



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Narrative Persuasiveness Without a Narrative Essence: A Rejoinder to Talbi's "Recognizing Something Human"

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Lumsden, David and Joseph Ulatowski. 2025. "Narrative Persuasiveness Without a Narrative Essence: A Rejoinder to Talbi's 'Recognizing Something Human'." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 14 (3): 1–7. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-9Cj>.

Merel Talbi's (2024a) main article, "The Epistemic Import of Narratives," concerns how narratives of personal experience can be persuasive in reaching across a significant social or political divide. A primary goal of the article was to defend their role and value against the assumption that our form of argument must be based on logic and science. At the same time, she alerts us to some dangers associated with the use of such narratives, which she develops in her response (2024b) to us (2024b), a theme that we shall discuss, recognising the political context in which these situations occur. What she identifies as the main difference between us about the persuasiveness of narratives of personal experience may be framed as a question: *what are the relative contributions of the narrative form and the personal quality?*

We shall return to that question by way of a reframing which avoids the assumption that there is an essence of narrative structure. En route to that topic we shall look at ideas about how narratives may mesh well with the structure of the human mind. That will include Schechtman's (2024) ideas about fiction as a process which mirrors the way human memory works. It will also include the thought that the self is a product of narrative self-creation. This may suggest that narratives can be persuasive given that they mesh well with our makeup. However our makeup is described, we hold that there is no essence of narrative structure that explains persuasiveness, for it comes down to the particularities of the situation. Narratives can occur in a variety of situations and a variety of forms; accounting narratives represent one kind of narrative with a distinct form and function. While there is no essence of a narrative that is linked to persuasiveness, narratives in particular situations certainly can be persuasive, as indeed they are designed to be.

Political Contexts for Narratives of Personal Experience

The focus of Talbi's (2024a) lead article is on the role that narratives of personal experience may play in crossing, and potentially repairing, political rifts. Thus, the context is a political one from the beginning. Talbi (2024b) has extended and deepened her discussion of how narrative structures may be useful in situations of power imbalance in her recent response to our commentary (Ulatowski and Lumsden, 2024b).

She brings in Berenstain's (2016) notion of epistemic exploitation "where more privileged individuals request some form of education or explanation of less privileged individuals about their situation of marginalisation" (Talbi, 2024b, 74). Talbi argues that the narrative form adopted by those who are less privileged can create some distance from their personal experiences while still being persuasive. Here again, we are looking at narratives of personal experience in a politically significant situation. There is an apparent tension between the idea that a narrative form can create that kind of distance from personal experiences and the dominant idea that the narrative form can allow a special connection across a political divide, one that is superior to logic and scientific reasoning.

We do not claim that this tension is, in effect, a contradiction. The tension only arises if we assume that the self-same structure that creates that distance is what connects across a social and political divide. The tension is resolved if we allow that there is not a unitary narrative structure across all settings. The marginalised individual may reach for a familiar standardised

form to talk about their experiences rather than in a style reflective of how they may communicate with others in their social group and thereby may employ the formulaic structure as a kind of shield from their true emotions. The persuasive aspect of a narrative will rest on more emotive and intuitive features.

The practice of demanding explanations from the less privileged, in effect, is problematic in three ways.

First, the disadvantaged disproportionately shoulder the responsibility to educate the privileged, which can be regarded as exploitative. There is no easy way to avoid this exploitation for, if marginalised peoples fail to carry out this education of the privileged, then those occupying a privileged position would never come to appreciate what it is like to live in a marginalised or disadvantaged position.

Second, the expectation is for the less privileged to use a narrative structure that the privileged people are already familiar with. In many instances, this is to abandon their own native narrative structure and possibly betray their own interests. If such narrative structure isn't taken up, then the concern is that the privileged people will be unpersuaded.

Third, privileged people are somewhat ignorant of the special position they occupy in society that permits them to dictate what others should do for them and how they should do it. They are either unaware of their own privilege or openly deny that they possess any privilege. These forms of epistemic exploitation introduce further debts that the less privileged must pay to those who are more privileged to appreciate how people have been disadvantaged or marginalised by society and the political realm.

Here's the rub. If the disadvantaged individuals are further burdened and expected to meet those who are more privileged where they are, then the person who is more privileged will still be disengaged from those who are less privileged. By asking the less privileged to provide a narrative structured in the way that the more privileged accept, this will not reduce the distance between the two populations. We would essentially be asking the less privileged to give up their own views and their own personal narratives in order to explain to someone who is not part of their community what it is to be a part of their community.

Talbi also develops the theme of third-party narratives of someone's situation, employing Kerstin Emhoff's narrative of Kamala Harris's shared parenting role. Talbi speaks of the dangers of speaking for others. This brings us back to the importance of a narrative based on lived experience. Talbi discusses the problem of epistemic extractivism, where knowledge is taken from marginalised communities and used by the powerful (Alcoff 2022). The example of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is relevant here too for it is not only a third-party narrative but a fictional one. Talbi points to the way that Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852/1896) generated the fiction on the basis of first-hand accounts. Once again there is the theme that narrative structure can be employed for persuasive purposes, here in favour of the abolition of slavery, and there is an indirect connection with narratives of personal experience.

The Stowe case isn't nearly as extractive as one might at first think because, while there was no immediate benefit for the slaves, there was no harm either. No one was morally harmed by Stowe's narrative. Likewise, she used her position within high society to warn against the trauma being induced by others and the oppression being suffered across the US South. We should acknowledge the dangers of epistemic extractivism even while questioning the force of Talbi's particular example.

There are far worse examples, particularly when it comes to our own region of the world. American social psychologists, and other very likely well-meaning experimental philosophers and social scientists, have sought to extract the views of Aboriginal, Māori, and Pasifika people by sending surveys to academic staff at universities in Australia, New Zealand, and Oceania and expecting them to send the surveys onwards to indigenous peoples without properly establishing a social connection with any of the people whom they seek to involve in their studies. According to their mistaken view, the compensation they provide, a few US dollars or its equivalent, is adequate. The trouble with this is its failure to respect any of the cultures.

We can see that narratives of personal experience that are located in significant and sensitive political contexts raise important political and ethical issues that demand our attention. We should now return to consider the extent that narrative form, taken in a general way, contributes to the persuasiveness of narratives of personal experience across political divides.

The Structure Of Human Cognition

There is a line of thought that attributes a match between the narrative form and the nature of human lives and their underlying cognitive structure. We find one particular strong form of that connection in Alisdair MacIntyre's (1984, 123, 210-211) claim that people enact narratives, a view followed by James Phillips (2003). The connection can take the form of attributing to the human mind and its cognitive processes a narrative structure or at least a structure that is akin to, or hospitable to, the form of a narrative.

Talbi refers to Schechtman's (2024) characterisation of fiction as a process and the way this mirrors human mental structure, for human emotions are not one-off events but unfold over time (see Goldie 2012). This emphasis on the temporal dimension of the mind is developed in philosophical work on the nature of memory grounded on neurocognitive evidence. Kourken Michaelian (2016) develops an account of memory as a reconstructive process. He says memory is just one part of a larger cognitive system for 'mental time travel' that serves to keep track of our ongoing lives by constantly recalling and anticipating in the context of our current situation.

In this way we can see how some significant characteristics of narratives match up with human cognitive processes. Just as a narrative will involve some selection among events such as to provide some coherence, some pattern, so too does the human mind. Moreover, the kind of pattern we see in narratives stretches through time and this is just what the mind does, according to Michaelian. This provides some comfort to the thesis of the narrative

construction of the self, as developed by Schechtman (2024) and also Daniel Dennett (1991, chapter 13; 1992).

If narratives fit well into what human minds routinely do, we might think this provides an explanation of the persuasiveness of narratives. In reality, it merely indicates a base level of compatibility which leaves room for persuasiveness; the persuasiveness of narratives of personal experience in a political context requires more specific attention. We need to consider the complexity of an audience member's narratively constructed self as we do in Ulatowski and Lumsden (2024a). We have previously argued that self-narratives arise from a bundle of discreet but interconnected narratives that govern different parts of one's life (*cf.* Lumsden and Ulatowski 2017, 2019, 2020, 2024; Ulatowski 2021; Ulatowski and Lumsden 2024a).

We should also recall the basic comparison between the force of narratives of personal experience and scientific and logical arguments. It is not as if human cognitive processes cannot handle scientific and logical arguments. Both narratives of personal experience and logical and scientific reasoning are routinely processed by our minds. The appeal of a narrative of personal experience across a political divide requires a more detailed explanation, one which we have shown depends on identifying narrative threads that we have in common.

Is There an Essence of Narrativity?

It is acknowledged by Talbi and by us that there is no simple definition of narrative. One way of fixing an initial understanding of the notion is to describe an archetypal form of narrative based on leading examples, such as novels and biographies, while allowing that there is a broad and indefinite penumbra of putative forms and styles of narrative (Lumsden 2013). While this serves to construct a working understanding of the notion of a narrative, it does not provide a precise definition specifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a narrative. Thus, when we ask of a particular situation what the role of narrative structure is in persuading an audience, we don't have a clear-cut narrative account to test for persuasive powers. We should not think of there being an essence of narrative containing a magic sauce that produces persuasion. At best, narrative is a very broad genus, and not even a well-defined one, and what we should be focusing on is the particular presentational structure that is employed in a particular setting. Talbi's focus is on narratives of personal experience in a broadly political context and that allows us to constrain our search for an explanation.

In offering explanations of the persuasive power of narratives of personal experiences, Talbi refers to various characteristics of narratives that have been proposed in the literature: the theme of overcoming obstacles (Stammers and Bortolotti 2020), a suspenseful structure (Dal Cin, Zanna, and Fong 2004) and the capacity of narratives to transport the audience into the situation (Green and Brock 2000). Overcoming obstacles is consistent with suspensefulness, though they need not go hand in hand. The capacity to transport depends on subtle features

of a narrative. We can investigate the persuasiveness of particular narratives without assuming there is a common essence that explains persuasiveness.

Of course, many narratives do not connect with personal experience in any direct way. An accountant can produce a spreadsheet in a budget document but also provide a written commentary, a narrative, that highlights certain aspects, certain goals and challenges. That narrative would not typically be regarded as persuasive in the way that a narrative of personal experience can. But it is designed to make the overall pattern of the document clear to readers. Similarly, when a forensic specialist draws inferences about a criminal suspect's movements and activities based on evidence left at the crime scene, they are constructing a kind of narrative. Also, a coroner will use evidence from an autopsy and witness statements and so forth to construct a narrative about the events leading up to the person's death. These kinds of narratives have generally a more objective character, though that does not make them immune from being used to misdirect an audience. Even within narratives of personal experience there is striking diversity.

The narrative of a member of an oppressed group will focus on struggles and challenges while the 'what we did on our holidays' narrative will not have that character, at least where the holiday is relatively uneventful. For that narrative to convey the flavour of the, hopefully pleasurable, holiday experiences there will need to be *some* kind of structure and coherence, which will involve selection. That is, arguably, a basic characteristic of narratives that contributes to their graspability, but it is a long way from constituting a substantial essence. Even if we were to identify a more substantial essence of a narrative, the explanation of persuasiveness in the kinds of political contexts that are our focus would still lie in the particularity of that kind of narrative.

We support Talbi's interest in defending the value of narratives of personal experience in reaching across social and political divides. Our recommendation is to focus on the specificity of that kind of setting and avoid any tendency to seek to broaden the claim to the persuasiveness of narratives in general.

Conclusion

We have engaged with Merel Talbi's theme of the persuasiveness of narratives of personal experience across social and political divides and with some ethical issues that can surround such narratives. Our main point of difference with her concerns the extent to which it is precisely the narrative structure that explains the persuasiveness and we have sought to reframe that question by focusing on the diversity among narratives and the diversity among the settings in which they appear. In general, communication with an audience requires the delivery to have a suitable form or structure and, in many cases, it can be described as having a narrative structure.

A narrative structure involves selection among the available details to create a graspable thread. This graspability of narratives may rest on fundamental features of how human memory and cognition work (Schechtman [2024](#)). We need not take the further step of

claiming that within narrative structure there is a specific explanation not only of graspability but also of persuasiveness. Our view is that the explanation of persuasiveness should be sought in the specifics of the situation. While any narrative should be graspable, we should not expect there to be some significant essence of narrativity that explains persuasiveness. There are different kinds of narrative that can be effective in their particular contexts.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Merel Talbi for extending our discussion.

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