L. Garcia-Lorenzo*, S-M. Nolas* and G. de Zeeuw**

* Social Psychology Institute, LSE
** University of Lincolnshire, UK

“Telling stories and the practice of collaboration”

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Telling stories and the practice of collaboration

Abstract

Stories and the telling of stories constitute an important, even major part of our daily life. How this happens is not clearly understood. Sometimes stories are seen therefore as a last area where the scientific mind has no access and no voice. Sometimes they are seen as its next area of development.

This paper is about the ways in which stories challenge the notions of knowledge that are common in the ‘classical’ scientific tradition. It also is about the function of stories in the collaborative, interpersonal and inter-organisational dynamics of the way knowledge is built up in daily life. Stories increase people’s awareness of their cultural and human heritage.

The paper will, firstly, explore changes in the notion of knowledge (and what is considered scientific method). It identifies various genealogies in which previous limitations on the experiences to be included in knowledge were extended. Among these extensions is the inclusion of the experience of uncertainty as well as the experience of intention.

Secondly, the paper will look at experiences that link to the telling of stories, and explore the way they challenge as well as link to previous notions and extensions of knowledge. A core characteristic of stories and their telling is an increase in people’s awareness of others as sources of intentional variation.

A number of examples will be presented to illustrate the point – for instance increasing this kind of knowledge to reduce (too) early pregnancy and resistance to imposed models of behaviour.

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Introduction

Stories and the telling of stories are increasingly attracting interest in academia. This shouldn’t surprise. Stories or narratives are a pervasive part of daily life. In the words of Barthes ‘Narrative is…present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting … stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover, under this most infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and nowhere is nor has there been a people without narrative’ (Barthes, 1993:251-2).

Indeed, stories being everywhere one might think that they “could appear problematic only in a culture in which [they were] absent…” (White 1980:1). This is where stories surprise us. There are such places. Stories have been mostly absent from academic culture – except for anecdotes about some of its absent-minded members. While this is changing rapidly, stories do not appear to have found their niche for study or discipline yet. Where should they be studied? Or if they need a special kind of study, how should they be studied – or even what should be studied in order to study them?

There have been many attempts to give stories ‘a hoist up’ as Bruner (2002) suggests, and honour them – from the point of view of scientific understanding, although others consider this an unacceptable form of colonisation. Stories have been considered as a species, as when Propp (1968) tried to identify patterns in fairy tales. They also have been linked to the members of a public, as when Bal (1978) concentrated on the actors that interact in stories. Further analyses have stressed the role of stories as repertories of everyday knowledge, and as mnemonics to access collective experiences (Turnbull, 2003).

Stories appear surprisingly able to challenge the inroad of the academics, even to the point of making them become tellers of stories themselves. What interests us is the why of this resistance – not a desire to break this resistance. Science is not a threat (Phillips, 1973), although many depict it as a monolith, a stronghold of everything not fuzzy or uncertain, but requiring considerable effort to gain entrance. Still, in its most impressive
forms it is willing to behave gently and understandingly as only one of the partners in the development of mankind (Descartes, 1985; Sennett, 1998; Grobstein, 2005).

The dynamics of science

The notion of science and knowledge as something indomitable is not entirely undeserved. The 17th century often saw fierce and debilitating fights between astronomers and established organisations like the church. Their outcome was noted and many efforts were spent to emulate the ‘wins’ of the former over the latter. Eventually this led to what is now called the ‘standard’ form of science, or something very much like astronomy and based on observing from a distance, without the promise of intervention. Both characteristics imply the possibility of (and the later emphasis on) prediction and understanding.

These are powerful notions. They suggest that knowledge acquisition may start anywhere, i.e. with any personal experience of unease – as they appear but to lead to some unique result. This appears to depend on collecting not only one’s own experiences, but also reports of those of others and of comparing and thereby selecting them. The aim is a combination or ordering, i.e. a class of experiences linked to each other and constituting a domain or unity (Churchman, 1968). The result, knowledge, constitutes a method of recognition – of the class by its elements (understanding), and its elements by the class (prediction).

This notion of knowledge limits the experiences on which its acquisition is based. In the ‘standard’ case these only include observations – as in astronomy, where observations prove independent of who is reporting. Excluded are experiences of touch or smell, where only first person comparisons appear possible (i.e. comparisons by the same ‘experiencer’). Other experiences are also excluded, for example emotions, norms, judgements and those related to story telling en story listening. The same holds for experiences like goals and intentions – all of which make it impossible to gain knowledge of actions.
First extension

No wonder much effort has been spent to redefine the notion of knowledge to include at least some of these experiences, starting with those that appear easy to incorporate and thus constitute what Vygotsky (1962) would call the notion’s next domain of development. Historically, this proved to be the experience of uncertainty or spontaneous chance. It refers to an inability to predict instances even when their class or domain can be recognised. Various theories have been developed to take care of this difficulty, including those of probability and statistical reasoning (and later on of fuzzy set theory (Zadeh, 1992)).

The reformulation of this difficulty as a problem of statistical reasoning has taken the shape of linking sample(s) to a population by way of a sampling distribution. Individuals in the samples no longer need to have the same properties as the population. As Durkheim (1951) noted, although the suicidal rate over a group (e.g. one determined by the area where members live) may remain invariant from year to year, and thus become a property of that group, one cannot predict whether anyone member will kill him- or herself in any year – or understand the suicidal rate as an individual property.

In this way statistical reasoning extended the kind of link one could search for between a class and its instances. It could now be identified even when it didn’t allow direct prediction of further instances given a domain and vice versa. This didn’t mean that such links were immediately accepted as knowledge (e.g. as suicidal ‘laws’). It took a remarkably long time before this happened – in fact, almost the whole of the 19th century (Hacking, 1990). When eventually accepted it included probabilistic links between instances and a class, next to deterministic ones – and hence did extend the notion of knowledge.

Extensions of this nature suggest the idea of a genealogy (Williams, 2002). The first thing to note is that the new type of knowledge inherited some of the properties of the previous notion. It allows for a kind of prediction (of the properties of samples) and for understanding (in linking samples to the wider population). Secondly the new notion is
irreducible to the previous one. It ‘hoisted up’ knowledge by ‘freeing’ it from deterministic constraints (Bruner, 2002). And thirdly, there may be further extensions – in the same genealogy, or in different genealogies.

Second extension
For some time this extension to experiences of uncertainty even had a wider, almost philosophical impact in that it seemed to explain our apparent ability to choose freely individually, although on a collective level the choice was determined by law (Comte, 1957). This idea may have sharpened interest in further extensions, which had to wait however until the Second World War. For a while it appeared necessary but impossible to deal with another experience of unpredictability, this time of intentional uncertainty or chance – as when a plane (and its pilot) attempt to avoid a well-aimed missile.

Such differences between actions imply a form of coordination: when I (as an unbounded source of experiences, or actor) experience what I attribute to you (another unbounded source of experience), I may act to produce a different, unexpected experience. The class of such coordinated, collective experiences is called a system. It will develop over time – and hence show characteristics that also can be experienced, like an increasingly smaller distance between plane and missile. If this distance becomes zero, the system stops; if not it may stop for other reasons like a lack of fuel, or continue.

It took much less than a century – about a decade – before the results of using these ideas of systems and their internal coordination were accepted as knowledge. Instrumental in their acceptance was the establishment of a number of scientific organisations like the Operational Research Club (1948, UK; later the Operational Research Society), and the Society of General Systems Research (1954, US). These and other organisations concentrate on identifying the forms of coordination between (the experiences of two or more) actors that allow them to maintain a recognisable system with desirable characteristics.
The inclusion of intentional chance appears part of the same genealogy as that of spontaneous chance. It still inherits the possibility of prediction (of system development) and of understanding (of forms of coordination). It also implies an extension that is irreducible to the previous one. At this point the notion of knowledge not only included goals, but even feelings – like feelings of loyalty to maintain a system’s desirable characteristics, for example those of traffic, government, justice and others (Mangan, 1986). What is added is that knowledge is no longer in the head of individuals, but in the system(s) they maintain.

A third extension?
Meanwhile attention has turned to other experiences. Stories are an important candidate. Since time immemorial stories have served to clarify experiences – without being recognised as knowledge. They appear increasingly important, however, for example in the improvement of organisations and in psychotherapy (Gabriel, 2004). This raises the question whether they will be part of a further extension of the same genealogy. This need not be the case. It may be that there are other experiences that are candidates for inclusion, for example those of emergence and innovation.

Before doing so it seems necessary to emphasise that although two important challenges of impossibility have been met (experiences of uncertainty and intentionality), these may not cover all recent changes of the notion of knowledge. What the genealogy should help us do, rather, is speculate effectively as to whether the experiences of stories and story telling imply a further extension. It also should stimulate the development of methods for the acquisition of such new knowledge – within the context of inheriting the characteristics of prediction and understanding.

Stories and their telling
The possibility of some obvious next development of the notion of knowledge will not considered here (Vygotsky, 1962). The aim is to speculate whether stories may become subsumed under such an extension, and thereby constitute a solution to the scientific problem of story telling. Stories challenge previous notions of knowledge. They are not
like observations (although they make something visible), they are not like uncertainty and they are not like experiences of intention or of desired future states. They are not like knowledge as they do not in some obvious way allow for prediction and understanding.

As the most visible characteristic of stories may be that they have to be told and listened to, or read and understood, or presented and engaged in – as when we tell children stories to initiate sleep, or listen to ghost stories in warm rooms on cold winter nights, or participate in heroic or dramatic deeds or admire fishermen’s tall stories. Stories are public – even those one tells to oneself. They cannot function unless told and listened to. Stories are not tacit as knowledge may be, having only indirect effects. And they are not like an argument, the aim of which is to be independent of any outside public contributions.

Stories imply the opposite. They solicit outside contributions from listeners. They provoke engagement and collaboration. Stories about the exploits of Sherlock Holmes start by eliciting experiences of outrage or pity from listeners. They may be summarised and coded as a mystery – as breaches in everyday life. These have to be mended, so there is a preferred direction. The detective has to elicit new experiences and order them as steps from the present to the future, often via mini-stories such as Holmes evoking images of the criminal on the basis of a cigarette stub. The story ends when this process stops.

Stories are not about ending, however. The telling is important. This is evidenced by the fact that stories may be told and retold endlessly – as is well known for children’s stories. Telling maintains the story (its peripateia; Bruner, 2002; Carsen, 1986). The end cannot be brought forward. One may think of stories told in pubs. Serious irritation, even mayhem, results when the listener doesn’t get the coda, the final moment when the elicitation process is resolved and it is confirmed that the actors in the story ‘lived happily ever after’ (Ricoeur, 1980; Boje, 2005). The same may happen in legal courts, where there is no such coda.

Note that stories are not treated here as texts, but as devices to address listeners.
This open-ended character of stories, the idea that a story does not stop until it reaches its logical end is also used intentionally. One may think of legal procedures where some stories are stopped externally (by the judge), or of the serialisation of stories, where each parts ends with a ‘cliffhanger’, a moment where elicitation hasn’t stopped yet. But also of the situation in companies where the organisational vision is meant to elicit experiences until stopped by the employees, i.e. by some recognisable achievement that provides a temporary end, to be followed by similar achievements of other employees.

Although the end of a story often is a ‘happy ever after’, it is not undefined. When the telling ends, experiences will have become ordered or re-attached that were elicited and detached when the story started. New distinctions will have been introduced. Parcifal, for example, starts out as the ‘unknowing idiot’, uncivilised and uncouth. He is unable to see others as separate beings and thereby distinguish between good and bad. Through various mini-stories new experiences are elicited and re-attached. What develops is an understanding of what it means to be a ‘pure idiot’, a compassionate and knowing being.

Although not all stories tell of this kind of enlightenment, they all seem intended to initiate not only a conceptual change in the listener, but a more or less moral one as well. Stories make us aware of distinctions regarding what should and should not be. Science fiction is a prime example. Reading or listening to it we become aware of the conventional nature of how we structure our experiences of daily life. There may be a next universe, or a Batman, or a way to travel to the stars. After (possibly repeated) experiences of such ‘other worlds’, we may become more accepting of our own world – even laugh about it.

There is the danger of course of not being able to come back to the world from where we started. We may stay in the new world, not achieve a new awareness, and simply take that world as unique – and negative as when youngsters emulate violent TV-stories in daily life. The same may hold for people who appear unable to come back from social and cultural experiences such as having inherited a certain gender and race, or a history
of having been colonised by a both attractive and oppressive force (Spivak, 1999). The difficulty seems to be that this means providing a description, rather than telling a story.

This suggests a need to improve on the telling of stories, i.e. ways to support the re-attachment – as well as suitable initial detachment. It is this need where the notion of knowledge comes in. Is it possible to elicit experiences and order them so they become stories that, when told, allow for changes in the resources people may use – as proved possible in the case of intentions and feelings of uncertainty. In other words, is it possible to transform stories into resources that people may use to become ‘more aware’ – of the existence of others, of their needs and development, of their contribution to variety?

The experiences involved in story telling do appear to increase individual awareness – a compassionate recognition of others having different but recognisable experiences. Such awareness allows for new combinations or classes of experiences. These are personal but are induced by stories that are public and social, even when people tell stories to themselves. They constitute a kind of knowledge – but not knowledge in the form of a story, or as part of a collective or system. It is personal knowledge, a growing awareness that results from living one’s stories in a social world.

At the basis of this awareness is a re-organisation of experience. People experience to know more than they know. A famous character in the Toonder strips regularly exclaims that ‘I didn’t know I had it in me’, when he reports his deeds. Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple similarly explains her success in solving murder cases (a moral activity) as due to frequently listening to the gossip in her village – and thereby knowing more than she knew. Resistance and liberation stories constitute another example. They do not aim to liberate individuals, but to free their self-confidence (Beecher Stowe, 1852).

What stories initiate is a process of knowledge acquisition that appears similar to the earlier search for the link between the experience of a system and individual contributions, or that for the link between a population and samples. The aim is to link experiences that are detached and re-attached to the experience of the development of a
complex of distinctions. This complex is stabilised by the retelling of stories and allows for compassionate interactions with the environment from which the stories stem. It appears that the complex is used to maintain the boundary between individual and social environment.

The resulting knowledge fits in with the genealogy of the notion of knowledge when extended to include experiences of (spontaneous and intentional) uncertainty and chance. It inherits the possibility of prediction (of the effect of telling stories given previous stories) and understanding (of the effect of stories by the resulting complex). At the same time the notion doesn’t seem reducible to any of the previous ones. Although it accepts the notion of knowledge on the level of populations and systems, it emphasises the awareness or ‘freedom’ of individuals to deal with more than one system.

This extension to experiences of awareness does not appear to have been generally accepted as knowledge yet, although similar speculations are available. Gherardi (2006) distinguishes distal and proximal views of knowledge. In the former, social elements are conceived as self-sufficient; in the latter, as beginnings and transformations, which constantly renew themselves (Gherardi 2006:51). Story telling emphasises the latter: a need to address what is continuing and incomplete, constantly striving but never achieving. Story telling appears to help maintain this need (Gherardi, 2006:51-52).

**Acquiring story knowledge**

The exploration attempted in this paper originated from a (quite limited) survey of the literature to see whether there is anything yet like an agreed way to acquire knowledge concerning the telling of stories. As it was concluded that there isn’t, the notion of knowledge itself was targeted. It proved to be quite dynamic, an approach to people’s experiences that appeared to get extended as more and more types of experience were included. The telling of stories was identified as a recent type – without the benefit, unfortunately, of a fully worked out method of actually acquiring such extended knowledge.
Some aspects of this process may be gleaned from the genealogy presented. Firstly, such acquisition should start with the collection, or elicitation of experiences from listeners to stories being told. Secondly, these are to be combined such that at each moment they are ordered and constrained so the listener is able to ‘live’ in them, but not yet ‘happily ever after’. This experience of a temporary life elsewhere should, thirdly, raise the listener’s awareness of his or her social environment. This awareness should have a moral tone to it: that environment is one where others live and grow.

In terms of the extended notion of knowledge, i.e. of including experiences of story telling, to acquire such knowledge one should not deviate from these aspects. Alternatively, they create an opportunity to recognise examples. Rappaport (2000) for instance reports on a mutual help organization (Bret Kloos, 1999). The author (Kloos, 1999) compared two different communities in the context of mental health. One was operated by a user-based, mutual help organization (‘normative narrative community’), the other was operated by a professional mental health centre (‘dominant cultural narrative’).

The study found that while both settings served similar people, and each organization delivered exactly what it said it would (in terms of environment and standards), each setting showed a distinct local culture, or in present terms, awareness of ‘environmental’ life. It defined 'how the residents come to understand themselves, think about their future, and develop a sense of personal identity, or engage in [...] "meaning making"' (p.16). In the professional setting the relationships between staff and residents were based on clearly demarked status, where education and defined roles determined decision-making power.

The mutual help organization appeared to be more of an 'achieved hierarchy, with residents taking on responsibility, as they are able, for operating the setting through shared decision making with the staff, and where former residents return to work as both staff and volunteers' (p.16). The narrative on the basis of which the collective evolved,
allowed its members to take on as well as change various roles and subject positions and collaborate with one another in different capacities – and hence presumably experience compassion. As such, participants could move in and out of peripheral and central roles as necessary.

As Rappoport (1995, 1998, 2000) concludes, the stories we use to create and organise our personal life – as part of our social environment – involve 'the integration of idiosyncratic experiences with the narratives we appropriate from our various communities of membership (2000:4). Consequently, the nature of available community narratives is a key element in both individual and social change.’ These narratives (or stories, the term we used as an equivalent) are not static. The professional story once was the only one around, for example, but is now increasingly criticized as insufficient in creating moral awareness.

Lykes, Blanche et al (2003) attempted ‘to illustrate some of the complexities that arise when academics engage with communities and together develop novel processes of self-representation’. One of their cases was a project in Guatemala where photography was used to develop stories as a material and symbolic resource for responding to the effects of civil war: ‘[the project] women sought to prevent future violence through creating a public record ... they sought new skills and resources to develop economic and psychosocial resources for their communities, thereby responding to the material ravages of war' (pg. 81).

By engaging in the storytelling, knowledge was co-constructed that […] ‘has created a structure and process wherein over time such conflicting experiences and the effects they generated can be better tolerated by women ... they have deepened their individual and the group's commitment to work within and across differences, despite persistent hurts, towards constructing a shared future.’ Despite ‘differences in religious beliefs, political affiliations, age and ethnicity’ (Lykes, Blanche et al, 2003, Lykes et al, 1999), the women proved able (in our terms) to increase their awareness of alternative views.
Many other cases may be adduced that exemplify knowledge based on story telling. A recent issue of Scientific American (April 2006) tells the story of the Sonagachi project, set up by Dr. Smarajit Jana to help the prostitutes of Calcutta (at present including some 60,000 of them) to resist pressures not to use condoms, and thereby reduce the spread of HIV (resulting in a stabilised low level). Firstly, prostitutes had to increase awareness of themselves (through Jana’s storyline: “I sell services, so do you”), secondly their social environment (police, pimps, criminals) had to become aware of the prostitutes’ lives.

Collaboration between marginalized young people in urban and rural areas in Peru provides another example of the systematic increase of knowledge as awareness. Originally the aim was to improve sexual health (i.e. reduce the number of teenage pregnancies). The youngsters were given the opportunity to create and tell stories about life in their communities. The effect was a reduction in pregnancies, but maybe more importantly, also an increased awareness of opportunities for local development, as actors and citizens (Ramella, 2002; Humphreys, Lorac and Ramella 2002, Vahl, 1998; Latour, 1999).

Examples such as the above help identify modern efforts to systematically help people acquire knowledge by story telling. They suggest ways to speed up acquisition (a search for suitable themes, testing levels of awareness by asking to identify the roles of the ‘other’ in social environments). Not unimportantly, additional examples may be found when looking at history – e.g. the change in external awareness of people engaged by biblical and other religious stories. Such stories tend to be repeated over and over again, either in full or by way of mini-stories like the Christian parables.

**Conclusion**

This paper started from a feeling of perplexity. Stories and story telling clearly constitute an important part of daily life. Still, some stories appear incoherent, just collections of jumbled thoughts and events – thereby suggesting the possibility of good stories. In fact,
it appears easy to think of good storytellers, like Balzac, Dickens, Dostoyewski, Homeros. This suggested the papers’ question: how story telling might be improved in a systematic way, as knowledge – without ‘unnatural’ impositions on storytellers, like those of the Soviet empire, where stories had to fit the party’s image.

In this paper it was attempted to answer this question. It was noted, first, that if the notion of knowledge had been clear, sufficient effort already appeared to have been invested to allow for an answer. The paper’s question was replaced, therefore, by the question what notion of knowledge to develop. It was attempted to identify a genealogy of this notion, as something extended over time to include experiences that originally were excluded as the basis for knowledge acquisition, for example feelings of uncertainty, goals and intentions. Some subsequent extensions were identified.

Next it was argued that stories and their telling necessitate a further extension of the notion of knowledge, one that allows people to know how to increase their awareness of their social environment, and of the respect and compassion fellow human beings deserve. The argument appeared to demonstrate, by way of a number of examples, that such knowledge can be acquired – although no established set of procedures has been identified yet. To study stories and their telling, one should explore the way stories elicit experiences of the listener and order them, to be returned as knowledge.

It was noted that stories do have content, but that it doesn’t appear as if this content is at the core of story telling knowledge. Almost all stories appear to be about what doesn’t succeed, or meets with difficulties – eventually to be turned around to glorious success. This suggested that it is this turn-around, rather than the content of stories, which constitutes the initial knowledge, the ante-experience (after Boje, 2006) that needs to be ordered as knowledge. A number of examples were presented where knowledge acquisition of this kind seems to have been achieved.

The main tool to extend the notion of knowledge was shown to be the idea of a collective or system. This was the case for the inclusion of uncertainty (leading to the selection of
samples as an intermediate level to exemplify differences between inside and outside experiences) and of intentionality (leading to systems of actions that would satisfy externally defined criteria). The same idea re-appears when extending to the experiences detailed by stories. What is necessary is the creation of collectives that maintain the awareness of others as sources of variation one may collaborate with.

References
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