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SELF-NARRATIVES AS SOURCES OF MOTIVATION

People use story structure to interpret self-relevant facts. Self-narratives provide two motivational mechanisms for a person's behavior. First, developing self-narrative operates motivationally as an "unfinished task". It prompts the person to decisions that close up the activated self-narrative plot. Second, self-narratives regulate processes of construing a person's goals, as well as emotions that energize striving for these goals.

One of the ways people understand the world is by creating stories. It is an unconscious constructive process. Subjectively, stories are outside us; they just happen in the world. In fact, however, it is our mind that imposes narrative meaning on a stream of ongoing events by ordering them in categories of beginnings, plots, and endings. In the same way, people understand the self and self-related events and facts by construing self-narratives. A self-narrative means a story where the self plays a main, or a significant, role. Therefore, our self-identifications may take the form of self-narratives.

Usually, an individual possesses a set of mental procedures to construct stories within a given life domain. It is sometimes easy for an observer to detect stable, repetitive elements in stories that an individual constructs to understand the stream of events, including the self-related ones, within a given life domain, no matter how these events differ from one another. It may be assumed that there are narrative schemata, or self-narrative schemata, that provide such stable procedures.

This narrative character of understanding has several implications for cognitive processes, including attention allocation, ways of interpretation, evaluations of social facts, and their memorization. However, when the self is an important character in a narrative, the narrative provides not only the frame for understanding events and the self but also provides a context for the development of a person's aims, plans, and decisions. It also organizes a person's emotional processes. In other words, narrative self-understanding generates distinctive motivation, and provides a distinctive mechanism of action control. Be-

fore I elaborate this idea, let me specify the concepts of self-narratives and the self-narrative schema. The general framework for these concepts is provided by the cognitive schema approach (e.g., Rumelhart, 1984).

Cognitive schema and narratives

Within this perspective, understanding processes are constructive. Our mind is not like a mirror that reflects reality. It creates the reality, or more properly, the reality as we understand it. The human mind constructs not only a strictly cognitive (or descriptive) understanding of reality, but also – which will become important later on – a content of the person's feelings and intentions in response to this reality. These constructive processes occur on the basis of incoming stimuli and rules of their interpretation that are embedded in the person's knowledge structures.

A concept that accentuates the constructive character of knowledge is called a cognitive schema. A cognitive schema is a model of reality in the same sense as category of a concept. But at the same time a schema of a given object is also a mental procedure to understand this object (an event, a person, a behavior) in terms of this schema, as its particular exemplar. The point here is that the knowledge system is not a passive collection of information representing the world, but is primarily an active system of procedures for interpreting the world.

A schema of A TABLE is not just a collection of our general knowledge about some class of objects, but it is also a set of cognitive procedures for interpreting objects as tables. A schema of LOVE is a procedure for interpretation of some interpersonal relations as exemplars of love. If I do not possess a schema of A TABLE, and LOVE, no tables and no loving relationships exist around me. But what happens if I do possess these schemata?

When activated, a schema of A TABLE works as a system of specific expectations. For example, the subschema of A LEG functions as expectations of a specific configuration of perceptual stimuli that are in a specific spatial relation (modeled by A TABLE schema) to another configuration matching A TABLE-TOP subschema. These expectations regulate our perception processes. They may end up in "seeing a table before me". The phases of perception of a given object are comprised of processes matching the schema-generated expectations with the appropriate perceptual data.

Schema-generated expectations initiate and regulate processes of information seeking, interpretations, production of inferences and memory recollections. When the configuration of stimuli matches the expectations, the process ends up with a perception (recollection, understanding) of a given object, event or situation as a particular instance of an activated schema. There is growing data that confirm this schema-regulated character of cognitive processes. Good illustrations are provided by studies revealing time-ordered sequences of a perception process, and the strong dependency of these sequences on the content of activated knowledge structures (e.g., Brewer & Nakamura, 1984).

A narrative schema is a kind of cognitive schema, and a narrative (or a story) is a kind of understanding. Within the narrative frame reality is understood and remembered as a collection of stories that have specified beginnings and ends, and that are organized around some „narrative plots". The narrative is a very universal, human form of understanding and representing mentally the reality, both at the individual and cultural level (Bruner, 1986, 1991; Howard, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986). Narratives have a universal structure the

basic components of which are: a) the protagonist/s/, b) their goal/s/, c) problem /complication/, and d) events making the history of the problem resolution (e.g., Mandler, 1984). This core narrative structure is as follows: *the protagonist with a given intention meets a complication and tries to overcome it*. Recent studies suggest that an important part of social understanding processes, like impression formation, moral judgments, opinion and decision making, have a narrative form, and the relevant social knowledge structures, e.g., moral knowledge, may have narrative organization (e.g. Bruner & Lucariello, 1987; Gergen & Gergen, 1985; Pennington & Hastie, 1992; Pennington & Hastie, 1993; Wyer, 1995; Vitz, 1990).

Self-narratives

Self-narratives develop when the self is playing an important role in a story plot. Self-narrative is a way we understand ourselves within a given context. Self-narrative is a form of a person's self-identity, especially when the events, values and behavior represented in the narrative structure are highly important personally. There are characteristic constraints in the content of self-narratives which are created by a given individual. Usually these constraints are life-domain specific. For example, in verbalized self-stories collected from our subjects, the kind of characters, their motives, kinds of intrigues connecting these characters, and kind of beginnings and finales of „stories that happen” in a peer life domain, were relatively stable and characteristic for a given individual (Trzebinski, 1995).

There are several possible sources of these constraints. For example, cultural standards, norms, and ideology, literature, or religion, provide (more or less explicitly) models for an individual's self-narratives (e.g., Scheibe, 1986). There are also individual internal rules for self-narrative construction. We assume that these rules have the form of self-narrative schemata, and that these schemata represent an important part of a person's self-knowledge. In many cases they may be considered as more or less creative individual transformations of cultural inspirations.

These schemata are revealed in repetitive themes of self-narratives constructed within a given domain of the person's life, despite different situational contexts. Persistence (sometimes pathological) of self-narrative contents is described by clinicians and personality psychologists, for example, in Berne's concept of „personal scripts” (Berne, 1972; Steiner, 1974), or in Carlson's „nuclear scenes” and their later transformations (Carlson, 1981), or in many other naturalistic studies, like inquiries in „self-stories” (McAdams, 1985).

The self-narrative schemata provide the frame within which events are creatively, but at the same time characteristically for an individual, interpreted and structured as components of self-narratives. This schema delineates, or even predetermines, the characteristics of actors, content of their motives, the complications they encounter, and the possibilities of overcoming them. It functions like the „ground scenario” for self-narratives, by providing general rules on what might be the building blocks for the narratives, how to impose a structure on them, and thus how to construct a meaningful unit – a story. The self-narrative schema does this powerful work by channelizing the content of expectations, and by directing attention allocation, and content of interpretations, assumptions, as well as information we are seeking for. In this way the self-narrative schema makes an individual mentally ready to:

- a) identify himself/herself, as well as other partners, as possessors of specific intentions,
- b) expect and identify particular kinds of complications around him/her,

c) expect and identify conditions, and probabilities of their resolution, within a particular problem space.

As a consequence, understanding processes have a global, top-down character. A person understands ongoing events and own role within them not in a piece-by-piece fashion, but by imposing on them a global structure of the most tentative story plot, and then by attending to and interpreting incoming facts within this frame. The characteristics of the plot and their components are specified by the self-narrative schemata to a certain degree only. For example, plots may be specified only in terms of their initial conditions, or potentialities, rather than in an explicit way. It reflects the general character of schema processing and results in creative and flexible, but also predetermined and organized, understanding (Rumelhart, 1984).

At a given time, for a given individual, some self-narratives are open, in the sense that they are still developing: Their plot structure is not finished yet, and therefore they absorb an individual's attention and mental resources. Some self-narratives are closed, in the sense that their plots have been resolved, and their narrative line ended in the past. The closed self-narratives are stored in memory, and may be recollected creatively, when new relevant facts appear. The stored content of open or closed self-narratives is activated by relevant stimuli and then function as a working memory system for processing incoming information. It provides a „top-of-the-head” framework for interpreting incoming data, for simulating possible scenarios, and possible selves, as well as for planning and decision making.

Self-narratives and motivation

Up to this moment self-narratives have been described as knowledge structures that organize understanding processes in the same way as other narratives, for example, narratives constructed to understand a person's social environment. However, the self-narrative schemata and self-narratives play also a crucial motivational role. There are two mechanisms of narrative motivation.

The first one is cognitive in character and resembles the mechanism of a “task motivation” studied by Lewin and his collaborators. It may be considered also as a special case of a “schema instantiation” mechanism of understanding processes (Rumelhart, 1984). If a stream of events activates a self-narrative schema, a set of expectations start to organize understanding processes within a story frame. There is thus a tendency to interpret incoming stimuli in line with these expectations, as constituents of the developing story. One's own position within the ongoing events is also interpreted as an important constituent of the story plot. The point is that within this activated narrative frame the person's decisions, ensuing actions, and their consequences are building blocks – sometimes very important ones – for the developing story. It means that in this framework the person is motivated to move in a particular way within ongoing events because these movements elaborate, fulfill, or close up the content of the self-story or important episodes of this story. In this way the activated self-narrative schema not only directs a person's understanding of the past, ongoing and foreseen events as components of a particular story, but also pushes him or her toward specific aspirations, decisions, and actions, thus to fulfill this story line. It may be said that the search for a meaning and maintaining the meaning is the underlying principle of this motivational mechanism.

One consequence of this mechanism is that the content of one's own intentions may develop during and within the more global processes of story construction. Narrative understanding of the complications and possible solutions may facilitate the formation and clarification of one's own aims, plans, and decisions as well as standards of action control. In this way personal decisions and actions are inspired by, and take strength from, ongoing self-narratives.

There is also a second way that self-narratives affect a person's motivation and action. The important constituent of self-narrative schemata are self-goal categories (as specific subschemata). The self-goal categories represent an individual as a possessor (a carrier) of particular standards he or she is striving for. Self-goal categories regulate processes of a person's self-understanding, namely, processes of constructing own aspirations, standards, ideals, etc. In short, a person considers himself or herself as somebody who wants, is afraid of, and plans or is acting toward something.

The most important distinctive characteristics in the self-goal categories is that they regulate not only a person's cognitive processes, but also the content of that person's motivational and emotional processes. It may then be said that self-goal categories consist of two kinds of procedures: (a) ones for descriptive understanding of the self ("who am I"), and (b) ones for construction of emotional and intentional components of self experiences. I will call the first one "descriptive" and the second "hot" procedures. The "hot" procedures direct interpretation of a person's intentional states, such as a desire to achieve something, or a fear of attending to a given state of affairs. They also direct formation of emotional reactions related to goal attainment or non-attainment, as well as correlated emotional reactions of a hope or anxiety. By intentional, and emotional reaction I mean not only inner experience, but also public manifestation of these reactions. We may say that "hot" procedures furnish intentional actions with the necessary energetic background.

In summary, within the self-narrative framework, *I understand myself* as a person who wants, who is afraid, or who hates something, and – as a consequence – I am motivated to take particular decisions and actions. Moreover, and this is particularly important, in this self-narrative framework *I really feel* these desires, obligations, hopes, and fears, and because of this, "narrative" motivation is based on a solid experiential background.

The assumption that intentions and emotions – at least some of them – are products of mental constructive processes may contradict the common sense view. However, some psychologists studying emotions and many clinicians provide strong support for this assumption. For example, Averill (1991) provided a convincing picture of grief and pride emotional reactions as products of cognitive procedures that have social origin and social support. It appears that a motivational or emotional reaction experienced by an individual is not a simple reflection of external or physiological stimuli. Its content is constructed by a person's knowledge system activated at the moment, on the basis of incoming stimuli, the context, and related memories. A person has to learn how to construct the contents of fears, desires, emotions of pride, shame, or hope within a specific context. It is mostly an unconscious, complex social learning process. When it is completed, the socially based "hot" procedures for construction of motivational and emotional contents are established. They are embedded in the self-schemata related to a given domain of life, mainly in the self-narrative schemata. For example, the self-in-family schema consists not only of procedures to understand self-related family events, but also of procedures for imposing meaning on one's own emotional and intentional reactions within the family setting.

Self-narratives and self-narrative schemata are thus powerful sources of a person's motivation for two reasons. A given decision and action is a necessary and subjectively obvious step for a person when his or her self-identity and understanding of the ongoing events includes appropriate wants, and when he or she is "really experiencing" the corresponding emotional states. What happens, however, if self-narrative schemata don't consist of the "hot" procedures to construct appropriate emotional reactions?

Self-narrative schemata without "hot" procedures

One way of understanding socialization processes is as teaching and training "hot" procedures for structuring inner experiences in line with "descriptive" self-identities. But in some cases, a self-schema consists only of procedures to understand one's own person, but not to organize in an appropriate way the meaning of one's own emotions and intentional states. In such a case there are usually incongruities between the contents of our emotions and intentions on the one side, and our understanding of the situation and one's own role in it, on the other. I know I am a person who strives for or avoids something, but I don't really feel these wants or fears. My emotions and intentions don't follow the self-understanding. I may detect this incongruency subjectively in various ways, or I may be blind by using self-deceiving tactics.

Sometimes such incongruent intentional and emotional reactions are nevertheless in line with "hot" procedures but they are based on an alternative self-schema, an old one, for example. Sometimes, however, a person may not be equipped at all with elaborated procedures to construct meaningful emotions within a given social context. Let's illustrate these two cases.

I would call the first one an immigrant case. This is the case of an individual who has belonged to and identified with one nation and – by emigration, for example – begins to identify himself totally as a member of another nation. The individual builds new self-identification as someone who believes in and obeys a new group's norms and values. If this process is not completed well enough, it is possible that the person will have trouble in synchronizing the content of his emotions and intentions with the way he understands himself and self-relevant facts. Emotions and intentions may be constructed by old procedures of interpretation embedded in older self-schemata and related to former national identification. This is a special type of value conflict and we often are not aware of it. In this conflict the opposite values differ not only in content, they belong also to two different kinds of values: with and without the "hot" procedures. A case of neophyte may illustrate an extreme dissociation of emotional experiencing and descriptive self-understanding. In this case extra action may be taken to resolve this dissociation and to demonstrate new identification.

To illustrate the second kind of problem with the "hot" procedures let's take as an example an individual who enters into a new social role and has suddenly adopted a new self-identity that relates to new domains of emotional and intentional reactions. This may often be a case of a young man who has become an officer, or a young woman who has become a mother for the first time. For these persons a new self-schema has been developed, but at this early stage it might not be fully elaborated. The "hot" procedures are usually not learned so fast as "descriptive" ones. So, a world of new emotions (relevant to new social interactions, for example) is chaotic for the individual – she or he cannot orga-

It seems that it matters very much. It appeared that among those who passed the entrance exam, in comparison to those who failed, there were many more youngsters who generated 3 or more – out of 6 required – elaborated self-narratives with university&exam-relevant topics (71% of those who passed the exams in comparison to 34% of those who failed).

What is the possible underlying mechanism of this relationship?

The data show that this relationship cannot be attributed to the declared importance of university education: the two categories did not differ in this respect. It appeared also that this relationship cannot be attributed to: a) scores in high school, b) total number of spontaneously narrated self-stories, nor c) general level of their elaboration.

On the other hand, the diaries and interviews show that authors of university&exam-related stories, in comparison to authors of other stories were:

a) more rarely „distracted by other things”, when preparing for exams, or working on school tasks, within the last month,

b) more often thinking about university life, and on alternatives to the chosen discipline, and on the approaching exam, „within the last 6 months”,

c) describing more situations, and more divergent situations, that happened „within the last month”, which provoked them to think about studies and exams and eventually to do something about it,

d) more often engaged in imagining exams, university life, himself/herself as student,

e) declared fewer situations of indecisiveness and „chaotic thoughts” when approaching school or exam-related tasks and problems.

The data show that the above facts contributed to the main „narrative” effect on exam success.

In another study we asked school youngsters to write self-stories on important issues that had happened for them that year. At the declarative level, there were no differences among subjects in estimation how important school and class matters were for them. It may be said again that these subjects, like the ones in the previous study, did not differ, at least in declaration, in terms of accepted school-related values.

We were curious whether it matters for social adaptation in the school context if school events constitute the central plots of youngsters` self-stories, or not? It appeared that among the teenagers producing more school centered self-narratives there were fewer feelings of alienation from school, more intensive peer interaction, and stronger indications of well-being at school.

They also:

a) listed more adaptive reactions to typical school stresses as characteristic for them,

b) listed more memories of „total, indisputable” happiness, and/or „absolutely negative experiences” at school, and

c) their reactions to school events described in their stories were less ambivalent and more vivid emotionally.

As a general conclusion, self-narratives provide direction and support for a person’s action, in other words, they provide solid motivational mechanisms for a person’s activity. In a consequence, the person is more effective in realization of the life task. From another perspective, it seems that self-narratives may enhance the role of personal values in a person’s decisions and actions. Let me explain the presented data within the frame of the self-narrative schemata concept.

When the youngsters' life-task of "being a student" was represented as a part of self-narrative plots, their personal plans, decisions, and actions had a pre-determined place in the narrated events in the past, present and foreseen perspective. The youngsters' commitments and actions come from rich schemata that interpret in an integrated way a range of events, situations, facts, and the positions of the self within them. It may be said that within the narrative context intentions and implementation plans are chosen and maintained on a solid and diversified basis. This narrative framework makes it possible to elaborate and smoothly accommodate the content of personal wants, aspirations, decisions, and plans along the course of ongoing events.

The meaningful place of own role and decisions within ongoing and anticipated task-relevant events reduces the stage of pre-decisional immobility and conflict, mobilizes and directs attention, and therefore enforces and stabilizes the value-related activity. All these should immunize this activity against inner and outer distractions, and facilitate acts of self-commitment to approach the challenge, and to overcome envisioned complications (Gollwitzer, 1990; Kuhl, 1986).

Further, the narrative framework is optimally tuned to the processing of action data, first of all to planning and decision making. Self-narratives also provide an optimal framework for construing „possible scenarios" of future events, as well as events wanted or unwanted, including construals of „possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Content of self-narratives is composed structurally out of the same elements as mental simulations of hypothetical scenarios. Greater ability to create mental simulations of events enforces plan implementation, and enhances the attraction of delayed gratification, as well as repelling abandonment of goal implementation, and – as a consequence – enables maintaining value-oriented actions intact over time and situations (Taylor & Schneider, 1989).

Finally, self-narratives provide an ideal framework for mental simulation of self-commitments in case of troubles in intention realization. Easy-made, and mentally vivid self-commitments of this kind enforce implementation of long-term values (see: Gollwitzer, 1990).

Self-narratives are an effective and socially supported way of searching for meaning, at least in a stable social environment. They can provide a higher sense of harmony between personal values as well as of purposefulness in a surrounding events and in following one's own decisions.

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