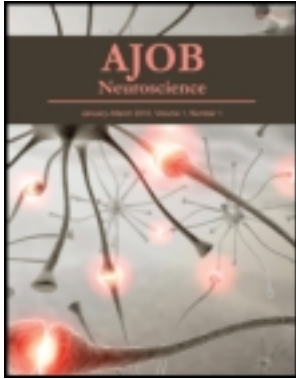


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Narrating Truths Worth Living: Addiction Narratives

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Self-narrative is often, perhaps primarily, a tool of self-constitution, not of truth representation. We explore this theme with reference to our own recent qualitative interviews of substance-dependent agents. Narrative self-constitution, the process of realizing a valued narrative projection of oneself, depends on one's narrative tracking truth to a certain extent. Therefore, insofar as narratives are successfully realized, they have a claim to being true, although a certain amount of self-deception typically comes along for the ride. We suggest that, because agents typically value certain outcomes more highly than truth for truth's sake, it makes sense to narrate in ways that *aren't* strictly true if that helps ensure highly valued outcomes *do* come true. Walker (2012) outlines three ways of defending the truth of past-directed narratives, but the role of future-directed narratives in realizing highly valued truths provides her a fourth way.

IS NARRATIVE NECESSARY FOR SELF-CONSTITUTION?

The evidence for this can be built on the experiment that Walker cites where children described as tidy enhanced their tidiness more than children told they ought to be tidy. The narrative interpretation is that being described as tidy incorporated "tidiness" in self-narrative, which subsequently guided action. The effects of narrative on who we become are likely to be much more significant and pervasive than this, however. To begin with, we might take control of the process just described and give ourselves desirable descriptions in hope of fulfilling them. This alone is likely to enjoy limited success, partially because some descriptions require more deliberate planning to achieve than improving tidiness. An addicted person simply describing him- or herself as "clean" probably won't see a huge effect on his or her behavior. However, narrative would provide a much more powerful effect if, upon narrating a planned course of action, the chance of carrying out that plan increased. If *this* were true, then the agent could complement simply thinking of him- or herself as "clean" with a variety of plans to become "clean." Does narrative projection tend to ensure the action narrated?

To begin with, there is evidence that *intentions* play this role (Holton 1999). An intention is formed when the agent decides to carry out a certain action. Intentions tend to en-

sure an action is completed in several ways. When agents are following an intention they overestimate their degree of control, are more overconfident in their own abilities, are more likely to focus on the advantage of success, and are less receptive to new or peripheral information (Gollwitzer 2003; Gollwitzer and Kinney 1989; Taylor and Gollwitzer 1995) Goal intentions are also more likely to be carried out if the agent fills in some of the intermediate, sub-intentions needed to implement it. (Gollwitzer 2004) So once we've decided on an intention and done some initial planning, we tend to stick with it despite the flux of desires and information that would otherwise distract us from our goal. But if intentions are vital for carrying out action, how do they relate to narrative? Well, intentions are typically mininarratives. We understand the relationship between the goal and the planning steps in narrative terms and of course intentions have to make sense in the light of our wider narratives and longer term intentions. David Velleman links intentions to the agent's narrative when he says: "Utterances are [sometimes] issued *as* commitments, in the understanding that they will feed back into your behavior. Hence you do understand that your running autobiography not only reflects but is also reflected in what you do" (Velleman 2005, 213–214) This line of thought ultimately leads to the view that narratives come true, so "we invent ourselves . . . but we really are the characters we invent" (Velleman 2005, 206).

EPISTEMIC CONSTRAINTS ON SUCCESSFUL NARRATIVE SELF-CONSTITUTION

Obviously the agent can't live out any truth he or she imagines; there are epistemic constraints on who we can each become. For successful self-transformation one needs to know of realistic target outcomes (e.g., sobriety), know who one is (e.g., someone who would benefit from sobriety and is capable of achieving it), and have the ability to narrate a realistic path to the desired outcome (e.g., how to achieve sobriety from here). Realistic narrative projections are more easily enacted than unrealistic ones. When a narrative is enacted successfully, the narrative projection provides a ready-made understanding of what just happened. Because the action was successful this narrative has met a threshold of accuracy and provides a better basis for ensuring the next narrative projection is realistic. Successful, narrated action is therefore a recursive process where accurate narration

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of past action grounds realistic narrative projection.¹ These constraints leave some room to move, however, so that distorted narratives of the past (the variations of which Walker highlights) and unrealistic projections can still form the basis for some degree of success in action. That said, successful action can only be accompanied by a certain degree of inaccuracy before the whole project falls apart.

NARRATIVE-AIDED RECOVERY FROM ADDICTION

Narrative helps recovery if the agent develops an accurate narrative understanding of where they are now. Several interviewees expressed hope for recovery based on their improving self-narrative. For example:

“I’ve never . . . really talked about it too much, so yeah it’s something that hopefully . . . just a different way of thinking and how I perceive the world I suppose and hopefully can open up some new chapters for me instead of being on this vicious merry go round that never changes.” (R31)

Then one needs to know how to narrate one’s way from the current position to a recovered self. The recovery narratives of others are one source of this information. Drawing on this narrative material, one can shape a narrative tailored to oneself. Some recovery narratives are more helpful than others and whether they help or not isn’t just a matter of how true they are. The typical narratives of addiction that circulate in society are of celebrities admitting to being mad, bad, or sad. They show remorse, and claim that it was all a terrible mistake and that they are going to be a good role model from now on. Regardless of whether these narratives are true or just public relations exercises, they lack depth and the typical addict can’t easily identify with celebrity narratives. In light of this, one advantage of group treatments like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is that they provide users with detailed, relevant recovery narratives (Swora 2001). These narratives might also be more truthful, given that these people aren’t so public relations (PR) conscious. However, it is interesting to note that they don’t have to be strictly truthful to be beneficial; some recovery narratives might implicitly involve useful fictions. Similarly, we can take inspiration from narratives we know to be fictional as long as we appropriately tailor the material to our own situation.

TRUTH AS A MEANS TO AN END

Because the epistemic constraints for pragmatic success admit more than one narrative trajectory, it’s plausible that the same person could achieve the same goal with a variety of different narrative-self understandings and with a variety of different narrative paths to the goal. If this is true, then the narrative trajectory to the goal only needs to be true enough to achieve it. Some trajectories are going to be better at realizing the goal than others *but not necessarily because they are truer or more realistic*. Indeed, Walker (2010) makes a similar point elsewhere, arguing that the 12-Step method of admitting powerlessness over one’s addiction, which is

1. We assume here that success (partial or complete) is measured according to normative standards.

false, strictly speaking, can paradoxically lead to being able to regain control.

Narrative projection, particularly in self-transformation, is an imaginative enterprise that requires the agent to narrate beyond known truths. An addict doesn’t know if he or she can recover and the addict often have plenty of evidence that suggests he or she can’t. When we asked one interviewee where he saw himself in one year’s time, he replied, “Probably at the exact same spot as where I am now” (living a lonely life in a deteriorated house). In light of the statistics, this is a realistic narrative projection but it will not help him change his situation. A more ambitious narrative less constrained by known truths would be more helpful in realizing a truth worth living.

CONCLUSION

Although knowledge tends to go hand in hand with successful narrative self-constitution, each supporting the other, they come apart to some extent. To pursue objective truth one must take a neutral attitude to the facts, but such an attitude is detrimental to self-constitution. In pursuit of self-constitutive goals it is often to the agent’s benefit to be selective in the facts he or she focuses on, and to favor certain interpretations of him- or herself and the world. Given that the typical agent values certain outcomes, like recovery from addiction, more highly than objective truth, the person shouldn’t be bothered by a degree of factual distortion. In other words, the agent should be happy to trade off some truth in various aspects of his or her narrative in order to secure the truth of the things that matter the most.

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