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NARRATIVE MODE IN IMPRESSION FORMATION

One of the ways people understand the world is by creating stories. Making stories is a powerful and early acquired way an individual interprets social events, own identity and that of other persons (Bruner, 1986, 1991; Sarbin 1986; Trzebiński, 2001). Within a narrative framework a person is understood as a character of a specified history: past, ongoing, future, possible or imagined. A story context of person perception should differ from a stereotypical framework. It might be expected that central elements of narrative person impression are motives and emotions, as well as the real or possible problems he or she encounters. Narrative impressions are more individualized because narrative mode reduces the role of stereotyping in social understanding. Moreover, narrative impression processes may occur at different levels of conscious control, because those processes are narrative schema-driven. Data from our experiments support the above assumptions. The narrative mode of person data processing was activated by a priming procedure. It was contrasted with non-narrative priming and no priming condition. After the priming, the subjects were provided with data on a stimulus person. It appears that, after narrative priming, in comparison to other priming conditions, (a) trait attribution to a stimulus person is less stereotypical and (b) motive and emotion categories became more accentuated. Also, after the narrative priming, the RT of attributions made for the stimulus person is faster for non-stereotypical categories and slower for stereotypical ones, in comparison to the two contrasting priming conditions. The same result occurs when the stimulus person was presented within a story vs a trait-list frame: a story context reduces the stereotype. The RT data confirm that the narrative effect occurs also in person understanding processes, which are not consciously controlled.

Key words: narrative impression, narrative mode, priming, person data processing

People understand social reality as stories. This “narrative mode” (Bruner, 1986, 1991) is a powerful and early acquired way an individual interprets social reality and behaves within it (Sarbin, 1986; Trzebiński, 2002a, b). Within the narrative frame reality is understood in terms of plots which are composed of characters, their intentions and the problems they meet in trying to realize these intentions. Narrative knowledge and narrative understanding seem to be a major and earliest learned form of knowledge organization and functioning (Bruner &

Lucariello, 1989; Nelson, 1986, 1991; Abelson & Schank, 1995), although not the only one (Bruner, 1986). Within a narrative framework a person is understood as a character in a specified story: past, ongoing, future, possible or imagined. No matter how concrete is a mental representation of a person-in-a-story, this representation consists of several common characteristics. First of all, the central elements of its content are the motives and emotions of the person, as well as real or possible problems or troubles he or she encounters. Secondly, this content as well as the context of the person's appearance becomes individualized; moreover, the contextual characteristics are important for the overall impression of the person. In general, the narrative mode results in a more dynamic and individualized person impression, in comparison to – for example – categorical person perception, when the main task is to compare different persons on some dimensions (“*who is more attractive*”) or to find social category relevant to the target person (“*is he a policeman*”).

Seeing a person in a narrative frame may have broad consequences, including behavioral ones. In several experiments we have tried to observe some of them. In the first part of the article we will summarize experiments showing the role of the narrative mode in naturalistic social interactions and, in the second part, we will present our recent studies concerning the character of cognitive processes comprised within the narrative mode. In three experiments we have tried to check if these processes might have an automatic, effortless form and thus might be similar to other schemata-based mental processes.

Narrative helping

Presenting a story of a person who needs help may increase the probability of helping behavior, in comparison to general “scientific” information about persons in similar situation. In one of our experiments, junior high school students were informed that they would participate in an informal meeting organized by the medical service and will be asked to consider helping ill persons (Trzebiński & Zatorski, 2003). Then each subject was given randomly one of two texts. In the first one, the story of a young man was presented. He had ambitious plans for life and was in love with a girlfriend when he was told that he was ill with leukemia. He was told that the only medicine for him that might help was a transplantation of somebody's bone marrow. An alternative text dealt with general information about leukemia and the role of bone marrow transplantation in therapy (which is a typical message in programs recruiting donors in Poland). Finally, all subjects were given a declaration form and were asked to decide if they wanted to participate in a bone marrow donation program. Declaration of participation meant that anytime a person may be called to come to the medical center and donate. All subjects who declared participation was asked two days later by phone to confirm the decision. Only those

persons – among donors – who confirmed their declaration, were included in the further analysis. At the end, all subjects filled out a test measuring narrative competence, a fragment of APIS (Matczak, Jaworowska, Szustrowa & Ciechanowicz, 1995). The test consisted of several tasks of re-grouping 5 up to 7 pictures of social interactions in an ordered, meaningful way so as to form a short story within a time limit. It was assumed that the ability to impose narrative meaning on scattered episodes of social interactions indicates the level of narrative competencies in understanding social reality.

Our expectation was that after narrative presentation, the percent of declarations of donation would be higher than after a standard presentation of the illness. We also expected that this narrative effect would be stronger in those persons who exhibited higher narrative competency enabling them more easily to detect and understand the narrative content of a message.

The data confirmed that presentation of a story of an ill person – in comparison to general information about leukemia, relates to a higher percentage of declarations of help for leukemia patients, but this effect occurs almost exclusively among those persons who exhibit a higher narrative competency. This suggests that the main factor in the observed relationships is the narrative mode of understanding which was activated by the first kind of provided text. This mode was more probable to be evoked among persons who possess greater general abilities to arrange provided content into narrative structures, that is, those persons who more easily and in a more elaborated way have extracted the narrative message of the first text. The narrative mode primed by the first text provided a general frame in the decisional process to help ill persons.

The results were supported by other data. The student subjects were told that they would participate in a meeting of volunteers aimed at helping young ill persons in medical treatment (Trzebiński, 2005). This time subjects were asked to help directly a person presented during the meeting. This time the subjects were given with the same description of the target person. Subjects differed only in terms of priming: they were given three priming procedures before presentation of a target person in need: narrative, neutral, and without priming. In narrative priming, the subjects were asked to write stories illustrating certain TAT pictures. In neutral priming, the subjects were provided with names of jobs and had to group the jobs into separate categories, then to find a definition for each category. It was assumed that narrative priming would enforce the narrative way of understanding the subsequent personal data. After priming, subjects were given a written presentation of a young student with leukemia. They were told that each would have the opportunity to help this person by soliciting money by phone for her medical treatment. The data showed that narrative priming resulted in a higher percentage of declared help than did categorical priming or the no priming condition. The same pattern was found when the time spent for help was considered: narrative priming relates to more time declared for helping by phoning and solici-

iting money for the ill student. In general, it may be concluded that the narrative mode of person information processing, activated by priming, increases readiness for helping a person when she or he is in need.

Narrative understanding of a person

Why might the narrative mode of understanding a person in misfortune be so influential? There are two possible complementary explanations. The first possibility is that narratives are powerful means of empathic communication with others. This is so because: (a) the narrative mode accentuates the motives and emotions of persons in data processing and (b) narratives provide a useful framework to integrate into a meaningful vision (a story in this case) the dynamics and complexity of human motives and emotions. These two characteristics mean that empathy and identification with another person (his or her wishes, fears, plans, etc) are easier and more important in the overall process of person understanding. The more understandable emotionally situation and the more similar to us a person seems to be, the more probable is helping behavior (Piliavin, Dovidio, Gaertner & Clark, 1981; Reykowski, 1979).

The second, complementary explanation is that within the narrative framework a person, and his or her situation, is more vivid and cognitively more salient. Narratives lead to a coherent and easily visualized image of a person. The narrative perspective is ideal for integration of distinct, complex, even contradictory, facts about a person within a meaningful story that explains the changes and conflicts in that person's life. The more vivid, coherent and salient a person is, the more our attention is attracted to his or her situation (Darley & Bateson, 1973) and the more probable it is that we will apply our values and norms ("*help people in a crisis*", for example) in the case of this particular person or similar people (Schwartz, 1977).

In several experiments we tried to verify these expectations (Trzebiński & Zatorski, 2003). In the first experiment, subjects were given narrative or neutral priming, or were not subjected to any priming procedure. After the priming, the subjects were provided with a description of a young man. The description was divided into two portions, with a neutral activity between them. The two portions differed. In fact, they provided two different profiles of personality. In the first description, the person was pictured as a young, mindless and easy-going person, in the second, he was portrayed as a responsible, serious individual. The subjects were asked to describe the target person and answered several questions about him. Two independent blind judges then evaluated the descriptions of the target person on several scales.

The results showed that narrative priming, in contrast to the neutral one and the no priming condition, results in increased internal coherency and visibility of the target person, as well as complexity of description, according to judges. Narrative priming results also in an increased sense of reality and distinctness from others of the target, as reported by the subjects.

In the next experiment, after one of three priming conditions, the subjects were presented with a description of a young policeman (Trzebiński & Antczak, 2003). The label “policeman” appeared at the beginning of the person presentation. This label evokes socially shared stereotyped expectations, which include a broad spectrum of traits, attitudes and behaviors. At the end, the subjects were asked to describe the target in a free description and to evaluate him on a list of adjectives. The results indicated that, after the narrative priming, the impression of the target person was less stereotyped than in the other two conditions. Moreover, after the narrative priming, the content of impressions included more information on emotions and motives than in other experimental conditions. Both results confirmed our expectations that the narrative mode characteristically shapes the content of our understanding of reality – the other person, in this case.

In conclusion, the narrative mode – in comparison to other common contexts of person perception, leads to the construction of a more coherent and distinct impression of a person, even in the case of complex and contradictory input data. The narrative frame facilitates integration of such data into a meaningful and easy to visualize image of the person. The results suggest that these impressions are organized around motives and emotions and are less stereotyped and more individualized as compared to other modes of person perception.

An anatomy of narrative mode: three studies on reaction time

In previous experiments, the narrative impact on person perception was observed in the effortful and consciously controlled attribution and description of a target person. The aim of the three following studies was to check if the narrative mode also affects non-controlled consciously and effortless processes of person perception (Antczak, 2004). The confirmation of this effect would support the contention that the narrative mode is founded on the mechanism of schema activation and processing. The building blocks of this mechanism are narrative knowledge represented in cognitive schemata and processes of activation of this knowledge which then direct the interpretation of incoming data and generation of new data to complete the process of understanding. The processes directed by narrative knowledge are not necessarily under conscious control. In fact, conscious processes are themselves directed by schemata-based narrative knowledge.

In the three experiments we observed if the narrative mode of person perception increases readiness to evoke motive-related categories (experiment 1) and diminishes readiness to evoke stereotypic categories (experiment 2) in attributing the target person. The readiness was measured as reaction time in attributing the target person. The attributions occurred in forms of fast and simple (*yes vs no*) decisions, with a provided list of possible attributes. In these experiments the subjects, before presentation of the target person data, were primed by: a task

inducing the narrative mode, a neutral task, or were not primed. In the third experiment, there were no primings but the subjects were provided personal data with a narrative context (the target's story) or with a neutral (non-narrative) context. As in experiment 2, what was observed was readiness (in RT) to evoke stereotype matched categories in attributing the target.

Priming the narrative mode

Priming the narrative mode should affect readiness to apply different cognitive categories in impression formation. It should reveal in attribution decision when a person decides if the target possess or doesn't possess a given psychological attribute. Within the narrative framework, motive /intention/ related categories are more central to the content of person impression and therefore an individual is ready to make an appropriate decision faster in comparison with other person impression frameworks. Moreover, priming the narrative mode may lessen accessibility of other categories – for example, those related to a stereotype relevant to a given target person. Person impressions should be more dynamic, that is, more oriented toward a target's intentions and emotions – and less stereotypic, that is, less oriented toward characteristics of the social category the target belongs to. In conclusion, it was expected that the narrative framework of person impression should decrease the RT of attribution decisions in the case of motive-related categories (hypothesis 1), but should increase the RT in the case of stereotypic attributions (hypothesis 2). The aim of the first experiment was to verify hypothesis 1, while the aim of the second experiment was to verify hypothesis 2.

Experiment 1

Method

Subjects

70 junior school students (17-18 yrs) participated in the individually scheduled experiment, during their class time. The experiment lasted 40 minutes.

Procedure

Procedure for experiments 1 and 2 was the same. Each subject was invited individually to a computer room installed in the school and took part in the priming and impression formation stages, presented as two separately arranged studies.

Priming. In the first stage the subjects were informed that they would participate in a short linguistic study, not related to the second part of the meeting. In fact, they were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: to *narrative* or *neutral* priming, or to a situation *without* a priming procedure.

In the narrative priming the subjects were asked to create stories from two sets of pictures showing 2 human figures. The instruction was in a Thematic Apperception Test form: subjects were instructed to write stories depicting how the story began, important problems of the characters, what happened and what was the end. In the categorical priming the subjects were given a list of vocations (i.e., *journalist, teacher*) and were asked to group them into 8 categories and give the definition of each category. It was assumed that this priming would activate the non-narrative mode of data processing, similar to a “paradigmatic mode” described by Bruner (1986), where a person concentrates on grouping objects in categories, finding clear rules of inclusion and clear boundaries between the categories. The content of both primings had no connection with the following stage of the study.

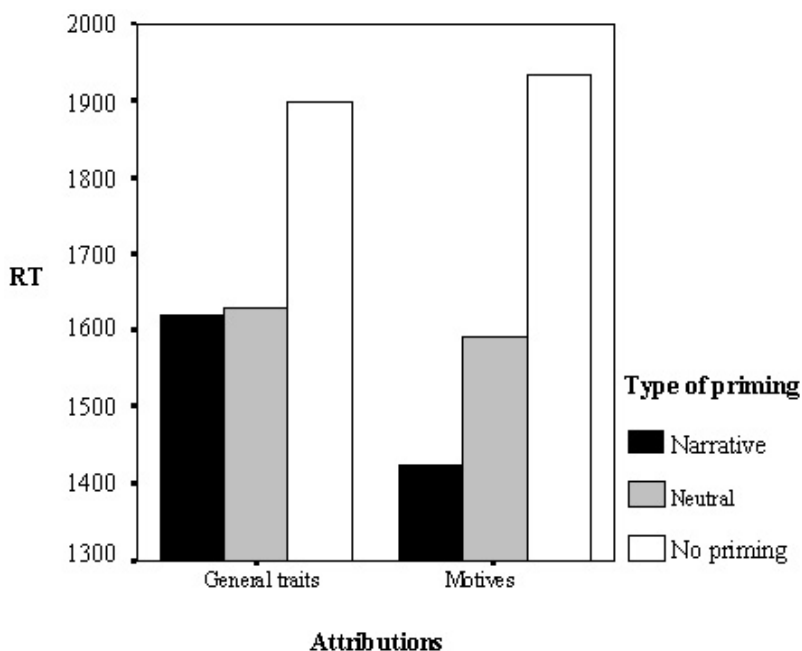
Presentation of a target person and attributing decisions. After completion of the first stage, the experimenter presented a second study aimed to discover “how people infer the character of a new person on the basis of short personal data”. The subject was informed that the data concerned an authentic person who had completed several questionnaires and had been interviewed, following which psychologists, on the basis of these data, had created a short personal profile which would be presented. Then a one-page text was presented on a computer screen. The subject was asked to read carefully the material and to imagine the character of the person. After completion of the presentation, the subject was asked to answer whether the person possessed or not traits named successively on a computer screen. The subject was instructed to press a *yes* or *no* key, as fast as possible, and was informed also that the time of each decision would be measured. The first five decisions were training ones, not included in the data.

Material

Target person profile. The profile for experiments 1 and 2 was the same. At the beginning of the text there was information that the target, a young man, was a policeman, consisting of socio-demographic information plus a short description of “character traits” which were neutral to the attributes listed in a decision making stage in both experiments.

Names of attributes. In the last part of experiment 1 the names of the attributes appeared – one by one – on a computer screen, after a subject had made an attribution, that is, had pressed the “*Yes*” or “*No*” key. There were 40 names and they belonged to two categories: names of general personality traits (*Quiet, Straight, Open-minded, Pessimistic,*), and names of general motives (*Loves, Hates, Strives for success, Jealous*). The names of both categories were presented in random order, the same for all subjects. All the traits and motives categories were proposed by two psychologists as a part of a repertoire of common sense knowledge on the “human psyche”.

Figure 1. RT (ms) in attribution decisions in dependency on type of priming and type of attribution (general trait vs motive)



Results

RT of attribution decisions was treated by 2x3 ANOVA with type of attributes (within-subjects), and type of priming (between-subjects) as two factors. ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of type of attributes and priming. Subjects decided faster in the case of motives ($F(1,58) = 4.40$; $p < 0.04$), and after narrative priming. Most importantly, there was an interaction effect of these two factors ($F(2,58) = 4.93$; $p < 0.01$). After narrative priming, the RT for motive decisions was faster than after neutral priming and in the no priming condition ($p < 0.003$). Moreover, after narrative priming, RT of motive decisions was much faster than in trait decisions ($p < 0.0009$), while no such difference was observed in the two other conditions. There was no significant difference between the two primings in the case of trait decisions. In the no priming condition, the decisional reaction were slower than after two primings, independently on the type of attribution ($p < 0.001$). The results are presented in Figure 1.

The results support the hypothesis that narrative priming – in comparison to neutral or lack of specific priming – shortens reaction time for decisions in case of motive attributions, but not trait attributions. Moreover, there is no rationale as to content, that the character of the decision (yes – no) had influenced the observed

effect. Three-way ANOVA $3 \times 2 \times 2$ with priming, attributes and character of the decision (within-subjects factor) did not indicate the third-level interaction when the third factor was added.

Experiment 2

The aim of the second experiment was to verify the hypothesis that the narrative mode diminishes readiness to use stereotypes in person impression. As in the former experiment, the readiness was measured as a RT of attributing decisions. This time, however, the content of attributes differed in terms of their closeness to the stereotype which related to the target person.

Method

Subjects

93 high school students (17-19 yrs) participated in an individually scheduled study in a computer room in their school. The experiment took place during class time and lasted 40 minutes for a subject.

Procedure and material

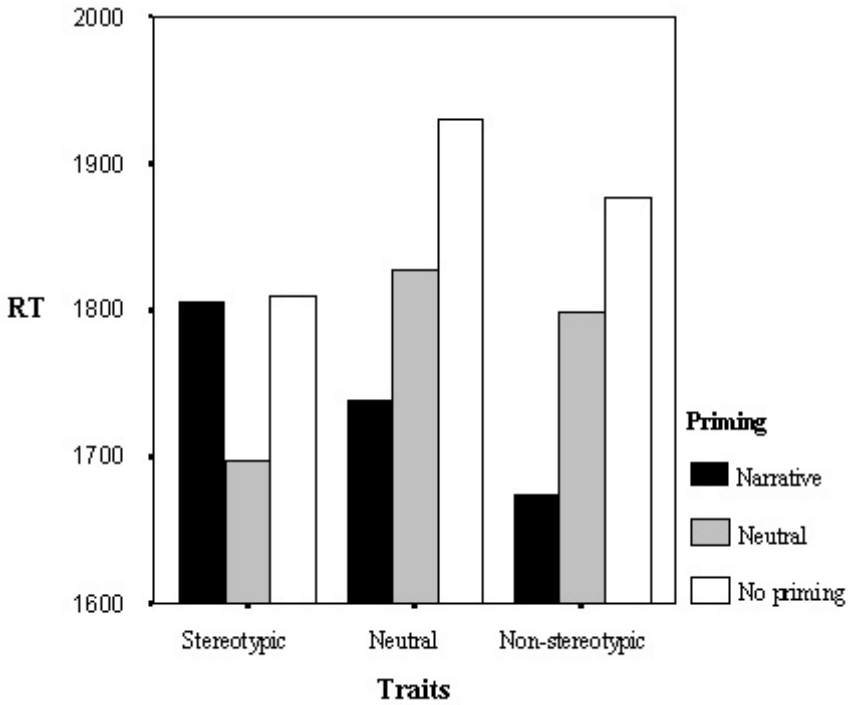
As in experiment 1, the study consisted in two parts arranged as separate experiments. The first part was priming: narrative and neutral. The procedure was identical as in the former experiment. There was also a group without priming.

After completion of the first task (for priming groups), subjects participated in the second part. It included presentation on a computer screen of the profile of the target person, which included the label “policeman” at the beginning, and then the stage of attribution decisions about the target on the basis of that provided on the computer screen. The procedure and content of the target profile were the same as in the first experiment. However, this time the attribute names presented successively on the screen, differed in terms of their match with the stereotype content of the policeman category. Three groups of attributes were created on the basis of pilot studies in the studied population: 10 stereotypic (*masculine, stubborn*), 10 neutral to the stereotype (*enthusiastic, extraverted*) and 10 non-stereotypic (*creative, dreamer*) to the common-sense category of a *Policeman*. These 30 items were presented in a random order, the same for all subjects. The subjects had to decide, as fast as possible, if a presented attribute belonged to the target person or not, by pressing *yes* or *no* keys. They were informed that the RT of the decisions would be measured.

Results

Two-way 3×3 ANOVA with trait-stereotype match (within-subjects) and type of priming (between-subjects) as factors was conducted on RT of attribution decisions. There were no significant main effects for either independent variables.

Figure 2. RT (ms) in attribution decisions in dependency on type of priming and the stereotype-trait match



However, their interaction was significant: ($F(4,180) = 2.41$; $p < 0.05$). The results are illustrated in Figure 2.

After narrative priming, there was a tendency to slower decisional reaction to stereotypical traits, in comparison to neutral priming ($p = 0.08$) and to the no priming condition ($p < 0.07$). There was no significant difference between neutral priming and no priming. On the other hand, the fastest reaction on non-stereotypic traits was after narrative priming (versus neutral priming ($p = 0.001$), versus no priming ($p < 0.01$)). Similarly, in the case of neutral-to-stereotype traits, the fastest reactions were after narrative priming (vs no priming, $p = 0.002$, vs neutral priming $p = 0.09$). As in the first experiment, additional three-way ANOVA $3 \times 3 \times 2$ with priming, stereotype-attribute match and the character of the decision (within-subject factor) did not indicate third-level interaction when the third factor was added, which means that positive and negative attribution did not play a role in the observed dependencies.

It appeared then, that the narrative priming – in contrast to neutral priming and the no priming situation – increases the reaction time in the case of stereotypical attributions of the target, but speed up the reactions in case of neutral and non-

stereotypic traits. Overall, it seems that the narrative mode caused by the narrative priming diminished the stereotype effect in impression formation. This effect was revealed at the level of fast reactions which are not controlled fully consciously. That happens in situations, where the target person was presented with a strongly stereotypic etiquette.

Experiment 3

The aim of the third experiment was to check if this narrative effect on person impression is also revealed when the target personal data are presented in the narrative way, as a story. Therefore there was no priming stage in the present experiment. Subjects were provided with the personal profile text which had two alternative outlines: the target's personal history over recent years, or general information on professional education and recent hobbies. As in the former experiments, the target person was introduced as a young policeman. As in experiment 2, the dependent variable was RT of attribution decision depending on their closeness to the policeman stereotype.

Method

Subjects

50 junior high students participated in an individually arranged experiment in a computer room at their school. The study took place during class time and lasted around 30 minutes for each subject.

Procedure and material

The subject was informed that the study concerned the way we form an impression of another person. Then the subject was presented on a computer screen with information about a target person. Subjects were informed that the target was a policeman.

The rest of the profile text consisted of two parts. The first part had two versions presented alternatively to the subjects. One version had the form of a personal story depicting a problem of the target person with paying bank charges for a family flat. Another version provided general information about the target's education, physical appearance and hobbies, and had a CV form. These two versions played the role of experimental manipulation. It was expected that the story form would induce the narrative mode in target person impression and the second form would be more neutral to the narrative option of interpreting the target's data. The validity of this manipulation had been tested successfully in our previous studies ((Trzebiński, 2006; Trzebiński & Antczak, 2003). It appeared that the narrative mode in processing the following data happened more often and was more dominant after "a story" introduction. The first part of the profile provided

a background for the next portion of information which included the target's trait descriptions (in noun form). Both parts of the profile were neutral as to the content of the *policeman* stereotype.

After presentation of the target's profile, each subject was asked to decide if the target did or did not possess the traits presented successively on a monitor, by pressing the "yes" or "no" key as fast as possible. The procedure and material used in this part of the experiment was the same as in experiment 2.

Results

The RT of attribution decisions was treated by 3x2 ANOVA, with trait-stereotype match (within-subjects) and type of information (between subjects) as independent variables. The results reveal no significant main effects, however the interaction was significant ($F(2,116) = 3.84$; $p < 0.02$). The story background, in comparison to the neutral form, slowed down the RT of attributing decisions for stereotypic traits ($p = 0.005$). As for the two former experiments, addition of the character of attribution as a next factor on ANOVA did not result in a significant interaction effect. There were no differences between the three priming situations in the case of non-stereotypic and neutral traits. The result is congruent with the former observation on the narrative priming effect and supports the hypothesis that the narrative mode of person impression – no matter how activated – results in a selective use of categories in construing the target person representation. Categories related to a person's motives are accentuated but categories related to a target-relevant stereotype became marginal in the formation of such a representation. These data add support to the conclusions drawn from the former experiments that narrative impression formation could not be under full conscious and effortful control, and therefore the data support our main hypothesis that processes generated by the narrative mode have characteristics of activated cognitive schemata.

General conclusions

These results seem to suggest a fundamental role of the narrative mode in person perception. Narrative understanding – seeing a person within a story context – affects the kind of information we are looking for, remember better and process more deeply. Moreover, the presented results indicate that these kinds of person understanding process are generally not consciously controlled, or – they don't have to be. We detected the consequences of the narrative mode at the level of attribution decisions, in terms of reaction times measured in milliseconds. The consistent patterns of RT indicate that narrative priming of personal data, as well as – independently – a story form of such data, both shorten the RT in attribution decisions, but only in the case of intention and action related categories. In contrast – both priming and story – seem to block the influence of stereotypes on person understanding, as measured in RT of stereotype related categories. These

facts seem to suggest that a person's narrative knowledge, which directs the person understanding processes, is organized within cognitive schemata (Rumelhart, 1984; Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977), or script models (Abelson & Schank, 1995). There are dynamic mental structures that – when activated – organize our thinking and decisions in the same way as stereotypes or other forms of experience based knowledge systems (Epstein, 1991).

Overall, the presented data provide a consistent, though still tentative picture of the narrative mode of understanding. In a story framework a person is understood – first of all – as the possessor of specified goals, plans, desires, and needs. These understanding processes are directed by schema based knowledge, therefore are – in part – not controlled consciously. At the end of this narrative process, a person is seen as more coherent and understandable and therefore subjectively is more real and distinct from others. It may mean that he or she attracts more our attention and thoughts. We may feel more empathy with his or her feelings and way of thinking, and we more easily identify with this person. These characteristics are especially vivid, when narrative mode is compared with so called “paradigmatic mode” (Bruner, 1986). This mode is opposite to the narrative one. When in the paradigmatic mode of thinking, a person concentrates on grouping objects in categories, finding clear rules of inclusion and clear boundaries between the categories, as well as underlying laws – the building blocks of abstract knowledge. The specific form of the paradigmatic mode is stereotyping. All these characteristics of the narrative mode have behavioral consequences. For example, somebody's misfortune in the frame of personal history facilitates engagement and readiness to help this person.

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