

## Book review

Tilman Habermas (2019)

*Emotion and Narrative: Perspectives in Autobiographical Storytelling*

Cambridge University Press

349pp, ISBN 978-1-107-03213-2, £95

When we share stories of emotionally challenging events, we elicit reactions in others that shape our sense-making and influence how we cope. In *Emotion and Narrative*, Tilman Habermas demonstrates the significance of diverse perspectives within narration and their potential to transform emotional responses. He asserts that conceptualisation of the recipient's role in narrative communication is least developed within emotion and narrative studies, and sets out to address this gap. Writing from a clinical background in psychoanalysis, Habermas explains his motivation in seeking to understand therapeutic processes within this specific interactional context, as "[p]sychoanalysis has little theorizing and little research to offer that actually studies the moment-to-moment mechanisms of change" (p. ix). By applying the lens of narrative emotion theory to the stories that people tell, he foregrounds emotion as a social process, proposing that insights derived in this way will transcend 'psych'-related boundaries.

The book is divided into four parts. In Part I, Habermas grounds the book's central concern with perspective-taking in a detailed examination of elements of narrative. Here, narrative is understood in the technical sense as a representation of causally linked events. This first part deals with ways that emotion may be narratively represented and offers a toolkit for analysis of autobiographical narratives. Taking a point of departure from Labov's (1972) evaluative function of personal narrative - the signaling of why a story is worth telling - Habermas then introduces perspective in Part II, as a key mechanism in narrative elicitation of emotion. He explores forms of influence of perspective within narrative, specifically on types of emotion for its recipients, and distinguishes the everyday from fictional narratives of literature and film. In the third part, Habermas shifts from the recipient of narrative, instead bringing his focus to the narrator, asking how different forms of narration may shed light on how the narrator copes with problematic experiences. He proposes that the exclusion of perspectives from narration serves unhelpfully defensive purposes, affecting or distorting the narrative product, which then loses its "agency" as a reflection of successful coping.

I found Part IV to be the most compelling, as Habermas moves beyond individualistic considerations to focus on the constitution of emotions in communication. Exploring the recipient's role in forming the story that is told, he proposes that their responses influence the narrative processing of emotions. He uses illustrative text from "two contexts that aim at changing the narrators' abilities" (p. 15); those of parent-adolescent accounts of emotional experiences and psychotherapist-patient interactions. Habermas portrays the recipient of the narrative, who is in a position of epistemic primacy in these examples (as parent or therapist), as the facilitator for discovery of narratives. Ultimately, he asserts that the recipient's influence on coping with emotion derives from challenging and adding perspectives during active processes of co-narration.

Progressing through these four parts, Habermas builds a case for individual mastery over emotionally challenging experience through narrative communication. His key argument is that a narrator's ability to take multiple diverse perspectives indicates the success of their coping with an emotive event. Habermas attends to the structuring of emotion through narration over time, arguing that retellings help us to shape a definitive version of a problematic experience within our longer-term coping. The generative potential of reiterative co-narration in fluid processes of *becoming*, for example varying the same story as a resource across different socio-temporal contexts of telling, remained out of view. Similarly, I found the reciprocal transformative functions of co-narration on emotion - the collective coping conveyed by Rime's (2009) concept of 'social sharing' - to be minimally explored.

Reading this book, I was reminded of Frank's concept of the polyphony of stories: the incorporation of multiple subjectivities in ways of understanding, where "interpretation is letting each point of view have its moment of being the perspective that directs the consciousness of storyteller and listener" (Frank, 2010, p. 107). In contrast to Frank's ethos of companionship with and through stories, Habermas relies upon formal, structural analyses. Throughout the book, he draws upon and expands classifications, typologies and taxonomies. To illustrate their application and interpretation, he predominantly uses transcript excerpts from research participants who had been asked to give an account of emotive experience, for example "an experience that made you sad" (p. 25). Habermas explains that these solicited narratives were "collected" by students in his classes on emotion, or during student research projects. Methodologically, Habermas acknowledges that "psychologists prefer to control the environments in which they produce their data" (p. 25) and suggests that this form of data generation facilitates the acquisition of large numbers of comparable narratives. I found limited reflection on the implications of soliciting narrative for emotion that is then conceptualised

relationally, or for understandings of everyday social interactions where narratives are frequently commenced spontaneously, without an expectation of where they will lead.

The book's key premise that "narrating the emotional experiences has the power to transform them and the emotions they engender" (p. 2), prioritises a narrative task of coherence. I was left wondering about those who might be deemed to share emotion in an incoherently narrated way, for example when cognitive or communicative challenges seem to produce fragmented narratives, or when emotions are fused with an "unsayability and ambiguity" (Squire, 2005, p. 15). Further exploration of cultural considerations, where certain feelings may not be emotionalised or made sense of narratively, could also have broadened the book's application. Despite these observations, readers will find detailed and structured content here, on the varied functions that narratives of emotion might play in shaping experience. The book will primarily appeal to those interested in communication of emotion for psychological and psychotherapeutic purposes. In addition, I believe Habermas contributes useful perspectives for students and researchers interested in narrative methodology and intersubjective understandings of emotion.

## **References**

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