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Original Citation

Hiles, David (2010) Things That Went Bump in the Night: Narrative and Tacit Knowing. In: Narrative, Memory and Ordinary Lives. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, pp. 93-106. ISBN 978-1-86218-090-1

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7 Things That Went Bump in the Night: Narrative and Tacit Knowing

DAVID HILES

Abstract

This paper replicates a previous study of how people give accounts of their experience after encountering an unusual and unpredictable event in their ordinary lives. Such accounts usually take the form of proto-narratives, which because of their link to an actual event are called *contingent narratives*. My previous study is extended in this paper by trying to theorize the processes involved. The key feature of these narratives is the ease with which people seem to use a narrative circumspection to making sense of their experience. People draw upon their own tacit knowing to construct narratives to explain their experiences. Such tacit knowledge is available without conscious effort, it easily adapts to new contexts, and is particularly good at handling the unexpected. There is a widely held belief that tacit knowledge is difficult to capture and make explicit, but as is demonstrated in this study there is good evidence that humans have evolved a particularly efficient way of sharing the tacit through narrative thinking. My point is that tacit knowing and narrative thinking offer the key to understanding our experience of ordinary life.

Narrative, Memory and Ordinary Life

A society where narrative is dead is one where men are no longer capable of exchanging their experiences, of sharing a common experience.

(Paul Ricoeur, 1984, p.473)

One of the conundrums of this year's conference theme, "*narrative, memory and ordinary lives*", is that the focus inevitably is on attempting to make explicit what is for ordinary life largely tacit. What I mean by this is that in undertaking narrative research we are faced with the challenge to uncover what is hidden from us. This is not, however, merely in our position as scientists, in addition we need to recognize that what is hidden is also hidden from our own everyday awareness. People bring a vast tacit knowledge to almost every

action they perform and every situation in which they find themselves, and this knowledge by its very nature is beyond our focal awareness (Polanyi, 1958). Indeed, it may well be difficult, if not impossible, to make everything that is tacit eventually explicit. Nevertheless, what I am setting out to demonstrate is that narrative thinking is essentially a tacit form of knowing.

I will argue that what emerges from this study is that narrative offers a particularly efficient way of communicating and sharing what is tacit. It seems plausible that human evolution has led to a particularly efficient way of sharing what is essentially tacit by means of narrative. Drawing upon Ricoeur's image of "a society where narrative is dead," in such a society, what is tacit would simply have to remain tacit, hidden from others, and even hidden from ourselves.

Contingent Narratives

Previously, I proposed that *contingent narratives* play a crucial role in our perception and understanding of everyday life (Hiles, 2005). I argued that it is helpful to distinguish between contingent and discursive narratives. By *contingent narratives*, what I mean is the stories that we generate, consciously or unconsciously, in order to shape our experience of ordinary life. Such narratives are contingent on our immediate experience of events, and are the building blocks of a narrative mode of thinking that is fundamental to our construction of reality, and construction of selfhood (cf. Hiles and Čermák, 2008). By contrast, discursive narratives are those that we construct as an effortless mode of communicating our experience with others.

In my original study (Hiles, 2005), I examined individual accounts of the experience of an earthquake near Leicester on a Sunday afternoon, in October, 2001. That earthquake had registered 3.8 on the Richter Scale, and had been witnessed by many people who were far from certain what it was that they were experiencing. Such earthquakes are relatively rare for this part of the world, so for many people this was their first such experience. The most striking feature of those accounts was the way in which people reported in a "narrativizing" mode their own interpretation of the event. Clearly these were examples of what I was calling "*contingent narratives*" – narratives produced in order to make sense of something that was happening or had just happened.

The recent occurrence of an even stronger earthquake, again near Leicester, has given me the opportunity to replicate that earlier study. This provided an opportunity to further explore the nature of these contingent narratives more closely. In particular, I hoped to focus upon the nature of the

process of their formation more closely, and the perspective from which I start is that reality and self-identity are very largely what we make them to be.

Earthquake!

At about 12.56am, on 27th February 2008, there was an earthquake, registering 5.3 on the Richter Scale, centered near Market Rasen, about 15 miles North-East of the city of Lincoln. The tremors were experienced throughout Lincolnshire and Leicestershire, as well as much further afield. I was in London at the time, and the first I heard about what had happened was a phone call from my wife about 1.03am describing her horrifying experience. She convinced me that it was indeed an earthquake.

As with my previous study, I saw this as an opportunity to explore people's accounts of their experience, particularly their initial sense-making experiences. The one difference from the previous study was that this earthquake occurred at night.

I decided to send an email request to as many colleagues and acquaintances as I could muster, asking them to snowball my request to others, as they saw fit. To the email I attached an A4 size proforma reply sheet, headed by the instructions in Table 1. In asking for short accounts, I am of course deliberately setting out to look for narratives, but without referring to narrative that explicitly. Using the neutral word "account," I am trying not to over-bias the sort of data that people will give me. It should be clear from this that all responses were written. No face-to-interviews were used for this study. While I did talk to several friends about their experiences of the earthquake, this has not been included in the data.

Most of the replies came back by email, although a few were returned anonymously by post. On receipt of the emails, the attachments were saved using a unique "E" number. The email was then deleted and the data was not looked at until replies appeared to have dried up. Thus the confidentiality of all participants was preserved.

Table 1: Instructions given to participants

**Earthquake, experienced in Leicestershire, about 1.00 am
on Wednesday 27th February 2008.**

I am interested in collecting some short accounts of people's experiences of the earthquake in the East Midlands last Wednesday morning, I am particularly interested in:

- (i) An account of your experience.
- (ii) Did you realise it was an earthquake?
- (iii) Please give a brief description of where you were, and how you immediately reacted.

Thank you.

Data

The data consisted of 42 replies, and one that was unusable. Two typical responses are illustrated below:

E1 *I was in bed asleep when the earthquake happened. It woke me up and my whole room was shaking, I shot up and just sat there confused. At first I thought I had just woke up from a nightmare and had imagined it. Then I got scared that someone was in my room. I went into the hall where my dad came out of his room and told me it was an earthquake which made more sense than what I had first thought! Somehow my mum managed to sleep through it!! I then just went back to sleep.*

E2 *I was asleep and was woken up near the end of the quake. I recall the last 3-4 seconds of it. The room was shaking and it was quite adrenalin inducing! I knew what it was as I used to live on the Wirral, very close to Wales and I remember the one with the epicentre there in about 1984. My cat was also on the bed and woke, with her neck arched, looking around, wondering what on earth was going on! Very exciting and I wouldn't mind it happening again!!*

The first of these two responses is typical of someone who did not realise it was an earthquake they had experienced. E1 narrativizes their experience as waking from a nightmare, or that they were scared by someone who is in their room. The second response is typical of someone who narrativizes their experience as an earthquake, because they are able to recognize it as such, based on previous experience. One of the limitations of this research is that we are not able to ask the cat what their experience was!

In Table 2, the full range of responses for those participants who, like E1 above, did not recognize the event as an earthquake, is listed. The striking variety of responses is self evident, and more or less replicates my earlier study of contingent narratives, with the main difference being that this recent earthquake occurred in the early hours of the morning, when either they were asleep, or, were alone reading, studying, or watching late-night TV.

In addition to the data that I collected myself, I also found a collection of postings made to the *TimesOnLine* webpage of the London *Times* newspaper (see Table 3). These seemed to offer further corroboration for what I was interested in: people's accounts of their experience of the earthquake. While, of course, people who "knew" it was an earthquake straight away are probably less likely to go to the trouble of posting something online, or, even responding to the request for an account of their experience in my own study, this is not relevant to the focus here. I am not at all interested in what proportion of people did or did not recognize it as an earthquake. What I am trying to understand is how people in an unexpected and unfamiliar situation come to explain their experience. Furthermore, it needs to be stressed that we are not trying to understand the uniqueness of the personal response of each participant. Whether someone experiences a ghost, a heavy truck hitting their house, a bomb, the roof coming off, people arguing next door, or God wiping out the whole world, the precise explanation will be locked in their own psyche. Instead, the focus here is upon the phenomenon itself, the way we generate contingent narratives to explain our own experience.

Table 2: Summary of the responses participants submitted

- I thought I had just woken up from a nightmare and had imagined it.
- the roof is collapsing.
- I thought I was having a seizure.
- a truck hitting the house.
- a heavy truck was going by the flat.
- the world is moving.
- I was disoriented, like I was going insane.
- I actually thought it was me tossing and turning, coz I turn a lot!
- maybe upstairs they were having a fight.
- a dog had got into the attic.
- it felt like when it is really windy and the bins fly around.
- someone had nudged my table (while working late in library).
- the dog had hidden under the bed.
- we thought it was judgment day.
- gas explosion in nearby property.
- a very strong gust of wind.
- the central heating was about to explode and how much it was going to cost me.
- I thought it was a ghost.
- it was my flat mate next door banging the wall.
- it was a bomb, or something structurally unsound with the house.
- something about to crash into the house.
- it was my son's rabbit, up to her antics.
- someone was in my room and was moving my chair.
- I thought my boyfriend was rolling around.
- I actually thought the day has come, the day of judgment, when God is going to wipe out the whole world.
- part of the building had collapsed.
- someone was in the house or room.
- like a lorry hitting the house.
- people were breaking into the house.

Table 3: Other responses found on “TimesOnLine”

- it felt as if the roof was coming off. I thought a tree had been thrown into the roof.
- we thought the house was coming down. I knew it was an earthquake straightaway.
- it was like a giant walking about in the garden.
- the front of chest of drawers fell out and my candles fell on the floor and broke. I thought it was a ghost.
- vibrations that might be caused by a low-flying jet or crashed plane.
- I thought there was a lorry or train going by but I’m not near a railway line and my lane outside is very small for lorries.
- I thought I was having a fit or something.
- was browsing the internet ... felt like people were running about above me.
- I was on my own so I thought I imagined it.
- I jumped to my feet not knowing what it was and thinking it was a bad dream.
- it felt like an animal running about on the roof, but I live on the 9th floor!!
- I convinced myself it must be an extremely heavy person running up the stairs of my flats.

Narrative Thinking in Everyday Life

It is the immediacy and authenticity of people’s sense-making ideas that is particularly striking in this data. Some responses are presented as full blown narratives, others as *proto-narratives*, or what Boje (2001) calls *ante-narratives*. As I proposed in my earlier study, I want to argue that this constitutes evidence of narrative thinking generated in the service of explaining a momentary experience. While earthquakes are not “ordinary life,” in Leicester at least, I do want to argue that contingent narratives such as these are typical of our everyday thinking about both ordinary experiences as well the not-so ordinary experiences. The only difference being that we are, of course, less likely to notice this narrative thinking in an ordinary experience.

What people seem to be doing is a kind of narrative circumspection in making sense of their experience, which involves a searching around for a

narrative that “fits” with what is being experienced. This needs to be placed within a broad framework for understanding the role of narrative thinking in everyday life, which recognizes that human knowing has two fundamentally inseparable features: the explicit and the tacit.

Narrative Circumspection

The question that needs to be explored much further is “precisely how do these contingent narratives become available to us?” The explanation that I am proposing is largely as a result of my reading of Heidegger (1927), especially his notion of a horizon of understanding, or significance, which constitutes a pre-cognitive capacity that efficiently, and without conscious effort, is able to generate a context for our being-in-the-world. The interesting point is that Heidegger characterizes this as a *circumspection*, by which he means a casting around for interpretations and meaning. It seems clear that contingent narratives are simply one of the most obvious examples of this at work.

When this notion of narrative circumspection is taken up together with Michael Polanyi’s idea of *tacit knowing* then a much clearer picture starts to emerge. The central idea in Polanyi’s philosophy is what he has called the *tacit dimension* (Polanyi, 1958, 1966). His basic proposal is that *all* knowledge involves personal knowing, and that knowledge is either tacit or is rooted in the tacit (Polanyi, 1969). He characterizes human knowing as “*participation through indwelling*” (Polanyi and Prosch, 1975, p.44), and that “*since all understanding is tacit knowing, all understanding is achieved by indwelling*” (Polanyi, 1969, p.160).

Polanyi himself recognized the similarity between his own ideas and those of Heidegger, especially the notion of indwelling that is crucial to both of these thinkers. In the preface to a new edition of his famous text, *Personal Knowledge*, he wrote “. . . *indwelling is a participation of ours in the existence of that which we comprehend; it is Heidegger’s being-in-the-world*” (Polanyi, 1964, p.x).

The point is that our narrative circumspections rely for the most-part not on what is known explicitly, but on what is known tacitly, ie. at a pre-cognitive level, outside of our focal awareness. And yet, this tacit knowledge has ease of access however unpredictable the event is that provokes the sense making process. Furthermore, what characterizes the tacit dimension is a participatory knowing that crucially underpins human meaning-making, human know-how and everyday practices.

Tacit Knowing as Knowledge by Acquaintance

While the explicit/tacit distinction is usually attributed to Michael Polanyi, the notion of the tacit dimension is by no means a new idea at all, but is an idea that has previously been described by some philosophers as *knowledge by acquaintance*. In fact, it dates back to at least the Ancient Greeks, in the contrast they made between *γινῶσθαι* vs. *εἰδέναι* (cf. Plato's *The Senator*, and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*).

In modern philosophy, the distinction has been strangely marginalized by the field of epistemology, but nevertheless it has received some mention by several key thinkers. For example, Hermann von Helmholtz (1863) made the distinction between knowing something by mere familiarity (*das Kennen*), and something communicated by speech (*das Wissen*). The American philosophers, William James (1890) and John Dewey (1916) contrasted knowledge of acquaintance, with knowledge about something (this was central to Dewey's stress on learning by doing). The British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1912) distinguished knowledge by acquaintance, from knowledge by description. The same distinction lies at the heart of Martin Heidegger's (1927) distinction between the ready-to-hand, and the present-at-hand, as well as in Gilbert Ryle's (1949) use of knowing how, and knowing that. The same notion is the central issue for Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1945) embodied perception, for John Searle's (1983) opposition between Background vs. representation, for Charles Taylor's (1989) proposal of a radical reflexivity, for Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) habitus, and for Varela, Thompson and Rosch's (1991) idea of embodied cognition that has now been extended even further in Thompson's (2007) concept of embodied dynamicism.

The point is, whatever terminology we use, there is something here that needs to be taken a little more seriously. If we settle for calling it knowledge by acquaintance, which conveys the basic notion rather succinctly, then equating Polanyi's tacit knowing with knowledge by acquaintance seems a very reasonable proposal. However, I am not the first person to make this connection between the tacit and knowing by acquaintance, Dale Cannon (2002) has also pointed out exactly the same connection. Neither, Cannon, nor myself, are trying to underplay Polanyi's contribution in any way, since more than anyone else, he has attempted to theorise and explain what knowledge by acquaintance really entails.

In two recent papers that I have presented at conferences (Hiles, 2008a, 2008b), I have argued that it is the *participatory* nature of human knowing that is being sadly overlooked. The participatory is concerned with knowing that arises from taking part, taking part in something. What I propose is that the essence of the tacit dimension is its participatory nature, and the participatory

is the essence of being (cf. Heidegger's *Dasein*). Behind my proposal is that human knowledge arises in at least three characteristic modes:

- *positivist* ("objective" practices)
- *constructionist* (discursive practices)
- *participatory* (know-how, personal knowing, embodied practices)

I have also attempted to explore the need to distinguish at least four different types of participatory/tacit knowing:

- (a) **dispositional knowing** (genetic, archetypes, categories, etc)
- (b) **discovered knowing** (know-how, skill, embodiment, etc)
- (c) **disciplined knowing** (convention, rules, language, etc)
- (d) **discerned knowing** (fiduciary, beliefs, assumptions, intuitions, etc).

There is not the space here to discuss either these modes of knowing, or these types of participatory knowing, at any length. But what I do need to stress is that all of these modes and types of knowing are necessary in understanding human action and experience. We cannot any longer ignore the gathering momentum to the argument that human knowing is to a very great extent tacit, and that in part at least, it is *embodied*, it is *enactive*, and it is *participatory*. And, what is particularly relevant here, we can see that contingent narratives are inherently *participatory*. By this, I mean that they are participatory in both the way they are generated, and in the way that they draw upon the tacit resources of participatory knowledge.

Tacit Knowing and Knowledge Management

There is one matter that has attracted some considerable discussion with respect to tacit knowing. It is an issue that has been discussed largely in the field of knowledge management, and concerns the problem that tacit knowledge is often regarded as especially difficult to communicate and make explicit. Despite my own dubious opinion of this field, with its concerns over "knowledge capital", and with "knowledge capture", and an emphasis on the commercial value of knowledge, it has alerted me to the issue that what seems to be overlooked in an area such as this is the somewhat obvious fact that humans have evolved a particularly efficient way of sharing their tacit/participatory knowing through narrative thinking, and that this can easily be communicated through narrative cultural practices.

Indeed, I have recently been absorbed in a project that is concerned with various ways in which tacit knowledge can easily be elicited and can be made

explicit. The most significant insight to come out of this research so far has been that, while tapping into the vast resource of tacit knowing is not practically possible, it is quite easy and straightforward to get participants to elicit instances of their tacit knowing, by designing a range of questions, tasks or problems, where they naturally iterate facets of their tacit knowing in response to the situation in which they find themselves. This earthquake study is an example of one of these studies.

In Summary

My idea is that when confronted with something ordinary, or, as in the focus of the present study, something that is out-of-the-ordinary, we quickly and efficiently seize upon a narrative that puts the event into some acceptable context. While I have not mentioned this in the current paper, I see the use of narrative in this respect, as involving a process of abductive inference, first described by the philosopher Charles Peirce (see Oatley, 1996). Abduction, which is sometimes referred to as “inference to the best explanation” (see Lipton, 1991), is probably best explained in this phrase. In explaining to ourselves the everyday events we experience, we come up with the best explanation by effortlessly drawing upon our fund of tacit knowing to construct what inevitably is a proto-narrative in form, which in turn proves to be more or less fairly easy to express. Such narrative circumspection is a pre-cognitive capacity by which we effortlessly generate plausible accounts of our experience. Narrative therefore can be seen to be the crucial means by which we could make the tacit explicit. In this way, it seems to become clear that tacit knowing and narrative thinking offer a key to understanding our experience of ordinary life. Moreover, it seems to me that in drawing on some of the particular ideas of Heidegger and Polanyi we might have the inklings of a way of developing out of this a theory of *context*!

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