

Identity Narrative as an Unconscious Scaffold for Human Autobiography

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Abstract

Over the past years, a multi-disciplinary literature on the significance of personal narratives in autobiography and identity has emerged. This subject has been of interest to authors in the fields of humanities, psychology, and medicine alike. In this paper, we are proposing the term Identity Narrative (IdN) to define a cognitive and emotional framework that serves as an implicit (unconscious) scaffolding of memory on which to build human autobiography. The authors first classify narratives into external (universal history, the humanities, culture) and internal (autobiography, based on personal experiences, both directly and indirectly, through identification and education). All philosophy and social commentary has utilized history for the purposes of prediction and meaning-making. Personalities including Aristotle, St. Augustine, Rousseau, Freud, Marx, Spengler, and Benjamin Franklin have reread history to gain insight about human nature. History has inspired the enlightenment and renaissance of a new reality for humanity. It is widely known that history can also be misused to justify aggression and human suffering. The use of history to create deep convictions that annihilate moral imperatives is only possible because of unconsciously consolidated internal narratives, the IdN. IdN is reshaped through life, both by “bottom-up” acquisition of information, as well as a “top-down” learning model, which includes the following circumstances: (a) sudden insight and awareness; (b) experiences with high emotional valence; (c) high frequency of repetition; and (d) prolonged duration of exposure. In this way, IdN, a form of relatively stable

unconscious, anoetic memory, provides a “first-person” experience to autobiography. Autobiography then, becomes part of auto-noetic consciousness, the human ability to mentally time travel and have self-knowledge. IdN parallels lifelong growth and development, language acquisition, and maturing of attachment. The extensive brain activation during communication and speech, revealed by neuroimaging studies, will be referred to as the “communication beltway.” We hypothesize that the alternation in activation between the default mode (midline structures) of the brain (previously associated with the Self) and the language brain creates a platform that encodes crucial components of IdN throughout life. In this way, IdN, autobiographical memory, and the language brain are parts of a larger biological substrate of social affiliations.

Keywords: identity, narrative, unconscious, scaffold, human, autobiography

Introduction

Narrative Identity and Identity Narrative (IdN)

Human consciousness is linked to our capacity to keep history. Our ability and need to keep a timeline between past, present, and future necessitates the creation of stories and human history¹. Indeed, human history starts with telling of stories and fairytales. In some languages the word for the field of history and the word for story are interchangeable [“Geschichte” (Ger.), “L’histoire” (Fr.)]. Through stories, all cultures provide a narrative for the origin of the world (Eliade, 1998).

The word Narrative comes from “gna” (Sanskrit) meaning knowledge, “gnarus” (Latin) and “narrare” (Latin) meaning to tell (Abbott, 2002).^[1] Contributions over the past century have pointed to the significance of a person’s narrative in creating a cohesive personal history. The term *Narrative identity* is commonly associated with the work of French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, referring to the life story that an individual develops consciously by creating an integration of life events into a coherent narrative. In more clinical contexts, narrative identity is a part of a conscious autobiographical integration of life events. We are proposing the new term “Identity Narrative” (“IdN”) to refer to an implicit unconscious type of memory that serves as support for identity and the self.

Identity Narrative and Autobiographical Memory:

Squire (1995) distinguished between declarative (conscious recollection) and non-declarative (without conscious sense of “pastness”) memory. Non-declarative, or implicit memory, has been traditionally associated with “habit” or procedural, automatic tasks. Tulving’s contributions (1972, 2002) on memory have delineated the differences between declarative semantic memories (facts) and declarative episodic memories (events). A subtype of episodic memories is the autobiographical memory (AM). Autobiographical memory gradually develops during preschool years. There is a large body of developmental, clinical, and theoretical literature on AM.

¹ Keeping a timeline is specific to auto-noetic consciousness of Homo sapiens sapiens (Leffert, 2018).

Autobiographical memory is seen as a quintessential attribute that provides identity to a person. However, from a neurobiological point of view, AM as a subtype of memory of personal events alone, could hardly fulfill its function of maintaining personality stability and predictability. Curiously, little has been written about the role of procedural memory in maintaining personality stability.

We propose that Identity Narrative (“IdN”), as a dimension of procedural memory, a form of the unconscious, consists of encoded information of a variety of origins, which are gradually retained as implicit (procedural) memories. IdN provides AM with implicitly encoded, predictable patterns of reactions to the environment which first develop in a dyadic relationship with caregivers. IdN is most actively developed during the preschool years, beginning with the time of the childhood amnesia but continues to expand and reshape throughout life.

We propose that IdN is a contemporary form of the unconscious. Seen in this context, the unconscious has a very specific evolutionary role. As a form of procedural memory linked to autobiography, it allows for the “anoetic” consciousness, which creates a profound and constant presence of “who we are.” IdN creates an early narrative, “a way of being,” rather than “a way of remembering.” “A way of being” is created by parental interactions, attachment, cultural environments, and life experience. In addition, temperamental factors and epigenetics may have a significant role in shaping IdN (Novac et al, 2017).

Thus seen in this context, the unconscious is charged with background constancy that, for better or for worse, provides an intergenerational and culturally cohesive role. This is supported by evidence that life-events, especially interactive experiences from ages 0 to 3, which an individual has no explicit memory of, are stored and influence a person’s development and future personality (Kernberg, 2015). Unlike pure autobiography and self-awareness, IdN, as part of anoetic consciousness, is present in vertebrate animals (Panksepp, 1998).

In humans, IdN stores a set of implicit memories prior to the emergence of autobiographical memory during ages three to five. The early “uploads” of IdN components serve as a basic framework, a permanent unconscious scaffolding for the further acquisition of autobiographical memories and the conscious autobiographical self. Throughout life, IdN continues to be reshaped by life events (Novac, Bota, & Blinder, 2017). There seems to be an ongoing reciprocal exchange between the unconscious IdN and AM. Previous work has indicated that the function of the “self” is associated with activation of midline brain structures (Panksepp & Northoff, 2009). In addition we have proposed the term “Communication beltway” for the extensive bilateral brain stimulation during interactive speech (Novac & Bota, 2014). We have hypothesized that the alternation in activation between the default mode (midline structures) of the brain and the “Communication beltway” creates a neurobiological platform that encodes crucial components of IdN throughout life. In a previous contribution, we also proposed that throughout life, the reshaping of IdN occurs

through a variety of mechanisms, depending on social circumstances: (a) sudden insight and awareness of a specific important life event and/or self-awareness (the “Eureka” moment); (b) any experiences with high emotional valence, as catecholamines secreted during emotional moments have a memory consolidating effect (McGaugh, 1983); (c) high frequency of repetition; and (d) prolonged duration of exposure (like the years spent in formalized education which shape identity) (Novac, Tuttle, Bota, Yau, & Blinder, 2017).

As IdN operates at an unconscious level, it encompasses a large number of functions, including: attachment, interactive restoration, acquisition of traits, reshaping of reactivity, etc. It also provides a stabilizing effect on autobiographical memory. In order to do so, it has to undergo a continuous *adaptive* process. Biologically, adaptation encompasses two separate components: *mutation* and *selection*. By means of mutation, new traits or structural components are created in time. These are all “developmental opportunities.” Through the process of selection, as time passes, only the most functionally useful “opportunities” are maintained. The unused components are gradually eliminated. Prior contributions that cover the unconscious hardly considered mutation and selection as active mechanisms. IdN, as a form of the unconscious memory, may undergo a continuous process of adaptation through active mutation and selection. This occurs through two major mechanisms: a “bottom-up” and “top-down.”

A. The Bottom-Up Mechanism:

Preverbally, IdN incorporates the previously described match/mismatch/repair paradigm during mother/infant interaction (Cavelzani & Tronick, 2016). This incorporation into the unconscious IdN mirrors the “predictive cycle” paradigm of procedural learning (Tadlock, 2005). This early implicit information becomes part of anoetic consciousness. Thus early acquisitions of IdN remain unconscious and are the basis of automatic associations and actions, with little access to awareness.

B. The Top-Down Mechanism:

After verbal acquisition, IdN also includes the acquisition of self-related skills (within the “acquisition of skills” paradigm of procedural learning) (Fitts, 1954), which is dominant throughout life. Through the “acquisition of skills” implicit (procedural) learning paradigm, newly acquired conscious, explicit memories of life events are incorporated into the unconscious, implicit memory pool, e.g. the IdN.

Functionally, the main role of IdN is the organization and holding of conscious autobiographical information. Its priority is autobiographical information-storage and retrieval in a *predictable and consistent* manner, to create stability of personality. It also allows for the storing of autobiography in the form of a meaningful “logical story,” a narrative. IdN provides a personal point of reference toward that narrative, common sense, and meaning for any story. Yet, IdN is unconscious.

IdN provides a variety of psychodynamic functions including defense mechanisms (against anxiety and panic). It facilitates attachment and thus allows for the expansion of personal development, social bonds, cohesion and communal kinship, which all promote survival.

Childhood amnesia, the first three to five years of life, for which most of people have little or no recollection, is the period during which IdN is formed and built through a gradual acquisition of implicit, experiential memories. Processes that occur during childhood amnesia do influence the emergence of autobiographical memory (Nelson & Fivush, 2004).

In a previous contribution (Novac, et al., 2017b), we proposed the coordinates of IdN and its functions in relation to childhood amnesia. While IdN (the unconscious) is anoetic, it makes the acquisition of the features of autobiography, and its auto-noetic conscious, possible: “Remembering that it happened to me,” the auto-noetic experience (Tulving, 2002); the linking of past experiences to the present; the ability to “own” the changes in one’s own self (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007); the ability to create a personal timeline and observe an organized manner in creating a personal chronology (Habermas, 2007; Habermas & Bluck, 2000).¹

The Relevance of Narrative Identity:

Phenomenologist, Paul Ricoeur’s extensive contribution on “Narrative Identity” constitutes fundamental knowledge for the study of autobiography. Consciously, a stable life narrative identity seems to emerge around adolescence (McLean, 2005; McLean & Breen, 2009).

Narrative Identity research elicits personal narrative from subjects that code the stories in areas such as redemption, contamination, communion, agency, etc. (McAdams, D, 2001). The function of meaning-making is particularly valuable in psychological healing and trauma recovery (Pennebaker, 1993, 2000). Narrative Identity with its coherent memory of one’s past is also crucial in the mechanism of constructing a coherent autobiography (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). In this sense, Narrative Identity is the organized conscious and functional component of a person’s autobiography.

Paul Ricoeur pointed to the fact that humans tend to draw past events together into a meaningful narrative, a process he called “emplotment.” To Ricoeur, attribution of causation, and explanation of one’s personal past, stands as the basis for moral responsibility. Therefore, narrative and by implication, Narrative Identity, are parts of establishing a moral universe. In Ricoeur’s analysis, Narrative Identity is closely linked to the concept of time. Ricoeur recognizes a “prenarrative level of understanding referred to as “prefiguration.” He posits that the prenarrative level of understanding stems from the fact that an individual consciousness is inhabited by

¹ The timeline may be part of an implicit organization of IdN.

its culture as a “symbolic whole.” (Ricoeur, 1975, 1978 1984, 1985, 1988). Regarding the future, “inchoate narrativity” integrates life events into potential narrative that creates a potential for action and decision-making. This creates a meaning for the future and the possibility of choice-making.

We are proposing the term Identity Narrative (IdN) to designate the implicit (unconscious) memory component that supports and creates a relative stability for conscious autobiographical narrative identity. In this sense, Narrative Identity and our new concept of IdN are distinct, yet closely linked.

Differences Between Narrative Identity and Identity Narrative (IdN):

Here we are presenting a broad delineation of the difference between these two concepts.

Narrative Identity is one’s consciously recalled and reprocessed life story: a part of autobiography. IdN is unconscious. There is evidence that its roots begin prenatally and develop before verbal acquisition.

Narrative Identity is structurally linked to time, cause and effect, and coherence. IdN tends to be timeless, may not follow cause and effect logic, and includes primary process thinking.

Narrative Identity has an ego-sustaining effect and explicitly defines the self in relation to others. It facilitates self-examination. IdN arises out of early dyadic relationships, evolutionarily meant to have reparative functions. It molds itself by virtue of the nature of infant-caregiver interactions. IdN is a form of the unconscious with an implicit record of interactive experiences. Alternatively, it may incorporate dysfunctional interactions which shape the developing self.

Narrative Identity also includes at a basic stage a “pre-narrative” level of understanding (“pre-figuration”) which stems from consciousness being inhabited by culture as a “symbolic whole.” IdN focuses entirely on a social, interactive “pre-narrative” aspect. It is unconscious and includes elaborate components with a role in non-verbal communication, trauma-reparative resiliency, and therefore, has a crucially stabilizing effect for autobiography. This has not been previously covered by the literature on narrative identity.

Narrative Identity is a human attribute related to the cultural environment. IdN is a neurobiological and clinical concept related to non-declarative (unconscious) memory and anoetic consciousness. It is present to different degrees in evolved animals. It is linked to the evolution of the brain.

Ricoeur’s concept of “pre-narrative” presents many similar features to IdN. The “pre-narrative” and the IdN, with their underlying deep predisposition to grasping and acquisition of specific new information, both evoke Chomsky’s “deep structure” for acquisition of human language (Chomsky, 1965)).

In conclusion, in our view, Narrative Identity is based on the inherent human drive to cultivate auto-noetic consciousness through narratives (stories), both on cultural and personal levels. IdN, with its early structuring function stemming from implicit memory consolidation, provides a relative stability to an individual's Narrative Identity and the autobiographical self. From a clinical point of view, the term autobiographical memory is preferred. From a philosophical point of view, identity is examined through Narrative Identity.

Narratives in Social Contexts:

We are proposing a classification of narratives into two types: External and Internal Narratives.

A) External Narratives (EN), the stories in society about people and places, which is history. The discipline of narrative inquiries, a qualitative type of analysis, is also related to EN. External Narratives, the recording of human history in all of its forms has emerged as an expression of auto-noetic (self-aware) consciousness, the ability and need to maintain a timeline between past, present, and future.

In the ancient world, Herodotus, the father of history, used biographical narratives, the stories of individual people, to reconstruct events (retroactively), thus creating history. Initially, narrative inquiry was used to also predict patterns. In the ancient world, predicting the patterns of the flooding of the river Nile, which created fertile soil, could predict the quality of crops. Nevertheless, the major role of history in society is its participation in both group identity and individual identity of its members. Today we still study history to understand the present and the future.

External narratives shape individual internal narratives in society. They are included and relied upon in many disciplines, such as literature, philosophy, ethics, and culture. The very purpose of having a universal culture and literature is based precisely on the natural need of humanity to have common denominating stories. Characters developed by William Shakespeare and Honoré de Balzac do not just portray segments of society as they saw them. Socrates' claim that "An unexamined life is not worth living" is based precisely on the ability to learn, assimilate and then re-route the contents of our examinations and the resultant moral lessons to implicit memory. Absent such examination, a fictive self may result. Goethe, Schiller, Victor Hugo, André Gide, and Marcel Proust have all created characters or provided insights about how we humans function internally.

External narrative can also create social cohesion under a variety of circumstances. The need of coherent meaning in a common story is also expressed in the spontaneous creation of narratives in groups when information about the future is not readily available. Rumors and gossip are spontaneous creations of a new reality. They are readily accepted as truth in order to fill in missing information about the present and future. Otherwise, such informational gaps can create uncertainties about the future (Sunstein, 2009). Though often based on falsehood, gossip and rumor narratives create meaning that is vital in maintaining stable and trusting relationships in society (Novac, McEwan & Bota, 2014). So intense is the drive for creating meaning in relationship based on these narratives, that ethics and religions have imposed

mandates and regulations to limit the potential damaging repercussions of unchecked narratives.

B) Internal Narratives (IN) refer to personal history Based on recorded or memorized personal experiences. Human personal experiences constitute our autobiographical memory. But humans (and in fact, all mammals) have the capacity to record events *beyond any full awareness* of the recall. It is this aspect of internal narratives that constitute Identity Narrative (IdN). Thus, internal narratives, “memories,” are comprised of individual experiences, sometimes personal stories, which often are the building blocks of autobiographical memory (Novac 2013). Internal narratives include the unconscious IdN and the conscious autobiographical memory including narrative identity.

To the study of social events, both internal and external narratives are relevant. The ties between internally created narratives by group situations as shaped by historical events will influence, at any given time, the collective narrative of a group. Such a collective narrative is still the resulting effect of concomitant narrative reshaping of groups in society or an entire nation. Internal group narratives, the potentiation and playing of beliefs will influence voting in democracies. Certain factors, like commonly held beliefs, misperception or the presence of financial deprivations can unify internal narratives of groups or an entire nation. At crucial vulnerable moments in history, populist leaders can create a new, external narrative by finding a common enemy or a wide promise of deliverance.

This is a social phenomenon that is well known to political historians. When seen in the psychological context through which internal and external narratives become synchronized, it becomes easier to comprehend how irrational behavior and significant social shifts can be activated. It is the fact that the external narratives (e.g., history, politics), become linked to IdN and autobiography, which carry deeply ingrained survival mechanisms. The psychological energy, the drive attached to survival behavior, cannot be overemphasized. History has shown that such major political upheavals can rapidly escalate with grave consequences for world peace.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have proposed the concept of Identity Narrative as an unconscious memory scaffolding for autobiographical memory. We are proposing that social phenomena be examined through the light of historical narratives of a nation or a group and their impact on autobiography of individuals.

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