Abstraction in storytelling

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Abstract

Discussions of storytelling and narrative have encompassed abstraction in different ways including master narratives (Bamberg, 1997) and storylines (Harre & van Lagenhove, 1998). These discussions, however, have often viewed storytelling and abstraction as a binary distinction, rather than a spectrum where speakers move between different levels of abstraction when recounting experiences. This article argues for a nuanced approach to abstraction in storytelling that considers how specific details of stories — namely, actors, actions, contexts, and time — are excluded or abstracted in the recounting of experience, with a link between increased abstraction and implied moral judgement. The article first outlines the theoretical basis for this argument, and then shows specific examples of abstraction taken from stories about religious experience. Finally, the productive implications of a nuanced view of abstraction are outlined, including for narrative and discourse analysis, for understanding of storytelling and cognition, and for critical analysis of racist language.

Keywords

Introduction

The relationship between storytelling and identity construction has been of ongoing interest for discourse and conversation analysts, social psychologists, and sociologists. Following Labov's (1972) work on identity construction and narrative, research has shown how stories regularly occur in natural interaction and do not necessarily follow a consistent structure: they can include multiple speakers contributing differently over the course of a conversation with an orientation to the development of a conversation rather than resolution of a particular story (Jefferson, 1978). Georgakopoulou's (2006, 2007) description of "small" stories and subsequent work on stories in interaction (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2011) has further emphasised the importance of storytelling in day-to-day interaction. With roots in research by Conversation Analysts like Jefferson (1978) which oriented theoretical understandings of stories and storytelling towards authentic data, empirical analysis of "small stories" has been shown to "theoretically and methodologically enrich traditional narrative inquiry" (Bamberg, 2006, p. 139) and illustrate how narrative contributes to identity construction in dynamic contexts. Stories serve specific purposes in interaction and orient themselves in different ways, depending on the context.

To identify the parameters of stories, Georgakopoulou (2007, pp. 37-38) highlights three key elements: temporality, disruption, and consciousness. *Temporality* is often described as ordered clauses or events, "a coherent temporal progression of events" (Ochs & Capps, 2011, p. 57), with events happening in a series that have some meaningful relationship in the telling of the story. *Disruption* is the sense that the story has something that needs to be resolved. *Consciousness* describes the realisation of the those involved in the telling and hearing of the story that it is meaningful in some way, its so-called "tellability" and reason for being told. The different elements of narrative that Georgakopoulou highlights are not mutually independent, and the *consciousness* criteria requires that the contextual elements of a

storytelling are fundamentally important to how a particular utterance including an event is heard. This *consciousness* includes all the stories that people interacting have told and heard and what they expect about types of stories. These regular ways of telling particular kinds of stories have been recognised in narrative analysis as *master narratives* (Bamberg, 1997) and in discursive psychological descriptions of narrative as *storylines* (Harre & van Lagenhove, 1998), and perhaps even more broadly in Foucauldian (1971) *discourses* or Bakhtinian (1981) *heteroglossia*. People come to every telling and hearing of a story with a unique cultural, personal, and physical context, and a tacit understanding of common patterns for stories; every story, like every utterance, is both novel and familiar, and have been analysed in depth with a variety of tools (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015; Lueg & Lundholt, 2020).

This article focuses on the processes of abstraction, arguing that it occurs in different elements of stories and to differing degrees. Where, when, and how this abstraction occurs subsequently reveals different aspects of the consciousness of the interactants and can show how individual events and experiences are understood in terms of larger structures, with moral judgements becoming more explicit at higher levels of abstraction and being obscured in detailed description of physical events. Using examples taken from interview discourse about religious experience, I will argue that as speakers move between specificity and abstraction in storytelling, moral judgements, categorisations, and generalisations emerge and are accounted for. Please note that the authentic data analysed in this article includes discussion of racial slurs.

Abstraction defined Within Cognitive Linguistics, *abstraction* refers "to the process that...
.allows us to form and store...semantic information gleaned across our experiences", and which enables humans to "discern what various objects and events have in common, and group them together into concepts" (Yee, 2019, p. 1257). The abstraction of events and objects as concepts includes a spectrum, with varying levels of specification. Yee uses the example of an "animal" and a "dog", where varying levels of common features are recognised as salient and organisable as a concept. Yee describes the role of language in this abstraction

process using the work of Sloutsky and Deng (2019): concepts might be lexicalised in top-down or bottom-up ways; that is, language might come first in identifying a concept and be grounded later (as in the case of "germs") or might first come from experiences, with a label being applied later (as in our experience of physical objects like other non-human animals).

Language therefore is essential to the organisation of and communication about concepts and is subject to cultural and linguistic limitations, and in communication about concepts, there is a recursive relationship between the development of a concept and the language about it. The "bottom-up" lexicalisation of concepts can also be particularly important in how people come to speak and think about complex, non-concrete experiences that are labelled in culturally salient ways, like the lexicalisation of a series of concrete experiences and felt emotions as "love". These concepts and their labels enable moral reasoning and our understanding of the rightness and wrongness, or goodness and badness, of experience, as they allow speakers and hearers to quickly make sense of intentions and outcomes of events, for example in the abstraction of a series of actions into a single concept of LYING (with small caps being used to differentiate the concept of LYING from the lexical item "lying"). LYING includes a moral judgement about intention that would not necessarily be clear in a description of one person telling another person something which may or may not be true. LYING encompasses a complex network of knowledge that goes beyond simply describing what one person has said to another.

Yee also notes that abstraction is a useful process for humans because it allows us to make sense of and generalisations about the world and communicate about our experiences with those around us. They allow us to draw in different levels of detail, depending on whether those details are relevant. Specifying different details or abstracting those details will make relevant idealised cognitive models (Lakoff, 1987) or frames (Fillmore & Baker, 2010) where other beliefs or knowledge help us make sense of a particular object or experience. For example, saying, "He had a drink" will have a different effect on hearers, then saying, "He had a coffee" because of how the general category of drink might be heard compared to the more specific category of "coffee". The detail or abstraction will change what is viewed as

important in the recounting of experience and how others hear and understand an utterance in a specific story as it exists in the contexts of other stories.

Abstraction in storytelling

Because processes of abstraction occur in talking about both objects and actions in the physical world, they are particularly relevant to the discussion of storytelling and how humans coherently and meaningfully speak about their experience. Moreover, because abstraction can also occur at different levels and can be related to different elements of experience, including physical objects as well as actions, abstraction is not an either/or proposition, but may occur in different ways throughout the telling of a story. To identify and analyse processes of abstraction in narrative, where exactly in story abstraction may occur needs to be identified. Considering the centrality of temporality in models of narrative, I will focus on the constituent elements needed to construct a story: namely, actions, actors, place, and time.

• *Action* is captured in verb phrases in English and can both tell the reader what has happened and when it has happened. Stories cannot be told without actions. Actions always involve some level of abstraction because they account for constituent parts of our experience of temporal physical events, as Yee (2019, p. 1257) describes "regularities across sensory input and our motor responses to that input." For example, the verb "walk" in an abstraction of a series of infinitely small actions that we experience as sensory inputs and understand as one concept, in this case WALKING.

• *Actors* often occur in the storytelling as noun phrases, although they can be implied or suggested through, for example, passive constructions or ellipses. Actors can be specific referents in the physical world, as in the naming of specific individual persons. Abstraction of those individuals can then occur on different levels, referring,

for example, to a particular family (the Johnsons), an ethnic or national categorisation (Germans), or a gender (women).

- Actions occur and actors exist in a particular *place* whether it is explicitly referred to in a story. Like the other elements of storytelling, place is necessarily an abstraction, with varying levels of specificity. One could be at home, or at a bedroom at home, or in a chair in a bedroom at home. Moreover, when place is understood among interactants, it may not be explicitly stated. For example, when saying, "I had breakfast before I went for a run today", the place where the eating of the breakfast occurred is assumed, so the speaker does not state it.

- *Time* can be explicitly referred to in detailed descriptions of experiences and events, where the temporal verb forms and conjunctions indicate the temporal relationship between events. Storytellers may also make use of references to markers of time. Descriptions of time do, of course, always implicitly involve some abstraction. A reference to a party happening "yesterday", for example, does not specify when exactly it occurred.

Language, and indeed any semiotic system, necessarily involves an abstraction of experience, and there is always a degree of specificity and elaboration in talk about the world (Langacker, 2008). For the purposes of this article, I will focus on scales of linguistic abstraction, and specifically the difference between a one-to-one relationship between a word and a physical object or action or place in the physical world, and words which describe groups or categories of people, actions, times, or places, which do not have a single, specific referent. How these abstractions might occur to different degrees within narrative, and what effect they may have on the meanings of stories, is of particular interest. Moreover, because stories are an emergent phenomenon, how any individual story emerges is the result of a complex interaction between components in a dynamic system of a particular discourse event (Cameron, 2015). These components include both the language used in the story and the physical context in which a

story is told and heard. What makes a story meaningful in a particular context is their

interaction throughout the trajectory of the particular telling of a story. For the purposes of this

article, I will focus on the different ways that abstraction can occur in each element (i.e.,

actors, actions, time, and place) of a story and how meaningful stories emerge in the

relationship among specificity, abstraction, and patterns and ways of telling stories.

Abstraction in constructed examples Across the four different elements I have highlighted,
abstraction can occur to different degrees and to different effects. Understanding how
abstraction in these different elements occurs and the overall effect of each detail and
abstraction in a particular story, we need to describe how abstraction and specificity informs
our understanding of how a story relates to other stories. Before attempting to apply these
principles to authentic data, looking at different constructions of similar sentences as they
might appear in a story will assist in isolating how particular elements contribute to the
emergence of the story, and how other elements might contribute differently to the same story,
with different effects.

First, consider the two following statements which describe the same event:

(1) Richard and Ahmed and Mary played baseball last week.

(2) The Brits played baseball last week.

Example 1 includes a relatively basic identification of the actors in the story, first names

representing men, in a cultural context where first names representing individuals is the

default way of referring to an individual that is known to both the speaker and hearers.

Example 2 abstracts the three known individuals in a way that draws on their common

attribute of being British. Why this is salient to the story is difficult to know from the two

examples, but because "Brits" co-occurs with "baseball" rather the more generic "a game" or

a more common British game such as "football/soccer", the relationship between different

levels of abstraction between the two points and an implicit knowledge of the cultural context

and the other options that might fill the slot of "Brits" (either their specific names or some

other categorisation of them that does not highlight their national identity) and "baseball"

(either the more abstract category of "game" or other games that could be played), the hearer

can begin to understand *why* a particular abstraction is made or why a particular detail is included.

In this way, metonymy plays an important role in how abstraction operates in the two examples, providing information by mapping closely related entities on to one another, such as CATEGORY FOR MEMBER OF CATEGORY, or SUB-EVENT FOR WHOLE EVENT (see Littlemore, 2015 for a full discussion). In these examples, the CATEGORY FOR MEMBER OF CATEGORY metonymy draws attention to an element that could become salient either by what precedes or what follows in the story. The fact that the three actors are British is not explicit in the first sentence, even though they are equally British in both examples. Another abstraction, referring to them as the "church members", would engage a different network of connections and a different storyline. These abstractions will not necessarily determine the kind of story that is subsequently told, but they work to position the story and prime the reader for subsequent events wherein the abstraction of the actors will be relevant to how the story develops.

Comparing Examples 1 and 2, the naming of the actors does not necessarily provide enough information for moral judgement, but when the abstraction is introduced, a potential understanding the reason a story is being told also begins to emerge, providing the frame needed for the evaluation. How the story becomes meaningful will then involve a preponderance of elements in the story that move between different levels of abstraction and signal to the hearers what sort of story is being told and how it should be heard in relation to other kinds of stories.

Descriptions of actions often require some abstraction for their meaning to be understood, as with the following statement.

(3) Amina went to the supermarket and slipped on an apple and fell.

Example 3 describes a series of events with three actions all in the past tense occurring in a series that implies they occur in order and that each action is predicated on the previous

action: Amina fell because she slipped on an apple, and these two actions occurred because she went to the supermarket. Isolated from any other context and with no more information about the circumstances of this series of events, many possibilities for how the story might be heard exist, dependent on the personal, cognitive, and physical contexts of the telling of the story. Before the hearer can understand which of these possibilities is relevant and how this story is meant to be heard, some information as to how action of slipping and falling should be understood is needed. If the adverb "clumsily" is included, the hearer understands the action of a clumsy person suffering because of their clumsiness. However, if we add the additional clause "because the store is dangerous", we understand the event in a different way and pass moral judgement on the store because the description of the store as "dangerous" abstracts a particular place (the physical location of the store) into a broader category of places (dangerous ones). The abstraction of actions need not be explicitly stated when the contextual or cultural knowledge can provide the necessary background for understanding how a story should be heard. If Example 3 were told in the context of stories about a person regularly doing clumsy things, or in the context of stories about dangerous stores, the interactants would understand the specific story as an example of an abstracted story because of the occasion in which the story was told.

In their Positioning Theory, Harre and van Langenhove (1998) make use of the example of one person telling another to iron their shirts, to show how contextual and implicit knowledge is used to make moral judgements of the appropriateness of the request. By placing a particular event in the context of a larger storyline, moral judgments about the event can occur. Without implicit or explicit abstraction of some or all elements of the description of an event, however, it is impossible to make a moral judgement about a particular action. In the case of slipping and falling, to make a moral judgement about responsibility, it's necessary to move beyond a description of concrete actions occurring in the physical world to an abstraction of those actions into a conceptualisation of the event. That conceptualisation of the

event necessarily involves knowledge about rights and responsibilities of individuals in supermarkets, concepts that will be influenced by personal, cultural, and physical contextual factors.

The importance of this knowledge in understanding how people make moral judgments about the same actions is best highlighted by Harre's (2000) work on terrorism showing that both George W. Bush and Osama bin Ladin were symmetrical in describing the other: one person's good was another's evil and vice versa. This does not, of course, speak to the genuine moral questions about the actions, but rather shows moral reasoning must necessarily require abstracting an event into a moral category to understand how it is judged by the hearers. As linguistic abstraction includes containing more information in single words and their incumbent concepts, things like intention and motivation can be accounted for in a way that concrete descriptions of actions cannot.

To better capture the nuance of abstraction in storytelling, I propose considering abstraction of actions, actors, time, and place individually, and conceiving of a cline of abstraction rather than two-tiered differentiation between stories and storylines or master narratives. To understand how abstraction is at work at each point in the story, we can analyse individual clauses within stories, mapping how speakers and hearers talk about the different elements of the story and how concrete those elements are, whether they are excluded, and what other options might be available to the speaker in describing an actor, action, place, or time. Consider the following sentences which recount the same action with different degrees of abstraction:

(4) Angela walked Emily to school yesterday.

(5) Angela walks Emily to school every day.

(6) Angela takes care of her kids.

(7) Good parents take care of their kids.

(8) GOOD PARENT

Example 4 represents a single event that occurred in the physical world, with two people doing a specific action in a specific place at a specific time. Whilst there is necessarily some abstraction given the nature of language (in "walk" and "yesterday"), the sentence refers to referents acting in an empirical reality. The proper names could be abstracted (to, for example, "the mother" and "her daughter") but the reality of the event would not change in that telling.

Example 5 represents an abstraction of the story's temporal element. The walking to school is now not something that occurs at a particular time, but something that recurs. Specific physical realities that have occurred will fall into that category, but the sentence suggests events that will occur in the future as well. It also implies that "every day" is "every day there is school." The hearer is unlikely to assume that the statement is meant to include the weekends, for example, if they are drawing on a cultural understanding of school regularly occurring on Monday through Friday. They will also make other exceptions that contained in the simple present tense, that Angela doesn't walk Emily to school when Emily is ill, or when there is a national holiday, or when school is not in session for the summer.

Example 6 abstracts the specific action of "walks" to "takes care" and abstracts "Emily" to the category of "kids". Like Example 5 the action is recurrent, occurring in the past, present, and future, but unlike "walks" encompasses a broader range of actions that will be understood based on the cultural, personal, cognitive, and physical context. The abstraction of "Emily" to "her kids" shows that Angela's "take care" action is about a familial relationship, and not limited to Emily. It also includes moral judgement about the action because it occurs in the context of a relationship between parents and children. What is included in the action of "takes care" is specifically related to the parent-child relationship and what is expected in a specific cultural context, which might include many of the same actions, or could include opposite actions, is bound up in both.

Example 7 abstracts the actions beyond a story and instead creates a description of a position that doesn't include any individuals. Without any concrete actions or actors or time or

place, the statement is entirely dependent on a shared understanding of family relationships and what the incumbent actions that "take care" includes. Example 8 illustrates this as a concept, one that can occur without language as a way of understanding and a network of knowledge what a good parent is.

Examples 4-8 also show how moral reasoning and abstraction are related. In the most specific description of the event in the first sentence, how the specific action of "walked Emily to school" should be understood is, without any additional contextual information, an ambiguous and apparently neutral statement, although tacit cultural understandings of the goodness of picking someone up from place might provide some insight about how that event should be viewed. As with the other examples, a hearer's understanding will be based on what has preceded and what follows the particular statement. The Examples 4-7 could be read in a series, or could be read in any order to differing, but still logical, effects. The stating of one does not make the others redundant, either moving up or down in levels of abstraction, but allows the hearer to access different ways of understanding the actor and actions.

Abstraction in Practice

Having presented constructed examples to highlight how abstraction can occur in different cases, I will now discuss examples taken from semi-structured interviews about religious identity, conducted as a part of a project entitled "Language and Religion in the Superdiverse City", funded by the Arts and Humanities Council in the UK (AH/V00980X/1) and based in Birmingham. Participants from a variety of different religious and community contexts were recruited through my (the author's) affiliation with a community organising charity, either as direct contacts in the organisation or through snowball methods, where leaders and members in organisations introduced me to potential participants. The interviews followed a period of

site visits and informal conversations with different people from religious and civic organisations where I kept fieldnotes and observed emerging patterns of common experiences that were told to me.

The participants were recruited and interviewed between September 2021-May 2022, with interviewees being familiar with me and my project to varying degrees, from colleagues who worked with me in the same organisations to participants who agreed to interviews through second or third-order connections and who had never met me. There was no requirement for participants to be of any faith background, only that they were willing to talk about their own identity and community as it related to the religious diversity within the city. My own identity as a white, cis-gendered man, an immigrant to the UK with a US American accent and no disclosed religious belief was either known to the participants prior to the interview or became apparent in the first several minutes of our interaction.

Twenty-three participants were asked about their own religious formation and identity, their experiences within their own religious communities, and their experiences living in a context with many people from different religious backgrounds and with no religious belief. Before the interviews, participants were encouraged to look at a participant information website and fill in a form agreeing to be interviewed. Participants therefore knew to varying degrees what the expectations of the interview were and that religious identity and stories about their own religious identity and experiences would be expected. I conducted the interviews either in-person or on Zoom, depending on the participant's preference. The interviews lasted around thirty minutes and covered significantly different topics and experiences depending on the participant.

The following extracts are taken from these interviews, with exemplars chosen to illustrate points where abstraction occurred at different levels and in connection to different elements of the story. Unlike the previous examples, the authentic data show a messier reality of individual stories emerging in discourse activity and orienting towards the expectations of

the interview. Although the interviews were open ended, as the project was focused on narratives of religious identity, my follow-up questions generally attempted to elicit specific stories, rather than statements about what individuals simply believed about themselves and others. The interviews normally included a story of the participant's childhood experiences, some formative experiences leading to their current belief, and narratives about their own local, religious, and/or ethnic community.

The first extract is taken from an interview with a Muslim woman discussing her experiences growing up. In the extract, she discloses she is a life-long resident of Birmingham and twenty-seven years old. She says, in response to a question asking about how she grew up:

> Um, so, I have never moved house. Which means I've lived in the same area of Birmingham for 27 years, now. Um, and my family is Pakistani-Muslim. My granddad came to this country, I think in, like, 1960. And yes, like, lived in London for a bit and then moved to Birmingham, and then had all of his children in Birmingham. So, we're very, very, yeah, a very Brummie family, I guess. Um, and I went to school in North, er, Birmingham. I actually went to the Catholic school, as a Muslim, which was really interesting because there weren't any Muslims in my Catholic school. And then I went to a grammar school in Sutton [a neighbouring area], um, but also, Muslims were a minority at the time. Like, there weren't very many of us. Um, and then I went to [a local university] as well <laughs>. So, yeah, I've basically grown up in Birmingham. I did work in London for two years, but I was, yes, that doesn't really count. I ended up moving back to Birmingham after two years. And now I've worked, I've been working for two years now, in, in a very inner-city, um, primary school...

Extract 1

Extract 1 includes a story that spans sixty years and highlights key events as they relate to the participant's own story of growing up. The statement "I've lived in the same area of Birmingham" and the subsequent "I have never moved house" emphasise the participant's long-standing connection to the city. The actions then focus on the key education and work actions of the participant, which include actions that seemingly contradict the first action (i.e., they worked and lived in London for two years), but this is positioned as something that "doesn't really count". The actors in the story include the teller and her granddad and her family, but also "Muslims", a positioning with which the storyteller identifies. The places

named include abstractions of schools they attended, for example, "Catholic school" and "grammar school" and "inner-city primary school", as well as the name of a university in Birmingham.

The extract moves between descriptions of actions and actors, and positionings that result from the actions. For example, the story of the granddad who came from Pakistan and settled in Birmingham and had his children in Birmingham, leads to the positioning of the family as "very, very.. .very Brummie" [being of Birmingham]. These actions then revolve around a storyline of being from Birmingham, which abstractions of long series of events such "growing up", "working", and "living". In each of these cases, the abstraction of the action to one that encompasses months or years, positions the participant as a "Brummie" and a Muslim who was routinely in the minority both in her neighbourhood and in school. The phrase "Muslims were a minority at the time" also suggests that there is a different between that time and now, although the participant does not ever state this explicitly.

The abstraction of her own identity in a CATEGORY FOR MEMBER OF CATEGORY metonymy is particularly salient in this story because she first uses the category of "Pakistani-Muslim" and subsequentially focuses on "Muslims" without mention of the national category. The story then becomes about not only her own experience, but about her experience as the experience of a Muslim. The abstraction of actions allows for the hearer to understand the story as one that is a story of "growing up" and the abstraction of her identity as a Muslim allows the hearer to understand the story as one of "Muslims growing up in Birmingham". Abstraction in this way then allows for the specific story to be heard as a story about Muslims, who may have been a minority at one point in the past, but who have grown up in the city and who are "very, very, very Brummie". Like the example of GOOD PARENT in the previous section, the inclusion of positioning within a series of statements with varying levels of abstraction and a story of "growing up in Birmingham" enforce a conceptualisation of BRUMMIE as a person born, raised, and living in Birmingham and which includes Muslims.

The telling of the story enforces the conceptualisation, and the conceptualisation enforces the story.

The emphasis on being from Birmingham and being very Brummie, as well as being Muslim, also implies a counter-narrative of Muslims not being from Birmingham, a common and recurring racist storyline in British society (Ahmed, 2015; Thompson & Pihlaja, 2018) and the tabloid press (Baker et al., 2013; Bruce, 2018). The abstraction of her identity in this way both addresses other potential storylines that Muslims (in this case a positioning for both a religious and ethnic minority) can't be "from" Birmingham and that she was made to feel out of place in the contexts where grew up, even though the participant never explicitly states this. The example sets up a counter-narrative that challenges a master narrative (see Lueg et al., 2020 for a full discussion).

Within the project and the interview data, questions of how ethnic groups who have historically been in the minority in Britain view themselves and are viewed by others reoccurred. In Extract 1, I noted that the story was told in a context of wherein the Britishness or Brummie-ness of Muslims was felt to be challenged by dominant discourses about Britishness and the telling of the story of an individual Muslim growing up in Birmingham may have implicitly been in response to that storyline and incumbent positioning. In Extract 2, a Black Christian immigrant from southern Africa is speaking about his experience and voices a common storyline about Black Christians.

> I was talking to another friend of mine, British white friend, he, he assumed that many Black people will go to Pentecostal churches because they agree with the theology there. But my take on it is actually sometimes they go to a Pentecostal and Evangelical uh Ch-, and I hate those terms again, but they go there not because of the theology, sometimes they go because of the hospitality and the quality of welcome that is there. Uh so-so-so and-and it doesn't necessarily mean that erm erm kind of the-the people there, they are theologically homogeneous uh, because that, that, that's uh that-that's is not uh always true.
> Extract 2

In Extract 2, the participant recounts a conversation with a "British white friend", who is first positioned just as "another friend of mine" before a self-repair reorients the description

to the friend's ethnicity, which is relevant to the dicussion. The interaction between the participant and his friend from that conversation is entirely abstracted to a mental process of "assumed"; the participant does not recount what the friend said as either a direct or indirect quote. The participant then goes on to present a recurring event about "black people" going to church, and the reasons for going, saying that the reasons for going have been misunderstood. The action of going to a specific church is abstracted to categories (or "terms", to use the participant's word) of church that the participant initially describes as "Pentacostal and Evangelical" with a particular kind of theology, which in the larger context of the conversation, encompasses a more conservative ideology, one that is, in particular, not inclusive of homosexual Christians. The abstracted churches are then attended by an abstracted group of actors: "black people". The consequence of this abstraction is a positioning of the group as "theologically homogeneous" according to the particpant.

The story about the conversation, and the storyline discussed in the conversation, namely "Black people attending Pentacostal and Evangelical churches" shows how storylines can be contested, and that abstraction including groups ("black people") and places ("Evangelical and Pentacostal churches") lead to assumptions ("being theologically homogenous") that can then be contested because they are both general and include knowledge that is not necessarily based in a specific example or set of examples. In Extract 2 the white friend is producing a storyline that suggests knowing the intentions of a large group of people, and the consequence of that storyline is an ssumption about the beliefs of that group of people, something the participant contests as not "always" being true.

The positioning of the friend, who the participant self-repairs from "friend" to "British white friend", an abstraction of relationship, and national, and ethnic identity, is evidence of an implicit storyline about stereotyping. Describing the friend as "British white" and the abstraction of the action of "said" or "told me" to "assumed" (which implies a belief held without evidence as well as, in this context, a verbal process of speaking that belief) suggests

a storyline wherein the friend is positioned as a representative of a category of people and their actions are subsequently positioned as typical of the way that people in that category act. The story itself serves as a metonymy for a kind of way white people think about Black people, namely that they make assumptions about why Black people do certain things, and those assumptions are not necessarily true.

The lack of specificity in the story provides a good example of how moral reasoning operates in abstractions and how those abstractions lead to storylines about categories of people and subsequently how they are conceptualised. The participant himself does not offer an example of why this thinking may be wrong but given his own identity as a Black man who has already disclosed that he holds a liberal theology and himself attends an inclusive church, his own presence in the story provides specific support for his claim. Because his positioning as a Black man is self-evident, there is no need for him to explicitly state this to support his claim. His storyline "Black people attend Evangelical and Pentecostal churches because of the welcome" is authoritative, or rather more authoritative than his friend's, because of his own identity which serves as an important exophoric element to the story about his friend's comments.

Extract 2 show the importance of abstraction in moral judgement when attributing intent. The category or positioning of a person is important for understanding why they say and do what they do; the friend holds the wrong idea about Black people because they are white. Further examples of the importances of abstraction of actors in understanding intent occur elsewhere in the interview data. In a discussion about how ethnic identity has potentially become less important than religious identity as it relates to Muslims in Britain, a Muslim participant stated:

> It's quite timely, isn't it, last you know the Yorkshire Cricket Club you know branding every-anybody that looks brown Paki. S-Sorry to use that, but I'm just using that as a you know a lot of my <laughs> non-Muslim Indian friends have been called Paki. You know so you know a racist person would never sort of differentiate whether you're Muslim, Hindu, Sikh. For them, a brown person is (.) a Paki.

Extract 3

In Extract 3, the participant starts by referring to the "Yorkshire Cricket Club" as a PLACE FOR EVENT metonymy for reports about racist language and incidents occurring at the Yorkshire Cricket Club, an event that was in the news at the time of the interview. The participant goes on describe "branding every-anybody that looks brown Paki", using the metaphor "branding" to represent the action of the people in the club using racist slurs. The participant then describes a similar recurring event saying, "a lot of my non-Muslim friends have been called Paki", which presumably recounts several different stories at the same time through describing what might be understood as their complicating action, that is, being called a racial slur. This recounting abstracts times, places, and people, but the action is several specific events in the physical world which have occurred to "a lot" of the participant's friends, showing equivalence in the actions.

The participant says, "A racist person would never sort of differentiate whether you're Muslim, Hindu, Sikh. For them, a brown person is a Paki". This statement abstracts the actors, action, time, and place, with a positioning of "racist" people rather than referring specifically to the people at the Yorkshire Cricket Club or the experiences of her "nonMuslim Indian friends". Instead, those actors are grouped with the implied actors in the experiences of the friends: that is, the positioning is offered as an accounting and evaluation of the actions that have been described, one that includes a clear moral judgement of the implied actors in the previous implied narratives within the category of "racist". The point of both stories is that people using the racist slur were ignorant, and their actions were based in their ignorance.

Abstraction here plays several roles. First, the metonymy of "Yorkshire Cricket Club" allows the participant to refer to a known event without having to explain in detail what has happened. When there is a shared knowledge of a particular story, the event can be abstracted to the name of place, but the specific actions that are implied in that reference have had the *effect* of being told and the participant offers only the amount of detail needed to confirm that

the hearers have understood the relevant part of the story; namely, that racist slurs had been used. Second, the abstraction of the event provides a basis for equating different racist actions, particularly the use of racist words. Third, abstracting the individual actors to "racists" allows for a moral judgment to be made on everyone using the racist language and describing them all as equally unintelligent and unable to make distinctions about meaningful differences between "brown people". The abstraction clarifies the evaluation: a racist doesn't differentiate between people of different ethnicities, religions, or backgrounds. The judgement is then not that the racist actors have genuine or logical positions, but that they, and through the abstraction of "racist person" all racist people, don't hold coherent positions that should be taken seriously.

The extracts show how the abstraction and exclusion of different elements of stories can occur in different ways and how specific details can be reduced and expanded in interaction. They also show how particular stories do not only support or emerge as storylines, but how they respond to other storylines, be they implicit as in the case of Extract 1 or explicit as they are in Extract 2. Positioning shows how dominant storylines are present, and how individual experience can emerge as a way of challenging them. Each story is presenting one version of reality that illustrates a storyline, but also potentially responding to and providing a counter-balance to other storylines. Why particular actions occur and actors do those actions requires some reasoning beyond the basic description of those actions, and storytellers, in accounting for those actions through abstraction, create, sustain, and challenge the moral world in which they live.

Conclusion

This article has argued that abstraction occurs in different elements and to differing degrees within stories. These abstractions reveal how storytellers and hearers understand themselves and others. The analysis has shown that abstraction provides an accounting for how different storylines emerge, enforce, and are informed by the details of individual stories told in day-to-day interaction. The article argues for three key conclusions:

   • First, master narratives or storylines emerge at different levels through interaction,

allowing for the widening or narrowing of the focus of a particular story. Where, when, and how abstractions occur can inform moral judgments and provide the basis for how a story should be heard in relation to other stories.

• Second, individual instances of metonymy, metaphor, and categorisation, are dynamic elements of stories that contribute to abstraction and there is an empirical relationship between the trajectories of stories and the abstractions that emerge within them.

• Third, because concepts emerge from lived experience, and the lexicalisation of concepts emerges in talk about those experiences, stories are key to their development on a range of scales between the individual and cultural. Understanding how and why particular concepts emerge and change over time, or differ depending on the context, requires understanding how they emerge in stories.

The examples in this article show the impact of abstraction on moral reasoning, including how citizenship is defined and monitored, how the actions of individuals are judged in relationship to how they are positioned, and how acts of violence are justified. The dynamic relationship between specificity and abstraction and how stories move across these levels has consequences for how individuals and groups come to be positioned and how stereotyping and racist discourses emerge and are sustained through storytelling. Attention to where and when these abstractions change in different contexts, depending on those present, and what remains implicit can reveal dominant ideologies and culturally accepted moral judgements. Understanding how experiences are articulated and abstracted in relation to previous experiences and the experiences of others, is a key starting point to better understanding the development of ideologies of ethnicity, gender, religious identity, and class.

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