

Anecdotes: Little narratives that carry bigger weight

Workshop organised by Prof. Mary S. Morgan and Dr Dominic J. Berry
Held at the LSE
6th November 2019



Abstracts

Medical Anecdotes, Re-inscriptions and Epistemic Vantage Points **Brian Hurwitz (King's College, London)**

Anecdotes stand near the top of a list of pejorative terms in medicine ‘in advance of’, yet also ‘the poor relation’ to clinical cases (Montgomery Hunter, 1991). This paper examines the inter-relations of these discourse packages and the rhetorical moves anecdote shares with short stories. The focus will be on the narrative and epistemic appeals which anecdotes make in conveying a knowledge of particulars in terms of generalities; on their interests in fleeting clinical phenomena; and on their capacities to marshal such features in disrupting and puncturing established medical beliefs and procedures.

Uses of Anecdote in Nineteenth Century Comparative Psychology **Martin Böhnert & Robert Meunier (Kassel University)**

Our contribution looks at the use of anecdotes in the work of George John Romanes (1848-1894) and Conwy Lloyd Morgan (1852-1936) on the intelligence of animals. While most authors agree in regarding them as the “founding fathers” of the discipline, many commenting on the history of comparative psychology have suggested that Romanes was an adherent to the “method of anecdote”, while Morgan rejected this approach as unscientific and laid out the basis for an empirically sound experimental method. We question this simple dichotomy and argue for a more complicated picture according to which both authors rely on small narratives of interesting incidents, but they use them in strikingly different ways, in line with their respective epistemic goals. Romanes, while making extensive use of anecdotes, provided reasons for why these little narratives carried bigger weight that were intrinsic to their subject matter. Furthermore, he aimed to discipline the genre, thus turning collections of

striking oddities collected mainly by amateurs into observational evidence for the study of the evolution of mental capacities. Morgan, too, saw the discourse about animal minds predominantly in the hands of amateurish "practical men", who left behind a "chaotic mass of anecdotal fiction" that made research itself questionable. For him, however, the question of an adequate methodology is of decisive importance. Although Morgan himself expresses the desire to transfer research into the experimental phase, numerous little narratives prove to be central to his cause.

How Small Travel Tales Become Big Theories **Mary S. Morgan (London School of Economics)**

Albert O. Hirschman begins *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (1970) with the surprising statement that this book originated from "an observation on rail transport in Nigeria". Despite the widespread view that such observational reports might be labelled 'mere anecdotes' (or possibly 'apt illustrations' for an already framed theory), another well-travelled social scientist, Howard Beckman, argued to the contrary. In his *What about Mozart? What about Murder?* (2014), he explains how one incident from his experiences working in Brazil provided an important impetus to his own theory-building. In both cases, anecdotes - when re-told to oneself qua scientist - became the basis of bigger theories.

Discussing a Theory by Rewriting an Anecdote: Marginal Cost Pricing and the Apologue of the Mine and the Forest **Guillaume Yon (London School of Economics)**

This contribution will discuss a narrative invented around 1949 by an engineer in charge of the pricing policy of the newly created public monopoly for the production of electricity in France. I will argue that this narrative, the stylized story of a small town with a coal mine, a forest, and a pricing problem (how to set the prices of these two sources of domestic fuel), aimed at producing three effects that the theory of marginal cost pricing could not produce. First, given its singularity and its rich details, the narrative forced the user to pay attention to the specificities of each situation. Secondly, the narrative emphasized the role played by contingent past events in the calculation, providing a sense of time and historicity. Thirdly, because through this narrative, calculating marginal costs became a situated decision made by a human actor that altered the life of an existing historical community (as in a story), it called for an ethics. The narrative was an apologue too: it communicated a general attitude towards the use of economics to regulate technological choices. A general attitude is difficult to capture with a theory.

Wrap-up

This half-day workshop generated an unexpectedly rich discussion about a 'small form' of narrative: anecdotes, from a small number of examples from different fields:

There is something interesting about the minor status of anecdotes, which was subverted in our discussions - for anecdotes figured in speakers' case studies as starting points that generated further thoughts and even theories (rather than as data taken as given); as revealing hidden points; as forms of observational report; as conveyors of truth; etc. - in other words as playing quite important roles in science.

But we might also take care in putting minor genres into a central place. If we deny that minor status, we might then lose something valuable about them. For example, in social sciences, anecdotes might be the place that recovers moral values; anecdotes may allow for a level of indeterminacy or even be anti-determinate, and so be open (graciously) to other interpretations.

If anecdotes are generative of theories, it may be because they create disturbances, or they create a change of epistemic stance or plane or level. Or perhaps anecdotes operate in a middle space between creation of ideas or concepts, and the descriptions of life?

If an anecdote typically reveals a hidden point, why do we need the anecdote to see it? The anecdote is like a piece that doesn't fit into the puzzle, so we have recourse to narrative in the form of an anecdote and then build that into another puzzle.

Points were made about the overlap between anecdotes and observations - perhaps because of the need for anecdotes to have factual quality. On the one hand anecdotes sometimes did stem from observations of a phenomena; but on the other hand, anecdotes often seemed more like parables, because of their story-like quality. In both cases, we could see how their function extends beyond itself.

And if there was singularity of the event reported in the anecdote, that singularity must also have been in the observational situation. But a singular observation would not count as an anecdote if it came from a series, unless it was removed from that structured situation of lots of observed events. If there is a series of anecdotes, that suggests variability or variance in the phenomena, which then might have to be mapped through a series of anecdotes.

If they are conveyors of truth, and appear both substantiated and relevant, this surely relies on 'affect': the potency of the narrative in that scientific community, taken in conjunction with the teller, and their authority. Possibly this is why they seem more compelling when the teller's voice is evident than when the text has lost its sense of immediacy and the reporting has become heavily analysed or conceptualised. And the infectious quality of the anecdote - that makes it re-tellable - supports the idea that there may be some emotional element involved (Nussbaum). The importance of the speaking narrator, and the story-like quality, may both well be lost when the anecdote is reported into scientific writing; thus 'telling' is perhaps more important to the anecdote than to other forms of narrative.

Questions were raised about why certain fields had anecdotes and others not; and about the contexts of anecdotes in different fields. While in economics they seemed to be field observations, in mathematics they seemed to be stories about mathematicians. Maybe only certain kinds of research incite anecdotal responses, and so value anecdotes positively. Some disciplines create dense anecdotes, some store variability, and some favour singularity. Some disciplines use anecdotes to relate peculiarities, others to suggest relational qualities.