The narrative sense of others

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Philosophers often point to the role of narrative in supporting judgments of agency and evaluative judgments of responsibility in cases of individual action and intention formation. Very few of them, however, suggest that narrative can play a similar role in collaborative decision-making and joint or collective action (Gallagher and Tollefsen 2017). Rather, philosophical accounts of collective agency and intentionality start by looking inside the heads of the individual participants/group members. Thus, for example, Raimo Tuomela (1984: 17) identifies his view of collective intentionality as individualistic and based on the "principle of conceptual individualism," where holistic social concepts are reduced to individualist ones. Likewise, John Searle (1990: 407) writes: "collective intentionality, and therefore. . . collective behavior, must be consistent with our overall ontology [. . . which is] based on the existence of indivdual human beings as the repositories of all intentionality, whether individual or collective. . . . We are not required to suppose that there is any element in society other than individuals" (see Duranti 2015: 213–14). What Searle calls a "we intention" is not the summation of I- or individual intentions; rather, it's just a special kind of individual intention, e.g., my intention to do something together with you.

This is the classic view, as characterized by Hans Bernhard Schmid (2014: 10): "Groups exist in virtue of the participants' [individual] *beliefs* that the groups exist." On this view, as Schmid suggests: "there is an air of mystery about the idea of a collective subject [or 'we']" (2014: 11). This motivates the question of whether anything in joint action or collaboration goes beyond just individual mental states, or additive aspects of the individual agents.

One strategy is to base the "*we*" or collective sense of intention on a shared sense of joint agency as Pacherie (2014) suggests. But Pacherie also argues that the sense (experience) of joint agency is to be found in the individual, not at a super-individual level of group mind. In this case, I have a sense that we are working together; you have a sense that we are working together; so *we* have a sense that we are working together. The overall ontology is still limited to a plurality of individual minds. If, however, we look closer, I think we can see something that goes beyond conceptual individualism.

Pacherie (2014) agrees that an individual's sense of agency is based on a complex of multiple factors that involve intention formation (see Gallagher 2012a). Let's consider her threefold distinction between different kinds of intentions.

- **Motor, or M-intentions,** are specified in motor-control detail as I move toward a goal
- **Proximate, or P-intentions,** are specified in environment-related perceptual predictions and feedback for the immediate guidance of ongoing action
- **Distal, or D-intentions,** are prior intentions specified in a reflective (prospective) process of deliberation and intention formation

Here is an example, in the plural. My wife and I engage in a conversation where we deliberate and decide to buy a new car next week (this is the formation of a D-intention). Next week arrives and we head out to the auto dealer, we walk around kicking some tires, and then sit down and sign a contract, etc. Our actions can be described in term of fulfilling P-intentions (transporting ourselves to the auto dealer, kicking the tires). All of this movement we are engaged in is specified in its details by M-intentions (extending a leg to kick; using a hand to sign). One can add retrospective evaluation which may reinforce our respective senses of agency for what we did.

Do any of these factors contribute to something more than an individual sense of joint agency? I think it depends on the type of joint action at stake. Consider three different types of joint action.

- **Ad hoc emergent joint action,** e.g., we're standing close by, the music starts and I grab you and start dancing. This kind of joint action depends on low-level motoric/perceptual processes involving M- and P-intentions.
- **Planned joint action** to accomplish some short-term goal, here and now: for example, we consider the position of a table and then move it to the next room. There are P- and M-intentions involved, and perhaps a relatively undeveloped D-intention.
- **Planned coordinated project**: this involves longer-term, distributed processes that require the formation of detailed D-intentions, prospective planning, and ongoing retrospective review to keep track of complex, articulated actions.

There are two ways that a sense of agency may involve something more than just individual experiences or mental states. In the first case, if our dancing involves synchronous movements, our interactions may form at the level of basic M-intentions, what Soliman and Glenberg (2014) have called a "joint body schema." In their study, two participants coordinate for five minutes by moving a flexible wire back and forth to cut through a candle. This requires close synchronous coordination.

Soliman and Glenberg show that, just as in the case of tool use where both neuroscientific and behavioral measures show that one's peripersonal space extends to the end of the tool (Maravita and Iriki 2004), one's peripersonal space extends to include the other person as one is engaged in such interaction. There are two interpretations of these results. (1) A process in the individual involving one's body schema/peripersonal space expands; and the other person's body schema does so too. These are subpersonal changes that may generate or modulate an *individual* sense of joint agency—a feeling of being in sync with the other. (2) Two bodies acting together form a larger action system, so the joint body schema belongs only to this larger system (two parts constituting a larger whole). Like the tango, the phenomenon emerges only in a process that goes beyond the individual actors. Clearly, this phenomenon, operating at the level of M-intentions, is limited to synchronous interaction—not all joint action involves this type of interaction.

What about the level of P-intentions? Is there anything that might count as more than an individual factor. Searle (1983) indicates that P-intentions, which may specify a common goal, do not specify the means in the same way and are agent individuating—they cannot be the same for you and me, precisely because two embodied agents are not embedded in the environment in the same way. Accordingly, action specifications at the level of P-intention will not be shared. For the purposes of this short comment, let's accept this view. I think the more interesting process happens on the level of the D-intention.

In regard to planning out a long-term project or short-term joint action, prospective deliberation or reflective thinking (e.g., in the context of forming D-intentions or planning out how to do things) can be a *social* process, as in the case of my wife and I deliberating about buying a new car. We can reflect together via communicative actions, about what we want to do, or about how we should go about doing it. What my initial individual intention might have been can change through this communicative process into an intention that is not reducible to just my or your individual intention. There's no problem here of speaking about a collectively formed intention. But we can ask, "where" does a collectively formed intention reside? In our individual minds? Or in what can be called a socially extended mind, or institution (Gallagher 2013), or what Alessandro Duranti (2015) calls a *socially distributed cognition* (Duranti 2015: 219). Such institutions go beyond individual cognitive processes or habits: they include communicative practices, and more established institutions include rituals and traditions that generate actions, preserve memories, solve problems. These are distributed processes supported by artifacts, tools, technologies, environments, institutional structures, etc.

And narrative. Narrative plays an important role here, since it is rare that joint actions are conducted on the basis of lists or instructions. It is possible that we could follow a set of instructions, but typically we would want to know why we are doing so, or at least where our actions are leading. Narratives address the *why* question as well as the how question. Clearly, our retrospective evaluations of our actions take the form of narrative; so do our prospective deliberations. What are we going to do, and why are we doing it?

There are developed discussions of the use of narratives in the case of individual deliberation, intention formation, and retrospective attribution and evaluation of

actions. Graham and Stephens (1994), for example, suggest the *individual* sense of agency originates in retrospective attribution—understanding this in terms of "our proclivity for constructing self-referential narratives," which allow us to explain our behavior retrospectively, which reinforces our sense of agency (1994: 101). David Velleman (2007) suggests that narrative acts as a framework for testing one's D-intention formation, a concept he calls "narrative authorship." On this view, narrative is a means of self-governing (supporting individual autonomy). In the individual this involves reflective (or narrative) distance, and it allows for what Charles Taylor (1989) calls strong evaluation.

Narratives are social products. They emerge relatively early in development and in circumstances involving child's play they lead to we-narratives (Nelson 2003). Narratives also assist in helping us understand others (Gallagher and Hutto 2008); and they exist not only in vocalizations, but in media that go beyond individuals—in texts and documents, etc. Duranti is quite explicit about various elements of distributed cognition, and he rightly indicates: "in coordinating our actions with others, as, for example, when we are engaged in a joint activity, we do not have to hold everything in our mind in order to execute a given task or engage in a given activity" (Duranti 2015: 220). Distributed cognition means the distribution of knowledge throughout environments—instructions, instruments, other people, etc., Gibsonian affordances; Goodwin's semiotic resources; Searle's "Background"; Bourdieu's *habitus*. Yes to all of this, but I want to add, *narratives* too.

Throughout *The anthropology of intentions*, Duranti makes extensive and excellent use of narratives as an evidence source about various practices in different cultures, including his analysis of jazz improvisation (e.g., p. 226); yet, in his considerations of intentionality and intersubjectivity, he doesn't mention the way narrative can work as part of distributed cognition, or in contexts of collective intentionality and group agency. It may be that he simply assumes this, but I think it is worth explicating. In this respect his analysis can be extended with the addition of narrative.

Specifically it is possible to show that narrative practices can lead to a collective sense of joint agency (in ways that go beyond simply the sharing of individual mental events); they can help to shape group identity; they can solve problems of stability of intentions and projects across time; they can provide resources for problem solving; and provide ways to track progress toward a goal. A focus on narratives could also flesh out Duranti's critique of Searle, even as it could help to explain concepts like "Background" and *habitus*. Rather than rehearsing these issues (see Gallagher and Tollefsen 2017; Tollefsen and Gallagher 2017 for discussion), let me focus on one issue that is of significant concern to Duranti.

Collective or shared intentionality can lead to the formation of in-group/out-group opposition. An "increase of sociality toward some members turns out to be a reduction of sociality toward other" (219). This is the "dark side" (231) of such social phenomena. "Being able to empathize, exchange places, and understand each other also feed social conformity, lack of authenticity, the acceptance of the locally sanctioned prestige—what Gramsci … called 'hegemony'—and ultimately, the reproduction of the status quo" (231). Duranti points to discussions of these issues

in classic phenomenology; he could well point to ongoing debates (e.g., Gallagher 2012b, 2014; Maibom 2014; Prinz 2011). These same issues are reflected in considerations about narrative.

In contexts of institutional evaluation or action justification, one might challenge the idea that narrative is the right thing to be looking at since a group's narrative may be nothing more than PR, a smoke screen, or propaganda—deceptive and not reflective of the real identity of the group. There is a deeper issue: to the extent that the instituted narrative, even if formed over time by many individuals, transcends those individuals and may persist beyond them, it may loop around to constrain or dominate the group members or the group as a whole. Collective (institutional, corporate) narratives often take on a life (an autonomy) of their own and may come to oppose or undermine the intentions of the individual members. Narrative practices in both extended institutional and collective structures and practices can be positive in allowing us to see certain possibilities, but at the same time, they can carry our cognitive processes and social interactions in specific directions and blind us to other possibilities.

Structures supported by narratives can play a dominating role in bureaucratic systems, democratic processes, and in an extensive range of social, legal, and political practices. Narratives, in supporting the formation of institutions, traditions, practices, etc., can be rigid protectors of the status quo, promoters of corporate and nationalist interests, and hinder innovative thinking. For this reason some critical theorists (e.g., Habermas 1987) are suspicious of narrative.

Given its conservative nature, the question is whether narrative can be critical in the sense of providing reflective resources to generate new or different possibilities. Can narratives be both keepers of memory, and also represent the blueprints of change?

Indeed, it is not clear how one could generate new or different possibilities without employing narrative. From a critical perspective, we may need to look for hidden narratives; we may have to struggle to tell an alternative story. In doing so, we may want to give more weight to what Striblen (2013) calls *externally* constructed narratives, i.e., narratives by people outside of the group or institution from a perspective that can allow for more distance from a group's own narrated actions.

A critical use of narrative, then, would allow for attaining a critical distance essential to effecting a strong evaluation. Narrative allows for the possibility of taking a critical look at how social and cultural practices either productively extend or, in some cases, curtail collective processes and shape our intersubjective relations.

Acknowledgements

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