Introduction: The Social-cognitive and Persuasive Functions of Narratives

In every known culture, people tell each other narratives. Toolan (2001) defines a narrative as “a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events, typically involving sentient beings as the experiencing agonist from whose experience we can learn.” The use of “learn” suggests that narratives may serve an adaptive function. It has been argued that this function lies in narratives’ contribution to the smooth collaboration between individuals within a group. Since collaborating individuals were more successful in gathering food and fighting enemies than individuals fending for themselves, their chances of survival increased.

Successful collaboration requires the capacity to decide who can be trusted to do their share and the capacity to turn the unwilling ones around. These capacities are referred to as social intelligence, i.e., the ability to understand, predict, and manipulate the behaviour of other people. The first of these capacities, understanding a person’s behaviour, requires insight into the goals and beliefs of this person, for, as Tomasello et al. (2005) observe, “the same physical movement may be seen as giving an object, sharing it, loaning it, moving it, getting rid of it, returning it, trading it, selling it, and so on – depending on the goals and the intentions of the actor.” To be able to accurately interpret this action, one has to master “mind reading”: inferring the goal and thoughts guiding these actions. Mind reading is also essential for the ability to predict a person’s behaviour. Knowledge about a person’s goals and his or her

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beliefs about the barriers and opportunities connected to those goals, enable one to predict this person’s next move. Finally, to manipulate people’s behaviour, one has to point out that the preferred behaviour will have more favourable consequences compared to its alternatives. Social intelligence therefore requires relevant information on how a person’s goals and beliefs guide his or her actions as well as information on what the consequences of these actions will be.

Boyd (2009) argues that narratives provide the training material for developing social intelligence. Narratives are the perfect vehicle to learn about the way in which people’s goals and beliefs guide their actions and subsequently to document the actions’ consequences while attracting and keeping their audience’s interest because of the entertainment they provide. He draws an analogy between people’s seemingly insatiable thirst for stories and the function of play. For instance, lion cubs mock-fight with each other; this play is entertaining but it also leads to the development of skills that are important for survival in their adult life as they are essential for killing their prey. According to Boyd, stories have similar characteristics: they provide entertainment but also train humans in the crucial art of understanding, predicting, and manipulating other people’s behaviour.

Pinker (1997) claims that stories enable the audience to explore the consequences of actions by observing how fictitious characters in hypothetical situations act and what the consequences of these acts are. In his words, fiction “is especially compelling when the obstacles to the protagonist’s goals are other people in pursuit of incompatible goals.”(...) “The intrigues of people in conflict can multiply out in so many ways that no one could possibly play out the consequences of all courses of action in the mind’s eye. Fictional narratives supply us with a mental catalogue of the fatal conundrums we might face someday and the outcomes of strategies we could deploy in them.”7 People may benefit from attending to narratives by (learning to) understand and predict people’s behaviour or to chart the consequences of certain actions. However, they do not read a story in order to be manipulated. Story tellers, on the other hand, may strategically focus on some consequences of an action while keeping silent on others in order to increase the favourability of a behavioural alternative.

We can therefore distinguish between a social cognition function and a persuasive function of narratives. This does not imply that there is sharp distinction between “social cognitive narratives” and “persuasive narratives.” Exactly the same story can serve both functions; the autobiography (life story) of a person who runs for office can serve as input for the audience to predict how