

# Autobiographical memory and autobiographical narrative

## What is the relationship?

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In this contribution I discuss the link existing between autobiographical memory and autobiographical narrative and, in this context, the concept of coherence. Starting from the Bruner's seminal concept of autobiographical self, I firstly analyze how autobiographical memories and autobiographical narrative influence each other and, somehow, mirror reciprocally and then I present some results of my previous studies using a methodology consisting in "narrating-transcribing-reading-narrating." The results show that self narratives can have positive effects on the narrators if they are provided with a tool to reflect on their memories. Moreover these results show that autobiography in its double sides — that of memory and that of narrative — is a process of continuous construction but also that this construction is deeply linked to social interactions.

**Keywords:** coherence, autobiographical memory, autobiographical narrative, externalization

## My starting point

Jerome Bruner showed more than two decades ago (Bruner, 1986) that mind cannot be represented as a file where experience is stored, but as a system in which cognitive processes are connected to acts of meanings. Promoting a "narrative turn" in the history of Psychology, Bruner showed also that autobiographical memory has a narrative organization (Bruner, 1990; 1994). His concept of an autobiographical Self is not simply that a Self tells stories, but a Self that is formed

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by the stories it tells others. In other words, the self as narrator creates a narrated self and is transformed by it (as well as other characters). This happens because a sort of need for coherence that seems to connect the Self as narrator and self as character. (Bruner, 1991;1994)

In this contribution I would like to discuss this concept of coherence, which has been, to me, a starting point and show how I have approached it thus far. A good strategy to study these basic concepts has been to investigate the type of link existing between memory and language, or more specifically, between autobiographical memory and autobiographical narrative.

There are other good reasons to justify this choice. Autobiographical memory can be studied by observing autobiographical narrative, i.e. by asking people to recount what they remember. However, autobiographical narrative is not the same as autobiographical memory. Narrating memories intrinsically implies that these internally stored memories are “externalized” in a different format, specifically into that of a narrative. This externalization is directed from the Self towards others in the form of language that transforms and stretches memory imbuing it with new semantic, pragmatic, and communicative functions. In brief, autobiographical narrative transforms autobiographical memory and makes it a cultural artifact. Now, what must be specified and expanded upon is precisely the meaning of the word “externalization;” otherwise the whole sense of the above paragraph might be misleading. This will be mainly the theme of my contribution.

### **Memories and narratives: How do they differ? How are they interconnected?**

From a certain point of view, autobiographical memory appears to be sharply different from autobiographical narrative because, while autobiographical memory can be appropriately represented in terms of the working self, knowledge base, and episodic memories (Conway, 2005), narrating autobiographical memories implies a change of level: from inside to outside the person, or from internal representations (also consisting in linguistic ones) to “language for the others,” as Vygotsky (1965) would say. What does this change of level imply? First of all, when people recount their own autobiographical memories, they produce sounds that are diachronically emitted one after another. Second, these sounds become sounds in a language, i.e. phonetically structured or connected words. Third, this language is shared with other interlocutors and respects syntactic, grammatical, and lexical rules. Fourth, since this language is addressed to someone, it has a purpose or discursive characterization. Fifth, to the extent that this language is a narration of

memories, it assumes the structure of a story. If it becomes a story, then this narration also shares all the characteristics that make it a story.

Bruner (1990) made a detailed account of these. In fact, as with any other type of narration, including an autobiographical memory, the story told is not only composed of an agent, an action, a purpose, an instrument, and a scene in order to be well structured, but it must also be coherent and persuasive in order to be believable, and it must be “tellable” in order to be listened by someone (Labov, 1997; Bruner, 1994; Burke, 1945). Lastly, in the moment in which people recount their own memories to someone, they cannot help but relate both to other stories and their own experiences, though private and personal, and to wider genres, which are those transmitted by the culture. In this specific case, this genre will be that of the autobiography, strongly influenced by other genres, such as those of law and literary narratives (Bruner, 2002). In such a way stories lead the self in the world of culture transforming it in a distributed self that somehow includes objects and other persons from the environment. In other words, memories undergo profound change when they are transformed from inner thought into a narrative form, because these must conform to the constraints imposed by the social context and by language structure and usage.

From what I have stressed so far, it might appear that narratives are an observable and “better” socialized product of the autobiographical memory (not unlike wearing your Sunday best to go out to a party), when actually narrating has a “return” influence, like a feedback effect, on memory processes. As Bruner’s (1991) wrote, in the autobiographical memory a narrator attempts to explain how the change from the protagonist in the “then and there” into the narrator in the “here and now” has occurred and how identity (i.e., the protagonist fusing into the narrator, becoming one single person possessing the same consciousness) has been maintained through the course of time. To complete this reasoning, a narrator must be able to narrate the differences and to sew these together. This entails, however, not simply saying what has happened, but also providing an appropriate interpretation of the event through a new attribution of meaning that makes sense both for the narrator and for listeners. This personal theory on the Self’s own narrative or metanarrative, modifies the organization of the memories and the perception a narrator has of his or her own life. Therefore, when people remember those parts of their autobiographical memories that have been narrated, those memories have also been transformed by previous narrative acts and have acquired an altered narrative organization.

## The mirrors game metaphor

In order to make a clearer account of what I have sketched so far I'd like to use a metaphor. Autobiographical memory can be considered to be a mirror through which people reflect on their life, however it reflects in a special way. According to Conway (2005), autobiographical memory works following opposite principles between that of coherence with the self and that of correspondence with the reality, and the individual struggles to solve the contradiction between these two principles. To this aim autobiographical memory tries to adopt a sense of "adaptive coherence" that forces a minimal level of correspondence to reality so that the chances of survival are maximized. In other words, autobiographical memories use more accurate episodic memories (correspondence). Simultaneously, these autobiographical memories make this knowledge of accuracy and past memories available to support the continuous search for goals and to provide evidence of at least some positive progress (coherence). Returning to the mirror metaphor, this first mirror, that of autobiographical memory, resends the image of the person. This reflection process occurs on the basis of the principle of "partial self-coherence" or "adaptive coherence," that is, on the balance between the need to correspond to the reality and the need for coherence of the Self.

On the other hand, autobiographical narration can also be represented as a mirror through which people can reflect on their lives. Similarly, this mirror represents life in special way. Labov (1997) stressed that a narrative must also be coherent and persuasive in order to be believable, and must be "recountable" in order to be heard by an audience. Therefore the need to be listened to does not create a state of unbelievability (nobody believes a story too exceptional) and the need to be believed does not make a narrator unheard (nobody listens to a boring or too obvious story), this mirror has to resend an image on the basis of a principle of "partial coherence with others" or that state of partial balance between the need to be listened to and the need to be believed. The narrator recounts his or her own life to the others making it interesting but believable. Once again returning to the metaphor, autobiographical memory and autobiographical narration are therefore two mirrors through which people reflect on their lives. The mirror of memory is guided by a principle of adaptive self-coherence. The mirror of narration is guided by a principle of adaptive coherence with the others. The continuous — even though partial — flow between memory and narration means these mirrors reciprocally reflect each other causing the individual to see a seemingly endless series of reflections.

Coming now to the meaning of the word "externalization," this process means that narrative externalizes memories that in many cases have been already externalized and that are built up during the processes of narration. Therefore memories in many cases are narrated memories that already have a narrative organization.

## From speculations to research

One merit of the narrative approach has been that of permitting to analyze the substantial changes autobiographical memory undergoes when are transformed into autobiographical narratives and, at the same time, how the act of meaning a narrative changes the structure and also the content of the memory so that what is narrated a second time is different from what has been narrated previously. The main idea of my research is giving a person the possibility to narrate the same memories more than once in order to observe how memories change into .

Recently we (Smorti, Risaliti, Pananti & Cipriani, 2008; Smorti, Pananti & Rizzo, 2010) attempted to explore how the autobiographical process could lead to a transformation in the quality of self-narrative. We organized two subsequent intervention-studies with psychiatric patients. In both studies participants were clients of a psychiatric residential center located in the metropolitan area of Florence, Italy. They had previously been diagnosed with chronic psychiatric disorders and had been referred to the Residential Center for Psychiatric Disorders, after repeated hospitalization in the Florence General Hospital's psychiatric department. In both studies the interviewer was a psychologist and expert in narrative-autobiographical techniques who worked under the clinical supervision of the center's staff. In both studies, a "warming up" phase occurred firstly, during which the interviewer became acquainted with the narrators over the course of several days, so as to not be perceived as an "outsider."

In the first study we aimed to explore how the autobiographical process can lead to a transformation in psychiatric patients' self-narrative. Fifteen participants, with ages ranging from 25 to 40 years, were selected to participate. A 10-question interview referring to 10 autobiographical cruxes was used to collect autobiographical data; the interview was re-administered 2 weeks later with the transcribed text of the first interview. Then we analyzed the text taking into account aspects of narration such as the role of the Self, specifically: the subject of active verbs; the object of people's actions; expressions indicating awareness of the narrator's dual role as protagonist and narrator; self-attributes and self-evaluations; other peoples' attributes and evaluations; spatial-temporal indicators; spatial-temporal or causal connectives.

The results showed significant differences in the type of elements that were produced in the two interviews, with the second interviews being richer in indicators of the active self, self as narrator, self-evaluations, and causal connectives than the first interviews had been. The position of the narrator was more evident, both in terms of expression of self as narrator and of the general analysis of emotions and memories. The findings gleaned from the text analysis were confirmed by the participants' reactions to the research experience. They all reported experiencing

feelings of well being at the second interview and, more importantly, after the second narration they expressed a sense of greater clarity and personal gratification, because of the interest shown in their personal histories. The medical staff conducted a clinical assessment of patients after the second interview and concurred that there had been an improvement in their well being.

In the second intervention-study, conducted with nine participants, aged between 20 and 42 years we organized an *autobiographical laboratory*. This consisted in about ten sessions during which the narrator's life history was collected and recorded, then transcribed by the interviewer and then resubmitted to the narrator to give him/her the opportunity to read the whole text or parts of it, correct, integrate, and modify it by adding further parts of his/her life story. Afterward, without the presence of the narrator, again the interviewer transcribed the narrator's words and integrated these into the previous text. In this way a multiple and subsequent versions of narrator's life were constructed. The last meetings were usually devoted to composing the complete text of the narrator's life history. The narrators were asked to give their story a title once they had finished telling it. They also could assign a title to each singular "chapter" if they liked. The aim was to eventually edit "the book of my life" as a product belonging to the narrator, something private which he or she could, if desired, show to others. Finally, all narrators received both the complete texts of their self-narrations (with the chosen title printed on the cover page of "The book of my life story") and copies of the recorded tapes.

Text analysis showed how narrators moved from a narrative that was more focused on the memory of the past (an "I" that remembered events which occurred in the past) to a narrative more similar to a conversation. This is evidenced by a greater use of "you," by more verbs used in the present, and by lower use of words indicating the memory process's presence. Moreover, the last narratives were enriched with "insight" terms and the use of verbs in the conjunctive form. Finally, patients shifted from feelings of sadness to feelings of anxiety.

## Conclusions

Our autobiographical laboratory consisted of "narrating-transcribing-reading-narrating." The rationale was the assumption that a narrative process can have positive effects on the narrators if they are provided with a tool to reflect on their memories. This tool was represented, in our protocol, by the materialization of their memories through the text. Reading the text, as an outcome of their memories, and being able to correct it, not only gave the narrators the possibility to become conscious of their narrative, but helped them to consider their life story as

something that could be modified. However this method had also another effect. The inpatients felt encouraged not only to reflect more on their lives, but also to narrate to someone, in this case the interviewer, and become aware of what had been narrated through a sort of autobiographical dialogue. We consider that, over the course of the laboratory, narrators became closer to the interviewer. Although in the first meeting the interviewer had the task of leading the patient's autobiographical narrative, by the last meeting the narrator had become an active subject in this dialogue. We believe that this method changed the couples' narrator-interviewer interaction. That is the couple interaction changed from an interviewer's questioning about, and listening to the patient's experience to a process of dialogue between the interviewer and narrator, which occurred in the present. When the narrator become more active, more reflexive, more in touch with the partner, and more oriented toward exploring the world of possibility, he or she was more likely to develop a new way of living his or her life.

So what have we learnt from these studies? We have learnt that autobiography in its double sides — that of memory and that of narrative — is a process of continuous construction but also that this construction is deeply linked to social relations. We could go on in the chain of Bronfenbrenner's connections saying that social relations leads autobiography to a wider world made of institution, economy, populations, genres, but honestly this is not what these two studies wanted to accomplish. However we would not be able to accomplish our results if culture would not have provided us tools as a recording machine and, mainly, a written text. Only a written text could offer to the interviewer and narrator the tangibility of an oral narrative and, from here, of memory. This concrete and visual instrument provided the narrator to "see" the product of memory transformation in narrative form. Subsequently, reading the narrative memories, and by extension employing another cultural device, permitted the narrator to assume new stances towards what has been produced orally during each session. This procedure encouraged new narratives and new memory constructions. Therefore the externalization into a written text was precisely what helped us to understand how autobiographical memory and narrative memory consist in a continuous process of construction, where the agent has the possibility to assume a stance in a metaposition on his/her narration, or to put it in Bruner's world on narrative, as the Self.

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