

## Two Modes of Thought: The Narrative/Paradigmatic Disconnect in the Bailey Book Controversy

Jonathan M. Adler

Published online: 23 April 2008  
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2008

Alice Dreger's compelling history of the controversy surrounding J. Michael Bailey's book, *The Man Who Would Be Queen*, presents two opposing camps, each entrenched in a seemingly intractable and incompatible position. On one side are proponents of Blanchard's theory and the scientific research supporting it that served as the basis for Bailey's book. The theory suggests that a certain segment of natal men who undergo sex reassignment surgery to become women do so out of an autogynephilic sexual orientation—an erotic attraction to the idea of themselves as women. On the other side are the transwomen who strongly object to the theory, dispute the scientific basis for it, and maintain that their desire to change genders was not motivated by erotic desires, but instead was founded in an identity-based position that their bodies do not match their true selves, what Dreger termed the "feminine essence narrative." In this commentary, I hope to offer one interpretation that attempts to get at the core of this conflict. In doing so, I do not intend to take either position in the controversy or to suggest that one side's argument rests on firmer ground. I have chosen to write this commentary because I believe that the controversy provides an elegant example for illustrating the nature of how we come to understand our lives.

Before I begin, let me take a cue from Dreger and briefly explain my background. I am currently an advanced graduate student in the psychology department at Northwestern University, the same department as Bailey. I have taken two courses taught by Bailey that are required components of my academic program (one about statistics and the other about psychopathology, both in 2003). I also served as a teaching

assistant for Bailey's course on human sexuality in 2003, a position I was randomly assigned to, wherein I served in an entirely administrative role, photocopying and scoring the multiple-choice exams (other TA's handled content-related issues). While I have had contact with Bailey in program-wide meetings and on two administrative committees, at no point in my graduate career has Bailey directly supervised any of my research or clinical work, nor has he served on any of my research committees. I observed the controversy surrounding his book from the sidelines as it unfolded, but have never talked with Bailey about his experiences. As a courtesy, I asked Bailey if he would mind my writing this commentary, which he was supportive of, but we did not discuss the content of the commentary, nor did he see a pre-publication version of it. In sum, while I observed the controversy from within Bailey's department, I have never been involved in the events in any way, and I would prefer to keep it that way. As I said, I chose to write a commentary not because I wish to weigh in on the merits of either side's position, which I do not, but because I believe the controversy raised an important question that I felt I could illuminate.

As I alluded to earlier, that important question is about the nature of how we understand our lives. I believe the core of the controversy surrounding Bailey's book is that the opposing sides were operating from fundamentally different epistemological positions. Bruner (1986) wrote about two modes of thought humans use in interpreting and understanding the world and their experiences. He wrote:

...one mode, the *paradigmatic* or logico-scientific one, attempts to fulfill the ideal of a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation. It employs categorization or conceptualization and the operations by which categories are established, instantiated, idealized,

---

J. M. Adler (✉)  
Department of Psychology, Northwestern University, Swift Hall,  
2029 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60208, USA  
e-mail: jadler@northwestern.edu

and related to one another to form a system. (p. 12, emphasis added)

The paradigmatic mode is the mode of science and is concerned with logically categorizing the world. The other mode, which Bruner called the *narrative* mode, is concerned with the meaning that is ascribed to experiences through stories. Bruner (1986) explains that these stories are about “human or human-like intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course” (p. 13). They capture people’s own explanations about what they want and how they go about achieving it.

In other words, thought grounded in the paradigmatic mode seeks to explain the underlying relationships between sets of observable variables while thought grounded in the narrative mode seeks to explain the storied meaning people make of these relationships. Each mode of thought has significant strengths. The paradigmatic mode offers the power of prediction in that it sets up and tests hypotheses about the nature of reality. In contrast, the narrative mode organizes the complex and often ambiguous world of human intention and action into a meaningful structure.

The two modes of thought, though complementary, are not reducible to one another—one is not simply an emergent property of the other. Bruner (1986) adds, “Each of the ways of knowing, moreover, has operating principles of its own and its own criteria of well-formedness. They differ radically in their procedures for verification” (p. 11). As a result, the merits of paradigmatic arguments and narrative stories cannot be judged by the same criteria. Good paradigmatic explanations should accurately predict observable phenomena. Good narratives should meaningfully capture the shifting contours of lived experience. In his excellent work on philosophy of mind, Brendel (2000) has referred to this distinction as one between causal explanations (the paradigmatic) and meaningful explanations (the narrative). Brendel argued that an equal appreciation and incorporation of both serves as the indispensable foundation for an ethical practice of psychiatry.

I believe that the fundamental conflict between the two sides in the controversy over Bailey’s book is their relative commitment to different modes of thought. Dreger writes:

Many transwomen have complained that, in their work, Blanchard and Bailey have ignored their life narratives, narratives that these women say fly in the face of the simple two-type model of MTF transsexualism that sees eroticism as a fundamental motivation for MTF sex reassignment. But what many of these critics have failed to realize is that Bailey and Blanchard aren’t interested in whether people’s *narratives* fit Blanchard’s theory; they are interested in whether *people* do. And Bailey and Blanchard see plenty of evidence that, self-representation to the contrary, transwomen’s histories—including their gendered and erotic histories—and the data drawn

from them in lab-based and clinical studies support rather than weaken Blanchard’s typology.

Dreger begins to suggest that Blanchard and Bailey are operating in the paradigmatic mode while the transwomen are operating in the narrative mode. What Dreger doesn’t address, however, are the relative contributions of each mode and their fundamental irreducibility.

I will devote less attention to the merits of the paradigmatic mode, as readers of this journal are well-versed in the power of scientific explanation and no doubt firm believers in scientific epistemologies. Without a doubt, the paradigmatic arguments of scientific practice provide an essential system for explaining the world. Paradigmatic explanations aspire to generalizable truths, those which accurately categorize and predict the observable world. As in Dreger’s article, it is well beyond the scope of this commentary to weigh in on the paradigmatic merits of Blanchard’s theory, except to note, as Dreger did, that it has accumulated some supporting evidence of the type mandated in evaluating paradigmatic arguments (though I am aware that some in the opposing camp dispute its validity). There can be little doubt that the work of Blanchard and Bailey strives to embody the ideals of the paradigmatic mode and to produce the kind of truth that this mode reveres; their success in doing so is beyond the scope of this commentary.

But what of the narratives of the opposing side? From its paradigmatic position, Bailey’s book suggests that Blanchard’s theory refutes their truth value. Yet shifting to the narrative mode, these self-stories assume a new power. Over the course of the past several decades, a group of academics from diverse disciplines has emerged to form a new field, loosely termed the *narrative study of lives*. At the foundation of this field lies the assertion that an individual’s identity is comprised of the stories he or she constructs about his or her life. This theory of narrative identity was developed by my research advisor, Dan P. McAdams, a personality psychologist (e.g., McAdams, 2001, 2006). McAdams (2001, 2006) has suggested that the internalized and evolving stories we tell about ourselves weave together the reconstructed past, the perceived present, and the anticipated future in an attempt to provide one’s life with unity and purpose. Stories of high points, low points, and turning points provide the key components of narrative identity. While Bruner (1986) suggested that humans are predisposed to crafting stories out of their experiences, the development of a coherent narrative identity is no simple task. Indeed, difficult, unanticipated, and highly emotional events can pose significant challenges to the maintenance of one’s narrative identity, and constructing good stories about these experiences is especially important for mental health and maturity (e.g., Adler, Wagner, & McAdams, 2007). There can be little doubt that feeling one’s body inappropriately reflects one’s sense of self is a uniquely

troubling experience, and the ability to craft a viable narrative about it is certainly vital to one's psychological well-being. Indeed, this story is at the very core of many transsexuals' narrative identities.

Where do people's stories about themselves come from? McAdams suggests that they are drawn from a menu of script templates made available to each of us by our broader cultural context (McAdams & Pals, 2006). In our modern, Western culture, the narratives that are produced by scientific inquiry are accorded special power. For example, a recent scientific study showing differences in intelligence among first-born and later-born children was published, receiving significant media attention and entering the realm of popular discourse. As a result, the narratives people construct about their own intelligence relative to their siblings began to shift to accommodate this finding (see Carey, 2007). Though narratives derived from scientific findings deserve privileged status as a result of the rigorous and replicable steps of the scientific method that produced them, they may or may not capture any given individual's unique experience. Adrienne Rich (1986) wrote, "When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, [or scientist, I would add] describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing" (p. 199). In the case of the controversy over Bailey's book, the scientific (paradigmatic) narrative of autogynephilia was pit against the "feminine essence narrative." Which cultural script is the best to adapt for one's own narrative identity is an incredibly important question; it determines who you believe you are. But it is a question firmly grounded in the narrative mode, not in the paradigmatic mode. The merits of a given self-narrative cannot be judged on their ability to generalize and categorize. The primary psychological way to assess the value of one's narrative identity is from within a narrative framework: Does the narrative effectively capture your perspective on your shifting intentions and actions?

One conflict inherent in approaching the same issue simultaneously from paradigmatic and narrative modes is that the goal of paradigmatic arguments is to generalize, to speak to trends in populations, while the goal of narratives is to explain how one's life is unique. Bruner (1990) writes that "the function of the story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern" (pp. 49–50). So, narratives are not supposed to offer the type of probabilistic, generalizable explanations that paradigmatic inquiry seeks; and paradigmatic arguments are not meant to apply to every individual in a given population, but merely to capture trends. No matter how robust a scientific finding about a given group, there will be people in that group whose personal narratives do not embrace the trend. In fact, for individuals who feel their own personal stories diverge from dominant cultural narratives, it

is especially important for them to develop a coherent narrative about that difference in order to maintain their psychological equilibrium. Such discrepancies do not render the scientific findings less valid, nor do they diminish the value of the narratives.

It is worth noting that narratives can be studied from within a paradigmatic framework. Much of McAdams' work, and mine as well, treats individuals' narratives as the raw data for a scientific exploration. For example, my own research focuses on people's stories about their experiences in psychotherapy (e.g., Adler & McAdams, 2007; Adler, Wagner, & McAdams, 2007). Therapy is an unusual experience in life, one explicitly focused on transforming the self in a positive way. People enter psychotherapy in a negative state with the intention of working towards healing. I have studied the stories people construct about this experience in an effort to explain how people understand their own process of self-transformation and how that understanding relates to their psychological functioning. I have found that particular narrative styles relate more strongly to mental health than others (Adler & McAdams, 2007). Instead of objectively assessing people's behaviors in psychotherapy, I use the meaning they make of the experience via storytelling as the data that drive my scientific attempts to generalize and categorize it and to uncover its relationships with mental health. My research, therefore, operates in the paradigmatic mode, but with narrative data.

So, which of the two narratives that frame the controversy around Bailey's book is right—the narrative of autogynephilia or the feminine essence narrative? The answer, of course, is both and neither. To date, there is a body of scientific evidence to support the paradigmatic argument for autogynephilia. There is also a group of individuals whose identity is firmly rooted in the narrative that they were women trapped in men's bodies. When these assertions are understood as operating in different modes of thought, they need not contradict each other; both can be accepted and validated.

Certainly both make important contributions and have significant drawbacks. The paradigmatic argument for autogynephilia has received some scientific support for its ability to accurately predict certain theoretically and clinically meaningful observable behaviors, though, like all worthwhile scientific findings, it is not undisputed. Yet, it has also generated a particular narrative of transsexualism that is accorded special power as a result of its grounding in the methods of science. As a result, those individuals who do not see themselves reflected in this narrative have endured the destabilizing experience of looking into a mirror and seeing nothing, as Rich put it.

On the other hand, the feminine essence narrative that some transwomen espouse affords them the coherence of identity that the most effective self-stories provide. This narrative

organizes this important component of their personal histories and imbues it with meaning. It has also proven to be a very effective tool in navigating the perilous medical terrain of obtaining sex reassignment surgery, where denying any erotic component of transgendered behavior may serve as a “get out of male free card,” as Dreger humorously puts it. At the same time, as Dreger adroitly pointed out, adopting a strictly de-eroticized narrative might have the potential to encourage these women to compartmentalize their genuine sexual experiences in a manner that restricts the full, integrated expression of their identity.

Dreger’s article offers her own historical narrative of the controversy surrounding Bailey’s book. She is careful to note that “the interview work [she] conducted for this historical project [has] been neither scientifically systematic nor generalizable.” It is not science; although its publication in a scientific journal may inadvertently accord it some of the power of scientific narratives. As with all successful narratives, Dreger’s account no doubt “mean[s] more than [it] can say” (Bruner, 1990, p. 59). It has likely been therapeutic and healing for the Bailey side of the controversy, providing a coherent through-line to the messy past few years. And it has likely been inflammatory to some of the transwomen who may continue to fail to have their personal experiences narrated in a way that is consonant with their own stories. This is exactly why narratives are important: people’s identities (professional and personal) are comprised of them. In writing this commentary, I have now offered a paradigmatic argument that suggests a new narrative for the bitter controversy surrounding Bailey’s book. I have no doubt that each side will

find some slippage in my ability to capture their perspective. My hope is that I have identified a novel perspective and that I have provided a compelling assertion for the fundamentally different, though equally important, contributions of paradigmatic arguments and narratives.

## References

- Adler, J. M., & McAdams, D. P. (2007). The narrative reconstruction of psychotherapy. *Narrative Inquiry*, 17, 179–202.
- Adler, J. M., Wagner, J. W., & McAdams, D. P. (2007). Personality and the coherence of psychotherapy narratives. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 41, 1179–1198.
- Brendel, D. H. (2000). Philosophy of mind in the clinic: The relation between causal and meaningful explanation in psychiatry. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 8, 184–191.
- Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Carey, B. (2007, June 25). Study on I.Q. prompts debate on family dynamics. *New York Times*. Retrieved September 10, 2007, from: <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology*, 5, 100–122.
- McAdams, D. P. (2006). *The redemptive self: Stories Americans live by*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McAdams, D. P., & Pals, J. L. (2006). A new Big Five: Fundamental principles for an integrative science of personality. *American Psychologist*, 61, 204–217.
- Rich, A. (1986). *Blood, bread, and poetry: Selected prose 1979–1985*. New York: W. W. Norton.