

Narrative Psychology and Its Role in Illuminating the Experience of Suffering

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Abstract : The examination of narrative in psychology has a long tradition, starting with psychoanalytic theory and embracing over time cognitive, social, and personality psychology, among others. Narrative use has been richly detailed as well in medicine, nursing, and social service. One aspect of narrative that has ready utility in higher education and in clinical work is the exploration of suffering and its meaning. Because it is such a densely examined topic, suffering provides a window into identity, sense of purpose, and views of humanity and of the divine. Storytelling analysis permits an exploration of a host of specific manifestations of suffering such as pain and illness, moral injury, and the impact of prolonged suffering on love and relationships. This presentation will review the origins and current understandings of narrative theory in general, and will draw from psychology, medicine, ethics, nursing, and social service in exploring the topic of suffering in particular. It is suggested that the use of narrative themes such as meaning making, agency and communion, generativity, and loss and redemption allows for a finely grained analysis of common and more atypical sources of suffering, their resolution, and the acceptance of their continuation when resolution is not possible. Such analysis, used in professional work and in higher education, can enrich one's empathy and one's sense of both the fragility and strength of everyday life.

Keywords : meaning making, narrative theory, suffering, teaching

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