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What the Parrot Saw: A Linguistic Analysis of Narrative Fragmentation

By Amelia van der Merwe

Introduction

Both chronic trauma and shame, the relation between them, and their consequences are understudied, internationally, as well as locally, this despite high levels of both trauma- and shame-related psychopathology in South Africa (Edwards). In this study, we focus on the associations between exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV), shame and a particular trauma-related symptom, fragmentation of narrative memory, using linguistic analysis.

Chronic trauma

Two perspectives have emerged in the literature addressing exposure to violence. The first perspective includes research examining the effects of acute exposure to violence on intrapsychic processes (single-event trauma, known as Type I trauma) (Pynoos and Eth; Terr, "Childhood Traumas"; Terr, "Chowchilla Revisited"). The second perspective includes continuous or multiple exposure to trauma (complex or chronic trauma, known as Type II trauma) (Terr, "Childhood Traumas"). Green et al. demonstrate that exposure to an acute trauma (Type I trauma) increases the likelihood of exposure to further trauma (Type II trauma), and that multiple exposure is associated with worse outcomes. Thus, Terr ("Childhood Traumas") argues that these types of traumas can co-exist, but that what differentiates Type II trauma from Type I trauma is the prevalence of denial and numbing, self-hypnosis and dissociation (characterized by memory fragmentation), and rage.

Shame

Shame is a complex construct, which has been theorized psychoanalytically, phenomenologically, according to evolutionary theory, affect theory and cognitive attributional theory. However, there is some consensus in the contemporary literature that shame is an involuntary, extremely painful and debilitating self-focused emotion that has an intensely negative effect on individual psychological outcomes and on interpersonal behavior (Tangney and Dearing). Although shame and guilt are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature, recent research demonstrates that they are theoretically and empirically distinct, albeit related, concepts. In distinguishing between shame and guilt, it is useful to focus on the role of the self – in guilt, the self negatively evaluates specific behaviors, while in shame, the entire self is perceived as diminished, defective or fundamentally flawed, as failing to meet standards, as inferior or worthless in comparison to others (Gilbert; Lewis; Miller; Tangney). Shame is associated with withdrawing, hiding, and wishing to escape (Lazarus; Miller; Tangney). It is associated with retaliation, externalization of blame, and increases in anger and hostility, as well as high levels of personal distress.

Shame has been implicated in the etiology of a range of mood and personality disorders associated with trauma, particularly sexual and emotional abuse, such as depression, anxiety, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) (Harder; Morrison and Gilbert; Tangney et al.).

Narrative fragmentation

Van der Kolk and Fisler argue that trauma memories in those with PTSD are unique because they involve learned conditioning, difficulties in modulating arousal, and shattered meaning propositions. These difficulties are characterized by changes in neurobiological processes affecting discrimination (manifesting as increased arousal and decreased attention), the acquisition of conditioned fear responses to trauma-related triggers, and changed cognitive schemata and social fear (Van der Kolk and Fisler). Dissociation (a central feature of PTSD) interferes with semantic memory and complicates the ability to communicate the trauma (Van der Kolk and Fisler).

Interestingly, these authors report that during the provocation of traumatic memories, there is a reduction in the activation of Broca's area in the brain, the part of the central nervous system implicated in the transformation of subjective experience into language. Traumatic experiences are initially organized without semantic or linguistic representations; traumatic memories tend to be experienced as fragments of the sensory components of the event, or as intense emotions, particularly initially (Van der Kolk and Fisler).

This fragmented quality of traumatic memory occurs because familiar and expected experiences are automatically integrated, while terrifying or novel experiences may not fit as neatly or easily into existing cognitive schemes, and so resist integration. Pre-existing schemas determine to what degree new information is integrated (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart). New experiences are only understood in the context of prior schemas, which has implications for the association between childhood and adult onset abuse (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart). Unintegrated memories become subconscious fixed ideas; it is as if chronically traumatized people experience arrested personality development at the point of trauma(s), and they are unable to change or expand by the addition or assimilation of elements (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart). The most extreme form of this is Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart).

Method

Overall aim

To explore experiences of chronic trauma, shame, and narrative fragmentation.

Objectives

To conduct a linguistic analysis of one chronically traumatized woman's trauma narrative with the aim of exploring narrative fragmentation.

Procedure and sample

We chose the trauma narrative of one woman, who was Colored (of mixed heritage) and English speaking, from the Saartjie Baartman Centre for Women and Children in Manenberg,

Cape Town, South Africa. The Center is a 24-hour emergency shelter for women and children who are survivors of IPV.

Interview schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule consisting of eighteen questions focused on traumatic experiences, shame and psychopathology. The interview schedule consisted mostly of open-ended questions, which is suited to the chosen analytic approach, narrative analysis.

Compliance with ethical standards

This study was funded by the Harry Crossley Foundation. Both authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

The woman described in this study completed an informed consent form in her first language. The study was approved by the Health Research Ethics Committee at Stellenbosch University and was conducted according to the ethical guidelines and principles of the international Declaration of Helsinki, South African Guidelines for Good Clinical Practice and the Medical Research Council (MRC) Ethical Guidelines for Research.

Data analysis

Narrative analysis was used in our study for a number of reasons. Firstly, the focus of the study is on subjective experience and personal interpretations; how the self and experience are constructed through stories (Bruner; Widdershoven). Secondly, narrative analysis is suited to the exploration of disruptions in expected story- or plot-lines, as occurs with trauma (Burck). Furthermore, the act of narrating experience restores order and coherence to the frequently disordered and fragmented experience of traumatized individuals.

This study will explore how trauma can lead to narrative breakdown, which in turn often leads to a revision of personal priorities, beliefs and values. Crossley argues that such narrative disruption occurs when one element in a chain of events, people, plans, aims, objectives, values and beliefs disappears or is damaged irreparably. In such situations, we literally "lose the plot" (Author et al.), and temporal sequences which were meaningful before the moment of rupture are experienced as "the senseless progression of one thing after another" (Crossley 56). The disconnection and disorientation associated with this "mere sequence" is described by Carr (in Crossley 57) as "the dark and looming outer limit of experience, the chaos which stands opposed to order . . . this is a threat which is, admittedly, in varying degrees, permanently present at the periphery of our consciousness, the very threat and possibility of madness".

We will analyze an example of narrative disruption or breakdown using Gee's linguistic approach to narrative. Gee argues that all discourse genres are socially situated and constituted, and that interpretive reading should take into account wider social contexts, including organizing discourses and canonical narratives, in addition to the spoken linguistic co-construction of texts. In this manner, Gee largely avoids being criticized for performing the error of "metalinguistic illusion", where language is viewed as a pre-existing, mechanical structure divorced from its social and cultural roots. Gee's method of analysis is particularly sensitive to narrative and linguistic disruption, and so seemed most appropriate for the detailed examination of the text as it fragments and loses coherence as a result of its traumatic content.

The selected narrative is divided into parts, strophes, stanzas and lines. "Idea units" are the smallest component of narratives. Each line is made up of one or more idea units (indicated with a slash or /). Each idea unit contains a piece of new information which is called the focus, and it has a unitary intonation contour consisting of one pitch disruption (the pitch glide) (Gee). Thus, the focus of the idea unit is determined by the pitch glide, which is the change in the pitch of the voice, including falling, rising, rising-and-falling, or falling-and-rising in relation to the base pitch level of the sentence (Gee). A line often corresponds with a sentence, including complex sentences, and is about one central argument (Gee). Lines form stanzas, the "building blocks" of discursive language, which cluster into groups according to a topic, known as strophes (Gee). These strophes fall into larger units or themes, known as parts (Gee). In coherent texts, different components of the text are fairly uniform in length and structure (Gee).

Gee argues that narrative texts are structured at five hierarchical levels, each connected to the line and stanza structure. Each level plays a role in interpretation. Levels include line and stanza structure (level 1); syntax and cohesion (level 2); main line/non-main line (level 3); psychological subjects (level 4); and the focusing system (level 5). Corresponding with each of these levels is a particular role in interpretation, respectively including ideas and perspectives on characters, events, states and information (level 1); logic and connections (level 2); plot (level 3); point of view (level 4); and images or themes which build an overall interpretation of the narrative (level 5) (Gee). The interpretive questions raised include: How has the text been organized as speech (line and stanza structure)? Why has the speaker made particular connections at this point? How does this connection make sense within the logical of particular narrative sections and of the overall interview (syntax and cohesion)? What is the significance of the plot (main line/non-main line)? Who or what is the psychological subject of this stanza: why does the narrator change subjects? Are there patterns in these changes? Why is this focus so important? How does it fit with other focused material (focusing system) (Emerson and Frosh)?

Results

Fragmentation of the narrative

In this article, the term fragmentation will be used interchangeably with disorganization, and will be defined as including both narrative cohesion (connectedness) and narrative coherence (conceptual organization) (O'Kearney and Perrott). We present one example of how the self, splintered and fragmented from trauma (Putnam), is reflected in the quality of the narrative; narrative form mirrors narrative content.

Prior to the interview, the narrator disclosed that her husband suffered from paranoid schizophrenia, the "madness" referred to in the text. Of note was the delusional nature of some of her narrative, suggesting that it was the narrator who suffered from a psychotic illness. She did disclose to me that her mental health deteriorated as a result of her abuse, thus we are using this narrative as an example of how the text breaks down as a result of trauma-related mental illness.

Trauma narrative

PART 1: (Isolation)

Strophe 1: (Limited contact with others)

Stanza 1: (No friends and seeing family twice a year for an hour)

1. He never allowed me to have friends/
2. He only took me twice/ to my own family/, and my family/ stays in Stellenbosch/
3. He took me twice/ to my family/, twice per year, and that was only for an hour./

Stanza 2: (Excuses and lies)

1. And whenever they want to come/, then I had to come up with an excuse/ like, no, we are not at home/; we are going out for the weekend/
2. Then I must lie/. We are going out for the weekend/ or I'm working/

Stanza 3: (Mommy wants to help)

1. And my mommy said/, that was before/ she passed away/, but, no, it's nothing/, then I can cook for you/ or do something for you/. Because I used to work from nine o'clock till nine o'clock/ at night in a shop/.

PART 2: (Shame and stigma)

Strophe 2: (Lies about abuse)

Stanza 4: (Lied to boss and friends)

1. Then I would say, no, mommy/, we are not going to be at home/
2. Then my children would ask me, mommy, why?/ I said, Jene (*gee*), man/, I don't want my family to see this/
3. I always hid/, and I always lied to them/
4. Even my boss and my friends, they see me with blue eyes or a broken arm/, I always lie./ I would say, no, I got hurt, and that and that/.

PART 3: (The parrot)

Strophe 3: (The parrot can talk)

Stanza 5: (So excited about Grysie)

1. And then, Amelia, my boss gave me a parrot/
2. I never knew a parrot could talk/, that was so interesting/
3. She gave me a parrot,/ a little one/, and I gave him the name Grysie/
4. She gave it to me as a birthday present/
5. It was in its cage/, and a big bag of mealies/. I was so excited about this bird/.

Strophe 4: (The parrot tells the truth)

Stanza 6: (The parrot opens my eyes to his madness)

1. The first night he was sitting/ in the cage/, just looking at us/
2. The second night when I got home/ he told me, hey, you vark (*you pig*)/, you are fast asleep!/ He is bringing in a lot of girlfriends/
3. And then he clawed my fokken (*fucking*) face/. I said, huh?/

4. He said, ja (*yes*), and he told me/, you know what/, and that bloody thing is mad/
5. And that opened my eyes./ That was on the 16th of March 1990/, and that bird opened my eyes/
6. I won't lie to you/, that bird told me/, you know, he took a lot of tablets/.

PART 4: (Madness)

Strophe 4: (He is mad)

Stanza 7: (He is a mad donkey, a monkey, not human)

1. And his sister came this morning with a big bag/, a lot of packets and packets of tablets/, he's mad/!
2. That is why he's going on like a mad donkey/. He acts like a monkey/; he's not human/.

PART 5: (The parrot is not dead)

Strophe 5: (The parrot is used to this)

Stanza 8: (The parrot told me not to worry)

1. And then he went to the cage/, took the bird out/ and…I thought the bird was dead/
2. And then Grysie said in Afrikaans: naai (*no*), don't worry!/ I'm used to this/.

PART 6: (Abuse)

Strophe 6: (You don't talk about the abuse)

Stanza 9: (Something wrong and bruises)

1. I phoned my boss/ and I said, auntie Asma/, why did you give me this thing that talks?/
2. She said, you know why/, because you don't talk, my child/
3. And I know there is something wrong/ because I see the bruises on you/
4. And I don't feel lekker (*good*)/ to see you in pain every day./

PART 7: (The parrot is needed)

Strophe 7: (The parrot is needed by somebody special)

Stanza 10: (Someone special)

1. And she told me/ the bird was eight years old/ and it belonged to her brother/
2. She asked her brother, give that bird,/ I need that bird/
3. I want to give that bird to someone special/.

PART 8: (The parrot tells the truth)

Strophe 8: (The parrot talks to the policeman)

Stanza 11: (The parrot tells the policeman everything)

1. The first time I laid a charge against him/ and the policeman walked in/, the bird told the policeman every single thing/
2. Everything/.

PART 9: (I ran out)

Strophe 9: (I ran out because he killed the bird)

Stanza 12: (He wrung his neck)

1. He killed the bird/ a day before I left the house./ He killed the bird/
2. He took him/ and he wrung his neck/
3. And that was in 2009/ when I left./ That is when I ran out/.

The narrative's form is not uniform across stanzas and strophes and parts and there is some variation in the length and complexity of these components of the text. The parts, strophes and stanzas are either elaborate and detailed, or are short and end abruptly, to give way to a dramatically new and different theme. Only one strophe consists of more than one stanza, giving the narrative a disrupted, fragmented quality.

There are insufficient connections between parts, strophes, stanzas and lines. However, the connecting words "and" and "then" link different components of the text (see stanzas 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9). These words sometimes do not carry any meaning, and their function is solely structural. It is worth paying attention to line 3 of stanza 6 in particular. The surprising content of line 3, which bears no direct relevance to preceding or following lines, disrupts the flow of this stanza. This is despite the use of the words "and then". The meaningless use of connecting words ("and then") recurs in stanza 8 (lines 1 and 2) where the theme changes from madness (stanza 7) to the parrot not being dead (stanza 8).

From the point that the parrot is introduced into the narrative (Part 3), the narrative leaps from one theme to the next in a chaotic way. There is no clear narrative thread connecting components of the text from Part 3 onwards, and the repetition (for example, lies in stanzas 2 and 4, and the parrot tells the truth in strophe 4 and part 8, as well as the references to the parrot's death in part 5 and part 9) does not contribute to connections between parts, strophes and stanzas. Instead, the narrative contains a random, disconnected revisiting of particular themes or topics.

The breakdown of the plot occurs in the mainline material (main clauses), indicated by the point at which the plot is "lost" in Part 3 (the parrot). Until this point there had been a loose but logical progression from social isolation (Part 1) to shame and stigma (Part 2). Shame is a complex emotional experience for this narrator. She lies about the abuse, suggesting she feels not only shame, but also humiliation and embarrassment. Humiliation is closely aligned with stigma through the belief in the presence of a hostile, mocking, judging audience (Elison and Harter). In addition, she is presumably lying to her boss and family about the abuse to protect her perpetrator, suggesting she feels blame or deservedness for the abuse. We believe the link between trauma, shame and psychopathology lies in feelings of blame and deservedness; feelings of being inherently "bad". These feelings appear to be negative, but have a positive function as a defense among people who have been abused, because it is more tolerable to believe that the self is bad, to blame, deserving, and so in control, than to accept that the loved perpetrator, whose abuse is random and unpredictable, is bad (Fairbairn; Orange et al.). Fairbairn argues that by conceptualizing the self as "bad", the individual makes the objects of attachment "good", which produces feelings of deservedness and shame. It is these emotions which contribute to a shame-prone emotional style that is at the heart of chronic trauma

syndromes such as Disorders of Extreme Stress Not Otherwise Specified (DESNOS) and Complex PTSD.

The narrator's abuse is raised again in Part 6, but she returns to the theme of the parrot in Parts 7, 8 and 9. What is striking about this "plot" is the disconnected repetition of particular themes or topics, most notably, lies and truth. This is a tension that characterizes the whole narrative. Part 1, stanza 2, Part 2, stanza 4 and Part 6, stanza 9, which all focus on excuses and lies about the abuse and the madness that evokes it (see Part 4), can be contrasted with the "truth" of her perpetrator's madness told by the parrot in Part 3. In this part, the parrot becomes a witness to the perpetrator's indiscretions (girlfriends) and his madness (for which he takes tablets); his function is to validate the narrator's (unspoken) knowledge. The narrator's silence (see stanza 9, line 1) is also contrasted with the parrot's outspoken disclosure of "everything" (stanza 11). Where she conceals, the parrot tells. The juxtaposition of lies and truth is most dramatic in line 6 of stanza 6, where the narrator says: "I won't lie to you, that bird told me, you know, he took a lot of tablets". Thus the main points of the plot are lies (stanzas 2 and 4) and the parrot/truth (stanzas 5, 6, 8, 10, 12). The presence of the parrot indicates multiplicity; the existence of oppositional, contradictory voices within the self (Raggatt).

Many trauma survivors struggle to believe that the traumas they survived occurred in reality – a phenomenon which is at least partly caused by dissociation and loss of traumatic memory (Putnam). It is very important to this narrator that she is believed (stanza 6, line 6), perhaps because she struggles to believe herself, common in contexts of radical invalidation, where the individual's sense that her feelings have any validity whatsoever are lost (Orange et al.). What is ironic is that the parrot fails as "objective" witness. It is not his own words that he is using, but the narrator's forbidden ones; the ones she is too ashamed to utter. The bird expresses everything the narrator knows, but cannot say. She puts words in the bird's mouth, and in so doing, destroys her validation, her "objective" witness. Although it is the perpetrator that ultimately kills the bird (stanza 12), at a symbolic level, she has already destroyed him (i.e., his functions).

Repetition, which illustrates what is important to the narrator, occurs for the first time in stanza one, when she talks about how seldom she saw her family during the abusive relationship. This emphasis tells the reader that social isolation was clearly very painful for her. The importance of uncovering the "truth" of the madness of her perpetrator in the narrative is demonstrated in stanza 6, where the narrator repeats how the parrot opened her eyes, suggesting that it was the first time the narrator could see clearly. The last repetition occurs in stanza 12, where the narrator tells the reader how her perpetrator killed the bird (repeated three times). This death symbolizes the death of truth, validation, support. It is perhaps this that leads the narrator to leave her abusive relationship for the last time.

The psychological subject varies substantially across different components of the text, in keeping with the chaotic structure of the narrative. In stanza 1, the psychological subject is "he", while in stanza 2 it is "I" and in stanza 3 it is "mommy". In stanza 4, however, the psychological subject changes from "I" to "boss and friends" to "I", and in stanza 5, it shifts from "my boss" to "I" to "she" to "I" to "she" to "parrot" to "I". The chaotic shifting

continues in stanza 6 ("parrot" to "I" to parrot ["he"] to "I" to parrot ["that bird"], but abates again in stanza 7 ("his sister" to "he"). In stanza 8 the psychological subject changes from "he" to "I" to parrot ("Grysie"), and in stanza 9 it shifts from "I" to "she" to "I". In stanza 10, this pattern is reversed and the changes are from "she" to "I" to "she". In stanza 11, the shift is from "I" to the parrot ("that bird"). Stanza 12 closes with a more chaotic shifting from "he" to "I" to "he" to "I". The most dramatic shifting takes place in stanzas 5 and 6, which are all centered around the parrot, and marks the most irrational (if not delusional) part of the narrative in terms of content. It is significant that the psychological subject is so unstable in this, the most fragmented, section of the text.

The dramatic shifts in focus are too numerous to repeat here. Like the chaotic shifts in psychological perspectives in the narrative, the disorganized changes in focus reflect an incoherent, fragmented narrative; a narrative on the verge of breakdown.

Conclusion

The narrative we have analyzed demonstrates the associations between chronic trauma, shame and a particular type of psychopathology, the fragmented quality of traumatic memory, demonstrated through the significantly fractured, incoherent and disrupted quality of the language used to describe the narrator's traumatic experiences. We used Gee's approach to uncover unconscious material reflected in language. Specifically, in our analysis, we aimed to demonstrate how (unconscious) trauma-related fragmentation of self is made visible in the fractured usage of language.

The narratives survivors of chronic trauma present are often chaotic. Chaos narratives are difficult to hear (Frank). Orange et al. (42) call this "the dread of structureless chaos". Frank (101) reflects on how interviewers directed Holocaust survivors towards alternative narratives that demonstrate "the resilience of the human spirit", failing to bear witness to the real stories the survivors had to tell because of their own fears; their own emotional inadequacies. In fact, with liberation, "the real trouble begins: the trouble of remaking a sense of purpose as the world demands" (Frank 107). Like the horseman in Kluger's tale who feared crossing a lake covered by a thin layer of ice, once he made it to the other side, he looked back, and instead of feeling relief or joy, realizing what he had survived, he died of fright.

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Dr. Amelia van der Merwe has worked in the area of violence and its psychological consequences since 1999. Her research has focused on community violence, intimate partner violence, and ritual abuse and its effects on psychological outcomes. She has worked at the University of Cape Town (SA), the Policy Research Bureau (UK), the Human Sciences Research Council (SA) and the University of Stellenbosch (SA) in both research and teaching capacities. She has published four books, the most recent, "Shattered but Unbroken: Voices of Triumph and Testimony". She has also written many book chapters and journal articles on the effects of violence and abuse, specifically on child and adolescent emotional and developmental outcomes. She is currently doing post-doctoral research at the University of Stellenbosch.

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