Written autobiography as a source of influence on autobiographical memory

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Abstract
This article uses narrative and genre theory to argue that both direct and indirect contact with published autobiography has an influence on autobiographical narrative, memory, and self formation. Exposure to the durable and pervasive modes of life-writing, transmitted culturally, provides frameworks for meaning-making that normalise certain narrative structures and shape the content and organisation of autobiographical memory. This paper traces the transfer of conventions found in life-writing genres in recently reported autobiographical memory studies, to argue that further consideration should be given to the impact of cultural and educational factors on memory.

Keywords: Autobiography; life-writing; biography; memory; narrative.

Narrative and Autobiographical Memory
Narrative is a representation of a causally-related series of events (Porter Abbot, 2008), a concept that has been transmitted from literary studies into those disciplines more closely connected with cognitive science. Bruner (1991, 2001, 2002) has argued that human experience and memories are shaped and organised as narratives, out of a cultural context of shared stories. This idea has been endorsed and examined by many others (e.g., Nelson, 2003a, 2003b, Herman, 2003). Similarly, the inter-relationship of narrative and self-formation is well established and continues to attract theoretical and empirical study (Dennett, 1991, Fivush, 2001, Thorne, 2000, Freeman, 2001, Brockmeier & Harré, 2001, Hutto, 2007, McLean et al., 2007). The very act of putting story into language has a bearing on the qualities of that story. As Bruner argues, ‘autobiography is life construction through “text” construction’ (1993, 55). Eakin (1985, 2008) goes further, to claim that memory shapes the past through the motivated agendas of the autobiographer, engaged in a textualising process.

There is growing psychological research on the precise relationships between narrative and autobiographical memory. Building on the work of Anderson and Conway (1993) on the structure, storage, and retrieval of autobiographical memories, Radvansky et al. (2005) have demonstrated the correlations between the comprehension and retrieval of details from narrative fiction and autobiographical memories. More specifically, Reese and Newcombe (2007) have shown the causal link between elaborative parental reminiscing style and their children’s earlier autobiographical memories and narratives, by identifying maternal education as an implicated factor in memory formation. It might be argued, though, that elaborations, or ‘new pieces of descriptive detail that parents provide about a past event’ (Reese and Cleveland, 2006) are not deployed routinely by some parents merely as a result of extensive education, but more precisely might be the result of a more thorough internalisation of the characteristics of literary narratives, which are in turn internalised by children. Researchers might consider, therefore, maternal exposure to published life-writing as a factor in the formation of an elaborate reminiscing style, the focus of the present paper, and perhaps also the implications of using ‘story production task’ experiments (Wenner et al., 2008) for transmitting narrative and generic schemas to children.

Narratives have an impact on subsequent narratives, as well as on memory, in that parental reminiscing style influences the shape and content of children’s fictional narratives (Wenner et al., 2008). This research by Wenner et al. on the way children reflect adult narrative features and extrapolate models from reminiscence to fictional contexts, develops the findings of Reese and Farrant on the mutual interaction of narrative structure and detail between shared reminiscences and individual memories (Farrant & Reese, 2000, Reese and Farrant, 2003). This circularity of influence, and the mutual interdependence of published (and therefore culturally transmitted) life-writing, the creation and deployment of autobiographical memories, and life narratives deserves closer scrutiny, particularly the role played by published and specifically literary autobiographies on the generic and narrative features of reported autobiographical memories.

Social processes of storytelling are present, if only latently, in autobiographical narratives and self-formation (McLean et al., 2007). Even though the causal link has not yet been investigated, empirical research has identified what might be called the confluence of some literary features of the personal communication goals of autobiographical narratives: for example, the impact on memory of adapting autobiographical stories to entertain (Pasupathi, 2006); the important role of imagery in autobiographical memory (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000, Rubin and Greenberg, 2003); and the incorporation of fictional material into memory via social contagion mechanisms (Barnier et al., 2008). This evidence suggests a genuine causal link between exposure to the rhetorical imperatives of published life-writing and those of personal narratives.
Published Life-Writing

Life-writing is an ancient, durable, and highly influential art, exhibiting many manifestations, sub-genres, and interactions with other genres. Modern autobiographies can trace their sources of influence as far back as Augustine’s Confessions of 398 CE, the text that instituted ‘the inwardsness of radical reflexivity’ (Taylor, 1989, 131) and had a profound effect on the shape, language and presentation of self-examination and in turn, on the creation of the idea of the self through the narrative organisation of and interpretation of personal memories. Other notable examples include Rousseau’s Confessions (1782) and Samuel Beckett’s Company (1980) (Olney, 1998). The former, like Augustine’s book of the same name, lead the way for the rise of those autobiographies that specifically focus on the act of self-interpretation (Peterson, 1986), though there are many other types of life-writing across the spectrum. Beyond these famous, and clearly influential, examples of published autobiography, is the broader phenomenon of self-formation though the act of self-representation in literary discourses, which flourished in early-modern western cultures (Porter, 1997, Mascuch, 1997, Bedford et al., 2006) as well as in modern contexts, where autobiographical practices have become even more varied, fragmentary, and widespread (Campbell and Harbord, 2002).

Beyond literary studies, published autobiography is frequently the subject of analysis as it provides a written account of identity formation (Eakin, 2008, 86) and a first-hand perspective on psychological processes (Belzen & Geels, 2008). There remains, however, work to be done on the impact of these published texts as part of the culturally-embedded set of narrative templates which underpin self-formation and the creation and articulation of individual life narratives, both individually and collaboratively.

Life-Writing and Narrative Fiction

Like autobiography, biography has exerted a bilateral influence on the development of narrative fiction, most notably the novel, a genre that grew out of the personal history in the eighteenth century. The huge and continued success of the novel as a genre, and the enduring contemporary interest in both biography and autobiography (Currie & O’Brien, 2008), are further complicated by the frequent blending of the factual and the fictional in all genres. Writers of both autobiography and fiction have made observations on the inevitable infiltrations of the fictionalising process on not only the writing of autobiography, but on the way in which memories are accessed, organised, and synthesised (e.g., McCarthy, Roth, discussed in Freeman [1993], 112-148).

Taken together, the various types of life-writing constitute extremely popular and wide-reaching published genres, with transmitted influence in film, television, stage drama, newspapers, magazines, and other creative and written modes. As such, life-writing is pervasive in western cultures and must therefore shape the cultural context in which narrative self-making and autobiographical memories are generated. More precisely, the structures and systems of meaning-making of life-writing, as part of the ‘culturally shared life scripts’ (Bernsten & Bohn, 2009) must exert a degree of influence on parental education and therefore on their reminiscing style (and in turn on the development of children’s autobiographical memories).

In English-speaking cultures, such as the Australian one, even people who have not had higher education (the factor used in distinguishing education levels in Reese & Newcombe, 2007), would have had considerable direct and indirect exposure to published biographies and autobiographies and more broadly the culture of individuality and the life journey that has prevailed in modern times. There is certainly evidence to suggest that this focus is more pronounced in certain cultures: what Eagleton calls ‘the peculiar English mania for the Individual Life’ (1993). This impact is the result of ‘cognitive predisposition’ to narrative and to the cultural transmission of narrative means of organising and reporting personal experience shaped particularly by memory and literacy (Boyer, 2009). That transmission of narrative forms has been shown to occur directly from parent to child (Fivush 1991). If child language acquisition allows the possibility of ‘joint reminiscing’ in order to ‘make sense of what happened’ (Fivush, 1998, 486), then surely the context in which that skill is acquired includes the discursive and generic features of fiction and life-writing, which, through their narrative structures, provide and reinforce schemas for making sense and communicating that sense in non-literary contexts.

Life-Writing and Self-Making

The impact of culture on cognition is now well-established in scholarly circles (D’Andrade, 1984, Cole 1996, Kitayama & Markus, 2007), as is the cultural determination of models of selfhood on which individual selves are modelled (Bruner, 2002). Many psychologists insist on the social and cultural, as well as the cognitive, impact on identity, and in turn, the influence of culturally significant narratives on collective memory (Reese & Fivush, 2008, Bannier et al., 2008, Wertsch, 2009, Roediger et al., 2009) and identity formation (Hammack, 2008). An ethnographic generation of master narratives provides shared material deployed in individual self-formation and autobiographical memory (Wertsch, 1998, Thorne and McLean, 2003, McAdams, 2006, Williams and Conway, 2009), which together act in a dynamic relationship (Wang, 2001). Part of that shared cultural memory is derived from the generic and narrative schemas of published biographies and autobiographies. These schemas include a prominent focus on the causal and temporal relationships of the actual narrative events presented; their organisational relationships; their significance for self-development; and therefore their memorability and capacity for contextualised interpretation.

Despite the widespread support for a ‘social-interaction theory’ of autobiographical memory (Nelson, 2003a, 2003b,
Nelson & Fivush, 2004), there has been relatively little work on the influence of published narratives on the inner or personal narratives. Those scholars who do touch on this relationship argue for its formative nature (Dennett 1988, Turner 1996). Jahn (2003) goes a step further, arguing for the adaptation of memories from external, or embedded, narratives in the framing and retrieval of personal narratives, and in turn the inter-reliance of the two in a ‘circle of narrative’.

But more broadly, both biography and autobiography must have an impact on self-making with respect to the frameworks for meaning making provided by those genres (Frow, 2006). Recent genre theory, most notably that espoused by Frow, reconfigures the idea of genre away from mere categorisation of texts into types, and towards the concept of a set of textual cues that bring about certain sorts of interpretive processes. This heuristic function of generic patterns and conventions is useful in situating the role of published autobiography as a source of impact on self-making, precisely because genres ‘actively shape and generate knowledge of the world’ (Frow, 2006, 2). It follows that our knowledge of ourselves and our access to and organisation of autobiographical memories is shaped by the conventions of life stories and the way we are accustomed to interpreting those narratives.

The most prominent features of those stories — event causality and sequence — shape both written and oral narratives. For example, in family reminiscing, a collaborative timeline and family history is established through shared memories, allowing children access to knowledge of events prior to their own birth, and in turn contextualising their own histories within the broader family history. (Reese & Fivush, 2008). Moreover, children who are exposed to orientational narrative markers (who, when, where) are more able to create coherent and fuller autobiographical narratives (Wenner et al., 2008).

Similarly, in the autobiographical memory conversations reported in Reese & Fivush (2008) prioritise the causal connectivity of events (it happened) that is the hallmark of narrative, prompted by the mother’s question: ‘Yes, the yellow spade broke, and what happened?’ (204). The daughter’s response, ‘um, we had to um dig with the other end of the yellow bit one’ (204), indicates that the episode focus remains on the event of spade-digging as experienced by the child, and that the integration of this event into a causal narrative is reinforced (Boyer, 2009). A similarly structured sentence used in another study likewise presupposes a narrative generic schema for a childhood autobiographical memory and a defined topic focus: ‘Your mum told me that you went to the glow worm caves, but she didn’t tell me what happened’ (Reese & Newcombe, 2007, 1158). These questions encourage the reporting of event-specific memories, and more broadly demonstrate how responsive memory is to cues (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000, Nelson & Fivush, 2004). They prompt the relational ordering of events, and foreground narrative coherence. Likewise, the categorisation of parental responses to reported child autobiographical memories as ‘autonomy supportive’ if they ‘continue or expand on a child’s topic/agenda’ (Cleveland & Reese, 2005), privileges logical-sequential causality as a priority of collective reminiscing that is considered to be effective. The questions and prompts used in these studies organise experience for the child, bringing some aspects into prominence, while concealing others, and thereby position the chronology of what happens as a chief frame for autobiographical memory.

Research has shown that maternal reminiscing is a distinct genre of discursive interaction, which may be characterised by an elaborative style not reflected in other contexts (Haden & Fivush, 1996). It is likely, then, that this ‘performance of genre’ (Frow, 2006, 17) systematically and formatively shapes narrative expectations and habits in young children, and in turn has an impact on their access to and deployment of autobiographical memory, especially because in the case of very young children, ‘mothers provide the entire structure and content of the recall’ (Nelson & Fivush, 2004).

I would like to suggest, then, that the culturally-embedded knowledge structures deployed in published life-writing are adopted and adapted in individual self-making, along with other sources of narrative. At one level, they form part of the overall structure of imagining and representing life as story, and also more specifically generate the formal and socialised properties of the episodic accounts underpinning self-narrative that arise from reminiscence.

These theories have not yet been subjected to empirical testing; I would urge those scholars engaged in studying autobiographical memory and reminiscing style in human subjects to consider the influence of the culturally transmitted generic structures and narrative schemas of life-writing. These schemas participate in the social distribution of ways of remembering, and of organising and recounting those memories. It would therefore be worthwhile to allow for more nuanced considerations of the influence of cultural and educational factors on elaborative reminiscing styles, and in turn on narrative self-formation.

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References


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