Our minds are wired for storytelling

What would your life's story be without the villainous characters you create to blame for your pain and distress? Stories are our downfall. Yet without them, life would be a massive struggle. Our brains are wired to work in this way. We live almost every minute of our waking day seeking and creating our own stories. A simple way to spot the start of your own narrative is whenever you can catch yourself using the word 'but'. For instance, when you're late to work and you think, *I would have made it on time... BUT my wife didn't iron my shirt*. In this scenario, your wife is the villain. So you don't have to take responsibility. Iron your own shirt. Get up earlier. Check the evening before to see that it's ironed. There are a hundred ways to prevent this and take responsibility. Blaming your wife is the easiest option.

Everything's a story. Every excuse or justification conjured for not eating healthily, losing your job or not remaining calm. Every success or awkward parenting moment you retell. Your narrative even tells you that locking yourself in a piece of metal and glass, weighing nearly two tons, and propelling yourself at reckless speeds to get to a gym class or meet a stranger on Tinder, makes sense.

You think you want honesty, truth and absolute clarity in life, but you don't. You *always* want information that appeals to your narrative. We don't mind being lied to (or lying to ourselves) if we're comfortable with the twists of the story and can rationalise the turns taken on the ride. The most potent stories give everything substance: religion, relationships, science or spirituality. Mar (2018) suggested that engaging with fictional characters and stories can promote social cognition and understanding of our relationships with real-world peers.[i] This is why we love powerful TV shows, books and movies. We embrace narratives which align with us. Siding with the protagonist's (or antagonist's) moral stance, as we accompany them on their journey for love, revenge, redemption or recklessness.

You want engaging, and often uncertain drama, from your own stories (that to some extent you can control with your past knowledge and experience). You want to predict—and dictate—situations based on what you expect people to do at school, work or in relationships.

Whenever we process any environmental information we immediately begin constructing a narrative that suits us. Stories are generally most effective when doused in emotion or morality. We pretend we're not interested in gossip but we're besotted with it. Studies have even suggested that our modern language evolved just so we could gossip and form social networks.[ii] Think about it—almost every sentence we utter is primed for gossip, by having an object: a who or a what. You want to know what people felt; their happiness, euphoria and redemption; or if it's negative—their violation, disgust and their suffering. Even if the story causes you a little anxiety too.

In fact, no matter which angle we look at it (making a justification, excuse or half-truth) there's always the opportunity for a greater story to explain the distresses in your life. However, the old saying goes: *Believe nothing of what you hear and half of what you see.* In today's world, you probably shouldn't believe anything of *what you see* either. Nevertheless, a good story exudes emotion; a brilliant story *exploits it*.

Why do our minds operate on narratives?

So why do we behave like this? A lot of people dislike when human experience is discussed in seemingly mechanical terms. We're not robots; we're loving, caring beings with emotion and consideration. This story persists despite science supporting how much of our information processing—including our proclivity for storytelling—occurs in a systematic manner. When the human mind weaves words, images, and experiences together into the narrative structures we're so familiar with, something unique happens in our brains. Our mind uses scripts or patterns called 'schemas' to dictate almost everything we do. Remember your fundamental idea? It is a framework made up of millions of these schemas and is the ultimate generator of your stories.

SCHEMAS: *a pattern of thought or behaviour; a mental structure or framework made of preconceived ideas based on your personal experiences of the world. They allow individuals to organise, perceive and interpret new information.*

Schemas function to make sense of your reality. Allowing you to *fill in gaps* in your perception, *make assumptions* of behaviour, and create *shortcuts* in your thinking and piece together (often ambiguous) snippets of information. From a cognitive stance in Psychology, we use scientific methodology to make consistent inferences of your thoughts by observing and recording your predictable patterns of behaviour. This increases our understanding of how schemas are believed to operate. Schemas are based on *your* unique experiences and what you already know about the world. So you want these to be right. They help you distinguish behaviour and the objects that you see; label the social roles that you play; interpret your feelings and experiences, and so much more. We chastise people a lot for making assumptions but we all *have* to make assumptions. That's literally what schemas do. Every schema is a story… and every story is a schema.

Conflict

When new information clearly doesn't fit your current schema—and you refuse to adapt—this results in mental conflict between them. We want

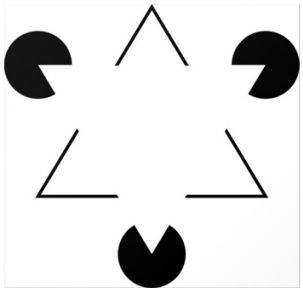
everything to just simply make sense. As you're aware, that's not always the case. This conflict leads to discomfort and happens on almost a daily basis. Your discomfort has a name. Cognitive Dissonance.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE: is defined as: *having two or more conflicting pieces of information in your mind (i.e. attitudes, beliefs, memories, data) that causes mental discomfort, which you're then driven to resolve.*

Cognitive dissonance doesn't disrupt your ability to tell stories. Arguably it enhances it. Instead of looking at the situation objectively, you're more likely to use a better story to resolve the dissonance. *He's rude and badly trained*. This story makes more sense in the context you create. Therefore, it easily resolves the mental discomfort—whether it's correct or not. By filling in the gaps, assuming and adding emotional relevance you convince yourself you were right all along.

Fast Thinking/Slow Thinking

Let me show you how easily our brain fills in gaps without us realising. Then you might be more driven to do something about it. Below is the *Kanizsa Triangle* created by Italian psychologist Gaetano Kanizsa in 1955. What do you see?



3 circles, 2 triangles and 1 star—or some combination of that?

The Kanizsa Triangle is an optical illusion where the brain perceives what it wants to see, (sort of like the Rashomon effect). You fill in the gaps and create a narrative that makes sense. In this case, 2 triangles, 3 circles and a star. It's obvious none of those objects are there. Yet you still see it. *(My editor first looked at it and saw three Pac-Man characters attacking some half-formed triangles!)* Visual perception is important in your decision-making,[iii] but when things are ambiguous, incomplete, or you're unsure, you just… guess, based on what you *expect* to see. Read this:

- *A cowboy and his bo _ ts*

- *a fisherman and his bo _ ts*
- *I went to the bathroom, I was given so _ p*
- *I went to the restaurant, I was given so _ p*

Let me guess, your brain—again—gave you the answer it wanted or expected to see. Even though there was more than one option i.e. *a cowboy and his boots/boats*. So, what do you think your mind does when the pressure to respond comes in the form of tricky social situations, petty arguments and awkward group gatherings? You guess based on your automatic habits.

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[i] Mar, R. A. (2018) *Stories and the Promotion of Social Cognition*, Current Directions in Psychological Science, 10.1177/0963721417749654

[ii] Dunbar, R. (1998) *Grooming, gossip and the evolution of language.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[iii] Smolyanskaya, A., Haefner, R. M., Lomber, S. G., Born, R. T. A (2015) Modality-Specific Feedforward Component of Choice-Related Activity in MT. *Neuron*. 87 (1): 208 DOI: 10.1016/j.neuron.2015.06.018