



Sharing autobiographical memories: Effects of arousal and memory

Roberta Lorenzetti, Luisa Lugli*

Department of Communication Disciplines, University of Bologna, Italy

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Autobiographical narrative
Empathy
Emotional Valence
Memory

ABSTRACT

As a wide range of studies in narrative psychology currently attests, the elaboration of personal experiences and identity could be enhanced through the sharing of autobiographical narratives. Our research focuses on the interrelated connection between empathy, emotional valence and memory in autobiographical narrative activity. We analyzed a corpus of dyad-friends' video-recorded narratives with the intention of exploring how remembering and recalling an autobiographical episode can be influenced by the level of memory sharing (shared vs. non-shared) expressed in the autobiographical narrative and, also, whether the emotional valence of the remembered episode can trigger empathic arousal and short-term or rather long-term memory effects in the listener. Results show that participants seem to focus their attention differently when autobiographical episodes coming from different levels of sharing are narrated. More specifically, results suggest that the listener's personal engagement within a shared speaker's autobiographical narrative influences the recall: the focus of attention is narrowed to the central gist, probably due to the shared knowledge. On the contrary, in a non-shared memory condition, when the listener is called to pay attention to an autobiographical narrative of the speaker for the first time, the focus of attention is wide and concentrated on all narrated details, consequently leading to a less selective and accurate recall.

© 2012 Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research. Published by Elsevier GmbH. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Remembering and recalling autobiographical narratives seems to enhance connection, elaboration and interpretation of experiences and situations along the life timeline (Georgakopoulou, 2003, 2006a, 2006b). Our investigation moves from the view of narrative that “outlines the significance of narrative as a privileged mode for making sense of self and others and as such a unique point of entry into questions of identity” (Georgakopoulou, 2006b, p. 236).

In this process of self and other's identity re-elaboration, some elements appear to be central such as mutuality, i.e., the close sharing of life experience, and empathy.

As Gergen and Gergen (2006) point out, “there is something particularly effective about listening to others' narratives that crosses boundaries of meaning and brings people into a state of mutuality” (p. 117). The authors outline some features that provide the basis for this process of mutuality construction. First, Receptivity, i.e., narratives provide for humor, drama, gossip, and the basis for sociability. Then Familiarity, i.e., narratives are shared virtually by all the members of a culture and have structural properties that are connatural. They have recognizable beginnings and endings, and are typically

built around a point of significant hedonic value. As a result, there is enhanced receptivity. The third basic feature is Witness Trust, i.e., the storyteller positions him/herself as a witness. High credibility often accrues from witnesses as trusted sources of evidence. As emphasized by the authors, the most important element regarding our research is Empathic Witnessing, i.e., audiences who listen to a story narrated by a witness become themselves second-order witnesses. They create all visual images for themselves, along with sounds and visceral responses of the witness. One might say that they engage in empathic listening and consequently feel as the storyteller does. In this way, a sense of intimacy is created. “For the empathic witness, it is difficult to stand outside as analyst or critic” (Gergen & Gergen, 2006, p. 118). Finally they stress the feature of Self-Recreating, i.e., all people harbor multiple stories of self and world but only a little group among these people will conquer a standout position in the interested context.

Following the distinction between narrative as a cognitive structure (or a schema that helps us to understand the world and guide our actions within it, as in Mandler, 1978, 1984; Shank & Abelson, 1977), narratives as discursive actions, from a social constructionist perspective (i.e., they derive their significance from the way in which they are employed within relationships as in Gergen & Gergen, 1988), and narratives as incorporated into the personal functioning of the individual (i.e., “one lives through the story”, see Gergen, 2001; McAdams, 1997), our research provides interesting hints about each of the above mentioned distinctions deduced from

* Corresponding author at: Department of Communication Disciplines, University of Bologna, Via Azzo Gardino 23, 40122 Bologna, Italy.

E-mail address: l.lugli@unibo.it (L. Lugli).

the point of view that “all that we have understood as distinctly psychological can be understood in terms of relational action” (Gergen & Gergen, 2006, p. 119).

The authors state the need for developing such a theory of listening relationally: this is the main argument our study is focused on. Actually, only a few studies concerning the impact of emotion on memory specifically focus on the listener and his/her cognitive and emotional processes.

Empathy appears to be central in the relational action of mutual identity elaboration. As Bamberg (2006) points out in his discussion about small and/or big stories, “the past experiences that are shared [...] have to be revealed or disclosed – in a particular way and in a particular empathetic style – in order to be successful”. And, again, “if we take narrating as an activity that takes place between people [...] we are more strongly focusing on the present of ‘the telling moment.’ This is the moment of narrating as a reaction to the immediate preceding past of the interaction, and at the same time forwardly oriented because it anticipates a response from the audience” (p. 140).

This point of view seems to be shared and extended also in Georgakopoulou (2003) when she considers that narratives (especially their specifications of time and place) might “transcend the boundaries of one taleworld and involve the dialogical interplay between different narratives” (p. 413) and when she refers to such a possibility in terms of affordances. From a psychologically oriented point of view, we might claim that the narration of past autobiographical memories performs the function of integrating oneself in time especially in contexts of interpersonal mutuality and intimacy that friendship relations perfectly represent. In these interactional contexts, atypical non-canonical narratives that might be labeled as narratives-in-interaction occurred frequently (Georgakopoulou, 2006b, p. 239) stressing their dialogical qualities, their taking part in ongoing social interaction. But also when autobiographical narratives display a structural familiarity (in terms of Gergen) they seem to be regarded in terms of affordances, i.e., in terms of contingencies and expectations as guidelines and interpretative viewpoints in the course of constructing past and future autobiographical narratives and/or narratives of shared events.

Even though our research is carried out within the limits of an experimental design, the level of memory sharing taken into account allows the narration of autobiographical episodes to “coalesce in the ongoing-ness of their telling (with links to previous, present and future interactions as well as to other telling)” (Georgakopoulou, 2006b, p. 239).

Moreover, our study takes into consideration the role of empathic arousal and the emotional valence (positive or negative) of the narrative on memory. Autobiographical memories and narratives entail the processes of retrieval and expression of emotions linked to the original memory as well as the process of empathic sharing of emotions that narrator and listener feel during the narration itself.

Recently, effects of attention orientation and the resulting effects on memory were ascribed to empathy, defined as a “thematically induced emotion” (i.e., thematic arousal, Laney, Campbell, Heuer, & Reisberg, 2004). Particularly in comparing the emotional arousal induced by visual stimuli with empathic arousal, a similarity was observed between both regarding the positive enhancement of the central gist of a narration. Nevertheless, empathy, opposite to arousal induced by visual stimuli, appears to also preserve memory for peripheral events, i.e., for the details of what is narrated. Thus, during empathic activation, the “narrowing effect” of attention does not seem to take place (“Easterbrook hypothesis” or “Weapon effect”).

These results were obtained in laboratory settings using slides and stories artificially prepared for experimental goals. Our research aims to find out whether the same effects on attention and

memory can be observed when the empathic arousal is reached in “ecological” or “natural” settings and conditions of individual narration. Moreover, the research aims to analyze the effect of the positive or negative content of the autobiographical narrative on empathic arousal and, hence, on attention and memory.

Regarding emotional valence, previous research (Lorenzetti, Stame, Nicoletti, & Borghi, 2006; Lorenzetti, Borghi, Nicoletti, & Stame, 2006) highlights the influence of specific content (positive vs. negative) on arousal and memory. Two experiments were performed. They differed insofar as the first experiment presented participants with video recording of cue-generated autobiographical narratives concerning positive and negative events (i.e., cues: trip, funeral), while in the second one participants were presented with tape recordings of the same narratives. In both experiments empathic arousal and delayed memory evaluation (of central vs. peripheral events) were measured.

Specifically, a significant difference emerged between arousal and memory evaluations for positive and negative narratives as well as a significant difference in memory retrieval of central and peripheral information, depending on the type of presentation (video presented narratives vs. tape-recorded narratives). A challenge was put forward to test similar effects in interactional settings and the present study follows this line.

Present data come from a corpus of dyad-friends video-recorded narratives. The main variables considered were the level of memory sharing (shared friendship memory, i.e., an episode recalled by the speaker about an experience shared with the listener within their friendship bond; vs. non-shared memory, i.e., an episode recalled by the speaker about an experience occurred in his/her personal relation with other people) and its emotional valence (positive vs. negative).

Our study aims to analyze how remembering and recalling an autobiographical episode can be influenced by the level of sharing (shared vs. non-shared) expressed in the autobiographical narrative, and also whether the emotional valence of the remembered episode can trigger empathic arousal and short-term or long-term memory effects in the listener.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

24 individuals participated (12 males, 12 females, mean age: 26.75, SD: 3.15). They were arranged in 12 dyads based on friendship relation; consequently all dyads were composed of two participants with a close friendship bond and a background of shared episodes. More specifically, the members of each dyad were coupled as follows: each participant recognized his/her confederate as a close friend with whom he/she had shared past experiences.

2.2. Procedure

After the informed consent, participants were alternately named as teller or listener. For example: participant A (randomly selected) was named as teller and participant B as listener for the first session (for example the shared memory condition), subsequently for the second session (for example the non-shared memory condition), participant A became the listener and participant B the teller. The applied procedure was the same for all dyads: according to the required task, tellers were instructed to reflect on a positive/negative moment of his/her life and generate a memory from those situations both for the shared and non-shared condition. In the shared friendship memory condition, tellers were instructed to tell shared friendship memories, in other words, episodes that happened to him/her and the listener together (24 autobiographical

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/141225>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/141225>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)