Folk Psychological Narratives: The Sociocultural Basis of Understanding Reasons

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Review by Kirsten Dierolf

SF practitioners have a tradition of avoiding the "why" question. Most of us shudder when we hear: "Why did you hit him? Were you angry?", and regard this as a rather nonsensical interaction – at least in a helping conversation. You can imagine my surprise when I met Dan Hutto, professor of Philosophical Psychology and Wittgenstein scholar and vaguely understood that he was saying something like "putting belief and desire back into our vocabulary". Hadn't we been arguing for a long time that understanding "belief" and "desire" as reifications or powerful entities inside a human being makes no sense? Of course, I had to buy the book!

Folk Psychological Narratives is a very clear and convincing book about how we can explain that human beings develop a way of talking about what other people want and believe and how we learn to make sense of other people's actions. Learning to talk about what other people believe and want is difficult, since unlike sentences like: "Here is your toy truck", which are used refer to something that can be seen, sentences like: "Jim wants chocolate and believes it is in the green box" have no tangible exemplar. We might see Jim opening the said box and then say that sentence: but how is it that children learn to do so?

Dan Hutto argues that our making sense of other people's actions is socio-culturally based. His main claim is that children learn how to make sense of the actions of others by

being exposed to narratives in which people do things for reasons. (I had a quick look at my children's books and found many "XYZ did this because she thought that ..." sentences – just think of Grimm's fairy tales: Little Red Riding Hood, thinking the wolf is her grandmother, the seven little kids mistaking him for their mother, Punch and Judy shows with the hidden crocodile.)

In "Folk Psychological Narratives", apart from putting forward this "Narrative Practice Hypothesis", Hutto argues against the existing alternative theories which are the different variants of a "Theory of Mind" – "simulation theory" (a child learns by simulating in his/her own mind) and "theory theory" (a child constructs a hypothesis and then sees what happens and slowly builds a theory). An argument that might be very interesting for SF practitioners in this context is that Hutto calls into question the assumption that making sense of other people's actions mainly happens in order to predict what they will do next. While this is one use for making sense of others, we actually learn about why people did what they did most reliably when they tell us about it in conversations with them.

It seems to me that SF practitioners have quite a particular tradition of ignoring or not engaging in language around reasons, desires and beliefs, which is possibly based on the teaching style of Steve de Shazer. de Shazer did not answer questions about why he used which question in therapy: "In seminars and workshops, after I have demonstrated interviewing a client, (...), I am often asked: 'What were you thinking, when ..' at some particular point during the interview (...). My usual answer 'Nothing apart from what you have seen and heard' satisfies me, but clearly not the questioner." (de Shazer, 2007, p. 139). SF practitioners often assume that their hindsight about "what I was thinking" or "why I did something" is a reconstruction and might or might not serve to increase our knowledge of what to do in a similar situation (the existence of which they also question, since every case is different). SF practitioners also don't find it useful to engage in hypothesising about the motivations of

their clients – in SF helping conversations finding out why someone did something or which "belief" led him or her to do something is completely irrelevant. SF practitioners are much more interested in what the person wants and they elicit descriptions of observable differences to find out what the client wants in the future rather than finding out "why" the client wants something. I know that this might be taking things too far and that Hutto is talking about much simpler cases (Jim and the chocolate box above) – however, a closer analysis of these peculiarities of the SF language community would be fascinating.

Another argument in "Folk Psychological Narratives" which might be very interesting for SF thought and practice is Hutto's rejection of an inbuilt symbolic "language of thought" in Chapter 5. Proponents of a "language of thought" like Jerry Fodor (1975) argue that there must be a symbolic level between our natural language and the biological workings of our brain which makes cognition possible. Hutto's rejection of this point of view also fits very well with SF practitioners' focus on observable signs of change rather than mentalistic explanations. In other approaches of change, the assumption of a symbolic "language of thought" is used to explain the interactions between people: people are said to have unconscious "belief systems" or "inner drivers" etc. Hutto's argumentation shows that it is entirely possible to explain the workings of a human mind without having to assume these entities and his line of argument might be a good way for SF thought and practice to explain why SF can do without them in SF practice.

Coming back to my confusion around "belief" and "desire", I think what I am learning from reading "Folk Psychological Narratives" with an eye on what might be useful connections for an SF practitioner is that, of course, human beings "believe" and "want" things. We can even say that we "have a belief" or "have a desire" – it is just not very useful to assume that these are encoded in a "language of thought" or in some kind of mental modules which cause us to think or do things.

There are many more fascinating ideas in "Folk Psychological Narratives" that I have not been able to comment on here and I encourage anyone interested in a philosophical excursion related to and relevant for SF practice to read the book. Hutto writes very clearly (albeit with many abbreviations) and while I was reading the book, you could hear me chuckle many times. Of course, the argumentation is not always easy, but with a few moments of letting things settle and turning back a few pages, I could always follow it even without being familiar with many of the concepts he introduces.

References

Fodor, J. A. (1975). *The Language of Thought*. Brighton: The Harvester Press.

de Shazer, S., & Dolan, Y. (2007). *More than miracles: The state of the art in Solution-Focused Brief Therapy*. Binghampton: The Haworth Press.

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