

# The Narrative Construction of Experience

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The recent turn toward experience in history is complemented by a similar turn in narrative studies. The critical convergence of the two disciplines in their approaches to experience raises new questions.<sup>[1]</sup> Experience, in a narratological sense, can refer to the narrator's experiences, the experiences of the characters represented in or conveyed by a narrative, or the experiences evoked in the reader of the narrative.<sup>[2]</sup>

The emphasis on the experiential aspects of narratives has arisen since the 1990s. One of the first proponents was Monika Fludernik, who introduced the concept of 'experientiality', defining it as 'the quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience' in narratives. The reader recognizes experience through their cognitive abilities.<sup>[3]</sup> It is widely acknowledged that narration is a way to process temporal aspects as well as to create meaning and understanding by connecting experiences and events. Nevertheless, debate has arisen about whether narrative imposes order on experiences and reality or is constitutive of them. Cognitive approaches have been criticized from a hermeneutical perspective for making experience and narrative models universal and ahistorical.<sup>[4]</sup> Historians of experience often maintain that there is no need for consensus on the definition of experience, yet the widely held view within the field is that experiences are constructed in relation to historical, social, and cultural context. In line with this, it is fruitful to consider narratives as a way of constructing experience rather than something external to or distortive of some supposedly 'authentic'<sup>[5]</sup> experience.

An influential definition of narrative has been proposed by the cognitive narratologist David Herman in his book *Basic Elements of Narrative* (2009). Herman states that narration can capture 'what the world is like from the situated perspective of an experiencing mind'.<sup>[6]</sup> In this definition, the elements of narratives are situatedness, event sequencing, worldmaking or world disruption and 'what it's like' (*qualia*). Situatedness means that narration takes place in a certain (communicative) situation. In historical research, this could be likened to source-critical approaches to historical context: where produced, by whom, for whom and so on. Event sequencing refers to the 'classic' element of narrative: temporality. The reader makes interpretations about the temporal relation of events. In historical source analysis, this points to the connection of temporality with interpretations of the past and expectations for the future<sup>[7]</sup>. Worldmaking refers to the narrative creation of a storyworld whereas world disruption conveys some kind of change. Considering historical sources in these terms, it is conceivable that they invoke their own worlds or indicate one or more disruptions of varying significance. 'What it's like', or *qualia*, refers to the meaning of events for a consciousness. It conveys an experience of life. *Qualia* refers to 'what it's like' to be an experiencing subject

in a certain situation. Perhaps the most obvious examples in historical sources are texts produced from the perspective of the subjective 'I'.[\[8\]](#)

Hermeneutical approaches emphasize how the self and the world are constructed in and through narratives. Despite the debates within narrative studies, it seems that the definition of narrative as experiential fits well with the existential-hermeneutical conception of the human being. From an existential-hermeneutical viewpoint the structure of experience and interpretation are analogous. Importantly, in this framework interpretation is seen as a process of constructing the self and the world, not merely a reflection of them. The human existence is bound to spatio-temporal conditions. The human being's relation to the world is understanding, which in some ways resembles existence: relating to one's own being as understanding, understanding that you exist and that you are in the world (being-in-the-world). In this framework, interpretation is a derivative of understanding: something understood *as* something (*Etwas als Etwas*).[\[9\]](#) In experiential narration, the conditions of human existence are combined: interpretations, that is experiences, are put into the framework of the spatio-temporal conditions of being. Experiential narration creates a unique spatio-temporal situation where experiencing takes place.

Hermeneutically, narration can be understood as interpretation directed to experiences that are already interpretations: a kind of a 'double-hermeneutic'. This understanding is especially applicable when making sense and giving meaning to complex constellations of experiences and events. Hermeneutically, narration is about choosing elements of the narrative and imbuing them with meaning as parts of this constellation. The elements and the whole derive meaning from their mutual relation, in a circular interpretive dynamic.[\[10\]](#)

The narrative self can be seen as a constant process of interpretation and reinterpretation, where past experiences and future expectations are adjusted to each other, to the present and to new experiences. It has also been theorized that the human being has a desire for their story and a desire to be narrated by the other. In this sense, narration is relational. Narration reveals the uniqueness of the human being, its *whoness* as opposed to its universal *whatness*. It is, of course, possible to weave multiple different plots of life.[\[11\]](#) For instance, experiential narrations in letters can be seen as fragments in the broader process of self-narration.

Narration is also an important means of sharing experience. 'Cultural narratives' can be understood as socially and culturally shared resources through which people make sense of and give meaning to their experiences.[\[12\]](#) Through them, personal experiences can be communicated and made intelligible to others. It can also be said that culture 'proposes' narratives as certain ways of interpreting sequences of experience, which, if adopted and owned, become part of human experience in the constructive and interpretative process. Experiences are reinterpreted in relation to cultural narratives and, conversely, cultural narratives become reinterpreted in concrete, lived situations.[\[13\]](#) In historical research, historians can identify and analyse what kind of cultural narratives the people of the past used and adapted, either consciously or unconsciously, in making sense of their lives.

When applying a narrative perspective to historical sources, it is useful to think of narration as process and fragments, not as a 'classic' narrative with a clear beginning, middle and end. Narration need not be coherent or even chronological. The theorization of narration is relevant to historical research because it enables the analysis of sources with certain features as constructive of, or else evocative of historical experience.

## Notes

[1] See e.g. Reetta Eiranen, Mari Hatavara, Ville Kivimäki, Maria Mäkelä and Raisa Maria Toivo (eds), 'Narrative and Experience', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 47 (2022). This article draws on my theoretical work in Reetta Eiranen, *Lähisuhteet ja nationalismi. Aate, tunteet ja sukupuoli Tengströmin perheessä 1800-luvun puolivälissä* (Tampere: Tampere University, 2019) and my contribution in Reetta Eiranen, Mari Hatavara, Ville Kivimäki, Maria Mäkelä & Raisa Maria Toivo, 'Narrative and experience: interdisciplinary methodologies between history and narratology', special issue, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 47 (2022). I thank my colleague Dr Anna Ovaska for very useful comments to this text.

[2] See e.g. Marco Caracciolo, 'Experientiality', *the living handbook of narratology*, eds Peter Hühn et al. (Hamburg: Hamburg University, 2014); Michael Bamberg, 'Identity and Narration', *the living handbook of narratology*, eds Peter Hühn et al (Hamburg: Hamburg University, 2013).

[3] Caracciolo, 'Experientiality'. See the original citation, Monica Fludernik, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 9.

[4] Eiranen, Hatavara, Kivimäki, Mäkelä and Toivo, 'Narrative and Experience'; Hanna Meretoja, *Ethics of Storytelling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5–9; Hanna Meretoja, 'Narrative and Human Existence: Ontology, Epistemology, and Ethics', *New Literary History*, 45 (2014), 89–90.

[5] On authenticity, see also Rob Boddice, 'Authenticity and the Dynamics of Experience', *Digital Handbook of the History of Experience* (2022).

[6] David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative*, (UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 157. Mind can be understood here as embodied.

[7] Cf. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004 [1979]): esp. chapter 14. (*Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten.*)

[8] Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative*; Eiranen, *Lähisuhteet ja nationalismi*, 41–2.

[9] See Martin Heidegger, *Oleminen ja aika* (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2007), transl. Reijo Kupiainen: §12, §31, §32 (*Sein und Zeit*); Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'Teksti ja tulkinta', *Hermeneutiikka. Ymmärtäminen tieteissä ja filosofiassa*, ed. and transl. Ismo Nikander (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2005): 207–248 ('Text und Interpretation', *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 2: 330–360, 1983); Meretoja, *Ethics of Storytelling*, 1–9.

[10] Meretoja, *Ethics of Storytelling*, 61–2; Paul Ricoeur, 'Life in a Quest of Narrative', *On Paul Ricoeur. Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1992), 21–2.

[11] Ricoeur, 'Life in a Quest of Narrative', 32–33; Meretoja, *Ethics of Storytelling*, 62–8; Bamberg, 'Identity and Narration'; Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006 [1997]) (*Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi*

*racconti*); Mary Fulbrook and Ulinka Rublack, 'In Relation: The "Social Self" and Ego-Documents', *German History* 28:3 (2010): 263–272.

[12] Cf. 'cultural script'. Scripts can be described as stereotypical sequences of events. It can be argued that narrativity only comes into play when something unexpected disrupts the script. See David Herman, *Story Logic. Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), esp. chapter 3; Matti Hyvärinen, 'Expectations and Experientiality. Jerome Bruner's "Canonicity and Breach"', *Storyworlds*, 8 (2016): 1–25; Matti Hyvärinen, 'Toward a Theory of Counter-Narratives. Narrative Contestation, Cultural Canonicity, and Tellability', *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives*, eds Klarissa Lueg et al. (London: Routledge, 2020), 17–29.

[13] Meretoja, *Ethics of Storytelling*, 62; Ricoeur, 'Life in a Quest of Narrative'. In the field of the history of emotions, William Reddy's concept of 'emotive' is interesting in relation to the (narrative) construction of experience. Reddy argues that emotives can elicit, construct and shape the emotion they express. Reddy differentiates between self-exploratory and self-altering emotives. Sentimentalism, Reddy's object of study in his seminal book, was preoccupied with sincerity (cf. 'authenticity'). See William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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