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Calls to Terrorism and Other Weak Narratives

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Abstract

Understanding and harnessing the persuasive powers of narrative is central to current U.S. counter-terrorism efforts. There is general agreement that there is an urgent need to develop effective counter-terrorism narratives while simultaneously destabilizing and exploiting weaknesses in terrorist recruitment narratives. This paper addresses two related persuasive powers - narrative identification and trajectory – and uncovers structural weaknesses that can be strategically manipulated.

Keywords

counter-terrorist narratives, identity, weak narrative

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Introduction

Narrative is central to U.S. national security interests. Since the September 11th attacks, military strategists have become increasingly aware of the central role that narrative plays in recruiting terrorists as well as the centrality that narrative will play in any counter-terrorism strategy.

The role of narrative is recognized as so crucial to counter-terrorism efforts that the Office of Naval Research has funded a research project designed to study its persuasive effects, called “Identifying and Countering Islamist Extremist Narratives” (2009) to investigate how, among other effects, cultural narratives can be used to further ideological agendas. The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency has funded research designed to study the neurobiology of narrative comprehension, test narrative theories, and determine the connection between narrative and persuasion (2012). Previously the domain of the Humanities, this project attempts to find empirical evidence for narrative theories by engaging multi-modal neuroimaging in the interest of discovering the neural networks involved in narrative comprehension and persuasion, and to determine how the structural components of narrative can induce or disrupt narrative understanding. The Rand Corporation’s presentation “Strategic Narratives: Their Uses and Limitations” (2011) to the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, was guided by essential questions about the form and function of narrative: the elements and characteristics of narratives, the ownership and control of narratives, and narrative conflict.

I am in agreement with Casebeer and Russell (2005) who, from the Naval Postgraduate School’s Center for Contemporary Conflict, insist that

failure on our part to come to grips with the narrative dimensions of the war on terrorism is a weakness already exploited by groups such as Al Qaeda; we can fully expect any adaptive adversary to act quickly to fill story gaps and exploit weaknesses in our narrative.... (p.3)

Because most of us are not conscious of the power of narrative, narrative is even more powerful. It is a tool that we can use, and if we don’t it will use us. We are being used by someone’s narrative as we sit here now. If we think about narrative at all, we think about the content of the theme. Narrative structure, on the other hand, is generally assumed. And when we assume something we do so uncritically. I would like to turn a critical eye to what is accepted as standard narrative form and its implications.

Accordingly I will proceed as follows:

1. I will begin by demonstrating that classical western narrative structure limits re-framing. When I refer to Western narrative structure I mean a structure, first articulated by Aristotle, which is *linear* (goes from beginning to middle to end) and is *unified* (there is a theme into which each component part plays a role) and is *temporally ordered* (time is an essential feature in the structuring operation.) It is important to recognize the non-universality of Western narrative structure so we don't make the mistake of projecting a culturally specific assumption onto those who don't share it, and so we are aware of the ways in which it can be exploited.
2. I will suggest the reconceptualization of an American narrative, as a counter terrorism narrative, that encompasses conflict rather than joins it.

I. The Limitations of Classical Western Narrative Structure

Narratives can be weaker or stronger, more persuasive or less persuasive, depending upon the effectiveness of both the formal elements and the metaphorical reference. In this paper I focus on two central features of narrative persuasiveness: formal structure, because form affects function, and identification, because identification influences action.

In this context I am using story and narrative interchangeably. When I refer to a story or a narrative I am referring, as Aristotle did in the *Poetics*, to an artfully arranged telling of events for the purpose of persuasion. This is distinct from a "history", or a simple litany of events.

We all have narratives, and we all act in relation to the narrative we see ourselves as a part of, but we don't all share the same structural assumptions. That means there is no universal cross-cultural agreement about how a story should proceed. As McAdams (2008) observes, "Our stories spell out our identities. But they also speak to and for culture. Life stories sometimes say as much about the culture wherein they are told as they do about the teller of the story" (p.1).

Most of our contemporaries concerned with terrorism and narrative begin by making an assumption about what narrative is – an assumption about its form or structure. For example, Casebeer and Russell assert that narratives generally have a beginning, middle, and an end. Citing Gustav Freytag (Freytag's Triangle), and Joseph Campbell's study of the structure of myths, they relate a structure familiar to western audiences, "there is some beginning, a problem presents itself that leads to a climax, which resolves itself into an ending" (p.4). They follow a

long tradition of assumptions about narrative form. It is an assumption familiar to lay persons and academics alike, and it has its foundation in Aristotle's *Poetics*,

Now a whole is that which has a beginning, middle, and end. A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after any-thing else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something itself, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; and a middle, that is by nature after one thing and has also another after it. A well constructed plot, therefore, cannot either begin or end at any point one likes; beginning and end in it must be of the forms just described. (Janko trans., 1987)

While there is general agreement that narrative is both expressive and constitutive of identity (Ricoeur, 1995, 1992; Johnson, 1993; MacIntyre, 1981; Lloyd, 1993; Schaffer, 1992; Bateson, 1990; Bruner, 1990; Linde, 1993) many contemporary philosophers, literary theorists, and psychologists have argued, at length, for the centrality of the classical Western narrative structure because they link a unified linear narrative, in the form just described, to identity. But they link it not to just any kind of identity; they link it to coherent unified identity in particular,

It is indeed in the story recounted, with its qualities of unity, internal structure, and completeness which are conferred by emplotment, that the character preserves throughout the story an identity correlative to that of the story itself... How, indeed, could a subject of action give an ethical character to his or her own life taken as a whole, if this life were not gathered in some way, and how could this not occur if not, precisely, in the form of a narrative? (Ricoeur, 1992, p.143)

And in his classic text, *Acts of Meaning* (1990), psychologist Jerome Bruner insists, "What gives the story its unity is the manner in which plight, characters, and consciousness interact to yield a structure that has a start, a development, and a sense of an ending" (p. 21). Narrative, according to Bruner, has four grammatical constituents: agency, linearity, canonicity, and perspective (p.77).

Most people would agree that three of four of these constituents are not neutral but rather reflect interest. Those three are: agency, canonicity, and perspective. I think the fourth, linearity, is not neutral either although linearity deceptively masquerades as neutral so its

resulting persuasive power goes undetected (Maan, 2013) As Bruner says, “the meaning of what happened is strictly determined by the order and form of its sequence” (p.90). It is imperative to recognize that “the meaning of what happened” can be manipulated by enlisting an ancient fallacy that linear narrative form relies upon for its enormous persuasive power; it is the “post hoc ergo propter hoc” (after this, therefore because of this) logical fallacy. As McAdams and McLean (2013) have pointed out, in recent studies of narrative identity researchers have focused on psychological adaptation and development but more needs to be done to “disentangle causal relations between features of life stories” (p.1). Narratives convey a specific understanding of the events they are about. And this understanding involves a particular way of organizing events. And in this way, narrative, by its very nature, is strategic and its strategic nature is inseparable from its form. Narrative bestows meaning on what were previously just a series of events that are sometimes related and sometimes not related. It ties together events in a certain way for a certain purpose. Narratives have “rhetorical aims or illocutionary intentions that are not merely expository, but rather, partisan”, they work to “cajole, to deceive, to flatter, to justify.” (Bruner, 1990, p. 85-86). And its formal elements effect action “what you do is drastically effected by how you recount what you are doing, will do, or have done” (Bruner, 1990, p.87). Narrative is also a way to appropriate, or to give meaning to, experience, and in the context of this discussion, involuntary aspects of experience are essential (note that many calls to violence first begin with casting the potential terrorist as a victim). I may not have control over my environment and circumstances but narrative gives me control over how I understand my environment and my circumstances. We re-create ourselves with the stories we tell, that is, events happen but we determine the status of those events in our narratives. In classical western narrative, the meaning of present events, past events, and future action, conforms to certain principles of emplotment. The event or action is going to fit either into the initial stage (harmony) or the second stage (conflict) or the last stage (resolution).

The application of his poetic structure to autobiography (individual identity) and cultural narrative (group identity) is not what Aristotle intended, however, that lack of intention is not itself problematic (ideas don't have to be used as prescribed to be useful or not). The problems that result from this unintended application are:

1. The exclusive application of Aristotelian poetic structure, to the exclusion of any other, is unnecessarily constrictive.

2. The structure and the meaning of action is therefore similarly constricted.
3. Forms of narrative, identity, and action that are inconsistent with Aristotelian structure are not recognized or mis-identified.

Classical Western narrative structure is a foundational myth that has served a purpose and continues to be useful but emergent sensibilities are overly restricted by it. Linear narrative restricts re-framing by restricting the structure of the new narrative to the culturally sanctioned structure of the old one, so that there will be a new theme but it will be coerced into the same structure with all the same attendant problems and we are back in the business of gathering together experiences that cohere with the dominant theme and editing life of its exceptions and inconsistencies. The only way that experience of chance, luck, accident, or tragedy enter in is if they *are* the dominant theme.

A few theorists have pointed to the handicap that this narrative structure places on the identity formation. Psychologist Roy Schaffer, for example, describes problems that occur when multiplicities of experience are diminished and reduced in order to represent a consistent self which can fit into a unified and whole culturally imposed narrative structure,

...self-deception is but one instance of a set of problematic ideas that are introduced by self theorists or grand self narratives. It is advantageous to regard self-deception as a story that people tell in order to present themselves or make a psychoanalytic interpretation It is a story that 'works': it communicates effectively and it helps construct experience. *But it is only one version.*" (Schaffer, 1992, p.52) (The emphasis is mine).

And philosopher Rosi Braidotti fears the normative force of this structure, "I am struck by the violence of the gesture that binds a fractured self to the performative illusion of unity.... and by its incomprehensible force" (Braidotti, 1994, p. 35).

One of the concerns of Steve Corman and other strategic communication scholars is to restore lost U.S. credibility while keeping in mind that Western notions of credibility may not translate (Corman, Trethewey, Goodall, Lang, 2008). I want to add that an essential aspect of credibility that may not translate is the value of unified selfhood and the attendant association with credibility in the Western mind. The self-consistency associated with Western ideals of credible selfhood may not translate. Conversely the lack of self-consistency may not be

universally perceived as a threat to credibility. This is a good thing from a strategic perspective as it allows for changes in policy without threatening credibility.

If, as those of us who argue for the centrality of narrative understanding insist, identity and action are correlative to narrative, and if unity-wholeness-linearity are not universal characteristics of narrative, then they are also not universal characteristics of identity or the actions that result from it (them). And this is good news for counter-terrorism strategists. Alternative narrative structures leave more room for changes and re-association and re-framing.

It is possible to be inconsistent without any threat to selfhood. So while one with a traditional narrative orientation will think of themselves as the same consistent self no matter where they go or when they exist in time, another person with a less rigid narrative orientation may think in terms of various aspects of self in various contexts at various times, and this sort of orientation is not understood as a threat to the stability of selfhood because consistency and uniqueness are not universally recognized central features of selfhood. What to some may seem to be a “talking out of both sides of one’s mouth” may in fact be a rational and functionally obvious way of being in different contexts, with competing demands, at different times.

II. Anti-Terrorism Strategy

Nothing is as persuasive as a story. There is no form of argument, no logical process that can move us the way a story does, because stories encourage us to identify. Who one sees oneself as, and the story one sees oneself as a part of, both compel action consistent with the self story. And if the narrative form privileges “unity” and “wholeness” then identity and the actions that result from it will be consistent with this form. What is the problem with that? One problem is that identity, whether personal or group, will be made up of consistent experience. Only the experience that fits into a whole and unified form is included in the narrative. The form doesn’t admit anomalous experience or action. There is no room for exceptions to the dominant story line. And as philosopher/novelist Rebecca Goldstein (1989) warns “the aesthetic preference for wholeness will often lead us to actions we would not otherwise undertake” (p. 57).

Narrative Identity Theory doesn’t just conceptualize identity as consistent with plot; it conceptualizes identity as consistent with plot structure – the Aristotelian one - that admits only a particular type of assimilation. I think this is an overstatement. Hilde Nelson has argued that narrative identity is a social construction that is tied to power, and an expression of moral

agency, or the lack thereof, and the fluidity of this would mean that identity can evolve even within the same plot structure, depending on the alterations in the construction of the person, by self and others. Hegel argued against Aristotle's centralization of the plot, arguing that it was the characterization of the person that is core to narrative, and it is conflict in that characterization that is the heart of the matter. However, Narrative Identity Theory can still retain its strength without relying on a model that bases identity on consistency over time. This is important because the over-emphasis on self-consistency is incongruent with change brought by changes in external circumstances, or changes occurring as a result of time passing, or changes brought about by critical reflection, or from gaining new information.

The problem with understanding a self as that being who narrates a whole and unified story, a story with one dominant authorial voice and consciousness, linearly over time, is that potentially meaningful experience will be left out of a unified and whole plot structure if it is anomalous or if it cannot be synthesized. Experience will be dichotomized as meaningful/trivial, anomaly/pattern, and will be included or repressed depending upon which category it falls into.

Culturally varied and contextually specific ways of being are at odds with a consciousness directed toward discovering, or creating, unity between diverse phenomena and its attendant orientation toward inner integration and consistency. That sort of orientation can cause acute problems in situations of narrative conflict. Because cultural and ideological conflict is inevitable it is strategically pragmatic to negotiate a narrative framework that is not threatened by change.

I would like to refer back to the claim made in the title of this paper. The title asserts that calls to terrorism are weak narratives. What is a weak narrative? A weak narrative is a fundamentalist narrative: a narrative with one theme that silences information that is consistent or contrary to the theme. What makes a fundamentalist narrative structure tactically weak? There are several things:

1. temporal order (because simply switching the order of events will alter moral responsibility),
2. unity or coherence (because this type of narrative leaves no room for anomalies or exceptions or change),
3. linearity (because all current events fit into the middle which is the conflict stage. The end is only projected and there will be endless disagreement about when the "beginning"

was, for example, did the war on terror begin after Sept 11 or years before?)

Dissemination of the counter-terror message within the U.S. doesn't involve the difficulty of dissemination in many other countries. Note that I am specifically focused on potential targets of terrorist recruitment *within* the United States. And when I refer to terrorism and the danger of domestic recruitment, I refer to the threat posed by the likes of Al Qaeda, as well as to the equal if not greater threat to national security posed by separatist groups within the United States.

In the U.S., dissemination involves conceptualizing and advertising an American narrative that encompasses difference, even conflict, without being threatened by it. Our narrative should welcome conflict. If we are not conflicted we are not thinking. And if we are not mindful of conflicting narratives then we are not doing what we should be doing: creating a national narrative that locates its identity not in one narrative or another but in the glue that holds multiple narratives together.

The Bush era slogan "war on terrorism" forces one to take sides without any inherent persuasive power to pull an individual or group in one direction or another. The slogan relies on identification as a victim for its persuasive power. But it is a weak narrative; it leaves identification open and vulnerable. Both, or all, sides will identify themselves with the victim and view their actions as consistent with fighting the war on terror. This war relies on an unvoiced assumption that the narrative begins with this current victimization, as the narrative structure is linear rather than cyclical. But in the mind of the "other" this event was not the beginning and if everyone jumps on the linear narrative bandwagon with its attendant need to stabilize a beginning, there will be endless disagreement about when the beginning was. If, on the other hand, the "other" does not share the same structural assumptions, the "other" can exploit this assumption with counter-examples of "beginnings". When we invoke a weak narrative like this one it is immediately countered in the mind of the "other" and the speaker not only loses credibility but also opens himself up to a litany of counter-examples.

The "war on terror" is a terrorist metaphor. Both sides have used it. It is the war Al Qaeda thinks of itself as fighting. It is the war white separatists in the U.S. are prepared for. An essential narrative strategy of terrorist recruitment is to dichotomize "us" and "them" and then to align "us" with good and "them" with evil, "us" with victim and "them" with the aggressor, "us" as on the side of God and "them" as heathens. Given these dichotomies who wouldn't align themselves with the "us" category? Most people, members of Al Qaeda as well as members of the U.S.

Department of Defense will align themselves with the “us” category. Under the “us” category (on both sides of a conflict) will come a long list of historical wrongs inflicted upon “us”. This dichotomy is a conceptual trap leaving participants, combatants, if you will, endlessly in conflict about who is “us” and who is “them”. No one is going to win that conflict. Both sides of a conflict will always justify violence by reference to a conflict narrative – a war. A counter-terrorism strategy must be a counter-fundamentalist strategy. And the commitment to, and even the unconscious assumption of, linear unified narrative is a brand of fundamentalism.

While the current administration has been careful to refine communication referring to the scope of the conflict and the nature of the threat (away from the “boundless global war on terror” language toward descriptions of “targeted efforts” and “partnerships with other countries”) (Obama, 2013) our national narrative still needs to be developed. A “war of ideas” is a more nuanced description of the situation than a “war on terror” but a “war of ideas” is still a weak metaphor. It is ineffectual. An idea cannot be killed or imprisoned or expelled from the mind or from society. Bad ideas have to be bettered, and in the case of counter-terrorist strategy, they need to be more attractive than the alternative.

I am not simply suggesting replacement of the conflict metaphor with another. Nor am I suggesting that we develop a competing metaphor, even a non-conflict metaphor. I am not suggesting this because it is not necessary. Rather than replacing the conflict metaphor we need to get outside it and encompass it. We, the United States, are already in possession of a metaphor that encompasses conflict. The U.S. already has the advantage here; we *are* the alternative metaphor.

We are an experiment in democracy, an experiment in religious tolerance, an experiment in preserving the dignity of the individual while considering the greatest good for the greatest number. And, as in many experiments, we sometimes make mistakes and we sometimes get results we don’t want and didn’t expect and then we modify our procedures and try again. As a young culture the U.S. doesn’t have the rigid fixed national identity that some other nations do. We are not so philosophically entrenched that we cannot re-think our intended results and recalibrate. And we are inclusive. We invite others to come along, to jump on-board. If we posit our narrative as an imperfect and on-going attempt, we encourage good will (if even grudging). If we posit ourselves as morally or culturally superior, or as victims, we encourage the resuscitation of contrary evidence and we are back in conflict.

We have an advantage over fundamentalist narratives and our advantage didn't come as the result of moral superiority and the advantage does not belong to any particular political party. Our advantage is that long before the events of 9/11 an American narrative has been one of inclusion. An American narrative must carefully avoid mirroring fundamentalist rhetoric by not forcing individuals to make a choice between religious beliefs and nationality. An American narrative enables one to be a Sikh, a Muslim, a Jew, and not be in conflict with those who have other beliefs. Forgetting that makes us weak. We play right into the hands of terrorist recruiters when we burn the Koran, when we attempt to silence dissent, and when we adhere to a fundamentalist national narrative.

The United States has taken a few steps back in terms of international credibility but we don't have to come up with a new narrative. We should invoke the metaphor of a worthy experiment in tolerance, dignity, and inclusion.

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