On the origins of narrative

Storyteller Bias as a Fitness-Enhancing Strategy

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Contents

Stories consist largely of representations of the human social environment. These representations can be used to influence the behavior of others (consider, e.g., rumor, propaganda, public relations, advertising). Storytelling can thus be seen as a transaction in which the benefit to the listener is information about his or her environment, and the benefit to the storyteller is the elicitation of behavior from the listener that serves the former's interests. However, because no two individuals have exactly the same fitness interests, we would expect different storytellers to have different narrative perspectives and priorities due to differences in sex, age, health, social status, marital status, number of offspring, and so on. Tellingly, the folklore record indicates that different storytellers within the same cultural group tell the same story differently. Furthermore, the historical and ethnographic records provide numerous examples of storytelling deliberately used as a means of political manipulation. This evidence suggests that storyteller bias is rooted in differences in individual fitness interests, and that storytelling may have originated as a means of promoting these interests.

KEY WORDS Evolutionary psychology; Fitness; Folklore; Human universals; Narrative; Sex differences; Social cognition; Storyteller bias; Storytelling.

The Storyteller

> Most rumors and most gossip too, are far from idle. They are profoundly purposive, serving important emotional ends. Just what these ends may be both teller and listener are usually unable to say. They know only that the tale seems important to them.
>
> Allport and Postman (1946:vii)

Narrative is one of the many uses to which humans put language. There is no known culture that does not practice storytelling (Brown 1991; Murdock 1945). Storytelling can thus be thought of as a psychological artifact—a verbal tool that appears in all cultures. This raises the question, What is the function of this tooP To ask this question is to ask why and how storytelling originated. This paper considers the origins of narrative by examining narrative bias in folklore.

In 1976, Nicholas Humphrey published a seminal paper in which he argued that social living rather than tool making had been the key selection pressure in the evolution of human intelligence (reprinted in 1988). Subsequent research on what has come to be called *social cognition* suggests that social manipulation has figured largely in the history of our species: "the possibility of deceptive, well calculated communications, and the necessity of detecting such machinations and manipulations, provided a major impetus for the evolution of primate and human intelligence" (LaFreniere 1988:239). As Humphrey explains:

> In a complex society, such as those we know exist in higher primates, there are benefits to be gained for each individual member both from preserving

> the overall structure of the group, and at the same time from exploiting and out-manceuvring others within it.. Thus, social primates are required by the very nature of the system they create and maintain to be calculating beings; they must be able to calculate the consequences of their own behaviour, to calculate the likely behawour of others, to calculate the balance of advantage and loss—and all this in a context where the evidence on which their calculations are based is ephemeral, ambiguous, and liable to change, not least as a consequence of their own actions. In such a situation, "social skill" goes hand in hand with intellect, and here ... the intellectual faculties required are of the highest order (1988:19).

Since reproductive success depends ultimately on access to finite resources (e.g., food, mates), conflicts of interest between group members are bound to occur, even between closely related individuals. Success in such conflicts depends on not only the prediction but also the manipulation of behavior. Language is an extremely efficient tool for effecting such manipulation.

Steven Pinker usefully characterizes human language as "an unlimited set of messages of a certain kind (basically, hierarchical propositions involving human actions, beliefs, desires, and obligations; objects and their rough relative locations, motions, and forces; and the durations and relative times of events and states)" (1995:279). Narrative, which is of course a specialized use of human language, communicates the same kind of messages that Pinker describes: stories essentially consist of temporally and/or causally linked representations of the phenomenological world, mental states, and abstract concepts. These representations can be used to influence the perceptions and, thereby, the behavior, of others (consider, e.g., rumor, propaganda, advertising, public relations). As Elizabeth Fine and Jean Haskell Speer point out, "Through the myriad number of choices performers make, ranging from selecting or composing a text to the tone of voice or style of movement, they have an opportunity to comment on others, on a situation, and on themselves" (1992:8). And Karen and Jeffery Paige observe that rituals, widely regarded as a rudimentary form of storytelling,[1] "are political tactics by which, in the absence of more direct political tactics, both performers and observers may gauge each other's future intentions and attempt to manipulate and monitor current public opinion" (1981:48). One of the opportunities that storytelling offers the storyteller, then, is the manipulation of the perceptions, opinions, and/or behavior of others to serve his or her interests.

Numerous lines of research support this hypothesis. Gordon Allport and Leo Postman, for example, argue that there are important psychological parallels between legend and rumor: "The motives that sustain legends, the course of change they take through the years, are basically the same as those encountered in transient rumor spreading" (1946:viii). Indeed, they define legend as an exceptionally persistent rumor

[1] See, e.g., Service 1979 and Radcliffe-Brown 1952:158—177.

that has ceased to change as it has been transmitted from generation to generation, noting that the terms *legend* and *rumor* are often used interchangeably (1946: 162—163; see also LaPiere and Farnsworth 1936).[2] They also observe that numerous narrative forms (e.g. courtroom testimony, anecdotes, autobiography, biography, history) follow the same pattern of distortion that is characteristic of rumor, and that many of the psychological processes involved in rumor transmission are also involved in story transmission: (ap)perception, sensation, attention, memory, language, temperament, mood, sentiment, susceptibility to suggestion. This parallel is significant because their research indicates that one of the chief psychological factors affecting the transmission and content of rumor is self-interest (Allport and Postman 1946: 108 ff.). Given the numerous similarities between rumor and legend, it seems highly plausible that self-interest is one of the chief psychological factors affecting the transmission and content of stories as well.

Indeed, in a study of creole-speaking inhabitants of St. Vincent Island in the British West Indies, Roger Abrahams demonstrates numerous ways in which gossip (and, by implication, other traditional oral art forms, such as proverbs and myths) can be "applied in the prosecution of personal or factional ends" (1970:290). Abrahams is not alone: Peter Seitel assumes that self-interest is a motivational force behind proverb use among the Ibo. Defining proverbs as "the strategic social use of metaphor" (1976:125), Seitel shows that not only the speaker's intention and the occasion on which the proverb is spoken, but also fitness-related variables such as the sex, age, status, and kin relationship of the speaker and intended hearer contribute to the shaping of meaning in a given instance of proverb use. He further implies that storytelling in general is rooted in self-interest, arguing that "By investigating the relatively simple use of metaphorical reasoning for social ends in proverbs, one can gain insight into the social uses of other, more complex metaphorical genres" (1976:140—141), such as folklore and myth.[3]

Seitel's suggestion is supported by the ethnographic record. In his classic study of the Kachins of Burma, Edmund Leach observes that "There is no 'authentic version' of Kachin tradition to which all Kachins would agree, there are merely a number of stories which concern more or less the same set of mythological characters and which make use of the same kinds of structural symbolism (e.g., the marriage of a man with the daughter of a nat), *but which differ from one another in crucial details according to who is telling the tale*" (1954:266; emphasis added). Leach futher observes that storytelling is consciously employed by the Kachins in the pursuit of personal ends:

[2] This phenomenon is true not only of English, but of other languages as well. For example, Allport and Postman note that the Chinese use the same basic term for *rumor* and *legend*.

[3] For example, he relates an account of a father and son discussing "the advisability of the son's associating himself with a certain group of boys, one of whom has earned a very bad reputation. To his son's argument that all of the rest of the members are reputable individuals the father may answer, 'If one finger brought oil it soiled the others"' (Seitel 1976:130). On the subject of the social context of proverb use, see also Firth 1926, Arewa and Dundes 1964, and Herzog and Blooah 1936.

> Kachins recount their traditions on set occasions, to justify a quarrel, to validate a social custom, to accompany a religious performance. The storytelling therefore has a purpose; it serves to validate the status of the individual who tells the story, or rather of the individual who hires a bard to tell the story, for among Kachins the telling of traditional tales is a professional occupation carried out by priests and bards of various grades (*jaiwa, dumsa, latka*). But if the status of one Individual is validated, that almost always means that the status of someone else is denigrated. One might then infer almost from first principles that every traditional tale will occur in several different versions, each tending to uphold the claims of a different vested interest (1954:265—266).

The use of storytelling by the Kachins to pursue self-interest is not unique. Raymond Firth documents the same phenomenon in his study of Tikopia history and traditions. A given Tikopian tale, reports Firth, will have numerous variants, and "the lack of agreement between these different versions, often in conflict, is due not so much to differential memory as to differential interests. Even one informant will give stories which are inconsistent with one another and this I interpret as resulting from the particular theme he is concerned to discuss at the moment" (1961:175). Firth argues that traditional tales function, in part, as "pressure instruments for keeping alive competing claims of varying kind, in particular claims to social status. Or in other circumstances they may serve as a mechanism for compensation, a surrogate for benefits of a more substantial kind" (1961:175).

As Firth himself concludes from these observations, "This bears on the general function of the oral tradition" (1961:175). Tellingly, it is intuitively accepted in folklore studies that the personality and experiences of the narrator shape both the repertoire of a storyteller (Holbek 1987) and the storyteller's attitude toward the stories he or she tells. Bengt Klintberg, for example, observes that "most of our traditional narrative types have generated a wealth of interpretations and personal attitudes among the narrators, which can be related to their personality, sex and social and cultural background" (1990:45). Indeed, in a study of the Chiricahua Apache tale of the culture hero Child of the Water, Morris Opler identifies three main sources of narrative variation, the third of which he variously refers to as the interests, personality, values, temperament, and idiosyncrasies of the narrator (the other two sources of variation are cultural change and chance). In his study, Opler found that "the versions of no two informants are precisely alike. There are differences of detail and emphasis, differences even in the numbers and attributes of the protagonists" (1941:147). Opler came to know many of his informants very well; thus, he claims, "The pictures of the informants, their roles in the society, and their conceptions of themselves were ever before me, and *I was overwhelmed time and again by the feeling that these factors were not unrelated to the differentiations of the myths*" (1941: 147; emphasis added). Linda Dégh makes a similar assertion. In a discussion of "The Search for the Lost Husband" she

argues that each variant of the tale "mirrors the narrator's specific conceptualization of the world and its affairs: his cultural and personal meanings. Most importantly, the main implementation of storytellers reflects a subjective characterization of the tale actors: compassionate identification with the actions of some and vehement disapproval of those of others. The storyteller is never neutral but emotionally involved when creating the personality of the cast" (1990:48). Dégh's finding is echoed by ilhan Basgöz, who characterizes the cross-cultural folklore phenomenon of digression as a strategic device by means of which the storyteller "renders his judgment about the attributes and behavior of the story characters and the development of the plot," "discloses his opinions, ideas, and values," and "praises, protests, and criticizes individuals, institutions, and human relations of the past and present" (1986:7).

Though documented, storyteller bias has not been explored at the level of ultimate causation. In a discussion of the mutability of folklore, for example, Vladimir Propp claims that "Not a small (though not the decisive) role is played by the narrator's personality, taste, views on life, talents, and creative abilities" (1984:8). This "explanation, " however, is only proximate: it leaves unanswered the question of why narrative change is motivated by these particular influences and not others. Ruth Benedict's claim that variant versions of a given tale "are the result of unconscious preference on the part of the narrators" (1935:xl) suffers from the same problem: it begs the questions of why individual narrators have preferences and why these preferences differ. The answer, of course, is that, since no two individuals are genetically (with the exception of identical twins) or phenotypically identical, no two individuals have exactly the same fitness interests. Thus, we would expect different storytellers to have different perspectives, priorities, and prejudices due to differences in sex, age, health, social status, marital status, number of offspring, and so on.

The folklore record indicates that, indeed, different storytellers within the same cultural group tell the same story differently. Leach, for example, reports that birth order affects the telling of the Kachin story of the origin of the spirit of jealousy, the Nsu nat:

> The Kachin stereotype of a jealousy situation is the relation between elder and younger brother. Two Kachin ethnographers, Hanson and Gilhodes, recount very nearly the same myth but the one is the reverse of the other. In Gilhodes' story the eldest brother is jealous of the younger brother, who is favoured by the nats. In the end the elder brother is drowned in a coffin he has prepared for the younger brother and the younger brother lives on to become a rich chief. In Hanson's story the roles are reversed and the younger brother, having long defrauded the elder, is finally drowned in the coffin he has prepared for his elder brother.
>
> Neither of these versions can be said to be more correct than the other. It is simply that where bad blood exists between an elder and a younger brother either party may suspect the other of bringing on misfortune by

> jealous thoughts; either party may then make an offering to the Nsa nat. If the younger brother makes the offering, Gilhodes' version will figure as the mythical sanction; if the elder brother makes the offering Hanson's version will serve the same purpose. The bard-priest (*dumsa*) will adapt his stories to suit the audience which hires him (1954:266).

The factor most commonly alleged to influence story details is the sex of the narrator.[4] Benedict's research among the Zuni exhibits this bias: she observes that plot details covary with gender, despite the fact that "there is no taboo in Zuni which restricts such choice" (1935:xl). She goes on to list some of the details women typically add to Zuni stories: "women add to a description of a picnic, 'The mothers nursed their babies and laid them down comfortably"' and "to an account of girls grinding for the priests, 'Their sweethearts waited to see in which house the girls were grinding. They drew their shawls over their faces and went in to husk for them' " (1935:xli). She notes two particular cases in which tales are told from the point of view of a man or a woman according to the sex of the narrator:

> The version of "The Deserted Husband" told by a woman expatiates on the woman's grievance; her husband did not compliment her on her cooking, "he never said, 'How good!"' It details the wife's determination to cook at other people's feasts and arrange a meeting with a man; it tells how she made herself beautiful, and how she went home to look after her little daughter; "she was making dolls out of rags." It follows through her arrangements with her lover and her handling of her suspicious husband.. The men's versions omit all this; they tell the story from the point of view of the man. They begin with the husband's proposal to bring calamity upon the pueblo because of his faithless wife, and relate the details of the kiva conversations, the ritual which causes the earthquake, the friend who informs on him, and the help of the Hopi priests... (1935:xlii)

The story of the Rabbit Huntress also contains different details depending upon the sex of the narrator. In the woman's version, we are told of a resourceful young girl who goes hunting and "gets more than a man's good catch" (1935:xIii). This version goes on to tell of marriage and childbirth. In the man's version, however, the girl is unsuccessful in her hunting, the childbirth details are omitted, and added is a description of the girl's husband following her to the land of the dead (1935:xlii).

[4] Selectionist thinking would predict that gender is not the only factor that causes narrative bias. Unfortunately, there has been little research on this subject; sexual differences in narrative content and style is by far the more popular research topic. Benedict, however, reports that an informant who was a headman of one of the Zuni medicine societies emphasized the medicine societies in the tales that he told (1935:xxxix). Opler, too, documents sources of narrative vanatlon other than gender (e.g., temperament, life experiences, values), but it is not clear in his discussion whether or how these factors reflect the fitness interests of the narrator.

These differences in point of view and plot dovetail with differences in male and female fitness interests. For example, one would expect female narrators and audiences to be drawn to those parts of "The Deserted Husband" which relate the costs of the husband's failure to invest sufficiently because women have an interest in encouraging investment on the part of their husbands. One would expect men to be drawn to those parts of the story which recount the calamity brought on by the wife's infidelity because men have an interest in preventing cuckoldry. A similar bias can be seen in a study of a Nordic tale about a woman who doesn't want to have children because she is afraid of dying in childbirth: out of some 150 known variants, Klintberg reports that "negative attitudes [toward the woman] were more frequent among men than among women [narrators]" (1990:37).

Point of view and plot details are not the only aspects of narrative affected by storyteller bias. Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson find evidence that "there are strategic differences in the kinds of stories women and men tell and in the ways those stories are told" (1992:157). They argue that men and women have different storytelling styles, men's being competitive and women's being self-effacing. Men's storytelling, they claim, is "characterized by 'topping' or telling a better and, as a consequence, more self-aggrandizing story than the preceding one(s)"; they cite research documenting competition among male storytellers to tell "the best, the funniest, and the most dramatic family stories" (1992:167). Women, on the other hand, "often choose to tell stories in which they play a minor, prototypical, or no role (vicarious experience), thereby deflecting focus from themselves" (1992:167). A study of joke-telling by Carol Mitchell yielded similar results:

> Men often seem to enjoy competitive joke-telling sessions where each man attempts to tell a joke funnier than the last. Women very rarely participate in these competitive joke- telling sessions, even if they are members of the audience. Not only do women refuse to tell jokes in these sessions, but they are much more likely than men to feel uncomfortable during the joking, for they seem to fear that the competitive nature of the event will lead to hurt feelings and hostility. Women are much more comfortable in joke-telling that seems to conciliate opposing views).

Furthermore, Mitchell reports, "men told a considerably higher percentage than women of the openly hostile and aggressive jokes, " men telling "more obscene jokes, more racial, ethnic, and religious jokes, and more jokes about death than women told" (1985:166—167). Indeed, "male tellers are more likely to use jokes sometimes to deride someone whom they dislike, while women rarely do this; and men are more likely than women to tell jokes that they think might be offensive to some members of the audience" (1985:167—168). The male competitiveness and aggressiveness documented in these studies is characteristic of the Black American art of the dozens as well, and may be attributed to sexual selection. Male reproductive value is strongly linked to

prowess—physical, political, and intellectual. Combative male joke- and storytelling can thus be seen as a form of male intrasexual competition—in this case, a battle of wits rather than brawn.[5]

Since high reproductive value in women is associated with youth (Buss 1987; Symons 1979), and verbal performance cannot aid a woman in this area, it is not surprising that women's joke- and storytelling have been found to be noncompetitive in nature. Indeed, an observation by Mitchell suggests that narrative showiness might actually damage a woman's reputation: "Many men feel that joke-telling is inappropriate behavior for a woman, especially if she includes 'dirty' jokes in her repertoire" (1985:170). The male psyche may interpret obscene public utterances by a woman as an indication that she is "easy" or promiscuous, qualities which men consistently rate as being highly undesirable in a long-term mate (Buss 1987; Buss and Schmitt 1993). Tellingly, Mitchell reports that women "tell their lowest percentage of obscene jokes to members of the opposite sex" (1985:184), while the percentage of obscene jokes men tell to women is almost the same as the percentage of obscene jokes they tell to men.

The Audience

> performance offers a statement of knowledge about the world.
>
> Fine and Speer (1992:8)

As Allport and Postman observe, "By definition rumor is a social phenomenon. It takes at least two people to make a rumor" (1946:49). Like rumor, storytelling requires an audience. Listening to a story, however, takes up valuable time—time that could be spent procuring or preparing food, making or mending weapons, and so on. It is reasonable to suppose, then, that people will listen to a story only if it is worth their while to do so, which raises the question of how storytelling benefits the listener. The answer can be found in such seemingly unrelated phenomena as neighborly chats over the fence, high school yearbooks, and CNN: since one of the major selection pressures on humans has been humans themselves (Byrne and Whiten 1988; Dawkins 1989), information about our social environment is essential to the furthering of our fitness interests. As Jerome Barkow explains, "Gossip has to do with the exchange of information about other people. It is increasingly apparent that much of human intelligence is social intelligence, the product of selection for success in social competition: There is little doubt that we were selected for the ability to predict and

[5] LaPiere and Farnsworth argue that "competition for conversational leadership" IS a motivational factor in the spread of rumor (which, as argued above, can be seen as a form of narrative): "Rivalry stimulates each individual to do his best, which means doing such things as opening a topic of general interest to the members of the group, telling a better story than the one just told, or adding details to that story" (1936:407). It is not clear ,from their discussion, however, whether they are attributing this competitiveness exclusively to men, or to both sexes.

influence the behavior of potential rivals for resources, present and potential allies, possible mates, and of course, close kin" (1992:628). Interestingly, in his study of the various uses of gossip among St. Vincent islanders, Abrahams observes that people who refrain from gossiping are perceived by the community at large as being selfish:

> The quiet person, who keeps most of his communications within the family, is someone who, in principle, is admired. But in actual interpersonal relations, he may be reacted to as an unfriendly person and his reticence may be held against him.. Not only will this lack of communicativeness be held against him, but imputations of greed and lack of cooperativeness may also be voiced, for these traits are those which are associated with this widely recognized Vincentian social type (1970:296).

The Vincentian characterization of close-mouthed individuals as greedy and uncooperative is an indicator of how vital social information is to human fitness interests.

Like gossip, stories are rich in social information: like gossiping, storytelling might have originated as an opportunistic response to the human need for social information. As LaPiere and Farnsworth observe, "The less people actually know about one another, the more they will depend upon story inventions to satisfy their desire to know" (1936:408). Stories, in other words, are a form of (not necessarily factual) social intelligence. Storytelling can thus be seen as a transaction in which the benefit to the listener is information about his or her environment, and the benefit to the storyteller is the elicitation of behavior from the listener that serves the storyteller's fitness interests.[6] The advantages of this relationship to both sides are illustrated in Freuchen's account of the best storyteller he ever knew, a lame boy named Tatterat:

> Before he came to live with us at the trading station, his devoted mother pushed him around on a small sled, and he talked to people and got their news. Even the most inconspicuous event he could turn into a news item of considerable interest. Everywhere he came, people flocked around his little sled to hear the latest; his art and finesse in holding their attention and amusing them were incomparable. He was a veritable living newspaper, and his store of tales and gossip seemed inexhaustible. People gave him bits of food and clothing because he entertained them so well, and it is no doubt on account of this artistic talent that he survived at all (1961:202).

This account is testimony to the value humans place on news and gossip. It also suggests how occupational storytelling might have originated: individuals who weren't very adept at hunting or foraging could earn a living by, in effect, providing an information service to others. It is easy to imagine an early reporter distorting the facts a

[6] As with any social exchange, there is potential for cheating on both sides: the storyteller may present false information, and/or the listener may not act upon this information in the way the storyteller had anticipated.

bit to provoke the desired emotional response in the audience, at which point the art of fiction would have been born.[7]

Evidence indicates that people are better at remembering information when it is relevant to their personal interests than when it is not. In his well-known study of remembering, for example, Frederic Bartlett found that "material which is a direct or an indirect stimulus to pre-formed interests is sure to reappear" (1932:90) in subjects' recountings of short narratives. Allport and Postman report that the recall of rumor details, too, is influenced by the subjects' personal interests. For example, women recalled store windows displaying dresses and signs advertising sales and bargains better than men did (1946:105—108). Allport and Postman find that "each rumor has its own public" (1946:180)—that certain groups will be more susceptible to a given rumor than others. This makes sense: social groups are based on common interests (e.g., nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, occupation); hence, a given group will be susceptible to rumors that pertain to the common interests of that group. A storyteller who took advantage of this phenomenon could increase his or her chances of eliciting the desired behavior from the audience.

Thus, we might reasonably expect storytellers—or, at least, good storytellers—to be sensitive to the interests of different audiences and select and/or modify their stories accordingly. Evidence from cognitive science indirectly supports this idea. Numerous researchers have described a phenomenon known as *audience design*: speakers design their utterances such that the intended audience will understand the communication but bystanders and/or eavesdroppers will not (Bell 1984; Clark and Carlson 1982; Clark and Murphy 1983; Garfinkel 1967; Sacks et al. 1974). According to Clark and Schaefer, "Speakers design what they say for the particular people they believe are or might be listening... They plan their utterances to be understood not by just anybody, but by the addressees and other participants in the conversation at the moment" (1987:209). This narrator discretion may take the form of disguising or concealing all or part of the information being presented. It stands to reason that, if speakers take the reactions of their unintended audience (i.e., bystanders and eavesdroppers) into consideration, they take the reactions of their intended audience into consideration as well.

The record indicates that, indeed, skilled storytellers tailor their stories to fit their audiences' interests. For example, Allport and Postman note that, during World War Il, "Nazi radio propaganda was highly stratified. That is to say, it varied according to the country to which it was beamed and according to the social group in each country to which it was making its appeal" (1946:30).[8] In his fieldwork among Turkish romance tellers, Basgöz finds that the narrator "may purposefully change the meaning of a motif

[7] This phenomenon continues in modern industrialized societies, where individuals now specialize In various storytelling media (e.g., the novel, poetry, theater, stand-up comedy, filmmaking, public relations/spindoctoring) and their associated industries (publishing, criticism, acting, cinematography, set and costume design, etc.).

[8] Indeed, one of the two basic conditions of rumor identified by Allport and Postman is that "the theme of the story must have some *importance* to speaker and listener" (1946:33).

or episode by using the digression as an agent of individual creativity. The individual remark attached to a character may present him or her as a positive or negative figure, a model of behavior or vice versa. Thus, the audience perceives the character the way the teller interprets him or her" (1986:13). He illustrates this phenomenon in a discussion of three variants of the Ashik Garip romance:

> In one (variantl recorded in Erzurum (Kemali 1974:342), an Eastern Anatolian city where traditional values are strong and still preserved, the hero ... IS a poor ashik who cannot meet the request of a father who asks a large sum of gold pieces to marry his daughter to the poor boy, and he decides to work abroad for seven years. When he is about to leave the town, the girl, who is in love with him, sends a messenger to tell him not to go away, that she would provide the money for him. The text includes the following passage: "Ashik Garip's pride was hurt, he could not marry using the money provided by his future wife" (Turkmen 1974:243). In that part of Turkey this reaction is appreciated. It is a matter of social prestige and family pride for the groom's father to meet the marriage expenses, including *kalim* (the money that should be paid to the girl's father), and to have a marriage ceremony as good and expensive as possible, Refusing the money makes the hero a behavioral model, a positive character. The Erzurum audience would believe that if he accepted the money he could not sustain the superiority of the husband in the future relationship. In the first quarrel she might say, "You could not even marry me if I had not provided your expenses." In two other variants written down in Istanbul and recorded in Ankara (the two largest cosmopolitan cities, and the old and new capitals respectively of the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic, where the traditional values lost their effectiveness and the attainment of wealth has replaced individual integrity as a source of prestige), the same behavior is attacked by a digression.. Here, by condemning and ridiculing the hero, the storyteller shows Ashik Garip in a different light. He is seen as a misfit, a stupid and maladjusted person who could not appreciate the opportunity that would only knock at one's door once in a lifetime. As the responses indicate, the audience shares his view. Thus, a positive character is transformed into a bad one who deserves cursing: he is now damnable and contemptible. *The teller's interpretation of the traditional story and the past culture by means of digression effectively adjusts the oral narrafive to new milieux, new audiences, and new conditions* (1986: 13—14; emphasis added).

There is good reason for such narrative discretion: as Klintberg suggests, some story topics "must always have created strong reactions, and different reactions, depending on personality, sex, and social background" (1990:35). Information imparted to the

wrong person could be damaging to the storyteller's interests, a possibility illustrated by Asa Nyman's account of the withholding of a story from an unsuitable audience. Nyman reports that one of her informants was reluctant to tell stories in the presence of her husband, the reason being that her repertoire "belonged to the women's tradition, a tradition she did not want to perform in the company of men" (Klintberg 1990:41). At a later opportunity, when no men were present, the woman told three tales: the first two were about unfaithful wives, and the third was a version of "Sin and Grace" in which the wife was portrayed as the victim of an unfeeling and brutal husband. The woman's reluctance to tell these stories in front of her husband is easily understandable: given the volatile nature of male sexual jealousy (Daly and Wilson 1988), it would not be prudent for her to show sympathy for adulterous women in her husband's presence.

Langellier and Peterson (1992:171—172) report an even more striking example of a narrator modifying her story in order not to jeopardize her fitness interests:

> One woman, an East Indian who had been in the United States for about five years, told a story about her first night in this country to a group of women. She narrated a disquieting tale of arriving alone at the Chicago train station where she was then accosted by a series of men, one very drunk. Although "nothing happened" in the story, her telling underlined the fear of rape, an experience supported by the other group members through their empathetic responses to the storytelling. When she later retold the "same" story to a mixed-sex group, it changed remarkably in its emphases and details and became a humorous story sketching the colorful characters who first "greeted" her to the United States at the Chicago train station that night.

The authors conclude that "Although other factors also operate, audience gender most certainly contributed to the changes in text, point of view, and especially the point of the story" (1992:172). It is easy to see why the sexual makeup of the second audience provoked the woman to alter her story, and how the changes she made serve her fitness interests: both biological and ethnographic evidence suggest that women have been vulnerable to rape throughout their evolutionary history (Baker and Bellis 1989; Palmer 1989; Smith 1984; Thornhill and Thornhill 1983). In a room full of strangers, some of them male, it would not behoove a woman to stress this vulnerability.

The Political Uses of Storytelling

> Poets, priests, and politicians
> Have words to thank for their positions.
>
> Sting, "De Do Do Do, De Da Da Da" (1980)

Not surprisingly, both the historical and the ethnographic record provide examples of individuals deliberately attempting to manipulate the behavior of their audiences through storytelling (see, e.g., Firth 1961; Leach 1954). Allport and Postman, for example, discuss the deployment of rumor as a form of psychological warfare, citing the use in ancient Rome of rumor wardens (*delatores*), "whose duty it was to mingle with the population and to report what they heard back to the imperial palace. The stories of the day were considered a good barometer of popular feeling. If necessary, the delatores could launch a counteroffensive with rumors of their own" (1946:159).[9]

One of the most instructive examples of politically motivated storytelling is that documented by Napoleon Chagnon, who writes that the Bisaasi-teri Yanomamo used myth to discourage him from contacting another village. They did not want him to visit the Shamatari Yanomamo because Yanomamo etiquette requires that visitors give trade goods (*madohe*) to their hosts, and the Bisaasi-teri wanted to monopolize Chagnon's *madohe*, which included highly prized machetes and other steel tools. As Chagnon explains, "The Bisaasi-teri were justifiably aggrieved that my objectives to live with the Shamatari would ultimately lead to a lack of supply of steel tools, so they incessantly advised me not to go to the Shamatari villages" (1974:7). At first they tried scaring him with stories of the Shamataris' hostility, but "[w]hen stories of treachery and murder failed to frighten me into canceling my plans, they began a new tactic: *Raharas*" (1974:15). According to Yanomamo myth,

> *Raharas* were created when Man was in his infancy. They were associated with the Great Flood and deep water. When the flood receded, the *Raharas*—awesome serpents—took up residence in the Orinoco River [a river in the general vicinity of Yanomamo settlement], somewhere near its headwaters. They have never been seen in the Orinoco, so the presumption is that they migrated to other rivers after the Flood and now live there.
>
> While no one had ever seen *Raharas*, their behavior was well known to the Yanomamo. They rise up out of the water and devour those who are foolish enough to attempt to cross the rivers, especially rivers that are unfamiliar to the Yanomamo. Furthermore, it is alleged that an underground river connects the Orinoco with the upper Mavaca [up which one must travel to reach the Shamatari village Chagnon wanted to visit], and that the *Raharas* took this course and migrated to the Mavaca.

Chagnon's discussion reveals the shrewdness of the Bisaasi-teri leaders' attempt to manipulate him into serving their own ends: "*Raharas* almost resulted in the cancellation of my planned trip up the Mavaca. Since none of the Bisaasi-teri ... had ever

[9] In a related study of Boston newspapers, Allport and Faden found that "most papers gave more space to speeches and arguments favoring their own editorial viewpoints. They tended, furthermore, to place at the beginning of a news article the facts and reported opinions favoring their editorial position, and toward the end of the article opposing facts and opinions" (cited in Allport and Postman 1946:187).

ascended the Mavaca very far, they were unable to discount the assertion that it teemed with *Raharas*" (1974:15). Chagnon ultimately outwitted the headmen by telling a story of his own: he claimed that there were also raharas where he came from and that not only did he have much experience killing them, but he had a special kind of cartridge made for killing them at a distance. In a very telling conclusion to this story, Chagnon writes that the two headmen who were trying to scare him with the raharas were very angry when "1 shifted my argument and asserted that I had special knowledge about the fabulous beasts. He [Shararaiwa] and Kaobawa held the advantage only so long as they had a monopoly on knowledge, and since neither of them had ever seen a Rahara, let alone killed one, I immediately gained the upper hand" (1974:16). Chagnon's experience demonstrates not only that narrative may be used to manipulate the perceptions and opinions of the audience to serve the storyteller's interests, but that it can also be used as a nonconfrontational means of exercising (or acquiring) power.

Chagnon's encounter with raharas, like Freuchen's account of Tatterat, suggests that the possession of special knowledge by the narrator is the source of the powerful appeal of storytelling. A study by primatologist Eduard Stammbach supports this hypothesis: Stammbach's work indicates that, among some highly social species, individuals may acquire social benefits (such as increased status) through the possession of special knowledge. Stammbach taught the lowest-ranking of a group of captive long-tailed macaques (*Macaca fascicularis*) to operate a popcorn dispensing machine (popcorn being a favorite food of the captive macaques). He then watched dyadic interactions between the monkeys to see whether the higher-ranking "nonspecialist" monkeys treated the lower-ranking "specialist" monkeys any differently than they had before. The nonspecialist monkeys quickly learned to approach the dispenser soon after or even before the specialist arrived, and also to refrain from chasing the specialist away from the dispenser. This, Stammbach concludes, indicates that the nonspecialist monkeys had learned that the only way they could gain access to the popcorn was through the specialist. Most interesting, however, is Stammbach's finding that grooming and other affiliative behavior between some nonspecialists and specialists increased in purely social (i.e., nonfeeding) contexts. In one particularly striking case, a nonspecialist named Djalan "began to increase his friendly interactions with Sakri, the first of the specialists established in his subgroup. When Mayun became specialist, he switched and began to 'flatter' Mayun" (Stammbach 1988:260).

Like the specialist macaques, the storyteller is often a person in possession of special knowledge. Although the special knowledge possessed by Stammbach's macaques pertains only to food acquisition, certainly humans are capable of recognizing and assessing special knowledge relevant to the solution of other adaptive problems as well. Evidence suggests that this is indeed the case. Allport and Postman, for example, report the following incident, in which the valuable information being communicated pertains to the adaptive problem of conspecific coalitional aggression:

> At a time when the United States was still at war with Italy, it was found that 25 percent of the members of a certain poor Italo-American community listened regularly to Radio Roma and passed along the Axis propaganda to their neighbors. At first sight it would seem that the loyalty of the group should be gravely questioned. But the motivation behind the situation was discovered to be simple and uncomplicated. People whose radios were good enough to pick up the Italian station enjoyed superior prestige in the community. To maintain th1S prestige they took pains to listen and felt pride in passing along what they heard to their envious neighbors (Allport and Postman 1946:47).

This incident, juxtaposed with Stammbach's experiments, points to a link between storytelling and prestige: possession of valuable information that others do not have appears to boost an individual's status.

Richard Nelson's fieldwork among the Eskimo supports this finding: he writes that the "Eskimos are traditionally concerned with knowing as much as possible, and *individuals are given special respect and prestige if they are especially knowledgeable.* Thus *they are willing and anxious to learn from their fellows*, both by watching them as they hunt and *by listening as they recount their experiences or relate what they have heard from others*" (1969:374; emphasis added). As Allport and Postman put it, "To be 'in the know' exalts one's self-importance. While telling a tale a person is, for the time being, dominant over his listeners" (1946:46).

Storytelling can also be used as a means of showcasing a special skill. For example, one collector of Appalachian folklore observes that, "In Patrick County [Virginia], where status based on wealth or political power is inaccessible for many people, some measure of status, power, and control over one's life can be achieved through wit—the ability to recount experience and to express one's values in clever verbal creations" (Speer 1992:131). In other words, storytelling can be used as a form of self-advertisement. As Richard Bauman explains in a discussion of the use of the tall tale by hunters,

> like all natural sociable interaction, the encounters of coon hunters are at base about the construction and negotiation of personal identity. In them, sociable narratives are a vehicle for the encoding and presentation of information about oneself in order to construct a personal and social image. ... The way to establish that you are a good coon hunter is to show that you have good hounds and are thus knowledgeable about quality dogs—even more so if you have trained them yourself. Thus, because hunting stories are instruments for identity building, for self-aggrandizement ... there is a built-in impulse to exaggerate the prowess of one's dogs with hyperbole .. or by selection (omitting mention of the faults of a dog you're bragging on) as a means of enhancing one's own image (1986:20—21).

Whether it's called exaggeration, bragging, the selective presentation of information, or out-and-out lying, it's clear what's going on here: fictionalization is being used as a means of self-aggrandizement. Bauman further notes that, "This tendency toward 'stretching the truth' has been widely reported in men's sociable encounters" (1986:21), which suggests that male status-enhancement through storytelling may be a human universal (see, e.g., Bauman 1972; Bethke 1976; Cothran 1974; Tallman 1975).

Conclusion

Pinker (1994) has very convincingly demonstrated that the human faculty for language is the product of natural selection. As a complexly organized, functional, species-typical application of language, it is possible that narrative, too, is an adaptation. It is easy to imagine how a faculty for narrative might have evolved: all other things being equal, once humans acquired the language faculty, any individual who could better manipulate the behavior of others via this new medium would have had greater reproductive success than his or her less verbally adroit fellows. As Humphrey argues, "If intellectual prowess is correlated with social success, and if social success means high biological fitness, then any heritable trait which increases the ability of an individual to outwit his fellows will soon spread through the gene pool" (1988:21). Since, as Fine and Speer point out, "performance involves acute perception, intuition, judgment, and knowledge of human character and action" (1992:8), the most effective verbal manipulators were likely those individuals who were most generously endowed with these abilities—what Humphrey calls "social foresight" (1988:22). Like chess, he argues,

> a social interaction is typically a transaction between social partners. One animal may, for instance, wish by his own behaviour to change the behaviour of another; but since the second animal is himself reactive and intelligent the interaction soon becomes a two-way argument where each 'player' must be ready to change his tactics—and maybe his goals—as the game proceeds. Thus, over and above the cognitive skills which are required merely to perceive the current state of play (and they must be considerable), the social gamesman, like the chess player, must be capable of a special sort of forward planning. Given that each move in the game may call forth several alternative responses from the other player this forward planning will take the form of a decision tree, having its root in the current situation and growing branches corresponding to the moves considered in looking ahead from there at different possibilities (Humphrey 1988:19).

Clearly, the ability to intuit the fitness interests of others would greatly facilitate the anticipation of the future behavior of one's social partners. Furthermore, such knowledge could be employed in the design of communications (e.g., stories) aimed at modifying that future behavior to better serve the designer's fitness interests. In this

way, both the structure and content of narrative may have been shaped by a history of natural selection.

What is needed at this point is quantitative data on whether or not narratives that feature adaptively relevant information elicit a stronger audience response than narratives lacking such information. The author is currently preparing a series of experiments to test this hypothesis. Until the results are in, however, it is perhaps best to be cautious. Just because humans use storytelling to serve their fitness interests, it doesn't necessarily follow that storytelling is an adaptation. After all, humans worldwide have used stone axes at various times throughout their evolutionary history, yet no one would argue that an axe is an adaptation. Like stone axes, the possibility exists that storytelling is most parsimoniously explained as the by-product of an adaptation (or several adaptations): it could be argued that, just as our hands enable us to produce various manual tools (including but not limited to axes), so does the language faculty enable us to produce various verbal tools (including but not limited to narrative).

The origins of storytelling can never be known for sure. Nevertheless, the correlation between storyteller bias and differences in fitness interests, coupled with the documentation of the use of storytelling to serve self-interest, strongly suggests that storytelling originated as a means of pursuing fitness interests by manipulating other individuals' representations of their environment. I would like to go beyond suggesting a possible origin of storytelling, however—beyond demonstrating the enormous potential evolutionary psychology offers to the study of folklore, literature, and narrative theory. Narrative is a social as well as cognitive phenomenon: storytelling is the intersection at which the study of language and the study of social exchange meet. I hope, therefore, to have demonstrated the usefulness of folklore and narrative research to the evolutionary study of human verbal interaction.

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