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CRIMINALS' PERSONAL NARRATIVES

David Canter

Within psychology and related social sciences there is an emerging framework for understanding a person's actions and experiences in terms of what McAdams (McAdams, 1993) refers to as 'The Stories We Live By'. This reflects the approach given particular emphasis by Bruner (Bruner, 1990) in his critique of the information processing model that so dominates cognitive psychology. It is argued that people give sense to their past, current and future lives by the roles they see themselves playing in key episodes that they remember experiencing. They formulate views of their identity and self-concept through an interpretation of the unfolding storyline that they see their lives as being. Importantly, the concept of a story here is not that of a fiction but of a constructed account derived from events and interactions with others.

Growing out of personality theory, the psychological emphasis is on 'personal' narratives; the stories that people tell about themselves. This contrasts with a strong tradition in anthropology that give importance to the dominant narratives in cultures derived from second and third party accounts, describing the key episodes in the lives of others. It is also distinct from a focus of many literary studies that seek to explore the nature and structure of fictional stories.

It is argued notably by (D. Canter, 2008) that the narrative approach is particularly fruitful when considering criminality because it helps to bridge the gap between the disciplines of psychology and law. In essence the argument is that the law deals with human beings as agents in their own actions and seeks to identify the narrative that explains how the crime came to occur. By contrast most of the social and behavioural sciences emphasise the processes outside of the individual's control that give rise to actions; whether they be genetic, neurological, hormonal, upbringing or social pressures. Exploring how people make sense of their lives and seek to influence their destiny as active agents engaging with the people and objects around them therefore provides a social psychological framework that connects with legal explorations of *mens rea* and 'motive'. In this regard the way in which the personal narrative approach may be considered to empower respondents, treating them as experts on their own lives drawing on a framework emphasised by (Harré, 1979.), accords more closely with the legal perspective on people.

In one of the first explorations of this framework within the context of criminal actions it was suggested that the actions the offender carries out during a crime may be regarded as one reflection of a personal narrative (Canter, 1995). This is rather different from the usual focus on verbal accounts of a person reflecting on his life. It was elaborated to argue that the offender's narrative was implicit in whether the victim was treated as a 'person', 'vehicle', or 'object'. One further implication of this perspective is that all crimes are in some sense interpersonal in that they imply the acting out of a relationship between the offender and explicit or implicit victims. Crimes are thus crucial episodes in an unfolding storyline the offender is living. How the criminal construes that narrative is thus of considerable psychological significance.

The challenge of this emerging framework is to operationalise the concept of a personal narrative and to develop systematic ways of studying it. There has been little substantive research on this within the criminal context but some possibilities are looking fruitful. One such approach has been to determine if the dominant narratives identified within the realms of English literature may be relevant to real-life storylines. Both McAdams (1993) and (D. V. Canter, 1995) have suggested that Frye's (Frye, 1957) proposal that there are four dominant narratives that run throughout all story telling may be productive. Frye demonstrated that virtually all major stories could be seen as either adventures (which Frye calls 'Romances'), tragedies, love stories (which he calls 'comedies') or comedy (which he calls 'irony'). Although Frye made the point that fictional stories are always likely to have a much tidier and clearer structure to them than real-life. Also by being able to draw on 2,000 years of drama and friction Frye can identify canonical, archetypal stories that illustrate his major types (or 'mythoi' as he calls them).

In order to explore the hypothesis that criminals may see their crimes as part of one of Frye's mythoi, (D. Canter, Kaouri, & Ioannou, 2003) provide one feasible, quantitative approach. They argued that one crucial aspect of a narrative was that participants are playing a role within some storyline. Therefore the nature of that role could be taken as some summary of the nature of the story it was within. For example, by asking a criminal to think of a crime he has committed and then to say how much it felt like 'being on an adventure', 'just doing a job', 'something I had to do' etc. it is possible to get quantitative answers that are open to statistical analysis. Their results drawing on MDS analysis, did lend find some moderate support to the hypothesis derived from Frye's work. They indicated that whilst all four types of narrative that Frye offers may not be directly applicable to criminals' views of their crimes, nonetheless there are distinctions in the roles they see themselves as playing, which broadly map onto a tragic view themselves and their crimes, or a view of them as part of a more optimistic adventure.

A complementary approach was taken by (Alison, 2000) based on published biographies and open-ended interviews with armed robbers. From the MDS analysis of the content analysis of their interviews they proposed that armed robbers could be seen to be playing one of three different roles, loosely related to the professionalism of the robbers. Ongoing research using a variety of structured and unstructured techniques is exploring how these roles may differ between crimes and criminals.

The potential value of this work runs through the whole range of forensic psychology activities. It offers the possibility of informing the formulation of **Offender Profiles** by enabling investigators to understand more clearly the psychological processes of which the crime is a part and thus possible characteristics of the offender. The interviewing of offenders can also be informed by an understanding of the storyline they may consider their crimes to be key episodes within. But possibly, most importantly it provides a framework for working with offenders to help them reconstruct their understanding of their personal narratives. This connects directly with the narrative approach to therapy (White M. and Epston D. , 1990))in which the client is encouraged to review his ways of thinking about key episodes in his past life as a way of finding a different future for himself.

Comment [MSOffice1]: I'm assuming there will be an article on this that will be cross-referenced here.

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