

## **A Spectre Is Haunting Psychology**

**Brian Schiff, *A New Narrative for Psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Hardcover. ISBN 9780199332182.**

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**BOOK REVIEW**

## **A Spectre Is Haunting Psychology**

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Seventy years ago, Robert MacLeod (1907-1972) published an article in *Psychological Review* entitled “The Phenomenological Approach to Social Psychology” (MacLeod, 1947). In it, he concluded that “the goal of science as science is not prediction and control but understanding.” He continued, “If we can understand the world as it is structured for the other person ... we shall have made one small step towards the resolution of the conflicts that beset us” (p. 53). The article was subsequently republished in a collection (MacLeod, 1958) which a young PhD student read in the late 1970s. I was inspired; there was a future for psychology, one which had at its centre the search for human meaning making but also had applications to contribute to resolving human problems. I termed it the “understanding and emancipation” approach.

Forty years later, the book by Brian Schiff reminds us that the debate over the nature of psychology as a science, and as having a potential contribution to solving many human problems, continues. He begins his book by stating, “I have always had a feeling that the psychology that I studied was inadequate to get at the problems that really bothered me—about the mystery of life and the puzzling lives of others” (p. ix). This book is an attempt to address this problem and to develop a new, revitalised psychology based upon narrative theory. The continuing dominance of positivist approaches within psychology can for some be

dispiriting, but the parallel growth of interest in qualitative methods is surely a sign that the debate continues. However, as the discipline has grown in diversity, there is the prospect of it splintering into different disciplines. Schiff's book is an enthusiastic call for a form of integration based upon placing narrative meaning making at its centre. Narrative is the spectre which is haunting psychology, and Schiff argues that it offers the prospect of a refreshed discipline.

His book is in many ways a detailed manifesto for a new psychology, which is extremely welcome and hopefully will convince others. Admittedly, at the outset he cautions that "the book is primarily addressed to the next generation of psychologists" (p. ix). Unfortunately, the current generation is so immersed in the dominant perspective, it will probably pass them by.

Like all good stories, the book has three parts. Schiff begins the first part by critiquing the dominant variable-based approach within contemporary psychology. He then moves to consider the contribution of narrative and concludes by considering the challenges in conducting narrative research and its potential application to the development of a new psychology.

The first part condemns the variable-based approach dominant in much contemporary psychology. *Variables* are the abstractions developed by psychologists and which they can measure. But where is the person in psychology? Schiff argues that psychologists need to place at the centre of their concern the person in context, or as he says, "we need to move beyond abstractions and study the concrete." By this, he means that we must locate psychological processes within the biological, social, and cultural world. A relatively ignored French psychologist named George Politzer (1903-1948) called many years ago for what he termed a *concrete* psychology, one which located the meaning-making human agent within their social context (see Santiago-Delefosse & del Rio Carral, 2018). Schiff argues that in its search for generalizable laws, which are basically inferred from statistical associations between variables, mainstream psychology has lost sight of what it is to be human. The important point which Schiff hammers home is that the human being is an active social being. We need to consider who is thinking, when, and where. These first two chapters set the scene for the central argument of the book: the role of narrative in this new psychology. This narrative is the process of active meaning making in context. "In order to get beyond vast generalizations that don't apply to any specific case, we need to get

our hands dirty and begin to explore social reality as it is constructed by persons in concrete situations” (p. 37).

Schiff then proceeds in the second part of the book to introduce the growth of a narrative perspective within psychology, which over the past 30 years has grown in its complexity such that, to the novice researcher (as well as the more experienced one), it can seem confusing. Schiff distinguishes between what he terms the *cognitive*, the *personality*, the *cognitive-personality*, the *interpretive*, and the *socio-cultural* approaches to the study of narrative. This section provides a clear summary of the different approaches, but Schiff then goes on to argue for the need for coherence based around the study of meaning-making practices in context. As he argues, “narrative psychology is, at its core, the study of meaning-making practices—how persons, together with others, articulate and inhabit interpretations of life” (p. 65). He is not concerned with narrative as being fixed, but rather an active process: “it is about interpreting life experience and making these interpretations known” (p. 66). Schiff argues that this approach can bring different groups of narrative researchers together. I welcome his proposal to integrate the different approaches or levels of analysis (Murray, 2000).

Schiff goes on to argue that there has been too much focus on the structure of narrative and we should turn more to its function as a means of making present. Narrative is more a verb (*narrating*) rather than a noun (*narrative*). In some ways, this is similar to the debate within social representation theory about the active process in the construction of representations (e.g., Howarth, 2006). He argues that this process of narrative-making is a spiral process through the work of encountering, imagining, and resonating. An important point he emphasizes is that meanings always come from somewhere. There is always a background to what we know and tell. Narratives are constructed in time and place. This is a point that he returns to in his many examples.

Having explained the process of narrating, Schiff then proceeds to consider how we can conduct narrative research. He emphasizes that there is not one true way of conducting narrative research. This is something with which I would strongly agree, but how do we proceed? Schiff argues for the need to adopt a narrative perspective. We need to start with reflecting on the research question. The most popular method has been the conduct of interviews. But what does the researcher do afterwards? Schiff summarizes his approach: “Based upon a close reading of interviews, developing a way of thinking about the transcript, connecting with relevant literature and grounding theory in the text, it is

the researcher's ability to see an interpretive action as part of a person's life, time in development, a conversation, a culture, which helps us to better understand its meaning" (p. 140). Throughout, the researcher needs to adopt a self-critical stance. "The narrative method of interpretation requires a process of engagement, close reading and consistent questioning in order to understand interpretive actions as part of the larger contexts in which they are produced and understood" (p. 143). He illustrates this with reference to his own work on interviews with Israeli identity. There are, of course, many other sources of narrative data besides interviews (see Murray, 2018).

However, a challenge faced by researchers is how they can move from the particular to the general. For Schiff, this requires moving from research questions to research claims. This requires the researcher to develop arguments that respond to the research question but at the same time argue about the form of the argument. Here, Schiff returns to his initial point about the nature of science. Narrative psychology has been derided because it does not conform to the tenets of variable-based psychology. He argues that what makes research scientific is not the choice of method, but the scientific attitude to inquiry, which he argues should be sceptical, critical, and attempt to recognise the limits of its own capacity to reveal the world.

This reminds me again of MacLeod, who began his unfinished and unpublished *Persistent Problems of Psychology* with the assertion "To be a scientist, a philosopher, is to be persistently and humbly curious, to be consistently inquiring but to be willing to check one's observations in every possible way by the most reliable methods of verification. Science, as we conceive it, is humble and disciplined curiosity" (see Wertheimer, 1973, p. 287). Schiff's book is in many ways an updating of MacLeod's argument. It is a call for a psychology which is human-centred but is self-critical and concerned about its potential impact in the world. While much of contemporary psychology attempts to strengthen its foundations with ever more concern for detailed statistical methods, Schiff offers a more imaginative and exciting guide.

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**Michael Murray**, PhD, is Professor of Social & Health Psychology at Keele University, Staffordshire, UK. He has published on theoretical and methodological issues in narrative psychology, including “A Narrative Approach to Health Psychology” (1999) and “The Narrative Psychology of Community Health Workers” (2015), published in the *Journal of Health Psychology*; and “Connecting Narrative and Social Representation Theory in Health Research” (2002), published in *Social Science Information*. Most recently, he edited (with Anneke Sools and Gerben Westerhof) a special issue on Narrative Health Psychology in the *Journal of Health Psychology* (2015). He has also published book chapters on “The Storied Nature of Health and Illness” in *Qualitative Health Psychology* (1999); “Narrative Psychology,” in *Qualitative Psychology* (2003); and “Narrative Social Psychology” in *Handbook of Critical Social Psychology* (2017). He is a Fellow of the Canadian and of the British Psychological Societies and of the UK Academy of Social Sciences. In 2017, he was elected Honorary Fellow of the British Psychological Society for his lifetime commitment to innovative approaches within psychology.