Editor
Dennis K. Mumby

Narrative and Social Control: Critical Perspectives

Sage Annual Reviews of Communication Research
Volume 21

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SAGE Publications
International Educational and Professional Publisher
Newbury Park London New Delhi

For information address:

SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Newbury Park, California 91320

SAGE Publications Ltd.
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
M-32 Market
Greater Kailash I
New Delhi 110 048 India

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Main entry under title:

Narrative and social control : critical perspectives / edited by
Dennis K. Mumby
p. cm. —(Sage annual reviews of communication research ; v. 21
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8039-4931-6. — ISBN 0-8039-4932-4 (pbk.)
1. Discourse analysis, Narrative. 2. Discourse analysis—Social aspects. 3. Social Control. I. Mumby, Dennis K. II. Series
P302.7.N366 1993
401'.41—dc20 93-5203

93 94 95 96 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Sage Production Editor: Astrid Virding

Narrative and Social Control

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INTRODUCTION: NARRATIVE AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Dennis K. Mumby

THIS INTRODUCTION GIVES me the opportunity to provide the reader with some insight into the orientation of this book. Although ostensibly its title might appear fairly self-explanatory (it is about how narratives function as a form of social control in diverse communication contexts), at a more fundamental level there are a host of issues embedded in the title that belie its simplicity. Many readers will no doubt have been attracted to this book because of the appearance of the term *narrative* in the title. Indeed, Walter Fisher's (1984, 1985) invocation of a "narrative paradigm" has alerted many scholars to the possibilities inherent in the development of a more literary, aesthetic approach to human communication. The articulation of social actors as *homo narrans* provides one alternative to the model of rationality that has characterized Western thought from Descartes to the present. The most recent iteration of the latter paradigm is best represented by the social science model, with its quest for testable and verifiable observation statements about human behavior.

Although we might question Fisher's claim that his narrative approach warrants the status of a paradigm, there is little doubt that what might broadly be referred to as "narrative theory" has contributed significantly to the "crisis of representation" (Jameson, 1984, p. viii) in contemporary thought. This crisis is founded in the challenging of "an essentially realistic epistemology, which conceives of representation as the production, for subjectivity, of an objectivity that lies outside it [and] projects a mirror theory of knowledge and art, whose fundamental evaluative categories are those of adequacy, accuracy, and Truth itself" (Jameson, 1984, p. viii).

Although some scholars might be profoundly disturbed by this crisis (and others may be unaware that such a crisis even exists!), I would argue that it provides us with a tremendous opportunity to explore alternative ways of making knowledge claims and hence to develop new ways of seeing the world. Indeed, I see the recent controversy over so-called political correctness as in part an expression of the tension that exists between those who want to maintain a monopoly over the rules for what counts as legitimate knowledge and those social groups who have been largely disenfranchised in terms of their ability to shape our understanding of the world. It is no accident that political conservatives in various realms (including academia) have appropriated the term *political correctness* as a way to denounce any efforts to breach the monolith of truth claims that makes up the body of Western thought. The attempts by various social groups (women, racial minorities, gays, environmentalists) to articulate a voice within the domain of Western orthodoxy is therefore framed by the Right as a threat to both the political and intellectual stability of democratic society. Thus, for example, postmodernism is considered anarchic in its rejection of rationality, gays and single mothers on welfare represent the undermining of family values, and environmentalists threaten the most cherished "democratic" principle of all—free enterprise.

The reader may indeed wonder what such issues have to do with a book on narrative and social control. My answer is that there is an integral relationship between the kinds of knowledge claims that we can make in a particular society and the quality of that society. In this sense, the crisis of representation works on at least two interrelated levels. First, as Jameson states above, it involves a casting into crisis of Cartesian notions of foundational Truth. But second, and just as important, it is a crisis about the process of political representation and about who gets to play a role in the constitution of societal meaning systems. Following Laclau and Mouffe (1985), I would therefore make the case that the current challenge to Western orthodoxy represents not a threat to intellectual and political freedom; on the contrary, it must be viewed as an expansion and (potential) radicalization of it. The plurivocity of the discourses that may arise out of the "decentering" of the Cartesian subject may in some sense be destabilizing, but at the same time such a destabilization process relieves us from the burden of discovering "essential" truths and creates a context for "thinking the unthought" in terms of political and intellectual possibilities.

Thus, the focus on narrative in this book also operates on two levels: narrative is both a communication phenomenon that is worthy of intellectual scrutiny and (epistemologically speaking) it represents a particular

orientation toward the study of social phenomena. In the remainder of this introduction, I want to provide an orientation toward narrative in the context of the issue of social control. In particular, I want to suggest a characterization of each of the terms *narrative, social,* and *control* that provides a rough set of guidelines for the reader in exploring the chapters in this book.

Framed epistemologically, the concept of narrative has emerged as a way of challenging the foundational premises in which most knowledge generation is grounded. The most (in)famous current articulation of this challenge is provided by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984). Written as a report on the status of knowledge in the postindustrial, information age, Lyotard argues that science does not simply consist of a neutral body of knowledge claims about the world but rather "produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy" (p. xxiii). Lyotard uses the term *modern* to designate "any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth" (1984, p. xxiii).

To Lyotard, however, "the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation" (1984, p. 37). As such, the advent of a postmodern sensibility requires a different approach to legitimation through narrative. Lyotard thus argues the case that the postmodern involves "an incredulity toward metanarratives" (1984, p. xxiv) and conceives of knowledge as paralogical; that is, as searching for and creating instabilities in dominant views of the world. Postmodern thought therefore consists of *petit récits* ("little narratives") that continuously challenge the stability of received knowledge.

In what sense, then, are the chapters in this book consistent with this postmodern orientation to knowledge? Although not all of the chapters articulate an explicitly postmodern voice (certainly Clegg, Ehrenhaus, and Nakagawa are explicitly postmodern), each embodies in its own way a critique of any foundational conception of knowledge. Narrative is examined not as a fixed and stable communication phenomenon but rather as part of the complex and shifting terrain of meaning that makes up the social world. What is perhaps most striking about the chapters in this regard is their willingness to recognize the open-ended nature of knowledge claims; to recognize the difficulty (impossibility?) of making any universal claims about the nature of the human condition; and to

acknowledge the extent to which, as theorists and researchers, we are never neutral, dispassionate observers of behavior but are always heavily implicated in the construction of the narratives (petit or grand) that provide insight to the social reality that we inhabit.

This is perhaps never more apparent than in the chapter by Porter and Catt. Their orientation toward the intersection of narrative and knowledge claims is best represented by the postmodern ethnographer Stephen Tyler when he states:

> Because post-modern ethnography privileges "discourse" over "text," it foregrounds dialogue as opposed to monologue, and emphasizes the cooperative and collaborative nature of the ethnographic situation in contrast to the ideology of the transcendental observer. In fact, it rejects the ideology of "observer-observed," there being nothing observed and no-one who is observer. There is instead the mutual, dialogical production of a discourse, of a story of sorts. (1986, p. 126)

Tyler's position encapsulates well the struggle that unfolds as we read Porter and Catt's chapter. It is highly self-reflexive in its attempt to wrestle with the essential question of the authorial standpoint (i.e., author-ity) of the researcher. Porter and Catt are forced to struggle with one of the most fundamental questions faced by critical-interpretive researchers—that is, how does one frame the so-called observer-observed relationship? From the standpoint of the traditional canons of social scientific rigor, this relationship is unproblematic because knowledge is produced only through the careful bifurcation of observer and observed. From this standpoint, Porter and Catt's chapter is nothing more than a series of interesting anecdotes that have about as much to do with knowledge claims as the cup of coffee that helps the researcher through the day.

However, I think (I hope) we have grown enough as a field to recognize the problem in allowing the epistemological underpinnings of the scientific method to dictate to us what constitutes knowledge. Porter and Catt struggle with the (very postmodern) question of how one negates the authorial voice of the researcher enough to allow space for the multiple play of voices that constitute the context of study. The Gordian knot that confronts them seems almost impossible, but the chapter has great value as a treatise on the kind of sensitivity that researchers must bring to their domains of study and on the problems associated with privileging a particular narrative voice.

The question of the "social" is of equally central concern to the chapters in this book. At a very broad level, all of the authors focus in various ways

on how narratives function to construct the social reality that constitutes the lived world of social actors. Thus, Langellier and Peterson argue that the social unit we call "family" is not a pre-given entity but is rather partly constructed through the various narrative structures that family members articulate. Similarly, Nakagawa deconstructs narratives of the Japanese-American internment experience to show that such narratives do not simply retell an already preformed experience but actually play a constitutive role in the (divided) self-identity of the Japanese-American community.

In general, then, each chapter assumes an integral link between narrative and the social. Narrative is a *socially* symbolic act in the double sense that (a) it takes on meaning only in a social context and (b) it plays a role in the construction of that social context as a site of meaning within which social actors are implicated. However, there is no simple isomorphism between narrative (or any other symbolic form) and the social realm. In different ways, each of the chapters belies the notion that narrative functions monolithically to create a stable, structured, social order. Indeed, one of the prevailing themes across the chapters is the extent to which social order is tenuous, precarious, and open to negotiation in various ways. In this sense, society is characterized by an ongoing "struggle over meaning."

The idea of the precarious nature of social order is perhaps best expressed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985; Laclau, 1991) with their rather counterintuitive notion of the "impossibility of society." With this notion they suggest not that society as such does not exist but rather that we need to abandon the notion that society is a complete, fixed totality. Thus,

> the incomplete character of every totality leads us to abandon, as a terrain of analysis, the premise of "society" as a sutured and self-defined totality. "Society" is not a valid object of discourse. . . . If the social does not manage to fix itself in the intelligible and instituted forms of a *society*, the social exists, however, as an effort to construct that impossible object. Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre. We will call the privileged discursive points of this partial fixation, *nodal points*. . . . *The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity.* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, pp. 111-113; emphasis in original)

I quote Laclau and Mouffe at length because I think that their position accurately characterizes the central thrust of many of the chapters in this book. In essence, many are concerned with the ways in which narrative

functions in attempts to construct the "impossible object" (society). In this sense, each chapter is about "nodal points"—about how narratives attempt to "arrest the flow of differences" and "construct a center" around which certain kinds of social relations form.

A good example of this process at work is provided by Ehrenhaus's chapter on narratives that characterize the legacy of the Vietnam War. Through a deconstructive analysis, he demonstrates that the "therapeutic motif" functions as an articulated "nodal point" of discourse that attempts to "fix" the meaning of the Vietnam legacy. This motif "dominates the field of discursivity" by articulating "healing" as the natural response to the aftermath of Vietnam (with the Vietnam Memorial at the center of this narrative construction [a physical nodal point?]). As Ehrenhaus incisively demonstrates, this therapeutic motif functions as a narrative strategy of containment that effectively provides a totalizing and "sutured" reading of the Vietnam legacy and hence precludes the possibility of a political, resistant reading that enables critique of U.S. foreign policy.

But as Laclau and Mouffe indicate, the impossibility of society means that, even though discourses are articulated in powerful ways to construct nodal points of meaning, the "infinitude" of discourse means that such nodal points are always open to contestation and change. As Hall (1985, p. 113) states: "Ideology . . . *sets limits* to the degree to which a society-in-dominance can easily, smoothly and functionally reproduce itself." Indeed, Ehrenhaus points out that despite the pervasiveness of the therapeutic motif surrounding the Vietnam War, oppositional discourses have emerged that challenge the dominant narrative and provide the potential for an "ideological crisis" through which America's Vietnam experience can be more fully explored.

The issue of "control," then, is tied integrally to the question of the social, insofar as the social and the political are largely interdependent. In this sense, the social construction of meaning does not take place in a political vacuum but rather is a product of the various constellations of power and political interests that make up the relationships among different social groups. This is the central thrust of Witten's excellent chapter. Building on the literature on power in sociological theory, she makes a compelling case for the idea that control in the workplace is exercised not through direct, coercive means but rather through the discursive construction of a workplace culture that maintains and reproduces the prevailing system of power relations. In this sense, the construction of social reality is not spontaneous and consensual but is the product of the complex

relations among narrative, power, and culture. The relationships among social actors in institutional settings are thus as much political as they are social.

The issue of control pervades all of the chapters in this book in the sense that each takes the social construction of reality to involve a struggle over the ways in which meanings get "fixed." As such, the social construction of meaning is inevitably a political process. In this context, it is useful to quote Laclau's distinction between the *social* and the *political*: "The sedimented forms of 'objectivity' make up the field of what we will call the 'social.' The moment of antagonism where the undecidable nature of the alternatives and their resolution through power relations becomes fully visible constitutes the field of the 'political' . . . the boundary of what is social and what is political in society is constantly displaced" (1991, p. 35).

In every instance, then, the chapters in this book attempt to deconstruct the relationship between the social and the political. In other words, the focus of analysis is both (a) the process of sedimentation that leads to the reification of the social and (b) an attempt to show how such reification potentially hides (political) antagonisms and mutes the articulation of alternative worldviews by groups at the margins of political power. Thus, for example, "The Family" is "denaturalized" and deconstructed as a social, political, and economic configuration that potentially marginalizes women and children (Langellier & Peterson); the social construction of the news-gathering process is analyzed as a response to a legitimation crisis (Zelizer); and, at a metatheoretical level, modern conceptions of power are shown to be the products of specific—historical, theoretical, and political—narratives (Clegg).

At its heart, then, this book is about the relationship between narrative (as both a theoretical perspective and a communication phenomenon) and politics. It is an effort to illuminate the myriad processes by which attempts are made to overcome "the impossibility of society." The myth of "society" means that efforts to "fix" meaning are always political and always ultimately doomed to failure, given the "surplus of meaning" that always characterizes hegemony-at-work. But it is important that we understand these efforts and thus develop a sense of how we, as members of particular social formations, are more readily able to accept some "realities" than others and sometimes become imprisoned by these realities.

If the "impossibility of society" is a leitmotif for this book, is its perspective not ultimately pessimistic in regard to possibilities for human action and emancipation? Laclau provides the best answer to this question:

> Opaqueness will always be an inherent dimension of social relations and . . . the myth of a reconciled and transparent society is simply that: a myth. We have therefore upheld the contingency of social relations, the ineradicability of power relations, and the impossibility of reaching a harmonious society. Are these not pessimistic conclusions? . . . [F]ar from being the cause for pessimism, they are the basis for a radical optimism. . . . [I]f social relations are contingent, it means that they can be radically transformed through struggle, instead of that transformation being conceived as a self-transformation of an objective nature; if power is ineradicable, it is because there is radical liberty that is not fettered by any essence; and if opaqueness is constitutive of the social, it is precisely this which makes access to the truth conceived as an unveiling (*aletheia*) possible. (1991, pp. 35-36)

Each of the chapters in this book, I would argue, views power as ineradicable while simultaneously recognizing the radical liberty and transformational possibilities implied by a contingent view of society. It is thus in the spirit of *aletheia* that these chapters are written.

FORMAT OF THE BOOK

Although clearly each chapter in this book can be read independently, there is a real sense in which it forms a coherent whole. First, in Part I, Stewart Clegg provides an excellent overview of many of the issues that are taken up in subsequent chapters. Clegg's chapter is a narrative itself and provides a metatheoretical historiography of the concept of power that is both nuanced and wide-ranging. Basically, he maps out two separate and often conflicting narratives about how power functions in society. The first, "sovereign" view, narrates power as a largely mechanistic, causal, agency-oriented phenomenon. Rooted in Thomas Hobbes, this narrative is traced by Clegg through to the pluralists and neo-Marxists of the 1960s and 1970s. The second, "disciplinary" perspective, conceives of power as simultaneously enabling and constraining. Born of a postmodern sensibility (see particularly the work of Foucault, 1979, 1980), the origins of this narrative, however, can be traced back as far as Machiavelli's work on strategies of power.[1] Finally, he intertwines these two narratives through his model of "circuits of power" (see also Clegg, 1989) and demonstrates its utility through its application to a specific organizational context—a construction site (see also Clegg, 1975).

The first major section of the book, Part II, addresses the role of narrative in diverse communication contexts. First, Langellier and Peterson exam-

ine the constitutive relationship between narrative and family. Critiquing the prevailing tendency in the communication literature to treat "family" as an unproblematic, monolithic phenomenon (i.e., as a "container" for communication events), they demonstrate the important role of narratives in the ongoing construction of particular family formations and relations of control. Thus, "Stories and storytelling both generate and reproduce 'the family' by legitimating meanings and power relations that privilege, for example, parents over children, males over females, and the white, middle-class family over alternative family structures" (p. 50).

Second, Peter Ehrenhaus's analysis of post-Vietnam public discourse demonstrates the "tyrannizing power of the therapeutic motif" (p. 82). He convincingly suggests how this motif functions as a strategy of political containment by "psychologizing" the Vietnam veteran and creating "a context that defines the warrior as cripple, and muzzles the warrior as witness" (p. 89). As such, voices that challenge the dominant therapeutic narrative are marginalized and rendered ineffective as a means of developing alternate readings of the post-Vietnam experience.

Third, Marsha Witten adopts a neo-Marxist perspective to examine the relationship between narrative and social control in an organizational context. Drawing on recent work in the fields of sociology and communication, she shows how legitimation and control is not a static—structural or individual—organizational phenomenon but is rather achieved "ongoingly through symbolic processes" (p. 101). Looking specifically at storytelling in two different organizations, Witten shows how a "culture of obedience" is not simply imposed by management but rather arises dynamically through the active constitution of organizational reality by members.

The next section, Part III, contains chapters addressing the relationship between narrative and race. Teun A. van Dijk adopts a discourse-analytic approach in examining how racist views emerge through the structure of storytelling. The importance of this chapter lies in its ability to show how storytelling is not linked simply to the cognitions of specific individuals; rather, stories are "a major discourse genre for the reproduction of culture and society" (p. 125). Van Dijk thus examines specific stories to demonstrate how, through the application of conventional storytelling practices, social actors articulate and reproduce the prejudices that exist at the macro-social level.

Gordon Nakagawa's chapter adopts a very different approach to the question of the relationship between narrative and race. Adopting a Foucauldian perspective, Nakagawa examines narratives of the Japanese-

American internment experience. Through an analysis of internee narratives, Nakagawa shows how they "chart a 'political anatomy' of the Nikkei [ethnic Japanese American] subject, a grid of power relations whose coordinates are deployed across the body of the internee" (p. 149). This chapter poignantly demonstrates the extent to which institutionalized practices of discipline and surveillance exercised in the internment camps "normalized" the Nikkei population; this normalization process, Nakagawa shows, is reflected by the internees in their narrative expression of space, time, and movement.

Finally, W. Marc Porter and Isaac E. Catt's chapter is framed around a critical racial incident on a university campus. Using the narrative form, they document and analyze the emergence of different constituencies and a narrative of "narcissism" in the debate over race that develops as a result of the incident. As I indicated earlier, the authors problematize authorial voice insofar as they adopt a "hermeneutics of vulnerability," taking a standpoint of radical contingency in terms of their ability to make "truth claims" in light of their analysis.

The final section of the book, Part IV, contains chapters that focus on the relationship between narrative and the media. First, Barbie Zelizer examines narratives of self-legitimation that emerged in the writings of journalists in the aftermath of the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald. Zelizer focuses her analysis on two different narratives articulated by the journalistic community, each of which constructs a different relationship between that community and the issue of journalistic excellence. The juxtaposition of these two contrasting narratives allows Zelizer to examine "the cultural authority that American journalists have come to embody as authoritative spokespersons for events of the 'real' world, and the control this gives them . . . in narratively determining preferred versions of those events" (p. 190).

Finally, A. Susan Owen's chapter on the television series *China Beach* argues that although the series conforms in many respects to the format of traditional television melodrama, moments of radical opposition are embedded in the narrative structure of the series. She shows how the producers of the series use the marginalized voices of women and "feminized" black males to speak the radical discourse of rage, despair, anguish, abjection, and horror that is the lived experience of many Vietnam veterans. She further argues that, given the political economy of the television medium, such cleverly crafted resistance is worthy of our attention.

Clearly this book has a wide appeal. My hope is that, in addition to being sympathetically received among the highly diverse and pluralistic