

## Narrative Authenticity

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Narrators of personal experience work to make their stories sound credible. As Labov (1982) noted:

Reportable events are almost by definition unusual. They are therefore inherently less credible than nonreportable events. In fact, we might say that the more reportable an event is, the less credible it is. Yet credibility is as essential as reportability for the success of a narrative. (p. 228)

Credibility depends in part upon the plausibility of a chain of objective events and whether they can be corroborated. Narrators, however, couch these events within subjective events that can not be contradicted. The narrators studied by Labov (19XX) threaded their narratives with subjective events such as thinking ("I thought he was gonna *hit* me"), knowing ("I didn't know what it was"), talking to oneself ("I said to myself, 'There'll be times I can't put up with this ...'"), intending ("I was about to hit him"), and feeling ("boy that was an *every* night for me comin' home").

Remembering is also a subjective event. However, although remembering itself is an unobservable and therefore unverifiable mental state, a thought cast as remembered is presented as true. *Remember* is a factual mental verb (Chafe & Nichols, 1986) that presupposes the certainty of a proposition. Thus: "I remember going to the House of Fabrics with you in my red corduroy pants" presupposes that the speaker went "to the House of Fabrics with you in my red corduroy pants."

Remembering, then, is an authenticating act: Rememberers publicly claim to have brought to conscious awareness a state, event, or condition that is real in their eyes; they believe it to be true.

In this sense, acts of remembering are attempts to seize authority with respect to a topic of concern. For the presupposed truths to become recognized as such, however, these acts require validation by others. When such validation is not forthcoming, the authenticity of the remembered experience and by implication the reliability of the rememberer is called into question (Taylor, 1995). Contested memories can concern personal and collective events of consequence for groups and nations. Contestation of memory, however, can also concern events of import only to family members or acquaintances directly involved. In the following family encounter between 3-year-old Evan, his older brother Dick, and their parents, the event contested concerns whether or not Dad promised Evan ice cream for dessert if he ate a good dinner. Towards the end of dinner, Evan attempts to remind Dad about the promise (Ochs, 1994, p. 116):

Evan: YOU 'MEMBER I COULD HAVE A—

Dad is occupied talking to Dick and Evan has to repeat his reminder to Dad and then to Mom:

DADDY? YOU ('MEMBER) IF I EAT A GOOD DINNER  
I—

... ((Evan is tapping Dad's arm for attention))

MO:MMY Mommy.—you—you 'member—( um ) if I eat a  
good ... dinner I could have a ice cream

At this point Dad contests Evan's memory, while the rest of the family side with Evan:

Dad: An ice cream?—Who said that

Evan: You

Dick: You

(0.4 pause)

Mom: Oooooooo ((laughing))hehe

Dad: I didn't say that

Dick: Remember?—he—you said "Daddy—could I have a  
i:cecream?"

...

Dad: Where was I?

...

Dad: I don't even remember telling you that—

What was I doing when?

Dick: Daddy I'll tell you the *exact* words you said.

Dad: Tell m- What was I doing—where *was* I first of all?

Dick: You were sitting right in that chair where you are now.  
(0.4 pause)

Mother: ((*laughing*)) hehehaha—It's *on film*—they have you.

In this exchange, it is not enough for Evan to have remembered Dad's promise or for Evan to have the supported recall of his older brother. Dad denies the remembered event and demands the exact details as positive proof. In the face of Dad's challenge, the children supply further evidence of the remembered event. Dick tells him he can quote his exact words and cites the precise locale of the promise: "You were sitting right in that chair where you are now." Mom, who first signals Dad's sinking position with her incriminating "Oooooooo" and snickering, provides the clinching source of evidence, namely, that the researchers have captured this entire episode on film. Her comment "They have you" may be interpreted to mean both that the researchers have Dad on tape and that the children have Dad boxed into a corner.

In this family interaction, a child's memory prevails, but often this is not the case, particularly when children are unable to garner support from more mature persons: In dyadic adult-child encounters, for example, children's rememberings often give way to adult reformulations, backed by their authoritative status in the family. This phenomenon is the object of focus in family therapies, in which parental accounts frequently prevail over those of children (Aronsson & Cederborg, 1994; Cederborg, 1994; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). In their study of Swedish family therapy, Aronsson and Cederborg articulated the linguistic and interactional resources that family members routinely bring to their talk to display authoritative stance, including evidential adverbs like *actually* and *absolutely* and recruitment of authoritative support, as in the following narrative dispute between adolescent Sam and his father (Cederborg, 1994, p. 126):

Father: Your clothing allowance was suspended for five months because you consistently spent it on things other than clothes, and then went and asked your mother to buy you clothes.

Sam: That's **not actually true**.

Father: **That's ABSOLUTELY true, ask your mother.**

Another consistent marker of high certainty is reference to *exact numbers*. For instance, Sam and his father conflict in their accounts of the amount of time that Sam devoted to studying, Sam supports his position that he has indeed studied hard by specifying the exact time he spent on this task:

Sam: The week before I went back I did 2.5 hours every day revising for my exams.

Of note here is that not only does he use numbers, he formulates the number as a statistic—2.5—as if he had arithmetically calculated average time per day across number of days studied. Sam's father is not to be outdone by such displays. He himself gets into the numbers game, claiming:

Father Three days you didn't do anything AT ALL. You were watching television all day and went off to Tom's in the afternoon.

Sam and his father continue to clash over the truth:

Sam: That just ISN'T true

Father: It IS true,

Sam: No.

At this point, father not only appeals to other authorities, he specifies the exact number who he believes will back him up:

Father: Well three people will tell you it is.

Displays of relative certainty and displays of positive and negative affect are the building blocks of identities. Each display of high certainty in the dispute between Sam and his father may be seen as an attempt to establish themselves as authorities and at the same time establish the addressee as a liar or culprit. Sam and his father become gridlocked in their unwillingness to accept the identities they have attempted to assign one another. Therapists work to establish a more balanced dialogue between parental and child perspectives on past events. This process involves helping family members relinquish their sense of absolute certainty about what they remember, in part through the therapist's modeling of less absolute stances and in part through making explicit the subjectivity and malleability of memory.

Sam and his father are not alone in their sense that their narrative tells the true story. Eyewitness testimonies, for example, are used in court to establish what actually happened. Research, however, suggests that memory of eyewitnessed events is affected by prior life experiences and biases and by postevent experiences, reflections, and conversations, including the testimony of others and the displayed dispositions of lawyers (Loftus, 1979). Loftus and her colleagues (Loftus, 1979, 1980; Loftus & Ketcham, 1991) conducted *misinformation* experiments, in which participants (generally college students) are shown videos of simulated accidents

and crimes. These studies demonstrated that witnesses are highly suggestible and can be led into modifying their perceptions through questioning techniques that contain presuppositions (e.g., "Did you see *the* dent in the car?", rather than "Did you see a dent?").

The issue of veracity versus subjectivity of narrative and memory plagues clinicians, litigators, and philosophers, among others. For those who believe there is a truth to recall, an important question is: Can a past truth ever be accessed? Kundera (1995, pp. 128–129) airs perhaps the most despairing response to this issue:

Try to reconstruct a dialogue from your own life, the dialogue of a quarrel or a dialogue of love. The most precious, the most important situations are utterly gone. Their abstract sense remains. ... perhaps a detail or two, but the acousticovisual concreteness of the situation in all its continuity is lost ... And not only is it lost but we do not even wonder at this loss. We are resigned to losing the concreteness of the present ... Remembering is not the negative of forgetting. Remembering is a form of forgetting ... We die without knowing what we have lived.

For those who are more optimistic about the recoverability of memory, a driving question is: How can we ascertain the accuracy of a memory? Is resistance to suggestion and refusal to modify one's account indicative of truth? The resistance displayed by Sam and his father suggests that being impervious is no assurance of accurate recall. Is implicit memory in the form of, for example, somatic sensations, fragmented flashbacks, or dreams indexical of the true occurrence of a past event? Unanswered, this question remains hotly contested (Sarbin, 1995). Although some believe that therapists or clients themselves can induce implicit memories (creating false memories) and that behavioral manifestations can be feigned, others insist on their unequivocal authenticity (e.g., Loftus, 1980; Terr, 1994). The issue has profound emotional and legal consequences for the lives of would-be victims and perpetrators. What are the consequences for one's sense of reality and self-identity when one's memory of even seemingly insignificant events is repeatedly overruled? Or when one becomes convinced that an emotionally significant event did not happen or happened in a radically different manner than one's memory? The risks can include social isolation, persecution, and excruciating self-doubt, which are frequently associated with psychiatric disorders.

There is no simple resolution of the tension between subjectivity and truth of a remembered past. This tension may be an inherent property of selfhood. As Bergson (1911) noted, and others like Kundera (1981, 1985, 1995) and Ricoeur (1988) later concurred, we can't reflect upon ourselves in the present, as we experience the moment. Rather, the nonpresent—the past and the possible—is the modality for self-making. As Bruner (1987, p. 12) noted: "We seem to have no other way of describing 'lived time' save in the form of a narrative. Knowledge of past and

potential selves in turn is grounded in beliefs about the past and the possible and in our assumption that these beliefs are true. The activity of self-reflection, however, also engenders the awareness that beliefs vary in certainty, can be contested, and are vulnerable to change. As such, the process of grounding ourselves is infused with doubt and motion. Havel (1988, p. 225) alluded to this dynamic when he reflected: "man is the only creature who is both a part of being (and thus a bearer of its mystery), and aware of that mystery as a mystery. He is both the question and the questioner, and cannot help being so." We come to define ourselves as we grapple with our own and others' ambiguous emotions and events. As a result, uncertainty as well as certainty plays an important role in configuring selves. Paradoxically, we are perhaps most intensely cognizant of ourselves when we are unsure of ourselves, including our memories. The tension between certainty and doubt drives narrative activity in pursuit of an authentic remembered self.

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