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New Zealand's 'Abuse in Care' Report, Childless Cat Ladies, and Narratives of Personal Experience: A Response to Talbi's "The Epistemic Import of Narratives"

Joseph Ulatowski, University of Waikato, [joe.ulatowski@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:joe.ulatowski@waikato.ac.nz); David Lumsden, University of Waikato, [david.lumsden@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:david.lumsden@waikato.ac.nz)

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Convincing others to take up a position different from the one that they currently occupy can be extraordinarily difficult when it comes to deeply held social and political commitments. In [“The Epistemic Import of Narratives”](#) (2024), Merel Talbi argues that narratives of personal experience can be employed to bridge an epistemic divide that exists between two people who maintain deeply held commitments on different sides of a social and political issue. We build our reaction to Talbi’s work around two main themes:

- (1) We argue that the persuasive nature of narratives of personal experience should not be framed as solely the result of the narrative structure, and;
- (2) We believe that narratives of personal experience may be persuasive when they mesh well with some part of the audience’s own self-narrative.

### **Relevant Background**

When a speaker intends to persuade an audience to take up a position with which they disagree, we may believe that the use of rational argumentation and facts is better than emotion. Yet, the presentation of facts, however informative they may be, often fails to persuade others, perhaps because of how sterile they are. This is true especially when we try to persuade others to take up a position concerning a political or social issue.

A striking recent example can be found in the final report of New Zealand’s Royal Commission of Inquiry ‘Abuse in Care’ Report ([2024](#)). The website has a section entitled: ‘Survivor Experiences: For Survivors, by Survivors’. There are 34 stories, and they make for harrowing reading. As the subtitle of the section makes clear, this is not to be regarded as merely evidence of the wrongs committed, for it gives those individuals a voice, allowing them to tell their own stories in a way that speaks for and to the broader group of victims.

Another example of the importance of narratives of personal experience arises from JD Vance’s deeply offensive and harmful 2021 comment aimed at Vice-President Kamala Harris (amongst others) that women like her were “childless cat ladies” who shouldn’t be eligible for political office because they “want to make the rest of the country miserable too” (Marquez and Alexander [2024](#)). After Vance’s comments re-emerged when Harris entered the 2024 Presidential race, Kerstin Elmhoff, Harris’ husband’s ex-wife, leapt to her defence saying in a [statement to NBC news](#), “For over 10 years, since Cole and Ella were teenagers, Kamala has been a co-parent with Doug and I. She is loving, nurturing, fiercely protective, and always present. I love our blended family and am grateful to have her in it.” In saying this, Kerstin is not only speaking of Kamala’s situation but of a wide range of people in blended family situations where parenthood runs differently from Vance’s stereotype. Others, such as actress Jennifer Aniston, comedian and social commentator Whoopi Goldberg, Meghan McCain (daughter of the late John McCain), and Taylor Swift’s millions of “Swifties”, have chimed in as well, speaking of their own personal experiences of being childless for medical and other reasons (Masih [2024](#)).

Talbi provides a stimulating discussion of how narratives of personal experience can be employed to bridge an epistemic divide with someone of an opposed social or political group. They are used to persuade in a way that contrasts with familiar methods of persuasion based on logical argument and scientific evidence. Talbi defends the use of such narratives, claiming that they can provide evidence of a particular kind by way of conveying to the audience the epistemic standpoint of the subject of the experiences. A standpoint is something that they experience as a member of a group within a certain place in the structure of society. This positive outcome coincides with the danger that such narratives may be used in propaganda. Using the work of Hannah Arendt (1958/1998), she discusses the way that danger can be mitigated by the way these narratives are constructed in a pluralist public sphere.

We find Talbi's article rich and insightful and, in many ways, persuasive (!) but wish to challenge and refocus two aspects of the work, especially, and wish to situate Talbi's argument within a broader context.

First, we argue that the persuasive nature of narratives of personal experience may be more about how you are confronted with the reality of the narrator's situation than about the narrative structure itself. Therefore, it can be misleading to frame the discussion in terms of an opposition between narrativity in general on the one hand and logical argument, scientific evidence, and reasoning on the other.

Second, we suggest that, if we want to bring *self*-narratives into the picture, it can be profitable to see how narratives of personal experience can be persuasive in terms of the particular ways in which a narrative meshes with the audience's own self-narrative. This provides us with some insight into how a speaker can craft a persuasive narrative.

### **Is the Narrative Structure What is Important?**

In our view, the persuasive significance of narratives of personal experience is not best framed simply in terms of an opposition between narrativity in general and the methods of logical argument and scientific evidence and reasoning. We should give proper acknowledgement to the *personal* character of the experiences, such that bringing the situation of that particular person vividly before the audience allows them to engage with the topic. While Talbi does narrow her topic down to personal experiences, the broad opposition between narrativity and logic is still influential. The very title of her article, 'The Epistemic Import of Narratives,' draws our attention immediately to the narrative form *in general*.

The focus on narratives in general is maintained as the very first example of a narrative she presents to us on page 2 is a *fictional* narrative, namely Harriett Beecher Stowe's iconic *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852/2005). That fictional narrative, which addresses the abolition of slavery, may be regarded as an influence upon the shaping of attitudes towards slavery in the antebellum period preceding the American Civil War. It's a curious and somewhat surprising choice because, strictly speaking, Stowe's abolitionist fictional narrative *isn't* a narrative of personal experience. The fictional characters of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* aren't real and have no experience. Talbi's commentary may have been better served if she had called upon

abolitionist narratives of personal experience from Daniel Webster, Henry Lloyd Garrison, or—more poignantly—Frederick Douglass or Sojourner Truth.

As Talbi proceeds (2024, 4) to explain that her topic concerns narratives of *personal* experience, she claims that she will not engage in a debate concerning rival conceptions of narrative structure. Even so, she does highlight a particular conception of narratives, taken from Rachel Fraser (2021), as “a structure with (autobiographical) characters facing adversities or obstacles” (Talbi 2024, 4). This narrow conception of a narrative is relevant to her use of the notion of standpoint knowledge later, where the sorts of standpoints that come to mind, such as the standpoint of a member of an underrepresented group, may involve obstacles and overcoming them.

Not all narratives of personal experience have that form, though. Consider the person who relates extremely positive personal experiences in their recent dealings with the health system. That could be persuasive to an audience that has deeply held assumptions about the deficiencies of the system. This is particularly true if the audience and the person reporting their positive experience with the health system have a long-cultivated relationship. The question we should consider is, what is carrying most of the persuasive burden, the narrative form or the fact of it vividly conveying a personal experience to the audience? Very likely, the contribution the quality of the narrative form brings to the persuasion will vary from case to case.

Staying for a moment with Fraser’s account of narrative structure, consider a narrative told by someone describing how they faced continual prejudice as a member of a marginalised group but managed to persist and eventually achieve success. We can imagine how this narrative could break through and gain the sympathy of the audience even though they had not previously been convinced of the reality or extent of that discrimination. The thesis of the persuasiveness of the narrative form claims that it is precisely the trajectory of the narrative that is achieving much of the persuasion. In a particular case, that could be so to a significant extent. The audience follows the ups and downs of the narrator’s tale and is drawn into their perspective and thus develops sympathy for them as an individual, which then overturns previous assumptions about society.

The alternative explanation, which may be prominent in other cases, is that it is the reality of the person who is presented to them, whether in-person, on a screen, or through their printed words, that is what is bearing the major persuasive burden. Statistics of job offers, police arrests and so forth had not penetrated the understanding of the audience but seeing the person before them they are led to engage with the reality of the prejudice. There is scope for empirical investigation about this. We could compare the persuasive effectiveness of a well-crafted narrative with the effectiveness of a bare image of a named real person with a supporting text baldly laying out some basic facts about them: qualifications, job application statistics, and so forth.

Charities that help people in places devastated by war, drought, or other natural disasters can appeal to potential donors using photographs of victims to solicit contributions. Here we see the power of the particular case, in this situation one that is intended not simply to persuade

but to trigger an action, namely a donation. That is not to deny that the power of a particular case can be enhanced by a suitably crafted narrative. The point remains that the narrative structure need not bear the whole burden of persuasion.

While Talbi frames the issue in terms of narrativity versus logic and science, she does in practice focus on how a narrative of personal experience emanates from one person, a limited evidence base. In response to that implied problem, she argues that such narratives are legitimate by way of capturing standpoint knowledge. The personal experience is just one person's personal experience. As it is just one case, it might be dismissed as providing merely anecdotal evidence but, Talbi argues, it can convey the situation of a whole group of people in the same situation. In this way, it captures the standpoint of that group so that there is a form of generalization from a particular case. A political party may provide the case study of Sarah, who is a single mother of two children, who has a part time job that pays minimum wage, has a certain level of rent and so forth. This is designed to put you not merely into specifically Sarah's shoes but, more generally, into the shoes of a whole group of people who face similar economic difficulties. Talbi's focus is on the situation where Sarah is recounting her story to us directly, and that human connection is liable to enhance its effect. Talbi speaks of the way that narratives engage us or transport us into that situation.

But the notion of conveying standpoint knowledge should not be regarded as totally depending on that narrative form. We can accept the view that narratives of personal experience can be valuable and legitimately persuasive by conveying standpoint knowledge, but we do not need to frame it in terms of an opposition between narrativity and logical and scientific reasoning. As we have suggested, a powerful particular case may convey standpoint knowledge without necessarily being presented in an obviously narrative form.

This brings us back to the question of how to understand the notion of a narrative, a notion that is notoriously vague or, at least, highly contested. Can a still image convey a narrative? That makes some good sense. To employ a very basic example, consider how illustrations can work in children's early readers. The dog in an illustration has clearly removed the sausage from the table while father's back is turned. There is accompanying text that describes just that. Doesn't the illustration, taken by itself, convey a brief narrative? Similarly, can't an image of a starving child in a charity's advertisement convey a narrative? It can seem arbitrary to deny that. Even so, the accounts of narrativity that Talbi mentions do not appear to extend to such cases and working with too broad a conception of a narrative can trivialise claims about the effectiveness of narratives.

Our main point here is that in attributing persuasiveness we should grant proper credit to the immediacy of a vivid example where we are, in some way, put in contact with the person concerned. We do not deny that a good narrative can package and enhance the power of that example.

### **Narratives of Personal Experience, Self-Narratives, and Persuasiveness**

While Talbi's primary focus is on narratives of personal experience, she does mention a different application of narrative theory, the view that the self is created by one's own self-narrative, something created in conjunction with others in a social setting. That central idea is developed in different ways such as by Alasdair MacIntyre ([2007](#)), Daniel Dennett ([1992](#)),

and Marya Schechtman (1996). As Talbi discusses in §2, such self-narratives are thought to underpin knowledge of oneself and indeed of others. She seems to suggest this bolsters the epistemic credentials of narrative form, which can encourage us to take seriously the epistemic role of narratives of personal experience.

Talbi further appeals to self-narratives when she argues (§2.1, 5) that:

If individuals are accustomed to using these narrative forms to make sense of their lives, that would also explain why reading or viewing other narratives will easily remind them of real-life, meaning making processes of self. This makes narratives easy to ‘digest’ and understand—and persuade.

We could say that our familiarity in general with narratives in making sense of the world and ourselves tends to make contributions in narrative form acceptable and persuasive. The persuasiveness of a vivid example presented directly to us can thus be enhanced using a narrative structure.

We want to focus on the role of self-narratives in the persuasiveness of narratives of personal experience in a further way, though. If someone uses a narrative of her personal experience to persuade an audience, then we might expect its success to depend on how well that narrative meshes with the self-narrative of the audience. Some narratives of personal experience simply are destined to fail in breaking through to someone with a different mindset. Consider the longtime member and supporter of the National Rifle Association (USA), Sarah, who wishes to get through to gun control lobbyist, Eric. Sarah constructs a genuine narrative of personal experience that describes being given her first gun, and how she came to shoot her first stag. She captures the centrality of gun use to her life in a way that can convey standpoint knowledge concerning people who have grown up in hunting families. But Eric is not only a pacifist but a vegan and the thought of killing a stag for sport disgusts him.

It should be no surprise that not all narratives of personal experience will be persuasive however authentic. No matter how well-crafted they are and how likely they are to convey standpoint knowledge, success depends on the nature of the target audience. Talbi is making the case that narratives of personal experience *can be* effective in breaking through to someone in a different mindset and quite legitimately so. We should spare a moment to address the kinds of circumstances in which this potentiality is in fact effective. We are interested in the situation where the audience’s self-narrative is likely to have a nature that is *unsympathetic* to the narrative of personal experience that is presented to them. So, how is it that the narrative of personal experience can break through into that unsympathetic territory?

There are two points that we would like to make here. First, Tracy Llanera’s work on extremists is particularly insightful because she shows the power of a redemptive relationship and the vision of an alternative lifeworld may help “complete the narrative arc of apostasy cases” (2019, 26). For extremists to change, they must not only have a vision of an alternative lifeworld but also see themselves as a part of it. The non-extremist who sets out

to persuade the extremist can provide an alternative lifeworld, but the challenge is for the extremist to see their own story as part of that lifeworld and less as part of their current lifeworld. That transformation is not going to be achieved merely by presenting facts to the subject. There needs to be a narrative of personal experience to help bring about change in the extremist. At least one way of ‘seeing’ themselves as a part of any lifeworld comes by way of a self-narrative, which may be informed by others’ narratives of personal experience. To move from a contemplative visionary to enacting change, the person seeking redemption must see their own story as part of *that* lifeworld and less a part of the current lifeworld that they occupy. The pivot from contemplation to action requires narrative transformation in the individual, rather than people who desire that they change merely by foisting facts upon them (*cf.* T.S. Ulatowski 2000).

Second, we have argued elsewhere that a deeply held political conviction can be regarded as a part of a person’s self-narrative (Ulatowski and Lumsden 2023). If the narrative of personal experience is intended to persuade across a strong political divide, then we have good reason to doubt that narrative of personal experience will indeed mesh with the audience’s self-narrative. Even so, as we have argued (section 5) common ground can often be found outside the purely political sphere. For example, there may be familiar features of the audience’s family life, ones that are not particularly politically charged, that can chime in with the speaker’s narrative of personal experience. As we put it in our (2023) as well as our (2017, 2019), the self is a bundle of narrative threads, including often enough a political narrative thread but also others such as a work narrative thread and a family narrative thread. There is no standard number or list of narrative threads composing a person, but this is a simple example that illustrates a general point. So, while two people are firmly located on two sides of a sharp political divide, there can be common ground to be found in other narrative threads. Thus, one person’s account of a child in need might engage with the other through their thread as a parent.

Our focus is on the common ground that can be achieved in a narrow sphere, let’s say just you and me. I know you and have a sense of how I can appeal to you specifically, even if I do not consciously and explicitly work it out. This is likely to involve engaging with a narrative thread within you that is not your political narrative thread, the locus of the divide between us. This works best where I have an established bond with you. You are more likely to listen to me for that reason, while you would dismiss a stranger saying the same thing.

### **Speaking Narratives To Power**

We have seen how a number of things can work together in the persuasive process. You and I have a bond, even though we have different mindsets on political matters. Moreover, I have a sense of how I can appeal to you by engaging with a narrative thread of yours that is not political. I have a personal experience of my own that I think may influence you, or perhaps I am aware of someone else’s personal experience that I can relate to you. An experience like that provides a vivid example that is presented to you with a kind of immediacy. Moreover, that experience can generalise to provide you with standpoint knowledge concerning a group of people in those circumstances, such that the persuasiveness can have a broader base. Inevitably, the experience will need to be conveyed in some kind of narrative form and the persuasiveness can be enhanced by it being a well-

crafted narrative. In this kind of way, Talbi’s central claims about the legitimate persuasive power of narratives of personal experience can be placed within a broader context.

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