Who chooses your past? Audiences, narratives, and environment.

Introduction

We understand ourselves through narratives. A successful autobiographical narrative should, in some sense, reflect our memories. Some have argued (Heersmink, 2020) that because our memories are distributed across objects, places, and people *"who we are as narrative selves depends on and is partly constituted by a distributed network of environmental structures."* However, distributed narrative accounts have not fully captured the dynamic relationship between agents, memories, and environmental structures.

This paper proposes that environmental structures do not merely store distributed memories. Instead, they actively shape those memories. Certain structures facilitate particular kinds of narratives. Narration requires the selective editing, omission, and emphasis of aspects of the personal past. Therefore, environmental structures can make agents narrate with a certain perspective, allowing the agent to experience their own memories with this perspective. In this way, environmental structures can cause, or be used by, agents to remember the past in particular ways.

What is a narrative?

Successful narratives have two key features. First, they are *meaningful*, allowing an audience to understand the narrator's perspective at the time of the events. Second, they have *emotional import*, communicating the narrator's present emotional evaluation of those events (Goldie, 2003). Both features are audience-relative. Narrators must anticipate what their audience will find intelligible or emotionally salient, selectively emphasising, omitting, or explaining aspects of the story (Goldie, 2012). During narration, audience feedback further shapes the account (Pasupathi et al., 2021). Through repeated rehearsal, narrators refine their ability to convey meaning and emotion, increasing the accessibility and familiarity of particular narrative framings (McAdams & McClean, 2013).

Affective Audiences

In many cases, narrators can choose their audience. Here, audiences can function as "affective scaffolds" (Colombetti & Krueger, 2015), helping to stabilise and amplify the emotional import of a narrative. Consider recounting an unusually wild weekend: told to a priest, the story may be structured around shame and regret; told to a friend, it may become humorous. Although the remembered events remain constant, their meaning and emotional tone shift with audience expectations.

This highlights a dynamic relationship between memory, narrative construction, and audience response. The process resembles collaborative remembering, in which others help shape recall (Sutton, 2014), but differs in that narrators often actively select the audience for whom the narrative is constructed.

Consider an argument with a partner. Telling the story to the partner, especially if they believe you were at fault, requires engagement with their perspective. Recounting the same event to a partner-critical friend may encourage selective emphasis on details that minimise your responsibility. In each case, memories are re-experienced with different meanings and emotional valences, shaped by anticipated audience responses.

Repeated rehearsal of a narrative tailored to a particular perspective can result in "narrative railroading" (Osler, 2024). For instance, repeatedly telling an uncharitable version of an argument to a sympathetic friend may render that version the most accessible narrative for the narrator. When later attempting reconciliation, this sedimented narrative may undermine mutual understanding, having been constructed to deflect blame.

By anticipating audience expectations, narrators adopt particular perspectives that shape their narratives. Through rehearsal, these perspectives become entrenched, influencing how memories are re-experienced. Some aspects of the past become emotionally salient, others diminished or omitted altogether. In this sense, our narratives—and the audiences with whom we rehearse them—play a constitutive role in remembering. Memories should not be conceived merely as "the building blocks of narrative" (Heersmink, 2023); rather, narration is best understood as a dynamic feedback loop involving storytelling, audience expectations, rehearsal, and memory re-experiencing.

Prescribed perspectives

Not all agents can choose their audience. In some contexts, individuals are compelled to make their narratives intelligible relative to prescribed perspectives imposed by their environment. Two illustrative cases are adults receiving an autism diagnosis and young men radicalised online.

Many autistic adults report long-standing difficulties meeting social expectations, often interpreting these struggles as personal or moral failures accompanied by shame. Receiving an autism diagnosis can provide a new narrative framework through which past experiences are reinterpreted. This shift is evident in first-person reports:

> *"The first 51 years of my life were absolute misery not knowing what I had, or why… I would think that I was a terribly wicked person because I couldn't do many of the achievements that are 'expected' of 'good' people."* (Jones et al., 2001)

> "*Some of the personality traits which others led me to believe were faults or failings are not so and may be applied in ways which render them as assets."* (Lewis, 2016a)

> *"It was a bit like standing up in court and hearing the jury say: 'not guilty.'"* (Punshon et al., 2009)

Here, the emotional import of remembered experiences shifts: shameful memories are re-experienced with understanding rather than self-blame. Access to a neurodivergent perspective allows agents to reinterpret earlier difficulties, while also reshaping audience expectations and enabling more sympathetic responses from others.

However, prescribed narrative scaffolding can also be harmful. This is evident in cases of online radicalisation among young men. Such individuals are often embedded in environments that exploit susceptibility to "narrative deference" (Byrne, 2025). Misogynistic online communities encourage members to reinterpret personal histories through narratives of grievance and victimhood, fostering what the UK Government (2024) describes as a *"preoccupation with reflecting on past instances of victimisation."* These narratives undermine alternative interpretive authorities and entrench a singular, adversarial understanding of experience, effectively railroading individuals into understanding their past through misogynistic frameworks.

Conclusion

These cases show that memories do more than merely support narratives, and that audiences are more than passive recipients of information. In some contexts, agents can choose their audiences, using them as affective scaffolds that shape emotional understanding and guide future action. In others, agents are subject to prescribed perspectives that impose particular emotional interpretations on experience. Together, these examples illustrate the dynamic interplay between memory, narrative construction, narration, and audience, underscoring the active role environmental structures play in shaping how the past is remembered.

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