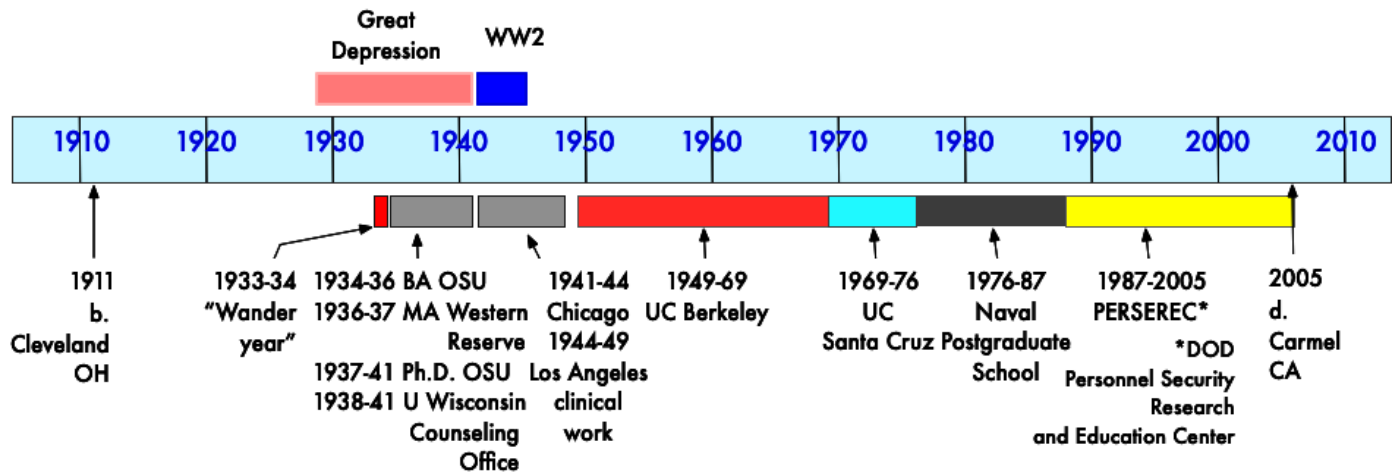




**PSY 444
Story &
Psychology**

2023 (Revised)

**Sarbin, Goffman, and the Emergence of
Narrative Psychology
SUMMARY**

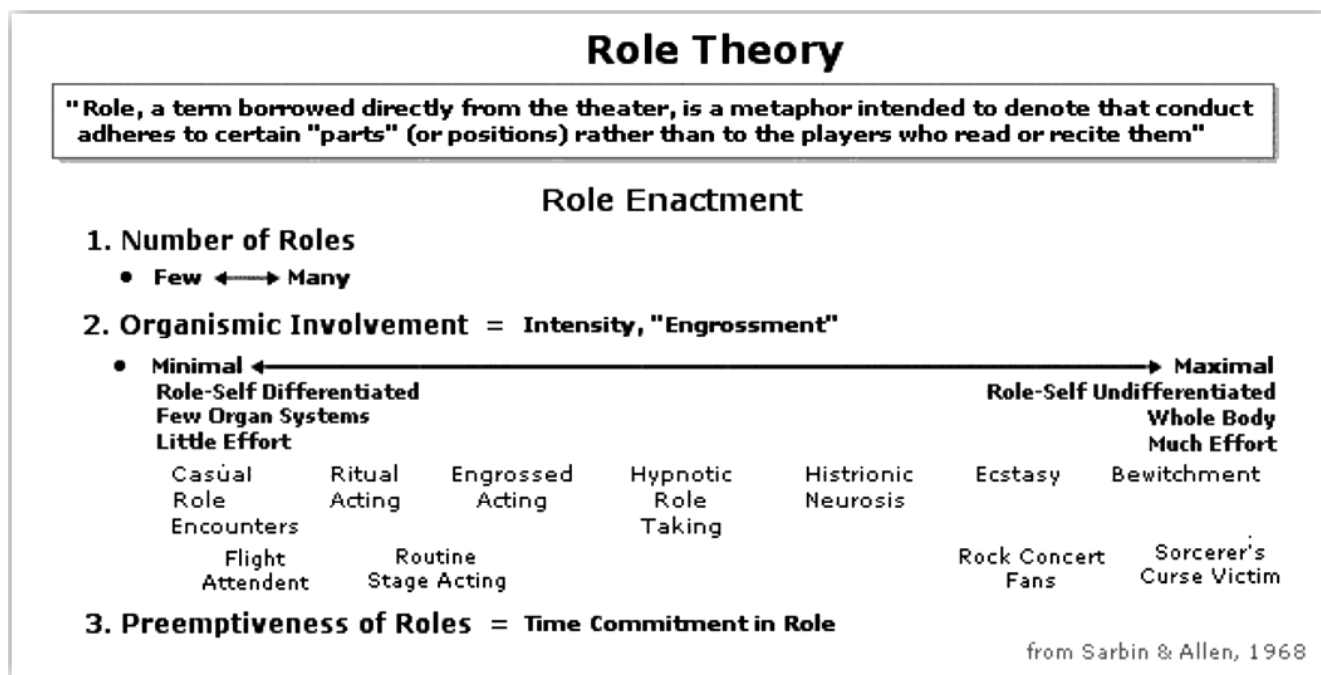


Sarbin: The Path to Role Theory¹

- A high-school drop-out originally, Sarbin completed his BA in 2 years at The Ohio State University and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1936.
- A behaviorist as an undergraduate, Ted's encounter with J. R. Kantor's interbehavioral psychology in the summer of 1936 began to erode Sarbin's behaviorism as well
- After a one-year master's at Case Western Reserve, Ted returned to Ohio State for the 1937-38 academic year to complete his doctoral coursework. That year he both learned hypnosis and, with his classmate, Joe Friedlander, began research on **hypnotizability** using Rorschach cards as stimuli. This work, Sarbin claims, "confirmed my belief that hypnosis was more than the mechanical expression of a mental disposition released through the verbal behavior of the therapist...I found myself interpreting the actions of the subject as somehow similar to the performances of stage actors"
- Sarbin heard the University of Wisconsin psychiatrist, **Norman A. Cameron**, present a talk about paranoid schizophrenic patients, to members of the Psi Chi chapter at UM (probably in 1940 or 1941). Cameron was a psychiatrist known for formulating the idea of "the **paranoid pseudo-community**" (1943). He held that even "asocial, disorganized schizophrenic patients [show in] For Cameron, individuals must learn a broad range of socially-validated roles and master the linguistic and behavioral components associated with these roles. Cameron's claim was striking: The root of the difficulty of such patients lay not in some Freudian conflict or medical disability, but in their ineptness in carrying out the roles demanded of them within their social worlds. For Sarbin, **hearing Cameron's theory of inept role-taking** proved to be pivotal and led him to expand his study of the notion of role.
- In 1941, Ted received a Social Science Research Council postdoctoral fellowship which he pursued for two years at the University of Chicago. There he was associated with Ernest Burgess, the well-regarded urban sociologist, who had years earlier collaborated with his colleague, Robert Park, to foster the "Chicago School" approach to social psychological research. Ted notes that the influence of the late George Herbert Mead and his ideas regarding the social construction of the self continued to be felt in the department Ted worked closely with psychiatrists and others at various mental health facilities in the Chicago area. **He soon linked the notion of role taking and the behavior of hypnotized for examples of his earliest approach to role theory as well his own use of psychodrama).**
- By the early 1950s, Ted had moved West, remarried Genevieve Allen after a divorce from his first wife, and joined the faculty of the University of California at Berkeley. There he elaborated his understanding of role taking into a more comprehensive social psychological theory and published it as a

¹ These comments summarize autobiographical and biographical materials found in Hevern (1999, 2006), Sarbin (1994, 2005), and Scheibe (2006).

major chapter on "Role Theory" in the 1st edition of Lindzey's influential **Handbook of Social Psychology** (Sarbin, 1954) and revised in 1962 in the 2nd edition.



Role theory focuses upon the overt conduct of individuals and, thus, regards the behaviors of persons as inherently and overwhelmingly social. The primary object of consideration within role theory is **role enactment**. Individuals enact one or many roles and may be evaluated for how appropriate, proper, and convincing they carry out these roles. Ultimately, role theory rests upon a judgment of the **adequacy of an actor's role performance** and, thus, cannot strictly speaking be subsumed under the positivist's credo of pure "objectivity."

- Three characteristics of role enactment engage Sarbin's general attention. The first asks **how many** roles an individual enacts within their life world.
- The second general quality of role enactment is the degree of **organismic involvement** by the actor, that is, how intense or engrossed is the individual inhabiting a particular role (Sarbin & Allen, 1968).
- The final note Sarbin applies to role enactment is called the **preemptiveness** of roles, i.e., how much time must or does an individual devote to a specific role. Some roles are so extensive (e.g., mother, father) that they may be considered universally preemptive

When actors fulfill roles, they must confront issues about how to carry out those roles. This raises the central question of **role expectations** which Sarbin defines as "the rights & privileges, duties & obligations, of any occupant of a social position in relation to persons occupying other positions in the social structure" What, then, are these role expectations generically? They form the cognitive bridge between the overall social structure of society and the actual behavior of individuals playing

their roles.

Role Expectations

= rights & privileges, duties & obligations, of any occupant of a social position in relation to persons occupying other positions in the social structure

- Cognitions including beliefs, subjective probabilities, and knowledges
- General vs. specific role expectations
- Formal vs. informal role expectations
- Normative quality to role expectations = how appropriate is someone in fulfilling the expectations
- How clear are role expectations? Unclear/vague/ambiguous vs. Plain/unmistakable
- Agreement among social actors, e.g., Role holders and audiences may agree/diasagree

from Sarbin & Allen, 1968

Sarbin and the Dramaturgy of Erving Goffman

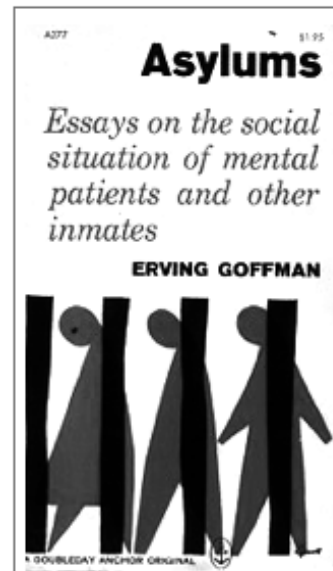
Erving Goffman



~ 1981



1956



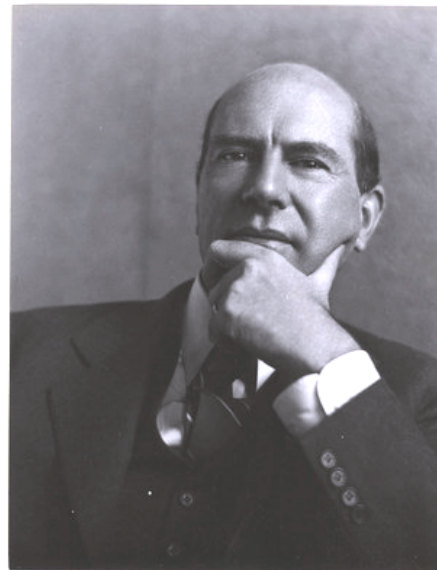
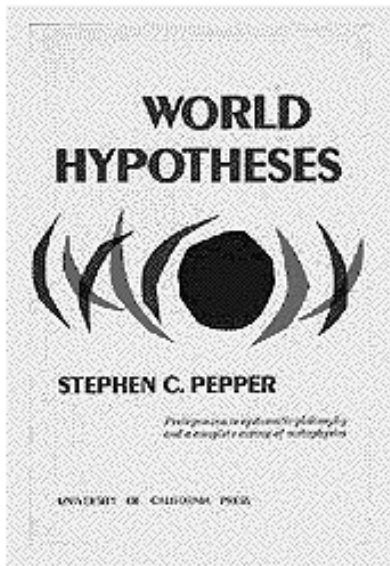
1961

In 1958 the sociologist Erving Goffman joined the sociology faculty at Berkeley as an assistant professor. Sarbin relates that he and Goffman held intensive conversations with one another. According to Goffman’s French biographer, Yves Winkin (1999), Sarbin was among the handful of influential senior faculty members

from various universities across the United States who supported Goffman's problematic but ultimately successful application for rapid promotion and tenure at Berkeley in 1959.

- Most broadly, exposure to Goffman's ideas on dramaturgy prompted Sarbin to advocate directly and comprehensively for the utility of the dramaturgical metaphor for his theorizing in two complementary ways. First, on the opening page of his 1968 chapter, Sarbin explains that he will be using "the role metaphor...[which] carries implications, drawn in this case from the theater" (p. 488) and points to the historical origins of the word "role" from the parchment actors used to help in playing their parts on stage. Rather than locate role as primarily a distinctive cultural unit intimately linked to a society's array of given positions, Sarbin's thinking coalesces around a much more dynamic and creative focus related to the intricacies of dramatic production. In 2005, he describes how his discussions with Goffman at Berkeley represented "a turning point in my identity narrative...his dramaturgical approach to interactional conduct influenced me to enlarge my conception of role. Roles need not be stereotypes. Persons create and modulate roles in response to changing contexts" (p. 21).
- **Impression Management.** Sarbin points to the range of observations in Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (PSEL) as an important resource related to understanding how roles may be acquired. Insofar as actors prepare for roles and can learn how to become characters in a drama, their efforts suggest ways in which individuals from a very young age develop role competencies. **The imaginary play of children and the ways parents and others guide child development parallel important means by which actors prepare their roles under the direction of acting coaches.** "Goffman showed convincingly the extent to which our social behavior is 'staged' to produce the desired impression on others, and the subtle and continuous interaction that occurs between a role performer and his face-to-face audience"
- Sarbin cites Goffman's (1961a) *Asylums* which documented "**instances of extreme change in role, such as acquiring the role of mental patient**" (Sarbin & Allen, 1968, p. 550) as well as the ways in which "**inmates in total institutions, such as prisons and mental hospitals, are processed in such a way that their social identities are reflection of placement in the nonperson position**" (p. 553). Goffman's research stemming mainly from his work at the St. Elizabeth psychiatric hospital in Washington, DC is deployed here to substantiate the complexity of role phenomena.

Stephen Pepper (1891-1972) & "World Hypotheses"



Sarbin makes clear that one of the key influences in his formulation of narrative psychology was encountering the philosopher and art theorist, Stephen C. Pepper's (1942) volume, **World Hypotheses**, and its description of "contextualism" as a root metaphor in philosophy

In Pepper's understanding, each major school of philosophy has at its heart one of five fundamental orientations or ways of understanding the world. Thus, for Plato and Aristotle, there is a concern for how well objects, thoughts, and other realities correspond in the way they assume form or shape--how similar are each reality to the others? (**Formism**) For Descartes, Locke, and Hume, the world must be approached as if it functions as a great big machine (**Mechanism**). The ostensibly "historical" approach of Hegel who describes the unfolding of the world in terms of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, actually employs the metaphor of an integrated organism at its base (**Organicism**). By 1961 Pepper had added **Selectivism** as a world hypothesis: by this he focused upon the purposive acts of entities which choose or select out prized goals or objectives (Pepper, 1967). But, it was his world hypothesis of **Contextualism** which directly influenced Sarbin. According to Pepper (1942), the contextualist root metaphor casts an understanding of the world as a function of examining historical events as they occur.

World Hypothesis in philosophy (Pepper, 1942, 1967)	Root Metaphor in psychology
Formism Plato, Aristotle	Similarities of Form Big-5 Personality Theory Faculty Psychology
Mechanism Descartes, Locke, Hume	Machine Behaviorism Psychoanalysis
Organicism Hegel	Integrated Organism Humanistic Psychology Family Systems Theory
Contextualism James, Dewey, Mead, Peirce, Bergson	Historical Events Narrative Psychology
Selectivism Whitehead	Purposive Acts as a Selection System Tolman's Behaviorism

The figure on the right notes that **each of the root metaphors in Pepper's scheme can be associated**

with some theoretical approach in psychology. Hence, the 19th century's forms of *Faculty Psychology* and the late 20th century's "Big-5" dimensional theory of personality might both be conceived as employing *Formism* as a root metaphor. Similarly, both Freud's internal dynamical system (psychoanalysis) and Skinner's external reward/punishment calculus (operant behaviorism) seem to be grounded in *Mechanism*. The individualistic theories of the humanistic school (Rogers, Perls) and the more systems-based theories of family therapists reflect a metaphorical basis in *Organicism*. While Pepper came to *Selectivism* late in his career, he explicitly referred to the form of psychological behaviorism advocated by his friend and Berkeley colleague, E. C. Tolman ("purposive behaviorism"). And, as we have already noted, narrative psychology shares a common metaphor with *Contextualism*.

Sarbin and Narrative Psychology. Where did Sarbin encounter Pepper and his philosophical system? As he discussed in his interview with me, "the first year I was at Santa Cruz, which was 1969-1970, Stephen Pepper came for one quarter to teach. He had already retired at Berkeley. My collaborator, Jim Mancuso, was also there on sabbatical. The two of them shared the same office. Jim and I had a lot of conversations with him. He was a delightful man. We read his book and Jim and I discovered that we had been contextualists all the time without knowing it. We were like Monsieur Jourdain, the ambitious merchant in Molière's play, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, who discovered he had been speaking prose his whole life" (Hevern, 1999). It is intriguing how Pepper directly and Sarbin indirectly were both influenced by G. H. Mead. **As Sarbin reflected upon what Pepper was saying, he began to recognize that narrative production that he had examined in varying dramaturgical senses was itself grounded in the contextualist metaphor advanced by Pepper.** He gave a paper in 1975 to the Nebraska Symposium on Motivation that was considering the work of George Kelly and his Personal Construct Theory. At the symposium, Ted spoke on "Contextualism: A World View for Modern Psychology" (Sarbin, 1977) and "made the case that **the search for causes of conduct, central to the mechanistic doctrine, had not been successful. To approach the complexity of human conduct, the psychologist had to cast a wider net and make sense of persons' actions through discovering how they emplot their lives.** Although I used mainly dramaturgical metaphors, my treatment of emplotment brought out the need to focus on narrative as a necessary conception in contextualist thought" (Sarbin, 1994, p. 29).

It seems that Ted found in narrative -- with its requirement that the acts of individuals be understood within a fundamentally social landscape -- a bridge between his advocacy of role theory and the function of historical context as a key to the meaning of behavior. Soon after, he articulated what he calls the **narratory principle** which simply states that "we live in a story-shaped world" (Sarbin, 1994, p. 7). **Rather than adopt the cognitive dualism of Jerome Bruner, Sarbin believes that, for people, narrative functions at an ontological level: every aspect of our mental and social lives -- from our dreams and nightmares through the rituals of work, family, and worship, to the experience of life as a daily tumble of events -- is fashioned with a narrative form.** Narrative, Sarbin holds, is the grounding or the primary social ecology for the lives we live (Hevern, 1999). By extension, the narratory principle involves both plot and action: in the former, humans are driven to employ narrative structures as how

disparate events are linked together and, in the latter, the actual behaviors of individuals make sense within the intentional, goal-directed context of a story. Sarbin points out that every story has a moral dimension, a deontological quality, which permits hearers to weigh the motives of the characters as well as giving meaning to the action(s) detailed within that story.

As he came to recognize the fundamental importance of narrative, Ted contacted a range of social scientists who contributed chapters to his 1986 volume, ***Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct***. The essays gathered in that text approach narrative as a fundamental theoretical perspective in the social sciences, a matter of developmental competence, a strategy by which individuals emplot their lives, and a set of hermeneutic or analytic methods employed within various clinical schools and settings. Thus, he concludes that "story making, storytelling, and story comprehension are fundamental conceptions for a revived psychology...narrative is a viable alternative to the positivist paradigm" (Sarbin, 1986, p. vii). A long biographical "sketch" of the life of Ted Sarbin as well as a selection of his later scholarly papers recently appeared in Scheibe & Barrett (2017).

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