

III. Assess the current state of knowledge/understanding of narrative theory. What do we know about how narratives work (you don't need to give detailed specifics; simply discuss the broad types of knowledge we have). Where are the gaps in our current understanding of narratives? Evaluate the direction in which the study of narrative seems to be going. Is it a useful and healthy direction? Would some other direction be more productive?

In order to give my response to this compound question a unified direction, I have organized this essay around three questions: Who is studying narrative theory? What is narrative? and How is narrative theory being used to explain human symbolic activity? In each section I shall comment on the gaps in and future directions for research regarding narrative theory.

A) Who is studying narrative theory?

Among the predominant themes confronting scholars of speech communication in recent years is narrative or story. Speech communication scholars interested in pursuing the study of narrative (narratology) will be confronted immediately with the interdisciplinary and international breadth of this research topic. W. J. T. Mitchell, reflecting on a recent symposium on narrative has observed that literary critics, philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, theologians, art historians, and novelists, all gathered with a single interest--narrative. Their purpose was to move narratology beyond the province of the "aesthetic"--that is, poetic, dramatic, or fictional narrative--and to explore the role of narrative in social and psychological formulations, particularly in structures of value and cognition (W. J. T. Mitchell, p. vii).

One glaring omission in this list of disciplines is that of

rhetoric and/or speech communication. This omission is unfortunate for two reasons: (1) because of the loss of valuable insight from this unique disciplinary perspective and (2) because the roots of narratology can be traced to ancient rhetorical theory. Demosthenes used narrative in developing his persuasive style of speaking (Pearson). Plato reportedly stated that the person who tells the best story rules the society (Plato). Since this earlier exclusion, rhetoric scholars have been moving hesitantly, adding numerous observations to this growing study. In 1985, an extensive section of the Journal of Communication was devoted to narratology. Along with this publication, other speech communication journals in the last three years, have carried numerous articles on narratology. In substance the narrative approach is not new to students of rhetoric having been articulated by Kenneth Burke within his notion of dramaticism (Burke, 1966, p. 54).

Most recently, Walter Fisher in numerous articles and a recent book, has compiled a welter of material to substantiate a postulate: Narrative is a metacode of human communication--human being is Homo narrans. He extends the metacode notion by suggesting a narrative paradigm that he declares, has or is replacing a previous rational paradigm (Fisher, 1987, p. 57).

Narrative obviously touches a myriad of related topics within and outside the field of communication. Regarding this pervasiveness, Fisher may not be unwarranted in his extension of the Homo narrans notion. Most scholars agree that narrative is a

pervasive form of communication with both constituting and constitutive characteristics, though they seem as a group, unwilling to say with Fisher that narrative constitutes a paradigm.

The interdisciplinary and international flavor of this conversation is both a blessing and curse. There is a wealth of learned insight, but little focus. International and interdisciplinary symposiums are not a substitute for carefully focused research. For the last ten years, narratology has looked more like a mystical religion than an academic discipline.

As the fervor begins to subside, scholars will begin to direct their efforts to some of the major concerns. For example, literary scholars may work out our understanding of narrative in itself while rhetoricians will deal with the effect of narrative.

Speech communication scholars need to continue to direct their attention in two broad areas: (1) To what extent is narrative a metacode of human communication (e.g. Fisher)? Assuming it is, how does this inform us regarding how and what we know? How has and how can we use narrative theory to develop rhetorical critical tools and improve those we have (e.g. Fisher, Burke, and Bormann). (2) How does narrative theory contribute to our understanding of rhetorical effect? In other words, assuming narrative is as pervasive as the claim, how do humans use narrative to persuade?

In conclusion, future research needs to move in the direction of disciplinary specialties. For speech communication research

this means narrative as a persuasive strategy, the honing of critical tools, and further, the exploration of epistemic and ethical issues regarding narrative. While the disciplines need to apply their specialties, maintaining the unity may prove to be a blessing.

B. What is a narrative?

From the foregoing discussion and the pervasive academic interest in narratology, it would seem safe to say there is a clear understanding of exactly "what" is being discussed. Such is not the case. I do not mean to convey that scholars do not know what they are talking about, but rather, that no agreed upon "what" appears immediately forthcoming. What does constitute a narrative? In this section I will explore some of the suggested alternatives. (Scholars approach the <sup>nature</sup> ~~definition~~ of narrative from three broad perspectives: 1) the ingredients, 2) the form, and 3) a priori - story is a given (innate). Gerard Genette exemplifies the ingredient type of definition by saying,

First, narrative refers to the narrative statement, the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events. Second, narrative refers to the succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse, and to their several relations of linking, opposition, repetition, etc. Third, narrative refers once more to an event: not, however, the event that is recounted, but the event that consists of someone recounting something: the act of narrating taken in itself . . . it is surprising that until now the theory of narrative has been so little concerned with the problems of narrative enunciation, concentrating almost all its attention on the statement and its contents, as though it were completely secondary, for example, that the adventures of Ulysses should be recounted sometimes by Homer and sometimes by Ulysses himself. Yet we know . . . that Plato long ago found this subject worth his attention (Genette, pp. 25-27).

Gerard Prince, another scholar working from the ingredient angle, attempts to get at "minimal story" when he says,

"A minimal story consists of three events conjoined in such a way that (a) the first event precedes the second in time and the second precedes the third, and (b) the second event causes the third. No more than three conjunctive features, one conjoining the first event with the second and two conjoining the second event with the third, are necessary (Prince, 1973, p. 24).

Later, Prince redefined narrative as "the representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other." (Prince, 1982, p. 4).

Robert L. Scott, commenting on the ingredient perspective says, "To me the most perplexing puzzle arising in all of my reading is whether or not one can sensibly assert that some particular sequence of events constitutes a story and that this story can be told in a variety of ways." (Scott, p. 201). Perhaps the clearest and simplest summary of the ingredients perspective on narrative is Seymour Chatman's when he says, "In simple terms, the story is the what in a narrative that is depicted, discourse is how" (Chatman, p. 19). *(see Rowland here)....*

Another group of scholars approaches the issue of definition not from the ingredient angle, but form. The issue of story as form reaches a pinnacle of perfection with Chatman. He argues that stories may be "transformed" in passing from one medium to another, but the form remains the same. For example, Cinderella goes from tale, to opera, to ballet, yet the story is the same. Transformation would not be possible unless there were a

fundamental story to be told; the fact that tales are transformed, that is, narrated in different media proves that stories exist apart from the telling (Chatman, 1981, p. 118). Though beguiling, the notion of an ideal form is taken severely to task by Barbara Herrnstein. She claims that Chatman's notion bears an unmistakable resemblance to a Platonic ideal form (Herrnstein, p. 212).

The scholars are unable to agree whether a narrative involves a minimum content of two events in time sequence, or an unchanging form, yet everyone seems to know a story when they hear one. With this churning discussion in progress, another group of scholars posits that people are Homo narrans, meaning innately storytellers, not just a metaphor but a way of being. To these scholars story or narrative is an a priori given.

Barbara Myerhoff says "Humankind as storyteller is a human constant." (Myerhoff, p. 272). Affirming her declaration and her work, Walter Fisher has become the major impetus behind speech communication scholars entering the discussion surrounding narrative. Prior to Fisher, Kenneth Burke's dramaticism, and Bormann's fantasy theme revealed the potential of dramaticism as a rhetorical critical tool and metaphoric perspective on human communication, but Fisher declares Homo narrans as paradigmatic, and the key to understanding human communication.

Fisher builds from narrative ingredients, and form to narrative paradigm. For Fisher, human mind seeks structure, and inevitably that structure is narrative, and narrative is

maintained through coherence and fidelity (Fisher, p. 58). Fisher does not define narrative explicitly because he assumes we story, though he appears satisfied with some notion of a sequence (Fisher, p. 58). *(Reaction to Fisher - via Rawland & others)*

So, what is a narrative or story? Does it involve a certain content, form, or is it an innate way of communication? The debate continues. *(The in this study char., plot, setting - see Rawland here).* Several observations are possible based on the foregoing discussion germane to the development of narrative theory. These observations focus on theoretical gaps and directions for future research.

First, scholars need to clearly delineate what it is they are talking about when they discuss narrative. Though reductionistic definitions can often stifle creative scholarly endeavors, some cohesive perspective is warranted. At this point in the discussion, at least from the work of some speech communication scholars, it seems as if narrative is communication and communication is narrative. Surely more specificity is in order and possible.

Second, scholars seem hesitant to articulate what is non-narrative. An exception is an article by John Lucaites and Celeste Condit. However, even their distinctions are borrowed from Aristotle, and their article raises as many questions as answers (Lucaites & Condit). Perhaps contemporary rhetoric scholars can peruse their own working theoretical notions, extrapolating from them a range of definitions concerning narrative.

Third, the narrative paradigm proposal suggested by Fisher seems premature. Once again, with very little clarity regarding the distinctiveness of narrative content or form, proposing the advent of a new paradigm is counterproductive. However, researchers might begin by building mid-range theories to link Fisher's umbrella-paradigm notions with less grandiose notions. For example, a place to begin might be studies demonstrating how technical as well as artistic expressions contain narrative form and content. Such studies may begin to fill the gaps between claim and experience. To date, there is an extensive theoretic disparity between humans as storytellers and humans who have story-minds or live in a narrative paradigm.

In conclusion, speech communication scholars need to develop their own definition of narrative emphasizing the rhetorical perspectives, thus shifting the discussion from those definitions offered by literature scholars. A definition like "a sequence of two events in time" does not capture the essence of the rhetorical distinctions regarding the how of a story. Perhaps a more satisfying definition of narrative is possible by a process of comparison with what is known to be non-narrative. An umbrella definition like, "a sequence of two events in time" appears self-serving to those who wish to equate narrative and communication in general.



C. How is narrative theory used to interpret human symbolic activity?

Despite the previous sections and the ongoing quest for a definition of narrative, scholars in the speech communication field have been using narrative theory to understand human symbolic activity with satisfactory results. This observation itself is fascinating. Perhaps the communication process is indeed intricately dramatic, or perhaps there is a void between narrative concepts, narrative theory, and narrative critical methods that warrants scholarly attention. Whatever the reasons, scholars have produced several working theories involving narrative notions. There is no narrative theory, though there are narrative theories. I shall explore four theories as examples of how narrative theory is used to interpret human symbolic activity. When appropriate I shall also explore theoretical gaps within these theories suggesting directions for further research.

Kenneth Burke represents the earliest attempts at applying narrative or dramatistic notions to human symbolic activity. Burke used dramaticism as a means of unveiling human motivation. He depicted two realms: one of motion and one of action. The action realm is peculiar to humans and emerges as the result of language. The pentad is a five-part means of critiquing the drama of life. Humans make various choices in the process of living and the pentad is the means of revealing what motivates those choices (Burke, 1962, p. xv). The emphasis in Burke's system is interrelationship. Humans function narratively by

featuring aspects of the ongoing drama of their lives. Pentadic analysis may reveal dominant themes that in turn reveal philosophical assumptions concerning reality. Burkean dramaticism is a major perspective used to explain the functioning of narratives showing the symbolic interrelationship of the respective parts of a whole.

Another major contributor to narrative theory is Ernest Bormann. He builds his narrative or dramatistic system around five key assumptions. First, humans build their realities out of collective and individual fantasies. These fantasies are "real" to the people involved and help to shape the perceptions, motives and behaviors of people living together. Second, these fantasies are created and diffused through dramatizing communication. Such dramatizing communication involves tale-telling, storytelling, and acting out desired realities. Third, through communication, these stories "chain-out" and become the rhetorical vision of the group involved.

Fourth, according to Bormann, a fantasy vision "is constructed from fantasy themes that chain out in face to face interacting groups, in speaker-audience transactions, in viewers of television broadcasts, in listeners to radio programs, and in all diverse settings for public and intimate communication in a given society. Finally, the fantasy vision is made up of the overall view of the world held by a group, the hero and devils involved, the plot line of the drama and the motives guiding the rhetors (Bormann).

Bormann's narrative theory has been criticized by Robert Bates and to a greater degree by G. P. Mohrmann. Bates contends that there is no direct relationship between a fantasy vision or theme and overt behavior and action. "Knowing only fantasy we cannot predict behavior. Knowing only behavior, we cannot predict fantasy" (~~Bates~~<sup>Mohrmann</sup>, p. 137). Mohrmann's criticism is directed at fantasy theme analysis as a rhetorical tool, as well as the absence of criteria drawn from outside the drama to gauge validity (Mohrmann).

Despite the criticism, Bormann's notions contribute directly to narrative theory revealing how humans communicate through shared fantasies and their dramatic substance. Bormann's theory explains how shared group fantasies bring about a convergence of feelings adding a psycho-dynamic dimension to narrative understanding. Further research is needed to provide more direct theoretical connections between fantasy and actual social activities.

A third major contributor to the narrative theory is W. Lance Bennett. Though a student of political science, he has contributed to narrative theory by studying how stories function in courtrooms. He asserts that narratives organize and enable us to interpret reality through a three-step process. First, narratives help humans to identify the central action of an experience. Second, narratives establish connections between the central action and the various parts of a story. Third, humans judge the narratives about reality presented to or created by them

for such qualities as completeness and consistency and find them either adequate or lacking. He adds that there are five kinds of connections humans use for interpreting narrative: empirical, language categories, logical, normative, and aesthetic connections (Bennett).

Finally, Walter Fisher takes the notions provided by these previous narrative theorists and declares the dawning of narrative paradigm. He says that humans are by nature "storytellers," and people judge the worth of stories by testing the narrative probability and the narrative fidelity of various stories. Stories meld together the various dualisms of fact-value, intellect-imagination, reason-emotion, etc. Some stories are better than others. They are more coherent and more faithful to the way people and the world are experienced. Stories are judged on the basis of a narrative rationality or logic rather than a traditional or an "imposed" logic (Fisher, 1984).

Fisher's approach is very similar to Bennett's, though Fisher's purpose is to extend narrative theory beyond a way of communicating to the way humans predominantly organize reality. Fisher is severely criticized by several scholars, though Barbara Warnick captures the major concerns. Her concerns and those of others cluster around the inadequacy of Fisher's critical method and the value of Fisher's claim of a narrative paradigm (Warnick).

These theorists all share in their attempt to explain human communication in terms of drama or narrative. Future research is necessary to glean those elements that are essential from those

peripheral. At this point all these theories do share an attempt to recreate in vivid, analogic terms the contexts and components, and the action itself of human symbolic interaction. They would concur that if the "characters" seem unreal, or if the "plot" seems strained and encumbered by too many extraneous details, asides, or appears contrived, the narrative will have little effect. If, on the other hand, the narrative appears to connect in some way with what humans have already experienced or have come to believe; if the "melody" without is harmonious with a "melody" within; then the narrative will succeed regarding the intended purpose of the narrator (Simon, p. 28).

Working from the assumptions implied in this cluster of theories, speech communication scholars have compiled an impressive array of research. For example, narrative is a pervasive experience--perhaps a universal way of communicating. When the human situation requires the moral and political resources of a culture there must be narrative (McGee and Nelson, p. 150). Narrative theory provides insight to everyday interpersonal conversation and issues of time (Farrell, p. 109). Others demonstrate through the use of narrative theory how literature persuades (Fisher and Filloy, p. 109). While the critics are many, there is a growing belief that narrative represents a universal medium of human consciousness (Lucaites and Condit, p. 90).

In conclusion, speech communication scholars would advance the knowledge of narrative theory by concentrating on the

following concerns. First, the narrative theories need to be gleaned for unifying elements producing stages or levels of theories. Second, assuming narratives both constitute and are a constituting force regarding human communication and perception, how does one narrative gain predominant acceptance over another? Third, scholars must articulate in contemporary terms the differences between narrative and communication in general. Fourth, knowing narratives influence, how specifically do they influence? When is it best to tell a story, when to argue in traditional rhetorical fashion, or where and when in an argument to place a story? In general, speech communication needs to extend its efforts toward specific kinds of narrative function and away from universal declarations regarding narrative as a metacode. In other words, how specifically, can humans use this "metacode" to improve the human situation?

## Question #3, Bibliography

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