



IAAP



Aim of the Joint Conference on: Narratives in times of radical transformations Interdisciplinary Perspectives

In recent years, scholars of different disciplines are repeatedly referring to social or cultural narratives with respect to personal, social or cultural transformations (WBGU 2011: 83-84; Grunwald 2015). In its 2011 flagship report the WBGU (The German Advisory Council on Global Change) calls for “a new storyline to further develop human civilization” (WBGU 2011: 84). The authors depict the necessity for a “sustainable and legitimized narrative which will serve prosperity, security, liberty, and fairness [...], which will accept the legitimations of the Earth’s ecosystems” (WBGU 2011: 91). Harald Welzer and Stephan Rammler put forward the idea of narrative and compatible future visions (Welzer and Rammler: 312) and refer to the narrativist turn, which emphasizes the persuasive power of storytelling rather than reasoning or modeling for intended transformation processes. Narratives have more to offer than simple depiction; moreover, they reduce complexity, create a basis for current and future-oriented action plans, are a foundation for the co-operation between actors, and support reliability of expectations” (WBGU 2011: 84); in other words: they entail guiding principles for personal, social and cultural transformations.

In the psychoanalytic tradition, the narrative has been one of the fundamental methods for diagnosis and therapy in psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic tradition started with the “talking cure” of Jung’s first patient Anna. When Jung mentioned life after death, he wrote: “I can do no more than tell stories”. However, the narratives seem to have been facing limits when they are associated with collective transformations. There is a growing requirement for scientific preciseness, which has led to Evidence Based Medicine against which the Narrative Based Medicine is seeking its own validity. What is the meaning of the narrative in the age of scientific evidence and big data? Moreover, in this postmodern time “the end of the big story” has been discussed as a sign for the lack of coherence in modern individual biographies (Lyotard). In this context C.G. Jung asked himself “What is your myth – in which do you live?” and could not find an answer (Jung, 1963). So, what is the meaning of narratives on the social and cultural level? This conference tries to revisit the meaning of the narratives and narrative based approaches in various fields, disciplines and applications.

A special perspective that Jung introduced in the psychoanalytic approach to psyche and narrative is the idea, that the person – in the sense of the ego – is not the only author of its biography. Instead, he placed special emphasis on the contribution of the Self, or we could also say the perspective of the potential totality and wholeness of the personality. In this perspective, the focus should be on the interaction between the ego and the impulses coming from the unconscious and – ideally – their fruitful interaction. Of special interest from the perspective of narrative in this context are dreams, because they can be seen as a communication to the ego from the unconscious, and they take the form of narratives. The Jungian tradition, in a certain sense, would argue that the position of the ego in the dream is always wrong, and has to be corrected – “compensated” – by the story, the narrative that the dream tries to tell.

This is not only true for the individual but also for larger communities such as families, groups or even nations. Francesca Polletta states in her study on politically driven protest cultures: “And people do things with stories. They entertain and persuade, build social bonds and break them, make sense of their worlds and, in the process, create those worlds” (Polletta 2006: 13-14; italics original).



Narratives can be understood as part of the socio-cultural web of meanings. “Narrative approaches suggest that people make sense of their experiences by telling stories to others and to themselves. Advocates claim that storytelling is a universal human activity” (Hards 2012: 762). Roland Barthes famously stated that “narratives are present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed, narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative. [...]. Like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural.” (Barthes 1975: 237).

Thus, a turn towards narratives within the study of individual, social and cultural behavior should be considered an important conceptual step towards understanding but also coping with transformations. The study of narratives leads to a better understanding of social meta-communication on three levels:

First, narratives are important tools for individuals to cope with crises in their personal life and/or find the energy and the motivation to transform themselves in the aftermath of personal crisis.

Second, narratives operate inherently within societies; they shape and define what is successful and what constitutes a failure and thus allow tracing internal and contingent drivers for action.

Third, when it comes to communication strategies, the insights provided by a sound analysis of socio-cultural narratives can inform the development of new orientations for society such as sustainable development.

Inter- and transdisciplinary research, with its operating principle of co-creation of knowledge between political, academic, and civil society actors (Brand 2016) is in specific need for shared narratives for the development of common problem-solving strategies. Broadly shared narratives are a key element for legitimizing a goal by supporting pluralistic value- and norm-integration (Habermas 1992).

However, the current debate about transformations at all levels (from the individual to an entire culture) is missing a stringent and jointly shared perspective. The scholars working on transformations in various disciplines and domains have not developed a common understanding of the role and function of narratives in society; a theoretically sound concept for understanding narratives’ meaning and role is yet to be discovered in transformation research and practice. Narrative analysis and theory is no new and unknown territory; many disciplines have long made use of this approach. What is missing, however, is the attempt to link the different schools of thought to identify the common and unique features of narratives in different individual and social contexts.

The conference will hence assemble scholars from the field of psychoanalysis, psychology, sociology, technology, cultural studies and related fields to share their perspective on narratives in situation of transformations and to explore commonalities and differences. The ultimate goal is to develop new insights how interdisciplinary research and therapeutic practice can be of assistance to individuals as well as groups and even entire cultures to facilitate transformations towards more peaceful and sustainable living conditions.

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