Expert Narratives: Systems, Policies and Practices

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1. Introduction

This report describes the one-day workshop Expert Narratives: Systems, Policies and Practices, which was held at the London School of Economics on the tenth of December 2018. The report is written following my parental leave, and hence at some remove from the workshop. As a result of these slightly unusual circumstances, I have written it in a particular way. The first section describes the background to the workshop, and the thinking and discussions which led up to it; in the second, I have summarised each of the eight papers which were given on the day, based on my notes and memories, as well as the speakers' presentations; in the third, I have included a brief discussion of the further questions which were raised by participants at the workshop during its plenary session. This is very much intended as a report from a particular point of view, rather than a definitive statement of what happened. I hope that this presentation can build on the rich conversations from the workshop itself, and that readers of this report will also feel welcome to join in. If you have any comments or criticisms, please email m.paskins@lse.ac.uk.

1.1 The Narrative Science Project

The Narrative Science project is funded by the European Research Council and based in the Economic History Department at the LSE. The project's principal investigator is Professor Mary Morgan; I am one of the group of post-doctoral researchers who are employed on the project. The goal of Narrative Science is to study explanatory narratives in the social and natural sciences—this means, in the first instance, how narratives are used to give explanations, rather than the rhetorical or popularising goals which they might also achieve.

The group's main points of reference have been taken from philosophy of history and narratology; contributors to our workshops have also offered perspectives from sociolinguistics, literary studies, international relations; the workshops have also incorporated natural scientists' own discussions of how they use narratives. Members of the project team are generally united in their concern with explanatory narratives, but do not have an agreed view about how these should be studied or related to other understandings of narrative.

1.2 Background to the Workshop

In the work which I had been doing before I was employed on the project, I looked at the shaping of social and technical futures in the popular press and in fiction. The shift away from the popular sphere and towards more technical realms was exhilarating and daunting. My studies of science journalism pursued a well-trodden furrow, much discussed by historians, science communicators, and scholars of literature and science; I was now trying to understand whether experimental procedures like chemical syntheses could be grasped as narratives, and what the gain of doing so would be. I was unsure of how to relate this work which I was doing to the usual concerns of the academic communities in which I am involved; but it was also stimulating to study more recalcitrant and technical narratives, which do not move out into the public realm.

I knew that the narratives of the chemists did not stop at the walls of their laboratories. Alongside my attempts to reconstruct the ways in which syntheses might be considered as narratives, I also conducted extensive archival research at the National Archives and the Royal Society of London: following chemists into policy spaces, and their work on government and industrial committees. How did the highly technical accounts of processes change in these locations, and how did chemists negotiate their technical understandings in discussions with civil servants and government ministers, representatives from industry—and so on? Many of the records which I found provided remarkably detailed transcriptions

of conversations and disagreements which had occurred at these meetings, informed by visions of chemistry which also appeared in more technical publications.

I started to wonder if the "technical committee narrative" might fit within the project's remit: neither popular nor rhetorical, committees order heterogeneous materials (witness statements, anecdotes, bits of information brought by members) into reports and decisions; these are further coordinated by the committee's terms of reference, the contributions of the chair.

Thinking about these unlikely narratives (when I told people that I was working on committees, they often rolled their eyes and mentioned some ghastly time-wasting board on which they had sat, or became very animated and whispered about committee-craft) reminded me of conversations which I have had over many years with friends and colleagues who work in, or study, the field of child protection social work. They had told me about the challenges involved in writing serious case reviews, which are produced when a child is harmed. These were narrative problems: how not to get caught in contingent details and blaming and instead to shape the story in a way which allows meaningful lessons to be learned. Very different kinds of narrative to those of my committees—but perhaps there were similar concerns in both spaces? And might engineers, who also often need to construct narrative accounts in the aftermath of system failure, also share some interests in these approaches?

Professor Morgan agreed that this would be an acceptable approach for a project workshop, suggested a number of names for possible speakers; together we shaped the brief for the meeting, which is reproduced opposite. I had discussions with all of the speakers about their contributions. What resulted is described in the following pages. I would like to thank everyone involved for the good faith which they showed in taking part, and the enthusiasm with which they embraced concepts of narrative which in many cases were new to them.

2. The Talks

2.1 Andrea Mennicken (LSE), "Regulatory Narratives and Narratives of failure"

Andrea talked about work which she and her colleagues in LSE's Department of Accounting have done on the public inquiry into failures at the Mid Staffordshire hospital, which resulted in the deaths of several patients. Her talk started with a quotation from a letter by Robert Francis, the QC who had chaired the public inquiry into the failings, which claimed of his report that "the story it tells is first and foremost of appalling suffering of many patients". Part of the policy landscape which had led to these problems was an attempt by government from 2005 onwards to introduce market ideas of failure, which would allow healthcare providers to fail, and exit the system. By emphasising competition and the possibility of failure, market mechanisms were supposed to move healthcare providers away from a "perfectionist policy" which paid no attention to financial limitations. Monitor, the regulator, produced risk evaluation tools which foregrounded financial risk, but which also produced a "culture of assurances", allowing for self-reporting rather than appropriate oversight; the "soft intelligence" of staff and patient complaints were also disregarded. The Francis report recommended instead a focus on communication, culture, values and leadership.

2.2 Brendan Clarke (UCL), "Narratives of Forensics"

Brendan talked about the role of narratives in constructing the role of forensic evidence in court. Regulators of forensics are keen to transform the field into an evidence based discipline; a lot of practitioners are nervous about this shift. Brendan framed his discussion in terms of "factishness": understandings which resemble facts and are supposed to carry the same evidential and rhetorical force as facts, but which are not straightforwardly factual. There is, Brendan argued, an analytic cost to thinking about questions of evidence with narratives in them—because narratives come in a unit. All that can be discussed in the

context of law is "the facts", the forensic findings—there is no discussion of how these findings came about. As the sensitivity of forensic tests has significantly improved in recent years, it has become increasingly difficult to interpret. The occlusion of narratives unpacking the provenance and interpretation of forensic evidence has fed into the narrative of their objective reliability.

2.3 Hannah Roscoe, "Serious Case Reviews and the 'Second Story' in the Learning Together Project

Hannah talked about work which she and her colleague Sheila Fish of the Social Care Institute for Excellence have done on the writing of serious case reviews. These are reports which are written when a child is harmed: they can have a tendency to focus on lurid and contingent details and to blame front-line staff. Adopting methods from accident investigation in other fields, Hannah and Sheila advocate a systems approach to constructing the narratives of these reports: finding "the second story" about practices and policies which create the conditions in which problems can be overlooked. In the first story, human error is identified as the cause of failure; in the second, human error provides the starting point for an investigation of how failures can have arisen. Responses to the first story often lead to false solutions, increasing pressure on and monitoring of frontline staff, or assuming that problems can be solved through automation; this can also undermine professional judgment. In the Learning Together project, SCIE emphasise three principles in constructing narratives: avoiding hindsight bias, appraising and explaining events, and exploring wider significance, not focusing solely on the case as an aberrant series of events. Hannah talked through the challenges which remain for serious case reviews even with such a shift towards a systems approach: they are usually framed in terms of providing lessons, but it is not always obvious that serious failures provide occasions for learning and improvement in the ways

which are claimed; and their reception often involves political factors, which may include a punitive wish to hold some named professional responsible when things have gone wrong.

2.4 Chris Hall, "Storytelling in professional – client encounters in social work: story structure v performance"

Chris gave a talk which explored the importance of storytelling in encounters between professionals and their clients, drawing on two approaches to the analysis of storytelling. The first is the sociolinguist William Labov's account of storytelling, according to which narratives in everyday speech conform to something close to an ideal structure, with six distinct elements: the abstract, orientation, complication, resolution, evaluation, and coda. The tendency of this view is to see verbal narrative as a monologue, with the narrator working through the stages before a story's meaning can be grasped. Chris showed how this approach could be used to interpret the stories told by social workers who had made the decision that children should be taken into care—an intervention which was not preferred at the time, and so required significant justification, and hence a widespread use of stories. Such stories, however, fail to conform to Labov's structure; suggesting that approaches from ethnomethodology, which focus on how speakers adjust their talk to one another, may be more appropriate for studying professional's storytelling practices. In this view, stories do not possess a distinct structure, but are shaped by the interactive context in which they are located. Would-be narrators have to obtain permission from their interlocutors in order to tell a story; listeners might tell a story of their own in response. In institutional contexts, the constant assessments of narratives is crucial. Chris emphasised that telling and listening to stories is a crucial part of the expertise which social workers possess—in this sense, it is their "narrative science".

2.5 Mat Paskins, "Technical Committee Narratives"

I talked about an expert committee of the British government from World War II: the vegetable drugs committee. Remembered as part of the patriotic home front, especially for its role in promoting the collection of rosehips in hedgerows by school children, the VDC involved narratives in all of its activities. The rosehip scheme, for example, was driven by suggestions by a Jewish German refugee named Clare Lowenfeld, reports in the medical press about the use of herbal materials in continental Europe, and memories of failed schemes to support herbal production during World War One. Tracing the ways in which technical committees configure heterogeneous materials, and transform them into the narratives of the reports and propaganda materials which they put out, can help us to trace the ways in which knowledge is made in these bureaucratic spaces.

2.6 Shana Vijayan, (UCL, Harvard) "Narratives in NHS performance management"

Shana spoke about her PhD research, whose main goal was to understand the impact of performance management on the experience of NHS workers. The introduction of performance management had brought new professionals to the fore in the NHS: regulators, auditors, and performance managers, arriving as part of the modernising agenda of the New Labour government, first elected in 1997. Performance was included as a very high priority in the NHS plan, produced in 2000, and was meant to serve as an indication of the government's rejection of top down management. Shana explored the multiple meanings of performance management in the NHS, and the quantitative tools through which it is evaluated, especially the use of tables, charts and dashboards, which could have the effect of removing local contexts and customs, and losing sight of traditional practices. She described her use of the methods of institutional ethnography, looking at apparently ordinary conversations and everyday events in order to elucidate routine practices. This involved

attendance at meetings, workshops and conferences, and taking notes from informal conversations with staff.

2.7 Lars Bo Henriksen, (Aalborg University) "Narratives vs Stories in Engineering Project Management"

Lars Bo talked about engineers' understanding of project management—where projects are rationalised plans of work which can exclude consideration of fundraising, working with contractors, and other human interactions. Within a Danish company which produces wind turbines, a charter was introduced which aimed to clarify the role of each factory within the company. The charter functioned as a narrative, which excluded some of the company's technical experts. It had been written by factory managers, concerned with operations—other engineers, more concerned with development, could not articulate their work through its provisions. This limited the scope for collaboration, and set the factory managers' goal of optimisation at odds with the new products introduced by the Development Department. To continue collaboration required more informal interactions; the status of a project as an overly cohering narrative raised too many suspicions.

2.8 Natasha McCarthy, (Royal Society) "Engineering Practice and Engineering Policy"

Natasha started by talking about how narratives of the role of the engineer impact on engineers' contributions to policy processes, especially in the advice given by national academies. She began by identifying some of the ways in which engineers talk about their own activities, as a tool-using, pragmatic and design-focused practice, based more on willing

than knowing. In relation to policy, engineers present their discipline as "solving practical problems and in changing the physical world, using scientific, technical and business skills." Part of engineers' expertise is to "think at a systems level mean[ing] that engineers in the civil service can make valuable contributions right through the policymaking and policy deliver cycles." The talk then explored three case studies, in which engineers had made specific policy recommendations: the Internet of Things, technologies for Greenhouse Gas Removal, and Extreme Space Weather. In reports by national academies on each of these themes, policy advice was given a distinct narrative form. Each case was also understood to be narrative in nature—drawing connections between current events and future scenarios through a distinct series of steps and process, and also contingent, assuming that decisions could be made which would lead from the present to the various envisaged futures. Finally, each case also gave a narrative of the contribution to be made by engineers: their role was focused on the future, offering solutions through design; and non-deterministic, "applying tools—including scientific theory and regulatory instruments—in complex and unpredictable environments." In turn, this led to four further questions. First, on the role of engineers alongside other disciplines in creating narratives of policy advice. Second, the challenges of competing narrative forms in interdisciplinary policy advice. Third, the role of engineering failure case studies in informing future scenarios—the role of narrative evidence And finally the question of how engineering narratives relate to the narratives of design more generally.

3. The Plenary

At the end of the day, we collected together suggestions from the audience about lessons they had learned, and further points for consideration. We asked everyone who participated in the workshop to share their thoughts, and collated them into a single Word document. They can be summarised under the following headings:

A

Are there standard narratives in expert systems? Do failure narratives adopt standard textual forms and structures across different domains? How do narratives travel between disciplines or fields; how do different experts consider each other's narratives? Some narratives are also much more clearly heterogeneous, combining diverse narratives. How do we decode the diverse narratives in a committee report? Need to think about how narratives generate power, and how power generates narratives.

B

Narratives can help to orient us towards the solution of bewildering problems. They can also shape understanding and offer coherence with the benefit of hindsight. Some narratives are unhelpful and can be damaging: acts of naming, giving prestige to some narratives, can cause trouble. The distinction between a 'statement of the facts' and 'a narrative' can also be difficult to gauge; how do the two shade into each other? And is narrative in competition with other ways of knowing? Thinking of Hannah's distinction between the first and the second story, what is it that makes the first story inadequate, and does this provide grounds for a more general view of narrative adequacy?

C

Narratives can also function within organisations to constrain and change. Engineers are practitioners and use tools; narratives are among these tools, because engineering is messy and we mustn't think of it as an algorithmic process. With this picture of engineering as a narrative practice, we might ask what 'social engineering' would look like if it more resembled the actual practices of engineers.

D

Some of the organisations described tended to believe in numbers more than narratives, and this led them into trouble. What is the source of the opposition between numbers and narratives, and what is at stake for those who defend it? Some figures are stripped of

narrative; there is a powerful narrative in play, in claiming that numbers can speak for themselves.