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Original Citation

Hiles, David (2005) Contingent Narratives: Fears and Tremblings. In: Narrative, Memory & Everyday Life. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, pp. 107-116.

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11 Contingent Narratives: Fears and Tremblings

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All knowledge about reality is possibility. (Søren Kierkegaard)

Abstract

Two brief studies are presented concerned with narrative thinking in relation to unpredicted immediate experience – ie. with what I call *contingent narratives*. The first study is a heuristic inquiry into the experience of travel/motion fear, and the second study is concerned with experiential accounts of an earthquake that occurred in Leicestershire in October 2001. The data were examined within the framework of Bruner's (1996) "nine universals of narrative realities". The striking feature that emerges from both of these studies is the way in which someone will immediately engage with "narrativizing" the event in question. A model of the narrative construction of reality is discussed, which proposes that contingent narratives are a dominant feature of everyday lived experience, and consequently quickly become embedded into our memory of events.

Introduction

Jerome Bruner (1996, p.149) has pointed out that "… we live most of our lives in a world constructed according to the roles and devices of narrative". It is this basic idea that is the main focus of this paper, ie. that we do not simply communicate in narratives but that we live in narratives, we think in narratives, and that our immediate experience of a world around us is constructed in narratives. Bruner has made this theoretical claim repeatedly. For example, "… the typical form of framing experience (and our memory of it) is in narrative form" (Bruner, 1990, p.56), and "… we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative" (Bruner, 1991, p.4). Donald Polkinghorne has also expressed the same idea: "… narrative meaning is a cognitive process that organizes human experiences into temporally meaningful episodes [. but] narrative meaning is not an object available to direct observation" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.1).

While this idea that narrative offers a mode of thinking for shaping our experience of the real world is clearly a very important claim, there is a need to proceed with some caution. It is a claim that has been made mostly by argument, and, so far at least, has not been supported by empirical evidence. How might it be possible to make narrative thinking open to more direct observation?

To begin with, I think it is helpful to distinguish between discursive and contingent narratives. By *contingent narratives*, I mean the stories that we generate, consciously or unconsciously, in order to organize our immediate experience of events. These are the building blocks of a narrative mode of thinking that is fundamental to our construction of reality. They can make the all too familiar strange and unpredictable, and can turn the unfamiliar and unexpected into phenomenologically understandable experiences. Such narratives prefigure our memory of events, and are the basis for later shared discursive accounts. With a slight difference in emphasis, this notion of contingent narratives is very similar to David Boje's notion of *antenarratives* (Boje, 2001), and to Daniel Stern's notion of the "present moment" as a *lived story* (Stern, 2004).

Despite Polkinghorne's doubts above, and Bruner's warning that "narrative realities … are too ubiquitous, their construction too habitual or automatic to be accessible to easy inspection" (Bruner, 1996, p.147), we will explore the empirical evidence for contingent narratives in two brief studies.

Study 1: Fears

The first study involves a phenomenological/heuristic inquiry into the experience of travel/motion fear.

Procedure

Heuristic inquiry (Douglass and Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990) is an adaptation of phenomenological inquiry but explicitly acknowledges the involvement of the *researcher*, to the extent that the lived experience of the researcher becomes the main focus of the research. This approach to research is similar to the idea of *lived inquiry* developed by John Heron (1998), and *mindful inquiry* developed by Bentz and Shapiro (1998). What is explicitly the focus of the approach is the transformative effect of the inquiry on the researcher's own experience. This is often achieved by a process that I think can usefully be called *discernment*. Moustakas identifies seven basic phases involved in this approach: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, creative synthesis and validation of the heuristic research (Hiles, 2001).

There is clearly more involved in heuristic inquiry than the researcher simply analyzing their own experience. What Moustakas outlines is the much wider context within which the researcher engages with the research question, examines their own experience amongst a number of other explorations, and follows this through with an awareness of the transformative processes at work in the research enterprise.

I am therefore both the researcher and the participant for this study. This was unplanned, the experience simply happened to me, but was so remarkable that I felt it worth making a study of in some detail. My approach was at the first opportunity to write down a full account of my experience, and then keep a diary of my thoughts, reflections and related experiences. I began by immersing myself in the original experience, so that eventually, explication of this research appears as the creative synthesis in the form of this brief report.

Findings

Cyprus – The precipitating experience occurred during a coach excursion, with my wife, into the central mountains region of the island, in April 1997. After a few minutes on the narrow and winding mountainous roads, I began to feel nauseous, overwhelmed by anxiety and fear. I told my wife, and desperately wanted to stop the coach. Trying to cope with these feelings, I thought of several possible explanations, and then began to notice that the anxiety was particularly intense when the coach was *turning to the right, and not when turning to the left*. With each turn of the coach, now to the left, now to the right, I was able to confirm this surprising observation. Gradually, I began to realize that this replicated almost the same situation I had experienced in India, when I was 18, some 30 years before. A coach that I was travelling on then, in a mountainous area of Assam, turning to the right, had almost skidded off the road, down a 100ft ravine. I had been no more than two or three inches from being killed.

Connecting these two events, 30 years apart, a *story* began to emerge in my mind that it was not the current driving that was causing me distress, but with each turn to the right my body was "remembering" my original experience in India. As I became aware of this story, my anxiety noticeably subsided, and became quite manageable.

I have subsequently replicated this experience several times over the past few years. For example, during a visit to Alaska, in 1998, the same but unexpected feelings of anxiety and fear overwhelmed me during a short coastal tour, although this time the feelings were recognized and quickly brought under control. During a visit to north Devon, in 2002, I consciously choose to be the passenger during a car drive along the coastal road in order to further test my observations of this experience. I have subsequently confirmed that the feelings are quite specific to:

- being driven (ie. not when being the driver, not sailing, not flying, etc)
- winding roads (ie. mountainous/coastal terrain)
- going downwards, not upwards
- turning to the right, with a sheer drop to the left
- the anxiety feelings are prior to recognition, etc.

Summary

I call this story a contingent narrative, since it is a formulation contingent on the immediate events (albeit mediated through a period of reflection). It is a story that enabled me to reinterpret my experience of the situation in which I found myself. In conclusion, this brief study highlights how a contingent narrative has a sense-making function, and in this particular case, has a significant transformative effect. Also, the story is now available for me to use as soon as the anxieties feelings are recognizable.

Study 2: Tremblings

The second study examines the accounts of a rather unusual experience for people who live in the city where I live, an earthquake that registered 3.8 on the Richter Scale.

On Sunday, 28th October 2001, during the afternoon there was an earthquake very close to Leicester. I did not experience this myself, I was more than 100 miles away, but was phoned by my daughter, who said that she had felt the house shake. I am still rather embarrassed to admit that I discounted any other explanation that my daughter offered, and suggested that this was probably a problem with our heating boiler. That it had been an earthquake was later confirmed on the radio. On talking later to a few people, I noticed how different each person's experience had been, and thought it would be interesting to gather the accounts of others who had experienced what was an unusual event.

Procedure

I wanted to collect the data as quickly, and from as many people, as possible, and decided that trying to interview people individually or in groups was impractical. For expediency, I set up an internet-based bulletin board and asked people to spread the word that I was looking for replies to the following request:

> I am interested in collecting some accounts of people's experiences of the earthquake in the East Midlands last Sunday. I am particularly interested in: (i) Your account of the experience. (ii) Did you realise it was an earthquake? (iii) If not, what did you think it was? (iv) Did you learn later that it was an earthquake? If so, when and how? (v) Have you ever experienced an earthquake before?

Findings

There were 32 contributions made to the bulletin board. The data clearly confirmed the wide range of different ways that people used to explain their experience of the earthquake, but the point of interest here is that these explanations are invariably expressed as contingent narratives, ie. as stories that participants generated in order to organize their immediate experience of the event. For example, a typical response was:

> P1: I felt the earthquake on Sunday. I was at my boyfriend's parents' house, and I felt the settee shake. My boyfriend's mum felt the door hit the back of her chair, it felt as though the whole house had shook. We thought that something had happened next door! Maybe something had blown up! We went round to next door, who were also wondering what had happened. There was an old man wondering around the street, I think he thought he was going mad.

From the accounts collected, it was almost always quite clear whether participants were alone when they experienced the earthquake, or were together with someone else. I therefore decided to separate these accounts into two groupings. The following are examples taken from the accounts of those who experienced the earthquake alone:

> P3: The room started shaking as I was standing in front of my shelf and I was certain that it was a car on the drive.

> P4: I thought at first a car had run into the house.

> P5: Immediately I thought the backdoor had slammed shut, but on investigation I realized this had not been possible and put it down to a large truck passing by, as I live near to a main road.

> P8: I presumed that it must have been a bomb and that we were finally under attack, due to the war on terror.

> P10: I immediately thought earthquake? Since I had experienced one before when living in North Wales.

> P13: I remember thinking at first that it was a large lorry driving by.

These are examples taken from the accounts of those who experienced the earthquake in the company of someone else:

> P6: We were in the cinema in Melton Mowbary. I felt a sensation as if a very large vehicle had run at speed into the building.
>
> P9: The first thing dad said was that it must have been an earthquake and so I believed him.
>
> P12: I was at home with my housemates. I felt my desk vibrate and more or less dismissed it … my friend thought it was a problem with the boiler, and I thought it was a train going past!
>
> P15: I was at work … we were on the ground floor, and to begin with I thought it was something moving a visual aid on the first floor … I went across to security, I could hear customers talking – most of them thought it was some kind of attack by the Taliban, and to be totally honest, I thought it was something to do with the American bombings.
>
> P27: The girl I was with initially thought it was somebody trying to break into the cash point which is situated at the side of the building where we were stood.

Summary

There is no obvious difference between participants being alone or being together with someone else, except that they may well be at home rather than out in a public place. Of course, the fact that the earthquake happened just a few weeks after 9/11 is significant, and widens the range of possibilities that participants draw upon.

What is the most striking feature of these accounts is the way in which people report that they immediately engaged with "narrativizing" an event such as this. Clearly these are examples of what I call *"contingent narratives"*, since they are narratives produced in order to make sense of something that is happening or has just happened. Shaking houses, moving shelves and wobbling rooms are narrativized as faulty boilers, cars driving into buildings, passing lorries, terrorist bombs, noisy neighbours, someone upstairs, or a raid on a cash point machine! People quickly draw upon local knowledge, plausible events, and ongoing concerns and fears to generate their contingent account. As in Study 1, here the contingent narratives have a sense-making function – the unexpected is made understandable.

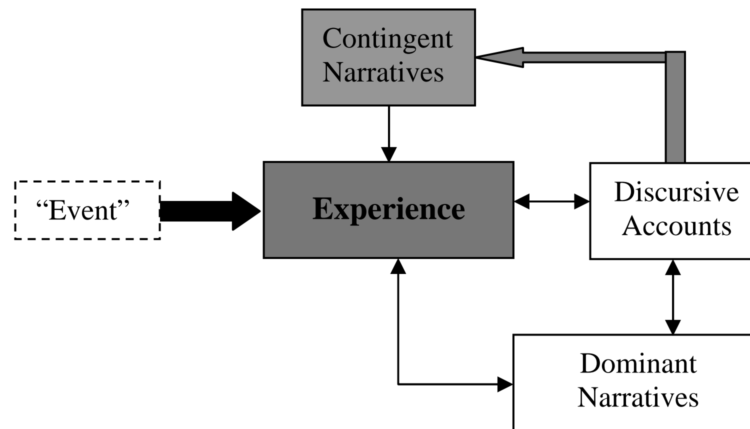
Discussion

I want to claim that these two studies offer good empirical support for a narrative mode of thought, but I think it is quite reasonable to ask, why do I characterize the data collected in these studies as narratives? This is not a simple question to answer, but I have given it much thought, and I think it is best answered by considering the defining properties of narrative. For example, Bruner (1996, p.133-147) has set out nine universals of narrative realities:

- a structure of committed time
- generic particularity
- actions have reasons
- hermeneutic composition
- implied canonicity
- ambiguity of reference
- the centrality of trouble
- inherent negotiability
- the historical extensibility of narrative.

There is not the space here to discuss this in detail, but I am satisfied that the experiential accounts from Study 1 and Study 2, meet the criteria of each of these universals outlined by Bruner. Thus, from the universal of committed time, where narratives are seen to segment time, not by the clock, but by unfolding crucial events, to the universal of historical extensibility, where narratives are seen to build on each other and chain with each other, it seems clear that we are dealing with narrative data.

Figure 1 Model of the Narrative Construction of Reality



A further issue that this research raises is the crucial distinction that must be made between *contingent* and *discursive* narrative practices. Narrative offers a mode of thinking for construing the immediate experience of "reality", as well as a mode for discursively sharing self-experiences with others. In Figure 1, I have proposed a simplified model of narrative thinking that may help to make this distinction clearer. The focus in the current paper has been on just the inter-relationship between contingent narratives and experience, however, the model also incorporates the wider part played by discursively shared accounts and the dominant narratives that also circulate.

Of course, the data collected in both Study 1 and 2 are discursive reconstructions of the original experience, recorded in either a diary or written into a bulletin board. Nevertheless, I think it is reasonable to take these reconstructions at their face value, as ample evidence that people *think* in narratives, as well as *tell* of their experience in narratives. While I have much sympathy with Jerome Bruner when he points out how difficult it might be "… to distinguish sharply what is a narrative mode of thought and what is a text or discourse" (Bruner, 1996, p.132), I do tend to follow Daniel Stern when he says:

> … one can not get to the lived experience and stay there while talking about it. But that does not stop me from thinking about it and approaching as close as I can.
> (Stern, 2004, p.xiii)

Conclusions

Contingent narratives are a dominant feature of everyday lived experience, they can be the basis for immediate action, and as the opportunity arises these narratives will readily be shared with others. The events experienced in both Study 1 and 2 were unexpected. This is by no means a defining feature of contingent narratives, but only served to highlight them in operation. We of course narrativize predictable and unpredictable events, continuously, in our every waking moment.

I also want to stress that contingent narratives are inherently *participatory*. Thus, we participate in our own meaning making (this is particularly relevant to the role of narrative in the construction of self, in counselling and psychotherapy, etc. – cf. Polkinghorne, 1988; Mair, 1989; Kerby, 1991; Bruner, 2002). Such narratives can have a powerful transformative effect on personal experience.

Of course, the narratives of others can be particularly persuasive. Inevitably, the authoritative narratives of radio and TV bulletins will compete for dominance in our understanding of "events". But, eventually, our contingent narratives become embedded into our memory of events, and the different tellings of our story.

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