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Recognizing Something Human: The Benefits and Dangers of Persuading Through Personal Narratives—A Response to Ulatowski and Lumsden

Merel Talbi, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, m.m.talbi@vu.nl

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On political and social issues, disagreement can be fierce. In today's political climate, it may seem that it is becoming increasingly difficult to overcome our differences, to engage in deliberation and to come to some form of mutual understanding. In my recent paper in *Social Epistemology* (2024), I have argued that sharing personal narratives may be one way to convey our personal experiences, which in important ways underpin our beliefs.

By utilizing narrative form, I submit that our personal experiences can be presented in a more vivid, transporting way, and that the structure of narratives, which often focus around characters overcoming obstacles, are a good fit to share with others the personal motivations for our beliefs. I claim that through this process, personal narratives can foster common ground (Stalnaker 2002; Stalnaker 2017), in that they can help to develop a shared understanding of how someone can very reasonably arrive at different conclusions from ourselves. Empirical work in social psychology (Kubin et al. 2021) suggests something similar. Experiments show that recounting how personal experiences have led to certain political or social beliefs, leads to an increased perception that the narrator is rational. Personal narratives, in short, can help us to see ourselves in another's place, understand their reasoning, and so bridge epistemic divides.

In a reply to my paper, Joseph Ulatowski and David Lumsden (2024) have continued on these themes, refocusing and broadening some of the above claims. They argue that the persuasiveness of personal narratives it not exclusively due to narrative structure, but also (and more importantly) related to the personal and human quality of the narrative. Additionally, they share their account of how epistemic divides may be overcome through matching *self-narratives* of narrators and audiences. They suggest that persuasion will be more successful when there is a stronger pre-existing match in self-narratives, and this offers a hopeful strategy for overcoming disagreement and conflict.

In this response to Ulatowski and Lumsden, I wish to specify the claims from my own paper and will conclude that their suggestions are not so very different from my own. I do, however, want to warn against relying too much on the personal quality of narratives to overcome disagreement and conflict, especially in situations where the conflict occurs between a more powerful group or individual and those who are oppressed or marginalized.

I will argue that understanding and using the persuasive force of narrative structure may be especially useful in situations of power imbalance. In these cases, narrative structure may allow us to bridge epistemic divides while potentially alleviating the risk of *epistemic exploitation* (Berenstain 2016). This form of allyship, however, will need to be undertaken with care. I will conclude with some thought on how we, as social epistemologists, might think further on how to work with the narratives of marginalized groups in a fair and just manner.

Narrative Structure, the Personal Quality of Narrative, and Common Ground

In their contribution, Ulatowski and Lumsden critically reflect on my emphasis on the persuasiveness of narrative *structure*, and suggest that perhaps I overstate how narrative form is important in understanding how narratives persuade. Instead, they suggest that not the

narrative form, but rather "the reality of the person" in a personal narrative is what creates the persuasive effect, where the presence of a real-life human experience helps to bridge epistemic and other divides. Some kind of inter-personal recognition, or perhaps the idea that the other person is someone just like ourselves, has an important persuasive effect, they suggest. This aligns with the work of Tracey Llanera (2019), who claims that to bridge great epistemic divides, for example when interacting with extremists, it is necessary that these individuals can see themselves in a relevant *alternative lifeworld*. Someone may be persuaded to leave behind their old beliefs, if only they have some realistic sense that there is an alternative place for them, where they might fit in and build new meaningful personal relationships. This is similar to what Ulatowski and Lumsden present in their own work on how similarity between narrative strands in self-narratives can help to overcome difference. Here, they emphasize that interpersonal connections can occur when individuals bond on aspects of themselves that are *not* in conflict.

In both of these examples, narratives play a role to showcase some more personal elements that can work to build bridges: alternative relationships and ways of existing (Llanera), or personal similarities in self-narratives on topics that are not the cause of conflict (Ulatowski and Lumsden). In the end, the authors suggest, it may not (solely) be the narrative structure that bears the burden of persuasion. It is instead the *reality of another person* that is present in the narrative, and that builds a personal relationship between narrator and audience, providing interpersonal recognition, likeness, and eventually persuasion.

While I believe that the account that Ulatowski and Lumsden present in their response is very plausible, I also do not think that it is so dissimilar from my own reading of narrative persuasiveness. It is true that I stress the importance of narrative structure, but I specifically claim that it is the strongly contextual, fine-grained and detailed nature of narrative form that makes it uniquely situated to transfer the personal quality of narrative. This makes narrative structure especially suited to transfer *standpoint knowledge*. Standpoint knowledge (based on the literature on standpoint theory as put forward by authors such as Wylie (2003), Harding (2004) and others) concerns the knowledge that individuals develop due to their structural position within society.

I argue that narrative structure, which often contains elements like having characters who overcome obstacles (Fraser 2021), is especially well-suited to provide insight into these experiences from specific, often marginalized positions in society. After all, a narrative helps audiences to follow along with the trials and tribulations of a narrator, recounting difficulties that are faced and challenges that are encountered—challenges and difficulties that may occur more often for those who are marginalized.

Of course, as Ulatowski and Lumsden say, not *all* narratives will be about overcoming obstacles, but many are. For an example, one need only think of the hero's journey, which forms the basis of many famous books and movies. Experimental psychological research has even found that this classic narrative structure can increase individuals' sense of meaning in their lives, when they are asked to recount their own life experiences in this narrative form (Rogers et al., 2023). In this way, a narrative structure that's based around overcoming adversity is a helpful form to transfer the experiences of marginalized individuals, that may even provide meaning in the very telling of it in this form.

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In addition to this, there are further persuasive benefits to the narrative form. In her work on narrative self-identity, Marya Schechtman (2023) emphasizes that narratives are especially suited to convey contextual richness and holistically cohesive accounts. I argue that this richness helps to foster *common ground* (Stalnaker 2002; Stalnaker 2017) between narrator and audience. As Melanie Green (2017) suggests, in sharing narratives, narrator and audience together build up a shared knowledge of the narrative world. I suggest that it is precisely the fine-grained, contextual and detailed narrative form that makes the building of this common ground easier and more effective than other forms of common-ground-building, such as merely putting forth arguments about the state of affairs of the world. Through the details of the personal experience that is being narrated, which come to the fore more elegantly and easily through narrative, a shared background understanding develops more smoothly than through argument, and common ground emerges.

Of course, I wholeheartedly agree with Ulatowski and Lumsden that there are situations where the differences between narrator and audience are so great, that no (or almost no) amount of lush world-building narrative will help to bridge the relevant divide. But that does not mean that, for non-extreme cases, narrative form cannot help to put the facets of a person's experiences into a richly textured narrative that can build up a shared common ground. In this sense, narrative structure is an important aspect of narrative persuasiveness—in addition, indeed, to the personal qualities that are part of the narrative, and that may also foster the relationship between narrator and audience.

Personal Narratives and Epistemic Exploitation

Based on the considerations presented above, I believe that Ulatowski and Lumsden are likely right when they say that some part of the personal reality of a narrative is important for its persuasiveness. However, I also believe that the narrative structure is especially well-suited to conveying this reality, which explains my focus on it and its importance in understanding the process of persuasive personal narratives.

There is another reason, however, why it is important to focus on the narrative structure, and not merely on the personal reality of experiences. This has to do with what Nora Berenstain (2016) calls *epistemic exploitation*. Berenstain defines epistemic exploitation as the process where more privileged individuals request some form of education or explanation of less privileged individuals about their situation of marginalization (Berenstain 2016). Asking less privileged persons to educate others in this way is problematic, because it forces them to spend time and energy on teaching others (sometimes even those who oppress them in some way), who may not even be very likely to take their accounts seriously. In addition to this, Berenstain notes that it is often very hard for marginalized persons to refuse this form of unpaid educational labor. Unwilling marginalized educators are often criticized very harshly when they choose not to engage. Berenstain identifies a double bind in these situations: either marginalized persons have to engage in an often painful process of explaining their experiences, or, when they refuse to do so, may end up confirming negative stereotypes by allowing them to go unchallenged (Berenstain 2016).

This idea of the costliness of doing educational work as a marginalized person is also present (though implicitly) in the well-known story of how the American ex-Klansman Derek Black left his environment of white nationalism (Llanera 2019; Dutilh Novaes 2023). Derek Black, who was raised and educated in a tightly-knit community of high-ranking members of the Ku Klux Klan, went through a remarkable process of transformation after he was regularly invited to and attended the Shabbat dinners of a young group of Jewish students at his university, where Black enrolled in 2010. The host and others visitors of these dinners spent years engaging with Black and discussing his racist beliefs with him, until Black finally distanced himself from white nationalism in 2013 (Llanera 2019; Dutilh Novaes 2023).

While this process of transformation on Black's part provides a hopeful account of how someone might change and come to see the wrongs of racist and oppressive behavior and belief, the time and energy that the Shabbath dinner's participants put into talking to Black and engaging with his ideas shows incredible patience, effort and dedication. It begs the question of how often a marginalized individual or group might be willing to interact with an aggressor in this way. It seems that this is a fascinating and extraordinary case precisely because it is so costly to engage, for *years*, in this manner. It would be entirely justified to opt out of this type of engagement as a marginalized individual or group, for the same reasons of epistemic exploitation that Berenstain highlights.

Berenstain's account of epistemic exploitation is relevant to the question of personal narratives, especially in situations where marginalized or oppressed individuals or groups attempt to recount their experiences to those who are more privileged. While empirical and theoretical literature both suggest that narratives of experiences of marginalization can work to persuade others of the harm and injustice of oppression, asking persons or groups to convey these narratives does come at a cost to them. Depending on the situation, that cost may, especially over time, simply become too great and unreasonable to request. One might think of situations where persons of color no longer wish to interact with those who are skeptical of their experiences and stories, because they have too often encountered (actively, sometimes purposefully) ignorant behavior.

In these situations, focusing on the persuasive force of narrative *structure* may help to alleviate some of the pressure on marginalized individuals. After all, when the persuasive burden of a narrative lies in the personal quality of it, it is likely to work better if *more* personal details are included in it. While this is likely persuasive, it also creates vulnerability for the narrator, who will need to share insights into very personal experiences that may be painful to recount in great detail.

This very personal recounting may be alleviated somewhat by focusing more on the persuasiveness of narrative structure. By making use of this structure, a narrative can be built that still conveys the personal quality of the experience, while also shaping these details into something that functions as a separate tale, a story in narrative form, that becomes an entity apart from a mere recounting of personal details. Some distance may be achieved in this process of narration, creating a kind of narrative 'buffer' between the personal experiences of marginalization, and the process of recounting them—while, thanks to the persuasiveness of narrative form, losing little of its persuasiveness.

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Of course, some elements of the personal reality of the narrator will still need to be present, but utilizing the narrative form may help in making the process more palatable and provide more control through focusing on narrative structure. In line with this, while my own account of narrative persuasiveness focuses mostly on autobiographical, true experiences, the dangers of epistemic exploitation may even provide a good reason to consider the potential persuasiveness of *fictional* narratives. The benefit of fictional narratives is that important tales of oppression may be shared, while decreasing the burden on marginalized communities to constantly challenge oppression, often at the cost of their own time, energy and well-being.

The persuasive influence of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* may be one successful example of how a fictional narrative has had important emancipatory and persuasive force, without putting a burden on victims of slavery to tell the tale. In the particular example of this book, Harriet Beecher Stowe went to great lengths to show to her critics that she had done ample research, and that what happened within this work of fiction was actually a fair representation of the practices of slavery (Strange, 2002). Stowe even wrote a companion book, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, to showcase how her book drew on real incidents that were deeply similar to what was presented in her fictional work (Strange, 2002). In contemporary situations, there may also be some space for more privileged persons to share the narratives of others, speaking on their behalf to carry some of the costs of epistemic exploitation in a form of allyship. In these cases, narrative structure helps to transfer standpoint knowledge, without relying solely on the personal quality of narrative, as put forward by the individual on whose experiences the narrative draws.

We might see some traces of this in the example that Ulatowski and Lumsden present in their reply. They recount the tale of how Kersten Elmhoff, Kamala Harris' husband's ex-wife, responded through narrative to JD Vance's offensive remarks on her allegedly being a "childless cat lady" (Marquez and Alexander 2024). Many others followed Elmhoff's lead, posting support in the form of personal stories of their own experiences on social media—many Taylor Swift fans among them (Masih 2024). This example, where not the victim herself (Harris), but others in her place (Elmhoff, other prominent feminists and many 'Swifties') told the story of Harris' valuable role in being a co-parent to Elmhoff's children, is one example where not the very detailed and personal response by Harris herself, but rather narrative accounts about her as told by others, provided a response to a personal attack.

Here, a bystander told a story *about* Harris, alleviating some of the epistemically exploitative burden. By doing this together, these women managed to share the burden of epistemic exploitation, which likely lightened the load somewhat in each individual case. In bringing together many stories that all provided smaller bits of the 'personal quality' of narrative in one large narrative structure, carried out by many people, the cost of epistemic exploitation decreased. In fighting the good fight, it may be beneficial to make use of these benefits of narrative structure, and not only rely on the personal realities of marginalization.

Allyship and Co-optation

Of course, the strategy suggested above is not without risk. Speaking on behalf of a marginalized or harassed individual or group brings along its own set of questions of how to do this properly. As Ulatowski and Lumsden say, an important reason for valuing personal narratives is to attend to the voices of those who are often unheard. In attempting to alleviate the burden of epistemic exploitation, allies must be wary not to undermine the goal of attending to valuable lived experience.

There is a danger in speaking on behalf of others. This is clearly argued by Patricia Hill Collins (2009), who emphasizes in her *Black Feminist Thought* that we all speak from partial, situated experience. This situatedness is valuable, and also provides an entry point for empathy, where sharing experiences can help us to better understand each other's beliefs and actions. Given the importance of real-life, lived experiences in the formation of knowledge, it is important to note that once these experiences are conveyed by those who did not themselves have those experiences, some of the depth and knowledge that the experience provides is likely lost, and less empathy will be built.

Additionally, there is the danger of *co-optation*. Myisha Cherry (2021), in her book of activism and philosophy *The Case for Rage,* warns against the dangers of bad allyship. Cherry observes how some allies may think that the moral outrage that they experience on behalf of the injustice that is done to others somehow affords them insight into the experiences of oppressed or marginalized individuals. In this case, something clearly goes wrong epistemically. Cherry and Collins both emphasize that the situatedness of experience is precisely what provides individuals that valuable knowledge, which simply cannot be gained in the same way through, for example, mere testimony. Cherry warns that a good ally should instead mostly listen, decenter herself, and provide room for those who are marginalized to share their voice and experience.

Based on the above, it may seem that Ulatowski and Lumsden were right all along in emphasizing the personal character of narrative—although perhaps for a different reason. Patricia Hill Collins suggests that it is exactly the situatedness of lived-experience that can foster empathy across difference, and Myisha Cherry warns against well-meaning allies who center themselves, instead of allowing marginalized narratives to take up the necessary space. These warnings are relevant, especially when we wish to alleviate some of the harms of epistemic exploitation in relying overly much on the personal, but also costly and vulnerable, sharing of personal realities in narratives.

On the account of allyship, the example that Ulatowski and Lumsden provide of Kamala Harris and Kerstin Elmhoff may read as an example of how to speak for others in a way that is both effective, but also sensitive to the warnings of Collins and Cherry. In the example, Elmhoff narrates her own experiences of being a co-parent with Harris, thus respecting Harris' own experiences and supporting them with her own. In this case, it appears that Harris is never herself *prevented* from speaking up, and her experiences are never recounted in place of her sharing her own. In this manner, important situated knowledge is shared, while alleviating the burden of epistemic exploitation somewhat. (Of course, in this particular case, Kamala Harris may be marginalized in some ways, but she is still an influential and powerful person in others.) Allyship and speaking for others through using narrative structures, in

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short, should be undertaken with care, especially when precarious or diversely marginalized persons are involved.

Concluding Remarks: Some Thoughts about the Social Epistemology of Personal Narrative

In this contribution, I have specified some of my thoughts on personal narratives in reaction to Ulatowski and Lumsden's reply to my paper. In the end, I believe that my own account is not so very far from their own. Personal narratives are likely effective precisely because they are about real-world, personal, lived experiences, which I believe can be transferred especially well through narrative structure. This narrative structure helps to build common ground, fostering empathy and mutual understanding. Some risks abound, however, in the form of epistemic exploitation, where marginalized individuals might be asked repeatedly to share their personal experiences of oppression. The narrative structure may help somewhat to alleviate this, when allies make clever use of the narrative form to recount the personal narratives of themselves or others—though this must be undertaken with care.

In all of this, philosophers who are interested in lived experience and personal narratives play a somewhat curious role. We also make use of the narratives of others in our academic work and use these stories and experiences to make certain arguments. Especially when our work is not explicitly activist, and especially when we ourselves do not belong to the marginalized groups whose stories we include, the warnings of Collins and Cherry seem apt to take into consideration.

In recounting the narratives of marginalized communities, we hope to provide a platform as good allies, but we ourselves must also be wary of co-opting narratives and experiences that are not our own. If we are not careful, *epistemic extractivism* may even occur: the process that Linda Martín Alcoff (2022) warns against, where knowledge is taken from those who are in less privileged positions and used by those who have more power. Similar to the warnings of Collins and Cherry on speaking on another's behalf, we, as researchers, might also think carefully on how to speak about marginalized communities, and aim to develop equitable and fair research practices. David Ludwig and colleagues (2024) are developing these practices for empirical research, in explicitly working together with indigenous communities. For us as epistemologists, there may be some further work to be done in considering how we can develop such fair and just practices for philosophical research.

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