

Exploring Place and Identities in a Modern World: The Power of Stories

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Tommy Orange's novel, *There There*, put me in mind of the opening passage from Rebecca Solnit's book about storytelling, *The Faraway Nearby*:

"What's your story? It's all in the telling. Stories are compasses and architecture; we navigate by them, we build our sanctuaries and our prisons out of them, and to be without a story is to be lost in the vastness of a world that spreads in all directions like arctic tundra or sea ice. To love someone is to put yourself in their place, we say, which is to put yourself in their story, or figure out how to tell yourself their story."

I have always been captivated by stories—some offer immersive escapes into fantasy, others are invitations to inhabit and learn about new worlds and characters from ancient times to distant futures. As a lover of literature and as a psychologist, the powerful forces that drive us to seek and construct patterns and meanings in our lives through stories continue to fascinate me. The psychological processes that enable us to learn and remember, to conjure rich and detailed records of the past and simulations of possible futures are at the center of my research interests. These psychological processes enable us to engage with the complex tragicomic characters and worlds in *There There* and to discover that stories can have powers far beyond entertainment value.

One way to uncover the important function any given psychological process serves is to consider what reality would look like if it was impaired or absent. For example, what if you had no sense of story? Memories rely on a coordinated flow of neurochemical activity channeled through various neural circuits. Memory researchers [Wilson, Baddeley and Kapur \(1995\)](#) describe a patient with extensive damage to the temporal lobes who experienced severe memory impairments as a result. The patient showed awareness of the present, but constantly forgot his experiences from a moment ago. With each shift of attention, he would have to construct a new reality from scratch as if he was just awakened from a deep sleep. He would write notes on sheets of paper, cross them out, only to re-write them again and again. The statements were identical or variations on the same theme: "Just now, for the first time, I have suddenly become conscious!" Without memory, it is impossible to knit a narrative framework to support a firm sense of self that exists across time. In Solnit's terms, this patient's "compass" and "architecture" were shattered into isolated feelings and sensations, brief and fleeting moments without apparent connection.

Autobiographical memories rely on the integrity of the brain's hippocampus ([Nadel & Moscovitch, 1997](#)). The hippocampus coordinates representations from various neural circuits and binds them together in the correct order to reconstruct the

original experience. When this structure is damaged, the ability to remember single events from any time in life can be lost. Hippocampal damage also renders one incapable of imagining and planning for the future because it is impossible to retrieve and recombine memories of similar past experiences and contextual details that make future simulations possible. Even at a fundamental neurophysiological level, our representations of self-identity are inextricably bound to representations of context - to aspects of "place."

There is a system of interconnected and interacting brain regions known in neuroscience as the [default mode network \(DMN\)](#); this network is the neurological basis for self or self-related information processing. The DMN becomes active when we are thinking about ourselves or about others and when we are remembering the past and planning the future. This is the same network that is activated when Theravada Buddhist monks meditate their way into states of higher mindfulness ([Marzetti et al., 2014](#)). Michael Pollan proposes that this network is shaken like a snow globe with a micro-dose of hallucinogenic drugs in his book *How to Change Your Mind*. The DMN is also active when we are remembering and understanding a story ([Simony et al., 2016](#)). It is interesting to consider the potential for meditation, psychoactive chemicals and stories to open windows of plasticity for redefining mental representations of the boundaries and parameters of the world and our roles within it.

The potential for stories to create positive change is an active area of inquiry in psychology ([Murrar & Brauer, 2019](#)). Psychological research shows that the attitudes we form regarding in- and out-groups are highly resistant to change. The tendency to cling to them defensively can be inadvertently enhanced by traditional interventions that hit us over the head with persuasive attempts or threaten self-determination if they are made mandatory. Moreover, attitude change requires a level of motivation and cognitive effort that real world settings might not evoke. Stories can counter these barriers by positioning messages subtly within a more salient plot. The stories we engage with have the added benefits of being freely chosen and often lead us to identify with and get emotionally involved with the characters. The power of this subtlety and engagement exists in the dialogues between Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield as a vulnerable child on Alcatraz and her teddy bear, Two Shoes, through which we are reminded of some of the brutal history of our nation and its people. These features may endow stories with unique powers to promote inclusivity and reduce prejudice ([Murrar & Brauer, 2019](#)).

Engagement with literary fiction can enhance our ability to identify and understand others' mental states and can bolster empathic responses, both of which are crucial to establishing and maintaining complex social relationships ([Kidd, Ongis, & Costano, 2016](#)). Stories with the greatest potential to do so are those that violate our expectations, challenge us to search for meanings and those that require that we experience simulated worlds through multiple characters' perspectives ([Kidd, Ongis & Costano, 2016](#)). In the absence of familiar conventions and stereotypes that script our everyday interactions, we are invited to explore and interrogate, to simulate and

confront, not only the inner lives of complex characters, but also aspects of our own identities and histories in ways that can open us to new levels of awareness and growth.

We say “there, there” to comfort and console. It is an offer of empathy and a way of connecting by attempting to understand another person’s story and share it. For me, Orange’s novel captures the promise of stories to bring us together and the perils and tragedies that emerge when stories become distorted and dysfunctional or if we lose them altogether—when there is no there there.

Marisa Knight, PhD, specializes in cognitive neuroscience. Her research is focused on the interplay between motivation, emotion and cognitive functioning across the lifespan.

References

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