

Narrative Template

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FULL ARTICLE

Introduction

Memory scholar James Wertsch elaborated on the narrative organization of collective memory. Based on research he concluded that a country's memory is underpinned by large narrative patterns that direct people's understanding of the past (Wertsch 1991, 2002, 2004, 2008a). The circulation and perpetuation of specific narratives about events and persons—uniquely situated in space and time—are often inspired by a general storyline or shared underlying narrative structure, which he called a schematic narrative template. Wertsch describes narrative templates as “basic building blocks” of collective memory (2004: 57). Stories about the past may vary in their details but can look like replicas as they draw on the same general narrative pattern. Wertsch came up with this concept after he investigated Russian students' views on the nation during the transition from the communist USSR to the Russian Federation. Students from both the Soviet generation and the post-Soviet generation showed in their stories how their historical accounts shared the same “triumph over alien forces” template (57). Despite all their differences, this basic plot was retained over time. Narrative templates are resistant to change, and their interpretive force often survives massive social and political transformations (Wertsch 2008b). Moreover, they are difficult to falsify and part of “deep memory”: narrative templates are hardly accessible to conscious reflection and people have a deep and strong emotional attachment to them. That is why Wertsch describes them as “unnoticed, yet very powerful coauthors” when we narrate history (2008a: 142).

The Concept over Time

In 1925, Maurice Halbwachs coined the term “collective memory.” Through this concept, he stressed that people always live and remember within a sociocultural framework and that the stories they tell are part of this collective context. By narratively linking the past, the present, and the future, people construct meaning about themselves and the world that surrounds them (Bruner 1991, 2002). While the past in itself has no story and consists only of a sequence of events, dates, and persons, people themselves impose a narrative structure on the past by their selection of events and persons (what) and by their interpretation (how). Narratives include three levels of information—fabula, story, and narrative text (Bal 2009)—and are meaning-making cultural artifacts through which people give sense to reality (Brescó 2008; Brockmeier 2002).

The same ingredients of a story can be structured in a different way. That is what Hayden White shows in his book *The Content of the Form* (1987). He argues that history writing is influenced by nineteenth-century literary conventions and elaborates on four forms or modes of emplotment: comedy, tragedy, romance, and satire. With these four story-types he shows how historiography shares the strong reliance on narrative for meaning. This means that written histories and their emplotment cannot correspond to the past as a whole; only individual facts and statements can be verified as such (Ankersmit 1983; White 1973). Historiography is never neutral and part of the contemporary context.

As a psychologist, Wertsch is also interested in forms of emplotment but he focuses on narratives related to collective remembering as a culturally contingent process. He highlights how individual voices articulate others connected to the culturally available narrative form. Wertsch is inspired by psychologist Frederic Bartlett (1886–1969), who used the terms “pattern” and “schema” to argue that people have unconscious mental structures that engage with individuals’ knowledge about the world. In his famous book *Remembering* (1932), Bartlett showed that cultural attitudes color memories of past events and experiences. The Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp (1895–1970) was another inspirational source for Wertsch. Propp studied the “recurrent constants” of Russian folktales to disentangle several generalized functions of these narratives, such as “hero leaves home” and “hero and villain join in direct combat” (Propp 1928). Wertsch also studies recurring patterns and schemes, albeit in a more abstract, overarching, and general way.

Although Wertsch utilizes a structuralist approach, he explicitly states that narrative templates are not universal archetypes. Instead, they belong to a specific cultural tradition (Wertsch 2008b: 124). Although the “triumph over alien forces” template is not the only one in Russia and available to members of other narrative traditions as well, Wertsch stresses that this template is the underlying structure of Russian collective remembering. For example, it can be found in the American tradition as well, but it will not play the same powerful role as in Russia since it will be outweighed by the American “quest for freedom” template.

As his ideas were developed in a time that was characterized by renewed national awareness and pride, Wertsch is mostly interested in national narratives as “cultural tools” for creating and recreating identity. He particularly wonders why national narratives can be quite conservative and resistant to change. Nowadays, his work is still mostly used in relation to collective memories about national history (Philpott 2014). In his publications, Wertsch also attempts to bridge the gap between historians and memory scholars. He not only questions the differences between history and (collective) memory but wonders how memory shapes history. The answer can be found in the concept “narrative templates”: they shape people’s thinking and speaking in such fundamental ways that they function as “co-authors” of historical discourse (Wertsch 2012: 174).

Interpretations

Other scholars have likewise argued that national narratives are “autonomous” to a certain extent. Ray Raphael (2004), who investigated founding myths of the United States, explains that some elements of national narratives have remained the same because they surpass the details of a specific story. He writes about the power of “narrative demands”—the ingredients

of a good story—such as heroes, clear plotlines, and a happy ending. He also mentions national narratives' powerful and persuasive "imaginaries," such as the battle between good and evil, or freedom and tyranny. "Even if they don't tell true history, these imaginings work as stories. Much of what we think of as 'history' is driven not by facts but by these narrative demands" (Raphael 2004: 5). Some national narratives are simply too good not to be told, since they are good stories. Precisely this feature makes them autonomous to a certain extent and immune to new academic findings.

Sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel studies the form of stories and shared historical memories from a different approach. He questions how groups of people in different societies and cultures perceive and structure time. His work is a "sociomental topography of the past" and consists of a structural examination of "social maplike structures in which history is typically organized in our minds" (Zerubavel 2003: 1). For example, he studies national calendars and commemorations, and discusses historical (dis)continuity and narrative plotlines, such as progress and decline. By stressing the sociomnemonic structures and social traditions of remembering, Zerubavel argues that "certain schematic formats of narrating the past are far more prevalent in some cultural and historical contexts than others" (14).

Although Wertsch, Raphael, and Zerubavel differ in their specific research, they share ideas on certain powerful, persuasive, and socially relevant narrative elements and their crucial role in the construction of identity as well as in the preservation, reproduction, and transmission of national history. The exact definition of these narrative elements remains a challenge. For example, what is the difference between a narrative template and a dominant, powerful plotline or a persuasive "imaginary"? Moreover, what is the difference between schematic narrative templates—which are part of "deep memory" according to Wertsch—and so-called "deep frames"? Gregory Bateson and Erving Goffman introduced the idea of framing in relation to a culturally determined definition of reality. Goffman defines frames as schemata of interpretation, as shared organizing principles that provide recognizable structures while making sense of experiences and information (1974: 11). An example of framing is narrating a specific historical battle as a "fight for freedom." In this way, a historical event receives a meaningful structure by placing it into a larger, recognizable scheme of interpretation. Various unique histories can be framed in the same way and widespread, powerful historical interpretations can become "deep frames" in long-term memories and the basis for the perception and comprehension of the present.

In relation to the above discussed problem of definition and distinction stands the issue of scope: to what extent can the nation-state be regarded as a narrative template for interpreting history? History can be narrated on various levels—for example, global, European, local—and mnemonic communities can transcend national boundaries. This means that the choice for a national frame in the narration and remembrance of history is not self-evident. Whereas official political accounts might stress a national understanding of history, individuals can hear other interpretations in their local environments. Hence, it is also important to recognize individuals' agency: they can replace one narrative template by another "as they move through life" (Philpott 2014: 320).

Whereas Wertsch stresses narrative templates' continuity and their resistance to change, historical contexts can change and interpretations that were earlier regarded as socially relevant can become a mismatch (Van der Vlies 2019). Next to highlighting the continuity of a

primary narrative template, it is important to concentrate on the plurality of narrative templates within a certain cultural tradition. Longitudinal historical research on national narratives' structures and perpetuation processes can reveal which narrative template prevails over another one in a certain period and why; it gives insight in templates' "dynamics of dominance" (Van der Vlies 2019, forthcoming). After drastic changes in society and the world, a narrative template can fade into the background while another already existing narrative structure becomes dominant again.

A final point of discussion is the invisibility and transparency of narrative templates, and the idea that they are used in an "unreflective, unanalytical and unwitting manner" (Wertsch 2004: 57). Philpott (2014) shows that powerful narrative templates can lose their transparency, for example, under the influence of a local sociocultural context. Furthermore, events with a huge impact—such as war—can also affect how reality is perceived. For example, after the Second World War, authors changed their interpretation of past centuries and intentionally recomposed history into a different narrative configuration to give a new meaning to the past, the present, and the future (Van der Vlies 2016, 2017).

The renewed attention for national narratives in the recent decades—sometimes as a fundamental part of identity claims—comes along with new initiatives that aim to challenge the perpetuation of powerful narrative templates. Whereas historical scholarship and school history have traditionally been major producers of national narratives and narrative templates, they are also involved in processes to dismantle these powerful cultural tools. For example, two years after the publication of the National Curriculum for History in England in 1991, Terry Deary published a very popular history series for youngsters entitled *Horrible Histories*. This series challenges standard narratives and "illustrates a popular iconoclasm" (De Groot 2009: 47). This narrative iconoclasm continues in the new century. For example, in their forthcoming volume *Reproducing, Rethinking, Resisting National Narratives: A Sociocultural Approach to Schematic Narrative Templates in Times of Nationalism*, Ignacio Brescó de Luna and Floor van Alphen aim to revisit narrative templates with the help of scholars from different disciplines to gain more insight in these powerful, often unnoticed coauthors of history.

Conclusion

Narrative templates are basic building blocks of collective memory, according to Wertsch: underlying narrative patterns that play a key role while interpreting history. Specific narratives about the past—uniquely situated in space and time—can look like replicas as they share the same underlying structure. Narrative templates are difficult to falsify and function as powerful cultural tools, for example, in the contemporary discussions about nationhood and identity. Recently, several scholars have taken the initiative to dismantle the power of narrative templates by developing a deeper understanding of their function and presence, and by considering ways in which these templates can be resisted, changed, or fought back.

Another form of narrative iconoclasm is visible in the streets. With the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020, the destruction of statues has come to a new climax in several countries. The attacks are especially targeted against the national narratives and ideas these statues stand for. Mnemonic communities fight about the remembrance of the past, since this battle engages with their identity in the present and their views on the future.

Apparently, collective memories are not necessarily national and within national borders various narrative templates are alive. It is remarkable that most activists do not discuss historical details; the specific narratives about historical persons or events are—most of the times—not at stake. Instead, the heated debates about historical statues in the public sphere show the power of deep memories and people's emotional attachment to narrative templates.

Related Articles

See also: Agency, Event/Eventual History, Experience, Fact, History of Historiography, What Is History and Why Does It Matter?, History of Ideas and Its Surroundings, Identity/Collective Identities, Narrative, Time

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