



Commentary

The Role of Narrative Practices in Embodied and Affective Change

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Abstract: Maiese and Hanna (2019) argue that social institutions shape and transform our embodied minds, and that detrimental and harmful institutions can be reverted in order to promote mentally healthy, authentic, and fulfilling lives. This commentary aims to complement this proposal by understanding the role that narratives and narrative practices play in shaping our embodied minds, by highlighting narrativity's (1) active, deliberative, and productive functions, and (2) its strong entanglement with embodiment. We will argue that this addition to Maiese and Hanna's account allows agents to assume a more active role within social institutions by engaging in conscious and deliberative self-narration. This is because, we contend, not only do we understand ourselves and others according to cultural narrative archetypes; we also, crucially, bring about concrete changes in our embodiment and behavior by narrative deliberation and intention formation. As such, self-narration is not only an intellectual endeavor, but can also have profound consequences for how we experience the world; in other words, narrative practices can purposefully alter our affective framing which, in Maiese and Hanna's account, is fundamental in the process of changing detrimental institutions into constructive, enabling institutions.

Keywords: narrative practice, habits of mind, embodied cognition

In a nutshell, *The Mind-Body Politic* (Maiese and Hanna 2019) can be unpacked in three main theses: (1) social institutions shape and transform our embodied minds; (2) neoliberal institutions shape our embodied minds in detrimental and harmful ways; and (3) we can revert these harmful influences, creating social institutions that instead promote mentally healthy, authentic, and fulfilling lives (refer to Pascoe 2021). In this brief commentary, we mostly focus on (1) and (3). Our main aim is to show that we can complement the proposal advanced by Maiese and Hanna, hereafter M&H, to revert the harmful effects of neoliberal social institutions by understanding the role that narratives and narrative practices play in shaping our embodied minds.

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The structure of the commentary is as follows. In the first section, we examine the role that the authors give to narratives in *The Mind-Body Politic*. After this, we introduce the notion of narrative practices, which is meant to highlight the productive aspect of narrativity. Finally, we conclude by suggesting that the notion of narrative practices can be a useful addition to M&H's proposal for building social institutions that promote mentally healthy, authentic, and fulfilling lives.

NARRATIVES AND HABITS OF MIND IN *THE MIND-BODY POLITIC*

Essential to the proposal of *The Mind-Body Politic* is the adoption of an enactive conception of cognition. This approach rejects the orthodox conception view, according to which cognitive abilities (perceiving, thinking, imagining, etc.) consist of disembodied, computational processes that occur in the brain alone. Contrariwise, it proposes that these cognitive abilities emerge from the complex and irreducible interaction of neural and bodily processes and that they are structured by our biological and metabolic necessities. Hence, this conception rejects intellectualism about cognition and “emphasizes the connection between mindedness and the living body” (17).

To this enactive proposal, they add the claim that our essentially embodied minds “are *partially determined*, and *literally shaped*, by the social institutions we belong to” (37, emphasis in the original). To fully understand this, it is important to note the role of “affective framing.” This is a spontaneous, non-inferential, and pre-reflective way of engaging and navigating the world, by selecting and paying attention to those elements that are relevant to our current concerns and necessities. The animal, they explicate, “makes sense of its surrounding *through* its affectively aroused body” (42, emphasis in the original). Applying this idea to human beings, M&H claim that the social institutions we partake in exert normative constraints on our affective framing, partially determining our patterns of attention, behavior, and consciousness.

This cultural shaping occurs fundamentally through the acquisition and refinement of habits. Such habits go from simple patterns of perception and action to more sophisticated schemas of interpretation, justification, and judgment—the so-called “habits of mind” (46). As a result, through learning and socialization, individuals come to internalize social and cultural norms that they enact regularly, often outside of their own awareness (52). It is in the habits of mind where narratives play an important role. According to M&H, from a very young age individuals are exposed to narrative archetypes. These are coherent stories about what actions are permitted and expected from particular types of persons (199; also refer to Brancazio 2019). As such, narrative archetypes encode social conventions and norms and serve to sculpt our habits of mind when they are learned and internalized. Examples of these narrative archetypes are those which are related to gender norms, and those related to neo-liberal, capitalist notions such as “entrepreneurship,” “profit,” and so on.

M&H's account highlights successfully how a great deal of our behaviors and thoughts are shaped by social entities that operate outside of our awareness, with mostly damaging results. However, the picture of agency that emerges from it is that of an individual whose embodied relation to the world is passively shaped, most of the time, by external influences. For instance, M&H often highlight how people develop habits in accordance with values that they have not freely chosen and are not even able to acknowledge other alternatives (54, 87). This is largely correct, in our view, but we also believe that a more optimistic picture can be presented once we recognize the larger role that narrativity and narrative practices play in our capacity to adapt and negotiate our social and cultural environment, beyond the one played by narrative archetypes. What is not highlighted in their analysis are two important aspects of narrativity: (1) its active, deliberative, and productive functions; and (2) its strong entanglement with our embodiment. In the following, we will argue that the concept of narrative practices can be a useful addendum to M&H's account, and will show how it can allow for agents to assume a more active role within social institutions by engaging in conscious and deliberative self-narration.

NARRATIVE ARCHETYPES AND NARRATIVE PRACTICES

Talk about narrativity in philosophy and psychology has mostly revolved around the recognition of the fact that both self-understanding and our understanding of others is often, although not exclusively, narrative. This means that we understand people, whether ourselves or others, and their actions, in terms of a diachronic, temporally ordered and mostly coherent web of beliefs, reasons, aims, and so on. Besides, the term 'narrative' evokes the idea that we interpret ourselves and others as characters in a story, where every action can be made sense of only in terms of the coherent whole. In addition, it is a widespread claim that narrativity is at least partly constitutive of our self-identity (Brandon 2016; Mackenzie 2009, 2014; Rudd 2012, 2016; Schechtman 1996, 2007), meaning that the way we narrate our lives, and the resulting understanding we have of them, partly determines who we are as persons (but refer to Hutto 2016 and Strawson 2004 for arguments against these views). In the following, however, we will discuss an aspect of narrativity that has attracted less attention in the literature, that is, the fact that self-narration can be a productive tool that allows agents to actively shape themselves and their behavior. In order to clarify how our analysis can be useful to M&H's account, we will firstly elaborate on the phenomenon of narrative archetypes and their effect on our narrative framing. Our goal is to show why focusing solely on this phenomenon falls short.

M&H take inspiration from Brancazio (2019) to understand narrative archetypes. Crucially, the analysis of Brancazio focuses on the way agents regularly evaluate and explain their own actions (including past, present, and future) in terms of who they understand themselves to be as a person continuous in time. This, she argues, entails employing a broader framework that includes their beliefs, intentions, goals and history (428). In other words, one way agents make sense of their own actions is by appealing to their narrative self (Schechtman 1996). In this picture, narrative archetypes reflect the expectations that social institutions have regarding how individuals ought to act: agents, from an early age, are told stories that involve fixed types of characters, and learn to understand their actions based on their identification with these characters. Crucially, while Brancazio highlights the strongly gendered aspect of these archetypes (e.g., the caring mother), M&H mention archetypes that are common in neo-liberal institutions, e.g., the hard-working employee and the innovative entrepreneur (M&H 2019, 199). The idea is that the imposing of these archetypes by the hand of institutions leads agents to employ ready-made interpretive schemas to understand others and themselves. While we fully agree with M&H that clarifying how received archetypes that shape our embodied habits is crucial for us to realize the subtle ways in which social norms deeply affect us, we also contend that it reveals only one side of the coin. In fact, someone can wonder what agents can do to oppose the influence of narrative archetypes.

A suggestion, we believe, is to be found in the fact that we ourselves are prolific narrators, and our story-telling aims go beyond making sense of ourselves and our actions. As Brancazio herself notes, "[o]ne can deliberate about what she ought to do and form future intentions based on the type of person she believes she is or has been, her related goals and desires, and so forth" (2019, 429). While being uncontroversial, this statement directs us to the main subject of the present commentary: we do not merely understand ourselves in light of imposed narrative archetypes, but we also engage in narrative *practices*. The notion of narrative practices, which we employ to highlight the active and productive character of self-narration, raises a question relevant to present purposes, which concerns how agents engage in narrative deliberation and intention formation. After having addressed this in the following section, we will conclude by arguing that the notion of narrative practices can be fruitfully integrated in M&H's positive proposal within *The Mind Body Politic*.

NARRATIVE PRACTICES IN EMBODIED COGNITION

At first sight, the fact that self-narration is productive, in the sense that we have the ability to spin new narratives about ourselves, can be considered trivial and not particularly interesting in itself. Instead, the argument that we

bring forward here is rather based on the idea that the way in which we narrate ourselves importantly shapes our embodied relationship with the world (Brandon 2016; Jongepier 2016; Køster 2017). Narrative practices, we contend, are productive also in the sense that they bring about concrete changes in one's embodiment and behavior. This is the central tenet of narrative therapy. As illustrated by McConnell and Snoek (2018), through self-narration, agents can engage in self-governance. This is possible through "building narrative connections between [their] plans, desires, and contingent circumstances, [in order to work] out which actions make sense given the circumstances" (32). With this idea in mind, the first issue that needs addressing is how self-narration affects our embodied relation to the world.

Reflecting about narrative therapy, Hutto, Brancazio and Aubourg (2017) note that the exercise of narrative practices can affect our engagement with the world and others by "making a fundamental difference to what we see the world is offering us as well as our potential to respond to such offerings" (301). Self-narratives are stories, and as such they are selective: they are comprised of a more or less coherent set of values, beliefs, goals and past events that we refer to when in need of understanding ourselves and our surroundings and to deliberate about the future. Intuitively, narratives that are forward-looking, as opposed to backward-looking narratives that are often used to make sense of our past, do not include an infinite set of possible options and goals, but only the ones that are relevant to who we understand ourselves to be. It is clear, therefore, how engaging narrative thinking can open our perception to new, previously hidden options. However, the question remains of how one can implement abstract goals and values resulting from narrative deliberation in concrete terms that affect behavior.

In regards to this last issue, Dings (2019) identifies a spectrum of different attentive modes that an agent can adopt towards herself: on one end, she can detach herself from her current situation and focus her attention on her narrative as a whole in order to establish goals or attribute meanings to particular events or objects; on the other end, she can reflect on her current situation and assess whether the action she is undertaking is coherent with her self-narrative. Combining these different kinds of attentive modes, agents can engage in "narrative self-programming" (9). Often, when we deliberate about ourselves (e.g., about the persons we want to be and what goals we care to reach), we do so in abstract terms, and this leads to difficulties in implementing the right courses of action needed to reach them. However, through a conscious effort, we can also specify such narrative goals in more concrete sub-goals and actions that we know will bring us nearer to our aims. This activity, according to Dings, makes us perceive the right kind of affordances and possibilities for action that are relevant to our narrative goals and self-understanding, so that we respond to them in desired ways (also refer to Brancazio and Segundo-Ortin 2020). For example, the abstract goal of being a healthy person can be implemented through the more concrete plan of going for a walk after breakfast every day. In other words, by forming such plans, agents can program their responsiveness in accordance with their self-narratives—i.e., they can determine to which affordances they should be responsive to. Another example of this narrative self-programming is narrative "meaning-making." This is employed when we need to give meaning to an impactful event in our lives. Since part of this process also entails deliberating about what specific actions will be relevant in which specific contexts, Dings concludes that "narrative endeavors are best understood as efforts to influence or alter those embodied interactions" (2019, 10).

For present purposes, another aspect of the productivity of narratives needs to be highlighted. It is not simply the case that the production of new narratives can change our embodied responsiveness in the future; rather, it is often the case that new narratives alter existing ones. Self-narratives are fluid and in constant change, much of the time below our own awareness. However, it is also possible that agents find themselves in the need to re-elaborate their life stories actively and consciously. This is the case, for example, when the presence of inconsistencies can lead an individual to adjust her narrative and, as a consequence, her behavior. In this regard, McConnell and Snoek (2018) offer a valuable illustration of the importance of narrative practices to the process

of recovering from addictions, where patients are usually struggling to enact a narrative that is in line with their values against an established self-narrative that depicts addiction as inescapable. It is in this context that the practice of reauthoring one's narrative becomes essential: becoming narratively skilled by also learning how to enrich one's self-narrative and re-interpreting one's history is a way to perceive the relevant affordances and possibilities for action that did not seem available before (Hutto, Brancazio and Aubourg 2017).

Thus, narrative practices can be both backward- and forward-looking. On one hand, the individual must be able to re-interpret previous beliefs, events, and so on. On the other, she must attempt to put in place narrative connections between her current self-narrative and the one she aims for (McConnell and Snoek 2018, 34). Our claim, however, is that putting in place new narratives is not *just* an intellectual endeavor. Rather, it has profound consequences for how we experience the world in embodied terms. As such, actively engaging in narrative practices can bring positive consequences, and can help us fight and revert the harmful influences exerted by neoliberal institutions, helping us to create social institutions that instead promote mentally healthy, authentic, and fulfilling lives. We dedicate the following section to flesh out this positive proposal.

NARRATIVE PRACTICES AND CONSTRUCTIVE, ENABLING INSTITUTIONS

Given that we are inevitably shaped by the social institutions we live in, M&H argue that our efforts should converge into building institutions that enable individuals to freely express themselves and their agency. Such institutions, built on participatory decision making, would promote critical consciousness and dialogical free inquiry, and would also allow for the development of flexible habits of the mind by breaking from tradition and allowing for collaboration (Maiese and Hanna 2019, 228-235). The questions they turn to answer is, thus, how to build such institutions and, most importantly, how the right changes in an individual's affective framing can take place. In this final section, we show how narrative practices can be a promising addition to their proposal.

M&H claim that to alter the problematic frames of reference resulting from living in neoliberal capitalist institutions, individuals should engage in "enactive-transformative learning," which targets the subjects embodied and active meaning-making (Maiese 2017). Although they acknowledge that the relevant change must be both cognitive and affective, M&H emphasize how conceptual learning itself might not be a successful avenue. Besides new tools of thoughts, they hold, agents have to form new patterns of attention and modes of feeling. It follows that enabling institutions should bring about positive change by targeting subjects' bodily comportment, feelings, desires and emotions. In other words, "[n]ew concepts and thoughts can be emancipatory, but agents need to be transformed in terms about what they, as essentially embodied minds, really care about" (Maiese and Hanna 2019, 269).

We are deeply sympathetic with M&H's proposal. However, we believe that conceptual thinking and deliberation can play a bigger role in the picture. According to them, humans' affective framing is often essentially non-conceptual and nondeliberative, while involving, first and foremost, bodily engagement and attunement (Hanna 2015; Maiese 2011). Moreover, they claim that much of our meaning making is underdetermined by conceptual, propositional, and inferential framing. Case in point are the different kinds of pedagogies that they suggest as ways to engage in enactive-transformative learning. Examples include learning-centered pedagogy (Concepcion & Elfin 2009) and activist pedagogy (Preston and Aslett 2014), which focus the subjects actually performing relevant activities (e.g., organizing campaigns) in order to experience what is to be learned, rather than just receiving information, or different forms of creative expression, ranging from dancing, music, gardening and drama, which are apt to disrupt frames of references by provoking inquiry and innovation or facilitating the sharing of experiences among individuals (M&H 2019, 278-283).

Importantly, we do not wish to underestimate the importance of these activities, but rather to complement them by also adding room for reflective and deliberative endeavors. Given the tight connection between embodiment, affective framing and self-narrative that we previously illustrated, we believe that narrative practices are an additional tool that can change individuals' affective framing in positive ways. Following McGeer (2019), we note that the cultural practices we are immersed in give us cognitive resources that we can employ to question and change the practices themselves; moreover, heterodox practices (i.e., practices that somewhat stand in opposition to the mainstream ones) importantly depend on the development of new epistemic tools, ranging from new forms of interpretation and sense-making and new systems of evaluation (54).

To give a more concrete example, let us first note that building self-narratives is a collective endeavor, as shown, e.g., by the phenomenon of narrative archetypes. Moreover, throughout our adult lives, how others interact with us deeply shape our self-understanding. Thus, narrative practices directed to ourselves also importantly depend on others accepting and enacting the new narrative content (McConnell & Snoek 2018). Usually, content is accepted depending on rules of coherence, both regarding our narrative whole, but also, crucially, regarding other's values: think about what values must be in place for someone to accept a man's self-narrative of being a stay-at-home father. Furthermore, whether others comprehend and accept our self-narratives affects their behavior towards us, e.g., how they address us or what courses of action they allow us to enact. Narrative practices, we believe, entail engaging in what we call 'narrative bargains': new narrative content must be tested by presenting it to others, and, when rejected, it can be reworked in order to submit it to a new test. Given our analysis so far, there is good reason to believe that this process will also importantly affect others' self-narratives and narrative practices, and thus their values and meaning-making. Thus, we claim, a collective effort in reflection and deliberation, by also taking a narrative form in the way here presented, can bring forward important changes not only into our thinking, but also into our embodiment and affective framing.

We take this to show the importance that conceptual deliberation and reflection have not only in social change, but also in changing our affective framing itself. Moreover, we have shown how our narrative self-understanding, which is deliberative in nature, is tightly woven with our embodiment. Thus, we conclude, narrative practices are an important tool to bridge epistemic and conceptual deliberation reflection and our affective, embodied lives.

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