Coherence and Fidelity in Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm

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Abstract
This paper explores the Walter Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm rhetorical theory specifically though his concepts of cohesion and fidelity and how they affect people developmentally and psychologically. This topic is explored through a discussion of a number of studies on these subjects including those of Robert Schrag, Kitty Klein and Adriel Boals, and Athena Androutsopoulou. Schrag’s study explores the idea of “first stories” and the development of narrative cohesion and fidelity in children. He asserts that cohesion and fidelity can not be inherent, but are, instead, learned early in life. In the study conducted by Klein and Boals, the idea of narrative coherence as it relates to a person’s perception of the stories of her life is explored. It focuses on a person’s coherent judgment and need to make sense in the retelling of a story from a stressful moment in her life. In a study by Androutsopoulou, the idea of narrative fidelity as it relates to psychological health is explored. She asserts that if a person finds fidelity in a story they encounter, the truths in their life begin to feel more valid. All of these studies come together to show that narrative coherence and fidelity are essential to human life. Judging life through the lens of story is a natural tendency of human beings.
According to Rhetorical theorist and scholar Walter Fisher, “people are storytelling animals” (Griffin 2012 p.308). Human beings were created as a people of stories. People live and interact with others in the context of story, or narrative. This idea is the basis for Fisher’s theory, Narrative Paradigm. As Griffin points out, “all forms of human communication that appeal to our reason need to be seen fundamentally as stories.” Because it applies to all forms of communication, it pertains to more than novels and anecdotes, or the things that are typically associated with story. Narrative Paradigm suggests that even things that seem to be objective fact need to be judged as narrative and seen within that context.

At the heart of the theory is the idea that human reasoning is based on the ability to judge narrative. According to Fisher (1987), “The narrative paradigm proposes that human beings are inherently storytellers who have a natural capacity to recognize the coherence and fidelity of stories they tell and experience” (p.24). Coherence refers to how well the story hangs together, or whether it makes sense, and fidelity refers to whether the listener finds truth in the story as it relates to the listener’s life (Griffin 2012 p. 313-314). Together, coherence and fidelity form Narrative Rationality (Griffin 2012 p.312). Fisher comes forward from the idea of “good reasons.” He defines this term as, “those elements that provide warrants for accepting or adhering to the advice fostered by any form of communication that can be considered rhetorical” (Fisher 1987 p.109). In any story, we look for these good reasons, or the values on which we can judge the story. We test these good reasons with the concept of coherence and fidelity.

According to Griffin (2012), “together they are measures of a story’s truthfulness and humanity” (p.312).

Coherence and fidelity are left to the judgment of each individual. Herein lies the interpretiveness of the theory. Each person can see different good reasons and judge the
coherence and fidelity of the story from their own sense of truth. In fact, Fisher might argue that there is no absolute virtue or truth. Truth is only what each person finds to make sense through their own sense of coherence and fidelity of the stories that they are given. According to Fisher (1987), “One can be fairly ‘objective’ about what values are in fact present in a message, but as one moves to the questions of relevance, effects, confirmation, and ideas, greater and greater degrees of ‘subjectivity’ enter into the assessment” (p.119-110). Through inherent human judgment of coherence and fidelity, each individual builds their concept of logic and reason and perceives the world in all of its many narratives through this constructed lens. The use of narrative rationality creates a vehicle for people to live their lives and tell their own stories. Once a person knows what she believes to be true through her assessment of the stories she consumes, she can build her own stories off of that truth. After all, according to Fisher (1984), “people have a natural tendency to prefer the true and the just” based on their own construction of those values (p.9).

But, the subjectivity of the theory creates some issues. Fisher (1984) says himself that the narrative paradigm does not deny that people can ultimately hold wrong values (p.9). It is thoroughly possible for people to find narrative rationality and good reasons in horrible stories if they have found the things within to be true in their life before. Perhaps this is how Hitler succeeded in his campaign. His campaign was persuasive because it had both coherence and a strong sense of fidelity for the people of Germany (Warnick 1987 p.5). It is terribly clear that the construction of a person’s concept of what is coherent and what holds fidelity is very important. The development of these ideas is instrumental in the rest of a person’s life of reasoning. So, how does an individual construct their sense of narrative rationality? The early development of a person’s coherence and fidelity influences their narrative judgment for the rest of their life.
Throughout life, coherence and fidelity are essential to a person’s growing sense of who they are and what they believe. A person can find what matters most to them, what they relate to and understand, through finding fidelity in a story. Psychologically, these skills are very important to the hearts and minds of human beings. Finding coherence and fidelity in the stories that humans are presented with as well as the stories they live are essential to development and identity.

As was named above, Fisher (1987) asserts, “The narrative paradigm proposes that human beings are inherently storytellers who have a natural capacity to recognize the coherence and fidelity of stories they tell and experience” (p.24). Where does this inherency come from? Are humans born with inherent storytelling? Are humans born with an inherent ability to judge coherence and fidelity? Robert Schrag of North Carolina State University was interested in this question. Every person alive has a “first story” or the first narrative that she was exposed to. Fisher (1984) says that narrative beings have “[an] inherent awareness of narrative probability, what constitutes a coherent story, and [a] constant habit of testing narrative fidelity” (p.8). This assertion is understandable, but incomplete. Infants are not able to fully judge the stories they are told before they have a handle on language. Humans are taught how to judge the stories they hear through the example of the people before them. The opinions held by a child’s parents certainly affect that child’s judgment of the stories they hear thereafter. In this way, a person’s sense of coherence and fidelity may seem inherent when actually it has been learned and constructed ever since that first story that they ever heard. But, when the child heard that first story, were they able to judge it? Or did they take it as truth and judge other stories based upon the truth found in that first story?

It is commonly thought that children tend to believe what they are told. A child would have no reason to believe that the first story they hear in their life is false. Schrag (1991)
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suggests that coherence and fidelity are not inherent but taught by experience (p.3). According to Schrag (1991), “children learn to compare their present with their past quite early in life” (p.3). This comparative process is essential to future judgment. After all, when a person judges a story’s coherence, she is really only seeing how it stacks up to everything she has decided to be true in the past. Schrag (1991) confirms this idea by stating, “Stories recount experience, and it seems logical that we gain our ability to assess narrative probability not inherently, but by holding each story up to the mirror of our own experience—to the stories we have lived (p.3).

But narrative fidelity is trickier to learn. According to Schrag (1991), narrative fidelity is taught by “first story” (p.4). Schrag (1991) asserts that first stories are very important because an individual takes them automatically as truth and “become part of the standard for subsequent judgments of narrative fidelity” (p.4). Perhaps this is why so many stories geared toward children, like fairy tales and fable, have a strong moral component and clear messages. Schrag (1991) suggests that “first stories” should be censored, considered, and investigated before they are offered to children, if possible (p.4). After all, it could be terrible if the first story a child was ever offered was that of, say, an R-rated action movie or a film about people that steal things. Narrative fidelity is learned early in life, and from then on, a person judges stories through the lens of the truth of that first story. Other truths can be built on top of the foundation of the first, but the first will remain. This framework for judgment of narrative rationality is imperative to Fisher’s narrative paradigm. That he described the ability to judge stories as inherent is quite interesting. It seems to be true that it is essential that humans learn to judge narratives in order to learn and grow in the world, but it does not seem that humans begin life with this innate ability. Coherence and fidelity are learned quite naturally and used throughout life.
People are surrounded by stories, but people are also storytellers. Everyone lives a story. Because of this, it is natural for a person to want her own life to have both coherence and fidelity much like the stories that surround her. A study by Kitty Klein of North Carolina State University, and Adriel Boals of the University of North Texas investigated narrative coherence in the personal accounts of the victims of stressful experiences. The idea behind this study is important. How do humans remember and tell the stories of their life? How does the coherence of a person’s own life stories affect her opinion of herself and of the world? It seems natural that stress could play into this idea. A person may not very well remember each event that was a part of a stressful moment of her life. According to Klein and Boals (2010), “autobiographical coherence refers to knowledge of how others’ lives typically proceeded” (p.2). Humans judge their perception of their own life stories based upon the lives of the people around them. One may see the progression of a friend’s life and feel that her life should proceed in the same way that her friend’s life did. For this reason, according to Klein and Boals (2010), people that describe stressful moments of their life add more linking and describing words to make the story make sense and link together because that moment of their life exceed their own expectations (p.18). Because the person knows that the moment exceeded her own expectation, she takes measures while telling the story to give extra explanation in order to help the listener find it to make sense.

Throughout life, humans seem to have a desire to make sense. According to Dan McAdams of Northwestern University (2006), “the idea that the human life resembles, or can be made to resemble a coherent story holds a great deal of intuitive appeal” (p.109). This desire refers to the psychological idea that “people make sense of their own lives in terms of self-defining life stories—integrative narratives of self that reconstruct the past and anticipate the
future in such a way to provide life with identity, meaning, and coherence” (McAdams 2006 p.110). As humans go through the world telling stories, they can’t help but judge their storytelling by asking, “Am I being understood?” (Mcadams 2006 p.111). Coherence both applies to a person’s judgment of the stories they are told as well as to the stories they tell about their self. According to Kathleen Roberts of Indiana University—Bloomington (2004), “Creating the story of one’s life and becoming embedded in it—becoming a person rather than an ‘individual’—informs one’s ethical decisions and binds one in a moral duty to other persons in the narrative. Narrative frames one’s actions consistent with a shared mission and common center” (p.3). Once a person sees their life as a story, she feels compelled to keep the story together and honor the thing that she started. Within the narrative paradigm, humans want to make sense and keep their lives together much like a coherent story.

Other studies have found that narrative fidelity in addition to coherence can be an important aspect of human psychological health. According to a study by Athena Androutsopoulou of the Association for Family Therapy (2001), “Stories of literary merit written by others can be used in therapy to help people tell their personal stories” (p.1). If a person sees something of her self in a literary character, if the character’s situation rings true to her, then the narrative surrounding that literary character can help the person to make more sense of her own life and situation. Narrative fidelity occurs when a person identifies with the story that they are presented with. According to Androutsopoulou (2001), “the choice of these stories reported by clients appears to help bring more sense and meaning to their own personal narrative” (p.2). The stories of life, whether literary and fictional or pertaining to everyday life, are powerful. Through narrative fidelity, a person can hear a story and feel like she knows something about it. The truth of her life is confirmed through the truth she sees in the story. The story gives the person the
chance to “identify” with one of the characters (Androutsopoulou 2001 p.4). In a way, she can imagine and put her self in place of that character in the story through narrative fidelity. Any time that a person experiences narrative fidelity a sense of identification is included in the response the person has to the truthfulness of it. Every person spends their life constructing a concept of identity as well as a self-narrative (Androutsopoulou 2001 p.5). According to Androutsopoulou (2001), “Well-informed (intelligible) self-narratives are crucial in our sense of well-being” (p.6). As was explored earlier, people want to make sense. And if a person sees a piece of herself in a character that makes sense to her, then she knows a little more clearly that she makes sense as well. Narrative fidelity can confirm the human belief that what one feels and thinks to be true matters and is valid. If one sees the truth that she adheres to in something else, then that truth is validated a bit more than it was before. Narrative fidelity is essential to the human experience. Through this aspect of the narrative paradigm, humans find the truth they know in their life in other places. Their truth is affirmed by the proclamation of another person’s truth.

Narrative rationality, the use of coherence and fidelity as a measure for the validity and usefulness of the stories that people encounter everyday, is an essential aspect of the human experience. Humans love stories they grow to recognize that they themselves are living a story. Each human being is taught and conditioned to make sense and seek things that make sense. They are taught to be true and seek truth. As a person interacts with story after story, her idea of what makes sense and what is true grows and builds until it turns into the story of her own life. Then her own sense of coherence and fidelity matters even more because she judges both herself and the world around her through that lens. Whether one adheres to Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm and believes that *everything* in the world is rooted in story or not, it is undeniable that stories are
an effective way to organize lives. People subconsciously judge the world in story-mode all the time, everyday, and they begin to feel out of whack when the coherence or fidelity isn’t quite right. This is a human activity, inescapable and almost comforting, because humans grow up with stories. People will continue to live narratively, seeking coherence and fidelity in the things they take in as well as the things they are.


