

Constructing Personal Historical Agency, Making Sense of the Past?

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Can literary first-person narratives help their narrators make sense of hard-to-grasp experiences, ones that have challenged their conceptual views of themselves and their lived lives? Does this enable the narrative processing of “problematic layers” of identity concerning subjective pasts, traumatic experiences, collective historical conceptions and their relations? In this article, I will try to contemplate these questions by emphasizing the autobiographically interpretive functions of narrating one’s life. I will showcase my points in the light of four written first-person narratives describing the Finnish Civil War of 1918. The war—an outcome of the Russian revolutions, Finland gaining its independence and an escalating political conflict between the soon-to-be counterparts of the war, the “Reds” and “Whites”—was traumatizing and led to some 36,600 casualties. The texts that I will use here are part of the data of my ongoing doctoral dissertation, and can be classified as war memoirs. They are targeted at an audience, are very personal, touch problematic experiences and atrocities, but lack explicit therapeutic motives.

In this article, I propose, firstly, that literary first-person narratives do indeed enable a personal, historical “sense making”: the narrative confrontation and working over of problematic experiences. Secondly, that this is based on the narrative possibilities of reinterpreting and reconfiguring subjective key experiences, and on evaluating, rationalizing and mediating them—and actions and views linked to them—with the validation and narrative application of “modes” of historical

experiencing, also in relation to various collective conceptions. The latter, evaluating historical phenomena on the basis of the authority of historical presence and experiencing, and while doing so reflecting on and drawing links to collective conceptions, is in my view central for expressing “narrative historical agency.” With this term, I refer on a more general level to how narrators mediate themselves as historical subjects, agents of historical action, in personal narratives of their creation. More precisely, it is a categorical concept for describing the narrative contents by which narrators constitute their narrative agency; especially the ways in which they evaluate, rationalize, explain, argue and justify their views, actions and patterns of experiencing in a specific historical context and timeframe.

I will firstly look at the reconfiguration of personal key experiences, experiences that shape the understanding of other experiences and stand out from the stream of experiencing (Turner 1986:35–36). I will do so by giving a brief overview of the relation of “narrative” and “experience,” and by looking at the narrative reconfiguration of key experiences in a text by a Red narrator. Then I will look at the constitution of narrative historical agency. Lastly, I will examine some differences in how some Red and White narrators write about problematic and traumatic issues by looking at the modes of historical agency, rooted in experience-based authority, which they utilize when doing so. I will use some examples from the war memoirs of my data to showcase the points drawn, but strive not to generalize on the basis of such a small sample.

The Narrative Reconfiguration of Experiences

Narratives are forms for “meaning making” which operate by drawing experiences together and by noting how they function as parts of a whole (Polkinghorne 1988:36). Another definition is that they are intentional-communicative artefacts, which manifest the communicative intentions of their makers (Currie 2010:xvii). Furthermore, narratives are rhetorical sequences with temporal and spatial framing (Cobley 2001:7–18), which also include a framework of emotional and evaluative responses that relate to the events and experiences described (Currie 2007:19).



"The passport of Artturi Hellman, who worked for the Red regime." (TMT, Finnish Labour Archives).

Autobiographical texts are interpretations of lived life that narrators strive to present in a coherent way (May 2001:81). Furthermore, describing a personal experience indicates that the narrator considers it significant for showcasing his or her actions (Stahl 1989:19). Experience is a result of perception, which is a cognitive process involving categorizing, referencing and validation (J. Bruner 1973:7–10). Experiences are biographical by nature, but also social, as they are structured by the social frames of the experiencer, and cultural, as they and their expressions structure each other interactively in discursive practices (Kõresaar 2007:46–48). Thus, the relation of experiences and their expression, which both consist of processual units, is interactive and dynamic (E. Bruner 1986:10).

The narrating of experiences is a process whereby experiences are synthesized and interpreted in such a way that they become parts of the narrator's life story (Kõresaar 2007:46), which consists of all the stories that make a point of or evaluate the narrator's life, and can be told many times and over many years (Linde 1987:344–346). It is obvious that these stories are essential to our identities (cf. Eakin 2008), as narratives structure our lived lives, and the knowledge we have of our past is of the utmost importance for the conceptions (self-image, identity) we have of ourselves (Shoemaker 1984:48). Yet the complexity and dynamism of the concepts of "life story," "life history," "narrative" and "identity" means that they are subject to continuous debate. One point of view even suggests that "self" is a narrative construction (cf. Zahavi 2007:179). My view, however, is more along the lines of one emphasizing that we constitute ourselves as persons by forming narrative self-conceptions, narratives which articulate our beliefs about ourselves and act as frames for experiencing and organizing our lives (Schechtman 2007:162). Hence narratives are tools for creating, processing and reassessing those conceptions that echo and articulate our (psychological and psychosocial) identity, a dynamic entity deeply rooted in our consciousness.

Following the dominant view, I see the functions of first-person narratives as various and variable—also as firmly context-bound—and intertwining. They are connected to evaluating (Labov 1972:366–370; Siikala 1984:34) and expressing lived life, but also to conveying and

structuring, reorganizing and re-evaluating personal experience. In other words, I concur with the view that, on the individual level, narratives are primarily a cultural tool for processing experience and making it understandable (cf. Hahn 2005:85). To sum up, I see retrospective first-person narration—aside from being a way of mediating experience—as a tool for restructuring, reorganizing and also reinterpreting experiences with complex and interrelated “outward” (autobiographically expressive) and “inward” (autobiographically psychological) intention and context-bound functionality. The latter is connected to the dynamics of autobiographical memory (cf. Damasio 1999), the former to expressing experiences and formulating life stories.

Next I will look at this retrospective reinterpretation and reconfiguration of experiences in a text by a Red narrator. His lengthy memoir was written down from dictation after the war, but edited, presumably by the narrator himself, in the 1920s. The narrator draws implicit links between his experiences of work before the war, the prison camps and post-war attitudes. Here he describes his work before the war, that of putting up a telegraph line:

We travelled in groups of 3–4 men, asking around. No-one wanted to take us in for the night, even less to give us some food. We said that we had a permanent job with the state, and we are no vagabonds. But even that didn't help. The hatred against the workers had grown great and under its influence the simple peasants were downright brutal. (TA 323.2.11; my translation)

The example shows the narrator's experience-based view on the attitudes that prevailed in the countryside before the war, and which were a source of conflict. This experience of being treated badly functions as a background, and in my view also as an implicit argument, for why the narrator later joined the Red Guards. In the second example, he describes his prison camp experience:

On Sundays we were visited by preachers from various sects, normal priests and ones from the Salvation Army. They reminded us of our wrongdoings, which now should be repented. I doubt it if

many did “repent,” because our everyday conditions and life since childhood, and especially in those times of revolution, had brought up in us a mind and belief that there was more cause to repent on the victor’s side than on ours. Because in the prison camps I saw such horrible events and miserable conditions, the telling of them would comprise a long tale. Therefore I couldn’t repent for those drunk on victory, nor have my deeds pressed upon my conscience. (TA 323.2.11; my translation)

The narrator views the abject living conditions of the poor as well as social and political grievances both as legitimizers of the Reds’ uprising and as the reason for the harsh prison camp treatment. He does not explicate it, but his understanding of his experiences is akin here to those of his work, as he believes he is treated and judged in both cases not by his actions and views, but on the basis of old hatreds prevailing in a divided society. This social grudge and the maltreatment caused by it interactively reassure the narrator that his actions and views were correct. The last example is from when the narrator had just been released from the prison camp:

Still preaching, the master of the house offered us his bread. My companion took it. When offering it to me, the master still grumbled something. I thanked [him] for the offer, but didn’t take it. I explained that not everyone who was imprisoned was a criminal, that you don’t seem to understand mass movements nor what has caused them. Also it would have taken a shorter sermon to express his convictions. This is not constructive, rather it tears things apart again. I received a new sermon from the master, this time about my depraved nature. Still I didn’t take his bread, and I wouldn’t have done so even if I had starved to death, so irritating and stupid and full of country pride was the man’s speech. (TA 323.2.11; my translation)

Once again the narrator describes the social prejudice and the justifications of his actions. As the narrative proceeds from the narrator’s work experiences to the prison camp time and eventually to his release, the description of the grievances and the justification of

the war, a mass movement to ameliorate the living conditions of the lower classes, become more explicit. I believe that this shows two things: (1) how the narrator's comprehension has developed during the course of collectively experiencing the war and its aftermath, and (2) how this comprehension is articulated retrospectively by pinpointing key experiences and linking them, in other words, by reconfiguring them. These linkages also create narrative coherence. Furthermore, I see them as a way of processing problematic, even traumatic experiences narratively, especially the prison camp time. In the case of this narrator, it contextualizes and explains the prison camp experiences and thus makes them more understandable—but not acceptable.

Historical Agency in First-Person Narratives

Above I looked at the narrative reinterpretation and reconfiguration of experiences by highlighting that they are linked thematically. Now I will propose another way of looking at how problematic experiences are processed narratively: by focusing on how narrators constitute their historical agency: how they express themselves as historical agents, and within this framework process and deal with problematic, hard-to-grasp and even traumatic experiences. However, defining how this historical narrative agency is constituted and expressed, even in one particular narrative, is very difficult. Therefore I shall focus on two more general dimensions: (1) how historical experiencing is used to validate expressing and mediating difficult and problematic themes and, related to this, (2) how experience-based, subjective perceptions interrelate with collective conceptions.

In the next part of this article, I will combine these two analytical perspectives by briefly scrutinizing how some Red and White narrators utilize their narrative historical agency in relation to dealing with traumatic issues. In my view, this can be done by categorizing the different, historically and experientially based modes of historical agency that narrators apply, consciously or unconsciously, when writing about difficult experiences, and especially when conveying evaluative meanings related to them. Recognizing and naming these experience-based, historically validating narrative modes is a

subjective, etic-level procedure executed for analytical purposes. I will also look at whether the narrators link their experience-based perceptions to collective frameworks and conceptions when processing these problematic, challenging and traumatic experiences.

White Trauma, Red Trauma?

The war memoirs of my data exhibit some of the various differences between how White and Red narrators experienced the war and wrote about it. Alongside the effects of the narrators coming from different backgrounds, these differences seem to stem from the nature and outcome of the war and their effects on the intentions and experience-based viewpoints of narrating. This is connected to how the war and its effects—on a general level, the post-war social context—shaped the Whites’ war-related output into an official “master narrative” and the Reds’ into marginal “counter-narratives” (Peltonen 1996:281–284). This division has clearly also had an effect on the memoirs of my data: the Red narrators strive to explain their ideological views and actions and also criticize the conceptions and actions of the Whites, in other words actively mediate and argue their historical agency, whilst the White narrators focus mostly on describing the war, as the victors’ ideological views and actions were not challenged or marginalized, and were therefore self-explanatory. I believe this to be the main factor in why the memoirs by Red narrators include many more linkages to and reflections on collective, historically explanatory conceptions and ideological discourses. In all likelihood, another contributing factor is the political activism of these narrators.

The explicitly traumatic experience in the war memoirs by Reds is the prison camp experience; the conditions, the treatment of the prisoners and the executions. A common way of touching on this experience is by emphasizing its collectivity. This can be seen in how a Red narrator, part of the Red regime and briefly imprisoned in Vyborg, describes the prison camps soon after the war:

In the prison camps I so clearly perceived the rottenness of bourgeois society. These masses hadn’t received in their lives anything

else but famine, misery and deprivation, what else can one expect from them [than a revolution]? Even though I often felt like scolding and scorning them, I had to take a stance of solidarity in the prison camp, as I had waged a revolution with them. (TMT 41/164; my translation)

In this light, it is not surprising that it was the collective experience of the war which unified the labour movement (Alestalo 1977:111). Another way—related to the constitution of historical agency and the authority thus created—in which narrators touch this traumatic experience is by an experience-based narrative mode that can be called “bearer of witness.” The authority of such witnessing is based on personal experience (Peltonen 2009:65–66; Blustein 2008:311–312), in the case of the narrators in question it is on the time spent in the prison camps. It also has both psychological and symbolic relevance for the narrators (Blustein 2008, 344). Furthermore, describing the prison camps—even though centring on personal experiences—also seems to provoke the narrators to reflect on the causes of the war and the Whites’ interpretations of it.

The extent of the trauma inflicted by the prison camp experience can be seen in this memoir by a narrator who served as an agitator for the Red Guard in the war. The memories are vivid but also so incomprehensible that he cannot find the words to describe them, even after ten years:

In hell! ... No that’s an understatement. The pains and sufferings of hell can’t be as great, as the ones we had to endure in the Lord’s year 1918 ... No words can be found to describe it all, nor a definition, by which we can comparably describe the prison camp miseries of 1918 ... (TA 332.2. 12; my translation)

Another clearly problematic theme in these war memoirs by Red narrators is the end and aftermath of the war on a more general level: the executions, losing companions and friends, the fight to survive and the flight of the Red leaders. When describing these problematic, personally destiny-defining issues, the narrators often revert to a narrative mode that I have chosen to call “historical

evaluator”: they evaluate historical decisions on a general level and the actions of others, and also give specific opinions on what should have been done to reach a better outcome. Here personal experience is actively used to criticize various collective conceptions and more generally the interpretive and ideological historical framework favoured by the Whites. In the case of these narrators, these aforementioned modes of historical agency—bearer of witness and historical evaluator—seem to function as ways of dealing with problematic issues that challenge their life histories and conceptions, even their identities.

As mentioned, the White narrators of my data do not constitute their historical agency as actively and explicitly as the Red narrators do; in other words, they rarely argue their views and actions, nor place them in relation to explanatory frameworks or explain their ideological views (the ideological references are often quite abstract, like “freedom” or “justice”). Therefore, the narrative mode with which these narrators mostly express their historical agency could be simply called that of an “experiencer,” as they focus on the description of historical events and their own actions. This experience-based authority is self-explanatory, and in my view authorized by how these texts are in accordance with the Whites’ collective interpretation of the war, which can be seen as a master narrative. In these texts, the events that seem to have had traumatizing effects for the Reds are hardly mentioned. Also, the horrors of battle and loss of companions are mostly dealt with very descriptively. However, this “silence” begs the question: does avoiding these topics hint that these experiences have actually had an impact, one that is easier—or more proper—to brush aside when telling of the war? Even though autobiographical narration in general can be seen as a discourse for structuring one’s identity (Eakin 2008:2–4), most of the White narrators of my data do not express their historical agency in a way that indicates that these narratives function as a way of dealing with problematic and challenging identity factors, as seems to be the case in the texts by Red narrators.

However, one interesting exception to this phenomenon can be seen in a text by a middle-aged man who took part in the war on the side of the Whites and wrote his memoir later, basing it on his war-

time diary entries. He writes about traumatic themes: how fighting fellow Finns burdens his conscience, how the atrocities of war are indescribable, and how the war is incomprehensible to his religious worldview. Also, he is the only White narrator who has empathy for the Reds and does not approve of the way they were treated:

When the evening arrived there were many hundreds of prisoners and new ones came from every direction, the worst, who were even slightly threatening or had weapons, were shot without mercy. There these prisoners were on the field like cattle, without any shelter. It was said that people died and were born there under the clear sky, because there were many women amongst them. These days of horror can't be described, what one saw there. War is cruel and brotherly war even more so, when one thinks that we are created by the same God. (*Muistelmia* n.d.:16; my translation)

The stance of the narrator is not, however, that of a witness in the same way as that of the Reds when writing about the prison camps, as his evaluation is neither directed against anyone nor accusing. Experiencing problematic, even traumatic events causes him to reflect on the war and his own beliefs, but otherwise he writes mostly in a descriptive manner and does not explicitly question the justifications of or reasons for the war. It seems as if this reflective way of writing is caused by these hard-to-grasp experiences, but guided by an instructive motive in narrating, as he clearly writes to an audience of future generations:

Now when I peacefully and freely wander around my own land it comes to mind, that I'm still allowed to open the door of my home, which many cannot do anymore, they had to spill their blood for a White Finland. We can pray that those martyrs of the fatherland do not go to waste. That our lord God would be the builder of peace who melts people's hearts to beat together so that such brotherly hate would never again happen. (*Muistelmia* n.d.:19; my translation)

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to contemplate how and to what extent first-person narratives function as tools for working over problematic and traumatic experiences. Firstly, I showcased how, in my view, the retrospective reconfiguration—mostly the re-evaluation and thematic linking—of key experiences can be seen as a way of making sense of problematic issues. Then I looked at the relation of narratively constituted historical agency and the narrative processing of hard-to-grasp experiences. I argued that the differences in constituting historical agency in memoir texts written by Reds and Whites is mostly based on how experiencing the war differently and the effects of its outcome shaped the possibilities and needs to write about it. Also, the modes that the Red narrators of my data utilize when writing about traumatic experiences—like losing the war, the prison camps and executions—interrelate much more with collective conceptions and discourses. Hardly any of the White narrators describe their experiences as traumatic, but the way in which one narrator writes about the war indicates that it most likely had traumatizing effects on the Whites too.

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