

In Pursuit of the Person in Psychology

Melanie Kreitler

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Contact: melanie.kreitler@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

Brian Schiff's new book, entitled *A New Narrative for Psychology*, takes a critical look at the current identity crisis of psychology, which is marked by a fragmentation into different theoretical perspectives and a lack of shared terminology. Schiff argues that a narrative perspective can lend the discipline a new self-conception and common direction. Centering research around narrative and meaning-making processes would help the discipline to dispose of issues like the convention of relying on quantitative research and the misinterpretation of findings. Taking a functionalist approach to narrative, the book reformulates the conception of narrative psychology to offer a new way to do psychological research. It is an appeal to the discipline to consider alternative practices and to focus on the particular, rather than the general. By doing this, the book constitutes an important contribution to the debate on contemporary psychology's future.

How to cite:

Kreitler, Melanie: "In Pursuit of the Person in Psychology [Review on: Schiff, Brian: *A New Narrative for Psychology*. New York: Oxford UP, 2017.]". In: KULT_online 59 (2019).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2019.259>



In Pursuit of the Person in Psychology

Melanie Kreidler

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Schiff, Brian: *A New Narrative for Psychology*. New York: Oxford UP, 2017. 266 pages, 57.50 EUR.
ISBN: 978-0-19-933218-2.

Abstract:

Brian Schiff's new book, entitled *A New Narrative for Psychology*, takes a critical look at the current identity crisis of psychology, which is marked by a fragmentation into different theoretical perspectives and a lack of shared terminology. Schiff argues that a narrative perspective can lend the discipline a new self-conception and common direction. Centering research around narrative and meaning-making processes would help the discipline to dispose of issues like the convention of relying on quantitative research and the misinterpretation of findings. Taking a functionalist approach to narrative, the book reformulates the conception of narrative psychology to offer a new way to do psychological research. It is an appeal to the discipline to consider alternative practices and to focus on the particular, rather than the general. By doing this, the book constitutes an important contribution to the debate on contemporary psychology's future.

Brian Schiff's last publications circle around the connection between life, narrative, and psychology. According to him and other scholars in psychology, the discipline is in an identity crisis, which is marked by fragmentation and a lack of shared language. His newest book, entitled *A New Narrative for Psychology*, actively engages with this issue and aims to offer a new common direction for the discipline. In a certain manner, the author stresses the argument made by Theodore R. Sarbin, who introduced the sub-discipline in his book *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* in 1986. Even back then, Sarbin saw narrative as a metaphor for psychology (Schiff p. 75) and advocated a shift from quantitative to qualitative research (Schiff p. 44). Expanding this model, Schiff's book has the ambitious aim to re-introduce narrative as the general theory and method for psychological research, claiming "we simply can't understand human psychology without narrative" (p. 233).

The book comprises nine chapters, which are divided into three parts. The first of these is dedicated to showing the necessity of finding a new way to conduct psychological research. The provocative outset is that “Psychological research and theory are in danger of being irrelevant to the understanding of persons and everyday experience” (p. 4). He critically examines the weaknesses of contemporary research, which result from the convention of using variable-centered approaches. Researchers, so he claims, tend to generalize their findings to larger groups to make greater claims about humans in general. Schiff offers a plethora of convincing refutations to this manner of conducting research, arguing that variables cannot be equated with individuals: “moving to the abstract, we lose the phenomenon” (p. 14). His second criticism is geared towards the interpretation of the findings of quantitative research: “The problem is that associations between variables, which are based on group averages, are misinterpreted as individual psychological processes” (p. 23). His appeal is to recognize these variables as life experiences that take place in a person situated within a temporal and spatial context, which is seldom simply a mean value. As a way out of these problems entrenched in the discipline, the book offers the narrative approach, the only method “attuned to understanding the focal problems of human lives” (p. 217).

In the second part, the book offers a reformulation of Sarbin’s conception of narrative psychology that follows a hermeneutic practice of interpretation. Using everyday examples and excerpts of interviews close to the reader’s life, Schiff speaks for functionalism in a narrative perspective. Narrative and function, so he claims, stand in a dynamic relationship to each other. In this way, he arrives at his theory of ‘Making It So’ in chapter five. Referring to Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutic spiral, he exemplifies how everybody is continuously engaging in acts of interpretation, or what he calls ‘making present.’ In this framework, “a narrative perspective allows us to understand the multilayered, and reciprocal, connections between persons, social relationships, and culture that are implicated in building, and rebuilding, a sense of the real” (p. 102).

In the last part, Schiff acts out this revisited conception of narrative psychology by dedicating one chapter to an exemplary analysis of an interview he conducted with a Holocaust survivor. The analysis follows a straightforward style, centering on ‘who,’ ‘where,’ and ‘when’ to answer the questions ‘how’ and ‘why.’ Additionally, he takes a critical look at two other studies of narrative research in psychology. He chose studies with different methodological approaches: one is a life story of a single person, whereas the other uses 3 ½ minute excerpts of group interviews. He arrives at the conclusion that, while both studies constitute valuable and well-researched contributions to narrative psychology, they could benefit from partially adopting the other’s research method. Using these examples, Schiff aims to highlight that there is not one common narrative method of interpretation. However, his light

criticism is geared towards emphasizing the value of his own proposed theory that could remove the minor issues he sees in both studies.

The book's main concern is to highlight that real insight into psychological processes can only be achieved by seeing the person and his surrounding contexts. This argument is clearly and descriptively presented, which lends it validity. A minor weakness is the repetitive wording that is most present in the over-application of rhetorical questions. Certainly, this is compensated by the persuasiveness of the claim and the demonstration of the accompanying merits. The only shortcoming of the book is that it neglects to critically evaluate the theory and method established. However, this is addressed by the author when he states that the usefulness of this research can only be determined by the community and the reader himself (p. 201 f.).

The book constitutes a comprehensive entry into narrative psychology, for students not only of psychology but also other disciplines, by being well-researched and critically reasoned. Additionally, it is also food for thought for researchers already established in the field, to see this as a new impetus and motivation for innovative research. A variety of research is included, which Schiff critically analyzes to show its advantages, disadvantages, and room for improvement. The work's greatest strength is its vividness. By using examples of everyday life, couple stories, or a conversation between a mother and her son, Schiff involves the reader and gives him a clear understanding of his advocated manner of working.

This book aims to reach out to the members of the psychological community to offer them a new direction in order to achieve a disciplinary change. Schiff not only argues for narrative in psychology, but for a new narrative *of* psychology, to help the discipline out of its identity crisis. As he himself highlights, unity cannot be enforced, but constitutes a sharing of the same ideas and concepts. This book may represent the flourishing of narrative research in contemporary psychology, initiating a paradigmatic change for the discipline; however, it may also cause further fragmentation. In any case, it is a convincing step towards a new psychology that focuses on the person rather than the variable.

German Abstract:

Auf der Suche nach dem Menschen in der Psychologie

Das neue Buch von Brian Schiff, *A New Narrative for Psychology*, wirft einen kritischen Blick auf die aktuelle Identitätskrise der Psychologie, die durch die Zersplitterung in diverse theoretische Unterdisziplinen und dem Fehlen einer gemeinsamen Terminologie spürbar ist. Schiff argumentiert, dass ein Fokus auf Erzählungen, oder genauer, eine erzähltheoretische Perspektive, der Disziplin ein neues Selbstverständnis und eine einheitliche Richtung verleihen kann. Indem das Hauptaugenmerk auf Erzählungen und die damit verbundenen Prozesse von Bedeutungsgeneration liegt, werden andere Problemfelder, wie die Konvention der quantitativen Forschung und die falsche Interpretation von Erkenntnissen ebenfalls beseitigt. Mit einem Fokus auf Funktionen der Erzählung bietet das Buch eine Neukonzeption der narrativen Psychologie und eine alternative Möglichkeit der psychologischen Forschung. Es stellt einen Appell an die Disziplin im Allgemeinen dar, sich mit Methoden auseinanderzusetzen, die sich mit dem Individuellen, statt dem Allgemeinen befassen. In diesem Zuge stellt das Buch einen wichtigen Beitrag zu der Debatte um die Zukunft der zeitgenössischen Psychologie dar.

Melanie Kreitler

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Contact: melanie.kreitler@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

How to cite:

Kreitler, Melanie: "In Pursuit of the Person in Psychology [Review on: Schiff, Brian: *A New Narrative for Psychology*. New York: Oxford UP, 2017.]". In: KULT_online 59 (2019).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2019.259>