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**MAUREEN GIBNEY**

Drexel University, Dept. of Psychology, United States

## **USING NARRATIVE TO ENHANCE STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF CHALLENGING LIFE EVENTS: A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH**

### **Abstract:**

The history of narrative analysis in psychology spans several decades and initially was fed by two distinctive streams, the psychoanalytic focus on life stories and the wide-ranging contributions of Bruner, who expanded the boundaries of what cognitive psychology could encompass. As the field developed, personality theory, developmental approaches, and neuroscience, for instance, all offered valuable perspectives on how persons construct identity and make meaning by visiting and revisiting their life stories.

In an upper-level undergraduate course, students immerse themselves in narrative theory, analyze journal articles, view videos, listen to podcasts, and read fictional and non-fictional writing on language and metaphor, memory, friendship, immigration and asylum seeking, and suffering, among other themes. Each student chooses one film or memoir from a wide variety of disparate cultural perspectives, and then examines the protagonist's struggles and accomplishments using narrative principles and dense reading of scientific works on racism, grief and loss, terminal illness, and other pertinent challenges and barriers the protagonist faces. Students report that this assignment, along with others embedded in the course structure such as a discussion board, help them see significant and often painful life events in a new way. It is hoped that the still-tentative use of narrative in psychology education will serve to enhance both empathy and critical judgment, a benefit that will redound to students and potentially to their communities.

### **Keywords:**

Narrative, psychology, undergraduate education, pedagogy, course goals

**JEL Classification:** I29, I31