บรรณนิทัศน์

Senjo Nakai[1]

ชื่อหนังสือ:	*Acts of Meaning*
ผู้แต่ง:	Jerome Bruner
สำนักพิมพ์:	Harvard University Press
ฉบับพิมพ์ครั้งที่ 1:	1993
จำนวนหน้า:	208
ราคา:	Paperback 29.00 USD

Historical Development of Narrative Studies

This article is aimed to review American psychologist Jerome Bruner's *Acts of Meaning* (1990) to examine the implications of narrative theory to the field of communication studies. This anthology of Bruner's eclectic ideas about story-telling left a far-reaching impact to humanities and social sciences in the following generations. Although narrative may be narrowly considered as a form of literary arts, Bruner saw narrative as "one of the most ubiquitous and powerful discourse forms in human communication" (1990: 77). He also viewed it as the kernel of humanity by calling "self as a storyteller" (1990: 111). Almost three decades after its publication, the anthology continues to inspire the generations

---

[1] Ph.D. in International Communication, Lecturer of Bachelor of Arts in Journalism (BJM), Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication, Thammasat University.

of scholars of various disciplines in understanding of human mind and communication.

In fact, our ability to tell a story occupies the essential part of human communication. The oldest written story is the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh, which is estimated to be written during the early Bronze Age (George, 2000). Of course, oral literature is believed to date back much earlier; anthropologists argue that Australian aboriginal tribes remember the rising sea level that happened in 5300BCE-11120BCE as oral tales (Nunn and Reid, 2016). Cultural knowledge and memories have been preserved and transmitted typically in the form of stories regardless of historical periods and cultures.

Narrative comprises identifiable characters, whose actions or events are interlinked to form a scene that leads to another, typically in a chronological order. It is by no means the mirror of reality, but it enables us to grasp it by reducing the complexity of reality. According to Bruner, narrative performs four primary functions: (1) action directed toward goals controlled by agents, (2) establishment and sustenance of a sequential order in which events and states are linearized in a standard way, (3) a sensitivity to what is canonical and what violates canonicality in human interaction, and (4) approximating a narrator's perspective. The cognitive process is called as "typification" by phenomenologist Alfred Schutz (1962), through which human beings can reorder a random and chaotic stream of subjective experiences, and share their experience with others. Without narrative, we would be overwhelmed by an infinite number of potentially legitimate interpretations of events. Bruner sensed that this ubiquitous human activity holds a clue to understanding human mind.

His works constitutes the academic movement called "narrative turn" in North American academia during the 1970s along with other celebrated scholars, such as a literary critic/historian Hayden White, a rhetorician Walter R. Fisher, a communication scholar Ernest Bormann, and a literary theorist/political activist Stanley Fish. Although their discipline and methodological approach are different, they all took a keen interest in the latent role of story-telling in human understanding and communication.

Although the movement is theoretically indebted by a long tradition of hermeneutics, and early twentieth century Continental scholars, such as Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp, French phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur, and French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre (Polkinghorne, 1987). It was the postwar period that their works were translated into English, and available to wider audience during the 1960s. North American academics, such as literary critic Northrop Frye and rhetorician Kenneth Burke, examined the centrality of texts in signification. A gradual increase of interest in narrative inquiries into a wide range of issues, such as illness experiences (e.g., Catherine Kohler Riessman and Arthur Kleinman), nationalism (e.g., Benedict Anderson and Anthony D. Smith), and the subaltern's resistance (e.g., James C. Scott and Aihwa Ong), counselling psychology (e.g., Theodor R. Sarbin and Donald Polkinghorne), economics (e.g., Deirdre McCloskey and Robert J. Shiller), and human geography (e.g., Michel de Certeau)

Cognitive Science beyond Behaviorism

For nearly eight decades, Bruner (1915-2016) contributed to the development of psychology. However, his academic interest went beyond

the parameter of psychology proper. Bruner is recognized as one of the proponents of the "narrative turn." Because of its interdisciplinary origin, this academic movement is difficult to summarize. However, proponents of narrative studies do share a departure from the positivist epistemology, which had been dominant in humanities and social sciences during the post-war period. During the 1960s functionalism was at the zenith in American academia.

From the 1930s to the early 1940s, Bruner was trained as a cognitive psychologist at Duke University and Harvard University. However, he became dissatisfied with the behaviorist approach to understanding human mind. He was critical about psychologists' tendency to view human beings as the void of agency, which simply responds to stimuli:

> This new reductionism provided an astonishingly libertarian program for the new cognitive science that was being born. It was so permissive, indeed, that even the old S-R learning theorist and associationist student of memory could come right back into the fold of the cognitive revolution so long as they wrapped their old concepts in the new terms of information processing. One did not have to truck with "mental" processes or with meaning at all. In place of stimuli and responses, there was input and output, with reinforcement laundered of its affective taint by being converted into a control element that fed information about the outcome of an operation back into the system. So long as there was a computable program, there was "mind."

> (ibid.: 6-7)

In the preface of *Acts of Meaning*, Bruner (cited in Bruner, 1990: xi) summarizes his book as an inquiry into "the nature of mind and its processes, questions about how we construct our meanings and our realities, questions about the shaping of mind by history and culture" by quoting his doctoral thesis advisor Gordon Allport's observation of the new movement he called "the cognitive revolution" within American psychologists in the late 1950s, which led to the critical assessment of then dominant behaviorism. After the World War II, Bruner returned to Harvard to teach psychology. There, he was exposed to the movement. Even before Bruner's lectures and articles were assembled into *Acts of Meaning*, his interest in narrative was already evident in his earlier essays and books, such as *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand* (1979) and *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1985).

Narrative Understanding

In the opening chapter, "The Proper Study of Man," Bruner argues why psychology needs an alternative approach to understanding the human mind. He started with the assumption of culture as a set of norms and accompanying narratives that allow human beings to make sense of their experiences (ibid.: 47).

In the second chapter, "Folk Psychology as an Instrument of Culture," "the transactional contextualism" is discussed in detail. The transactional contextualism, which owes its theoretical underpinning to interpretative sociology and anthropology, is one of the two movements that contributed to the narrative turn:

> It was the view that human action could not be fully or
> properly accounted for from the inside out-by reference only to

intrapsychic dispositions, traits, learning capacities, motives, or whatever. Action required for its explication that it be situated, that it be conceived of as continuous with a cultural world. The realities that people constructed were social realities, negotiated with others, distributed between them. The social world in which we lived was, so to speak, neither "in the head" nor "out there" in some positivistic aboriginal form.

(ibid., p,105)

Bruner described that human beings understand their world and interpret experiences in two distinct modes. First, the dominant understanding is *logoscientific*, which is epitomized in western natural science (1990: 77). The logoscientific mode is underpinned by both the essentialist view of reality, and the positivist approach to understanding. However, he was critical about decontextualizing human beings from the cultural environment:

For it deals with the nature, causes, and consequences of those intentional states--beliefs, desires, intentions, commitments--that most scientific psychology dismisses in its effort to explain human action from a point of view that is outside human subjectivity, formulated in Thomas Nagel's deft phrase as a "view from nowhere."

(ibid.: 14)

He refocused his inquiry on human beings' ability to reflect upon themselves in relation to culture or history--symbolic systems of

language, which precede the existence of members of any given society. He, therefore, argued that the systematic inquiry into symbolic world requires a different approach from the logoscientific approach. The human mind and their meaning-making process can be understood more appropriately through the prism of culture, which he coined cultural psychology (ibid.: 12).

Bruner calls narrative as the "tool kit of interpretative techniques" in accounting for experiences (ibid.: 67-68). In short, narrative understanding can be realized only within certain social and cultural contexts at a given time. Human beings are born into a cultural community, in which they acculturate themselves through repeated, meaningful interactions with the symbolic environment of the society, and master how their experience can be understood. Not only does it give a sense of order to one's own experience, but also share his/her experience with others.

Bruner was influenced by symbolic interactionism and hermeneutics, both of which question the positivist view of reality that a uniform and objective reality lies beyond the influence of subjectivity as he details in Chapter Four. Positivists view that objective reality becomes accessible with appropriate measures. On the other hand, symbolic interactionists believe that meanings are not something that can be found, but "constructed, negotiated, reformed, fashioned, and organized by human beings in their efforts to make sense of happenings in the world" (Sarbin and Kitsuse, 1994: 3). Bruner absorbed the constructed nature of reality via the works of Russian psychologist Leo Vygotsky. Social constructivists view "human experience of everyday life and of reality itself as an artificial construction that people somehow

maintain with only occasional, minor break-downs" (Baran and Davis, 1995: 286).

If reality is a social construction, how can we avoid being trapped in incommensurability? Is there any way to mediate the conflicting views? Narrative is "a system concerned not solely with sense and reference but with "felicity conditions"--the conditions by which disputes in meanings can be resolved by invoking mitigating circumstances that account for divergent interpretations of "reality" (ibid.: 67). Despite the multifaceted nature of reality, only certain interpretations are allowed. Thus narrative "promotes negotiation and avoids confrontational disruption and strife in meanings" (ibid.: 68).

Bruner, for example, postulates that meanings are created and negotiated within a community through narratives (ibid.: 11). For example, in writing a national history, some events or historical figures are remembered, or even sometimes fabricated to fill a gap in history while others are erased from the historical narrative. A canonized historical narrative is promoted by the political authorities through a variety of media, such as textbooks, songs, films, monuments, regalia, holidays and place names. Although historian Benedict Anderson emphasized the role of technologically assisted media, the print media in particular, in the construction of modern nationhood of Thailand in his seminal book *Imagined Communities* (1983). Shared stories of epic wars, great leaders, enemies, or even sports events serve to bind a culturally heterogeneous population, the great majority of whom have no direct interaction. Apart from being a cognitive framework for an individual, narrative contributes to forming solidarity among the population and maintaining a collective identity. Narrative also creates "moral commitments and institutional

obligations that prevail in every culture" (Bruner, 1990: 68). Over time, the members of a culture learn and internalize norms and values that are inherently expressed in narratives and learn to act accordingly. Although Anderson did not focus on the role of narrative in nation building, his view of nationalism shares the social constructivist view of reality with narrative theorists.

Further Development of Bruner's Idea of Narrative

Bruner's inquiry focuses on narratives that are already available to the members of a society. So how can a new narrative be created and shared by others? An American sociologist Tamotsu Shibutani (1966: 23) provided a clue in his research of rumor. Shibutani pointed out that rumor is a vernacular narrative in which the public attempts to make sense of inadequately defined situations. Lack of critical information may lead to an emergence of an interim narrative "in an effort to cope with an unexpected event or in sustained collective tension" (ibid.: 62). If the demanded information is not forthcoming, "frustrated men must piece together some kind of definition, and rumor is the collective transaction through which they try to fill this gap." In order to cope with paucity of information, the concerned population relies on their own "intellectual resources," which can be anything that can contribute to defining the unclear situation.

Although rumors are often considered as unreliable and distorted, Shibutani argued otherwise that "[m]ost of the participants [in rumor] retain their critical ability; reports are checked for plausibility and reliability of sources; and the definitions that eventually emerge tend to be consistent with cultural axioms" (ibid.: 94). Similarly, Warren A.

Peterson and Noel P. Gist's study (1951: 161) indicates that divergence in recollection of the original piece of information occurs not because of faulty memory but because of the communicators' identities that influence interpretation of the information. Even if the same piece of information is given, it may be interpreted differently by different groups of people.

Bibliography

Anderson, B. (1983), *Imagined Community*, London: Verso.

Baran, S. and Davis, D. (1995), *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Bruner, J. (1979), *On Knowing: Essay for the Left Hand,* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

_____. (1987), *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds,* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

_____. (1990), *Acts of Meaning,* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

De Certeau, M. (1984), *Spatial Stories: In the Practice of Everyday Life,* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

George, A. (2000), *The Epic of Gilgamesh: A New Translation,* London: Penguin.

Kleinman, A. (1988), *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition,* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Nunn, P. and Reid, N. (2016), "Aboriginal Memories of Inundation of the Australian Coast Dating from More than 7000 Years Ago", *Australian Geographer,* 47(1): 11-47.

Ong, A. (1987), *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline,* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Peterson, W. and Gist, N. (1951), *"Rumor and Public Opinion", American Journal of Sociology,* 57(2): 159-167.

Polkinghorne, R. (1987), *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences,* New York, NY: SUNY Press.

Riessman, C. (1993), *Narrative Analysis,* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sarbin, T. and Kitsuse, J. (1994), *Constructing the Social,* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Schutz, A. (1967), *The Phenomenology of the Social World,* Evanston, IL: Northwestern University.

Scott, J. (1985), *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of Peasant Resistance,* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Shibuani, T. (1966), *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor,* Indianapolis, IN: Bobby-Merrill.