real agreement. At its most basic a narrative is perhaps a representation of an event or a series of events. The event (or action) is the critical element. Without something happening, the event, then we just have a description (‘the book is red’), which many would argue is not sufficient to be a narrative. To create a narrative we need something to happen (‘The red book was read by a person’). Barthes (1975) suggests that a single event is not enough, that there needs to be two or more events.
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Others suggest that there needs to be some causal relationship. Abbott (2008) argues that this overcomplicates it, and we should stick with the simplest definition rather than a more restrictive one that demands causality or multiple events.

Whichever way we define narrative we are unlikely to have a single definition that fits all cases. I favour a pragmatic approach – which is generally the way to approach applied science. If it works use it. Rather than having a specific definition of what is and what is not a narrative the important element is that it has some value in relation to what we are doing. If ‘the book is red’ is sufficient for purpose, then it is a narrative. If we need an event such as the book being read by a person, then we will use that as the basic narrative. When we are looking at the narratives created by, for instance, traumatised people, we may need more complex narratives to make psychological and scientific sense. For instance, we have been argued that traumatised people have problems constructing a coherent narrative (e.g. Burnell et al., 2006) and that their accounts of traumatic incidents are so disjointed they cannot be called narratives. For us to come to this conclusion, the narratives of these people must be complex. They are likely to include a narrator, multiple characters (who have explicit characteristics and relationships with each other), detailed plots and possibly subplots, several elements of causality derived from chronology and so on. A lot more than ‘man bites dog’ or ‘the book is red’ – though we should not reject these as narratives if the setting is appropriate. The critical point is that defining narrative for the purpose of applied psychology depends on the context in which it is to be used.

Chatman (1990) argues there is the chronologic of narrative. He argues that narratives have a doubly temporal nature. In the first place, a narrative moves through time ‘externally’, that is, the duration of the reading of the novel, the telling of the story and so on. In the second place, it moves through time internally, in terms of how long the plot itself takes to unfold. For instance, it might take several hours to read a novel (external), but the novel itself is set over several years (internal). According to Chatman, the first is discourse and the second is story. He argues that texts such as an essay or a description of a rocket engine do not have this internal time sequence and so are not narratives. I disagree. A student essay is a narrative about the construction of an argument. It has no internal time element. Neither does this book. It would be unusual to say that a book such as this is not a narrative. Of course, Chatman was arguing from the arts, where the story element may need to be separated from the discourse; but I am a psychologist, and so see stories as narratives, whether or not
there is a distinction between internal and external temporality (which are useful concepts in certain circumstances).

While our understanding of narrative is not entirely operationalisable, which is usually not a good thing in terms of science, we all know what a narrative is, from formal narratives such as a book, a magazine article or a lecture, to less formal narratives, such as a conversation in a café or a discussion about football. The main point is that narratives are not the sole province of professional writers and speakers, they belong to everyone. We all understand narratives, we can all create and adapt narratives, we can all express narratives to others and we can all listen to and understand other people’s narratives.

If we accept what has been argued earlier, the terms narratives and stories are roughly interchangeable in practice. They tell us about something that happened. The ones we are interested in as psychologists generally provide characters, how characters interact, some sort of plotline, cause and effect and some sort of change. Normally, something has to happen for a narrative to be a narrative. It should also be reasonably coherent, so that an audience can understand what the narrator is trying to put across, their point, the meaning of the story. Narratives have both universal and cultural aspects (Hunt, 2010), enabling us to cross the bridge between realism and relativism, or naturalism and constructionism. Narrative processes themselves are universal; the stories we tell are told by all cultures across the world. The expression of these narratives does vary, enabling cultural expression to take on different senses in different parts of the world. The universality of narrative processes means we can understand narrative from a neuroscience perspective, though the evidence as yet remains limited.

We are trying to understand the mechanics of narrative, the theory, the method and its applications within the context of psychology, particularly within the context of applied psychology. It is all very well saying that we all use narratives, but what does that mean in psychological terms? What is the purpose of a narrative? How might it benefit a listener or the person who constructs the narrative?

Having established a very general definition of what we mean by narrative (this will be explored in more detail in Chapter 2), we need to think about how we can use narratives in psychology. We use narratives all the time. We use a range of different narrative styles. We not only construct and employ narratives, we are the audience for other people’s narratives. Without narrative we would not be human. If we used language without narrative, it would be no more sophisticated than the sign languages learned by chimpanzees in the experiments of the 1950s and 1960s. Of
course, some humans, due to some form of disability, are not able to use narrative. Such dysfunction does not negate the argument for the criticality of narrative as the norm.

As applied psychologists, we use a range of methods to try and help people. Clinical psychologists use a range of therapies to try and reduce mental health problems, health psychologists try to reduce the psychological impact of ill health, forensic psychologists try to understand how the criminal mind works and occupational psychologists try to make the workplace a better place to be. They are all using narratives of one sort or another, even if these narratives are neither explicit nor even acknowledged. A key aim of this book is to demonstrate how we as psychologists use narrative in our work, both implicitly and explicitly. The other key aim is to show how using narrative approaches explicitly can improve the work we do.

Narrative theorists, therapists and others draw on a wide range of approaches to narrative psychology. It is an area where ten experts will come up with fifteen approaches. This can get very confusing. This is an applied book. We want things that work. We are less interested in the deep theoretical and methodological conflicts and debates that occur within narrative psychology and more interested in how we can make use of narratives in our work, irrespective of our specialisms. That does not mean we can ignore theory. If we are going to use narrative approaches, then we need an understanding of theory and method, but this book will not provide a detailed explanation of the many approaches. The approach used is meant to be coherent but not completely explanatory. We need a scientific explanation for why people use narrative and how and where they use it. As I have already noted, and will emphasise throughout the book, the evidence for the effectiveness of many narrative approaches is rather weak. We need to develop a coherent set of methods for using narrative, but this does not yet exist. What I hope to do here is provide a way of understanding and using narrative, not the only way, but it is, I hope, a reasonably coherent and useful way – even if I am asking that if you do use narrative, try to employ it in such a way as to be able to collect empirical evidence for its effectiveness.

**Empirical Problems**

One of the main problems working in the area of narrative psychology is that, apart from the notable examples of NET (discussed in Chapter 9) and Expressive Writing (Chapter 7), the evidence for the efficacy and utility of narrative approaches is at best weak, often contradictory and
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sometimes virtually non-existent. As a scientist this creates a problem. We cannot go around saying we are doing science if the evidence for our theories is weak, contradictory or non-existent. How are we to deal with this?

In the first place, acknowledging a lower level of evidence will – for the moment – have to be acceptable. For many of the approaches discussed in the book, there is at least some evidence. This will be described and evaluated. Furthermore, the area itself, narrative, has emerged from the arts, through sociology, to psychology, and in the arts, evidence is of a very different kind to evidence in science. Over the years, the evidence regarding the ontological status of narrative, its very existence and nature, has been built up, theorised and well-established. There are few people who would argue that the concept of narrative is not immensely valuable when understanding the nature of people and the way they express themselves.

On the other hand, artistic theorising is not acceptable to most scientists, though perhaps they should be more open to developing understanding through the arts. Novels tell us a lot about the human condition. I have written elsewhere about the psychological understanding we can derive from Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Hunt, 2004). There is ample scope for developing psychological understanding through the arts. What is acceptable now is showing how narrative approaches can inform our psychological understanding and how, in the context of this book, it can inform our understanding of applied psychology.

While there is a distinct lack of evidence for some applied narrative psychology, there are well-organised procedures that can be tested, such as narrative therapy and narrative coaching. One of the purposes of the book is to provide a detailed account of where we stand with regard to these procedures (and the evidence base) to act as a heuristic for further research.

Finally in this section, we need to be aware of how widespread narrative approaches are across the whole of psychology – even though sometimes they are not explicit, as in much of clinical psychology. The purpose of clinical psychology is to help people with mental health problems make sense of their problems and find ways of overcoming them, or at least managing them, that is, to create new stories by which to live. Forensic psychology likewise. Occupational psychology is, in the end, aimed at making organisations coherent and ensuring the people within these organisations function well, that is, ensuring that the overall story of an organisation coheres with the stories of the people employed by that organisation. Coaching psychology is a relatively new area, which is about how people’s stories are problematic and need to be changed to create improved stories, more effective ways of being, whether at work or in one’s personal life.
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The Rest of the Book

The book is presented in two main sections. Chapters 2 to 4 explore what we mean by narrative. These chapters are not applied, but they provide useful background understanding of ideas in narrative thought, with some practical examples. The second part of the book is concerned with applying narratives to psychological problems in various ways from more generic ideas round interviewing and analysis to addressing specific applied examples.

Chapter 2 examines the nature of narrative in more depth. Most narrative research has been conducted by people interested in understanding the nature of story and narratives through fiction. These provide important insights into how narrative works not only in fictional accounts but also in real life narratives. The rules governing narrative – such as they are – are discussed in some detail, particularly how they apply to the narratives we use in everyday life. There are fundamental disagreements among theorists about what constitutes a narrative, and as already suggested, I will take a liberal approach here. Nevertheless, the key linguistic ingredients of a narrative, character, plot, action and so on, all will inform our understanding. Narratives are not only defined by the facts that are contained in the story but also by the structure and function of the story that is told, that is what makes narrative interesting to psychologists.

Chapter 3 examines the core reasons why narratives are important to psychologists. When someone is using a narrative, it is not just the facts that are important but also the structure and function of the story. As psychologists we recognise that narratives are universal, but we want to understand why people use the narratives they do in certain situations, and why narratives sometimes fail. Why does a person with depression focus on negative aspects of their life story, and how can we help them change that and in so doing perhaps lessen the impact of their depression? Why do people who are traumatised have such difficulty describing what happened to them, often reverting to non-narrative forms of expression, using ellipsis, or omissions from speech to avoid talking about certain subjects, or describing past events (analepsis) in what appears to be a random fashion, or demonstrating a lack of agency? This chapter brings together narrative theory as it is understood by psychologists. For instance, McAdams (2008a) argues that there are a number of key concepts necessary for narrative understanding in applied psychology. These include coherence, meaning, agency, construction, redemption and contamination. Psychologists are interested in how the self is constructed, identity and identity change, and the limits of construction itself with respect to human behaviour.
Chapter 3 will also examine the role of key psychological theorists who have brought narrative into psychology such as Bruner (1986), Sarbin (1986), Reissman (2005) and others, and how their ideas have influenced psychological thinking. In the early days of narrative in psychology, Bruner argued that psychology can be split into paradigmatic and narrative psychology, with the former being traditional experimental approaches. This distinction is problematic and may be one reason why narrative has not yet become mainstream, mainly because narrative psychology itself is paradigmatic, something not recognised by many psychologists.

The emphasis in narrative psychology has often been on how to do it rather than doing it. There is a diversity of theories in narrative psychology. It is also essential to examine the relationship between the individual and the social world. Narratives function at several levels: the personal, interpersonal, social and cultural. At the top level, these are known as master narratives. The distinction between these categories is somewhat fuzzy, but it can be argued there is no such thing as a personal narrative as all narratives are influenced by the world around us, and by our audience. Not only friends and colleagues but also the media plays an important part in constructing and reconstructing narratives. Moscovici’s (1984) theory of social representations provides a good example of how these issues have been discussed in psychology for a long time without necessarily drawing on narratives explicitly— even though narratives are essential to social representations. Narratives provide the best approach to understanding how we understand ourselves, our interactions with others and the world around us and how we make sense of all this.

The constructs we use in psychology are part of the master narratives of the subject, the interaction between psychologists, the users of psychology and society itself. There are two key points to be made here. The first is the nature of psychology itself and the second is how many of our theories are narrative in nature, at least implicitly. This is not to undermine psychology, but to point out the importance of narrative across the subject. The narrative of mainstream psychology in the UK for many people is that it is a scientific subject, accepting the scientific method, with the experiment as the best approach, and theories and methods derived from the natural sciences. While this has advantages, it also has disadvantages. In terms of specific theories, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) provides a good example. PTSD was created in 1980 by the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 1980) to describe the responses people have to traumatic events, specifically at the time the response to war trauma, though in subsequent years, this has developed to include the response to other
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forms of traumatic incident such as rape, sexual abuse, manmade or natural disasters, road traffic accidents and so on. There is a debate about which events should be included or not included, and over the years, the definition of PTSD in different editions of DSM has changed several times as a result of developing narratives. The fundamental problem is that PTSD is a constructed disorder. It is based on evidence relating largely to US veterans of the Vietnam War, and over the years, it has been adjusted to hone the symptoms more effectively to what is seen as the response to a traumatic incident. At the level of the narratives involved (narratives about trauma, PTSD, individual responses to trauma, emotions associated with trauma and so on), these narratives are not universal, and they are constantly changing. This fundamentally challenges the medical model. It is not that we are simply finding out more about PTSD, it is that the narrative of PTSD constantly changes to bring in more people, more traumatic event types, yet at the same time fails to account for the genuine problems people face as a result of challenging life-threatening experiences. People with a diagnosis of PTSD usually have a comorbid diagnosis of some other constructed disorder such as depression or anxiety (e.g., Ginzberg et al., 2010). If we have this constantly changing narrative, then in what sense are we understanding the nature of mental illness?

Chapter 4 will explore master narratives, the overarching narratives that determine how cultures function. Every culture has one or more master narratives, which determine how participants think and behave to a large degree. While not everyone will agree with all elements of the master narrative – there are often subcultures, particularly in modern sophisticated liberal societies – the concept is essential for understanding the social world. The interaction between the individual narrative and the master narrative is essential for both social and individual change. We will see the effects of master narratives in certain societies and some of the problems associated with them, such as the problems of multicultural societies where there are fundamentally conflicting master narratives.

Chapter 5 looks at narrative methods. It examines where and how narratives can be used in psychological research. It includes a general outline of the ways narrative is used as a method, the different conceptualisations and the limitations of narrative as a method. There are many accounts of how to use narrative as a method – perhaps too many, as some are contradictory, and the multiplicity of approaches makes it difficult to establish best practice.

Narrative analysis is, as to be expected, mainly a qualitative approach (e.g., Wong & Breheny, 2018), where the researcher attempts to make sense