



Narrative, Memory and PTSD. A Case Study of Autobiographical Narration After Trauma

Deborah de Muijnck

RWTH Aachen University, Germany

Abstract

This paper argues that by structuring potentially traumatising memories through narration, autobiographical storytelling reduces the experience of contingency, supports narrators in regaining feelings of autonomy and thus enables traumatised individuals to complete their otherwise potentially incomplete autobiography. Post-trauma writing carries the chance to re-articulate highly emotional experiences with formerly 'random or isolated events'¹ into a meaningful storyline. The effects of highly emotionally experienced trauma decrease and enable the individual to continue narration about their present and potential future. A case study of a veteran autobiography is used to emphasise the meaning of autobiographical writing when individuals suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This paper is particularly relevant in times where war and terror are frequently not just communicated through the media but are experienced by millions of people worldwide. At the same time, it is a contribution to the rapidly developing field of Cognitive Narratology and Restorative Narratives.

Keywords: restorative narratives, cognitive narratology, autobiographical writing, narrative identity, post-trauma writing

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag wird die These vertreten, dass autobiografisches Erzählen durch die Strukturierung potenziell traumatischer Erinnerungen mittels Narration die Erfah-

runge von Kontingenz reduziert, die Erzähler*innen bei der Wiedererlangung von Autonomiegefühlen unterstützt, und es somit traumatisierten Personen ermöglicht, ihre ansonsten potenziell unvollständige Autobiografie zu vervollständigen. Posttraumatisches Schreiben birgt die Chance, hochemotionale Erfahrungen mit ehemals 'zufälligen oder isolierten Ereignissen'² in eine sinnvolle Erzählung umzuwandeln. Die Auswirkungen des Traumas lassen somit graduell nach und ermöglichen es dem Individuum, die Erzählung über die bestehende Gegenwart und die mögliche Zukunft fortzusetzen. Anhand einer Fallstudie über die Autobiografie eines britischen Veteranen wird die Bedeutung des autobiografischen Schreibens bei posttraumatischer Belastungsstörung (PTSD) hier diskutiert. Diese Arbeit ist besonders relevant in Zeiten, in denen Krieg und Terror häufig nicht nur über die Medien vermittelt werden, sondern von Millionen von Menschen weltweit erlebt werden. Gleichzeitig ist sie ein Beitrag zu dem sich rasch entwickelnden Gebiet der kognitiven Narratologie und der restaurativen Narrative.

Stichwörter: Narrative Identität, Post-Trauma Narrative, Autobiografisches Erzählen, Restorative Narrative

Prologue

In a time where war and terror frequently dominate the news, and refugees as well as soldiers and veterans receive increased media attention, society must find ways to enable those shaped by potential trauma to heal. Naturally, the Humanities need to find ways to react to these issues as well and to adapt research questions and research processes to new phenomena. This paper discusses the impact of narrative on memory processes and how highly emotional experiences can be turned into meaningful chapters in life using non-fictional, autobiographical storytelling. It also emphasizes the role of cognitive narratology and restorative narratives within life writing and how approaches from cognitive literary studies may contribute additional insights to post-trauma research.

Traumatic experiences 'ripple through life'³ as they become powerful forces which often drive survivors to situations where they can work their way through their pain. 'To give shape, release and express it, make sense of it and find meaning in it'⁴ through self-expression is one of the most effective means of healing. Naturally, this includes verbal communication, fictional and non-fictional writing as well as poetry, art therapy and music. Through realization processes, memories are used to move from a

passive state of suffering to an active state of production. This paper argues that autobiographical writing can help trauma survivors by not just supporting memory reconstruction processes, but also by helping narrators create a coherent and meaningful story of the self and thus to re-establish themselves as the dominant author of their own life-story. Thus, it begins with a brief introduction to the fields of narrative psychology and cognitive narratology. The following sections focus on the impact of traumatic experiences on memory and how creative thought processes can enhance survival chances within moments of life-threatening circumstances. Afterwards, this paper uses the established knowledge base to focus on the question of how highly emotional and potentially incomplete memories can benefit from autobiographical storytelling. This paper argues that narrators may establish authorship of their own life story by structuring their memories narratively. Heterogeneous and potentially fluctuating experiences are transformed into a completed, externalised form and serve as a communicational tool that stabilises the self. This way, narration may bridge the gap between the experience of contingency and the establishing of autonomy. These arguments are supported by the case study of United Kingdom-veteran John Paul Jordan's autobiography *Joys of War*, whose subtitle already hints towards his own journey 'into hell with PTSD' ⁵. The term *post-conflict* narrative is used to emphasize that not all potentially traumatizing experiences automatically lead to trauma. It is a more encompassing term which allows for a broader spectrum of included narratives.

Cognitive Narratology in the Context of Autobiographical Writing

Narrative tools such as fictional and non-fictional prose, life-writing, and poetry enable human beings to connect their past, present and future; they allow us to understand ourselves and others, to communicate in the real world, and to create and move within imaginary worlds. This section highlights some of the basic terminology required to discuss autobiographical writing in the context of cognitive narratology, and connects them with a focus set on the key argument of this paper: by structuring potentially traumatising memories through narration, autobiographical storytelling reduces the experience of contingency, supports narrators in regaining feelings of autonomy and thus enables traumatised individuals to complete their otherwise potentially incomplete autobiography.

This paper uses David Herman's definition of narrative, stating that 'narrative is a fundamental way of organizing human experience and a tool for constructing models of reality'⁶, as well as Brian Richardson's remark about the causally connecting properties of narrative units, which hold episodic stories together ⁷. Naturally, life writing

goes beyond autobiographical narratives of the self. It is thus important to highlight that this article focuses only on the concept and impact of autobiographical narrative, and does not highlight any of the other, intricate aspects of life-writing.

According to James Phelan and Wayne C. Booth, 'the narrator is the agent or, in less anthropomorphic terms, the agency or 'instance' that tells or transmits everything—the existents, states, and events, in a narrative to a narratee'⁸. In contrast to the author, who is the real, and concrete entity that writes the autobiography, the narrator 'designates the inner-textual (textually encoded) highest-level speech position from which the current narrative discourse [...] originates and from which references to the entities, actions and events that this discourse is about are being made'⁹. What differentiates autobiography from fiction is that autobiographical texts posit the conceptual identity between writer, narrator and protagonist, whereas in fictional work one generally has to discern between the author and the narrator. In accordance with Benjamin Lejeune's established concept of the 'autobiographical pact'¹⁰, the stating of this identity in an autobiographical narrative is regarded as an agreement between author and reader. By presenting their life-story as an autobiography, the author declares his or her commitment to the reader to narrate a factual account about their own life. Thus, the narrator in autobiographical writing serves as the narrative voice of the author, who is the 'logico-linguistic centre for all spatial-temporal and personal references occurring in the discourse'¹¹ and who takes on the communicative role of narratively transmitting the author's life-story.

The term of the protagonist has been applied since Greek antiquity, and 'refers to the main character of a narrative or a play'¹². Characters are text- or media-based anthropomorphic figures in a storyworld¹³, thus typically referring to fictional storytelling. However, in non-fictional autobiographical writing, the protagonist is the main character of the narrative who provides a representation of the author's past and potentially present self-conceptions in the given text.

The term 'narrative psychology', which is one of the forerunners of cognitive narratology, has its roots in 1986, when it was initially coined by Theodor Sarbin¹⁴. The same year, Jerome Bruner approached narrative psychology with an empirical approach in his groundbreaking work *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*¹⁵. Dan McAdams also stresses the difference between the use of narrative within psychological inquiry and specific narratological approaches, which use narrative as the key principle for psychological explanations¹⁶.

Since then, the works of narrative psychologists such as Jerome Bruner, David Herman, Dan P. McAdams and Donald Polkinghorne (to name only a few) have opened a new field for scholars of literary studies and linguistics: cognitive narratology. As a

subdomain of the cognitive sciences, cognitive narratology is ‘the study of mind-relevant dimensions of storytelling practices wherever—and by whatever means—those practices occur’¹⁷. Research areas that work with storytelling practices, such as Linguistics and Literature, are thus naturally inclined to work within this context. Cognitive narratology enables researchers to combine the fundamental question of narratology, namely ‘what are the underlying rules of narrative textual systems?’ with the question ‘which mental processes, activities and tools enable us to construct and understand narrative?’¹⁸. Additionally, cognitive narratology aims to shed light on how human beings process and make sense of their experiences through narrative, which is one of the main foci of this paper. Especially relevant here is the use of autobiographical writing in overcoming trauma. Specifically, the concept of narrative identity, which is defined as the ‘internalised and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to make sense and meaning out of his or her life’¹⁹ is relevant as it emphasises the stabilising properties of life narratives and the impact narratives can have on memory and the self.

The Impact of (Traumatic) Experiences on Memory Processes

Cognitive narratology, as well as evolutionary and social psychology, cognitive linguistics, and other domains of the human mind seek to understand how experiences shape us as human beings. More specifically, the cognitive sciences question how we process and communicate past, present and possible future events. From a neurological point of view, the answer to how events shape us as human beings lies (amongst other factors) in synaptic strength. By learning, imagining and experiencing, synaptic strength grows, leading to increased transmitter release and thus facilitated signal transmission from one neuron to the next²⁰. Though in basic psychology often connected to classical conditioning, this process is the same anytime human beings experience and learn. Through already experienced previous incidents, the excitement of different neural cells and axons in the brain is influenced, which then, naturally among other factors, has an influence on the individual’s personal and cognitive development²¹. Synapses in the human brain can show a persistent increase in synaptic strength, also referred to as long-term potentiation, as well as a persistent decrease in synaptic strength, also referred to as long-term depression (LTD)²² which is not to be mistaken with clinical depression. Thus, every experience in life can leave short-term and long-term changes within the human brain’s neural cells and thus within ourselves. This has a direct influence on the way human beings (re-)act, communicate, and develop. Naturally, it thus also influences autobiographical writing.

Although this model of synaptic strength is simplified, it still offers a comprehensive glimpse at how the influence of trauma may impact the narratives of trauma survivors. The field of broken narratives specifically focuses on how conventional storytelling may be influenced by gaps, silence and the unspeakable²³. Everything we see, everything we do, and everything that is done to us has an influence on who we are, who we intend to become, and who we think we have been in the past. The effects of trauma are often reflected in human beings' behaviour, everyday thoughts and the content we choose to speak about, write about, maybe even sing about²⁴. Naturally, trauma thus also has a lasting effect on individual autobiographical storytelling and on how narrators position themselves within their own life stories.

According to the DSM-5²⁵ trauma in this paper is defined as follows:

actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence, in one (or more) of the following ways,

1. Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s).
2. Witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others.
3. Learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental.
4. Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (e.g., first responders collecting human remains; police officers repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse)

PTSD can only be diagnosed after exposure to trauma, and is defined as follows:

A disorder that can develop following exposure to a traumatic life event [...] Symptoms of PTSD include (a) re-experiencing the trauma through flashbacks, intrusive memories and nightmares, (b) suppression of these re-experiencing symptoms and avoidance of trauma reminders, (c) hyperarousal, (d) negative alterations in mood and cognition, and (e) an impact on social and/or occupational functioning

One important concept of this paper is the neurological and psychological notion that trauma is often not consciously experienced and is thus at first incomprehensible for the one experiencing it²⁶. It is commonly stated among survivors of traumatic incidents that they cannot find the proper words to express orally or in writing what they have endured, seen, and felt. Through incomprehensibility, fear, and distance from normality, the individual tends to react but hardly consciously acts on his or her own accord. Post-conflict narratives of 'belated experience'²⁷ thus help individuals realise

what happened and to position their memory as well as potential memory gaps in their biography. This can be used in therapeutic settings, in communication with loved ones, using a diary and by writing one's autobiography.

Memory loss is a typical side-effect that survivors of trauma face. Imaging techniques such as fMRI show the manifold results of trauma-specific changes in human neuronal structures²⁸. Especially the role of the prefrontal cortex, hippocampus and the amygdala are often underlined when treating PTSD patients, as information processing is often seen to be dysfunctional, which shows that survivors very often literally cannot comprehend what they are trying to memorise. Even further, psychiatrists regularly refer to decreased activity in the Broca's motor speech centre, which is where language production is situated. This inactivity can explain why people often struggle to find the correct words to describe their traumatic experience and thus refer to 'speechless terror'²⁹. Life writing may thus at first be impossible after conflict due to the lack of structured and comprehensible memories.

Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between Primary and Secondary Memory, a differentiation which is directly applicable to post-trauma and post-conflict narratives³⁰. He describes primary memory as 'that of a person who has lived through events and remembers them in a certain manner'. Secondary memory in comparison is described as the 'result of critical work on primary memory, whether by the person who initially had the relevant experience or, more typically, by an analyst, observer or secondary witness'³¹. It is additionally important to mention that both forms of memory are always influenced by the social and cultural evaluations of the person who experiences events³². When it comes to trauma, LaCapra, states that memory can only ever be secondary as the experienced events are not 'integrated into experience or directly remembered' and the event 'must be reconstructed from its effects and traces'³³. Although I would argue that this statement is too general, because a) not all emotional trauma is necessarily characterised by memory loss, and b) not all cultures have an awareness of or even a word for the concept of trauma³⁴, it is still true that traumatic memories need to be processed. Writing is regarded as a particularly suitable tool for the integration of cognitive and emotional aspects of the self. Specifically autobiographical writing assists the narrator not just in the overall process of meaning-making³⁵, but it also improves the physical and emotional symptoms of (post-traumatic) stress³⁶. As human beings narrate their potentially traumatising experiences, they transgress from the passive experience of contingency into the active role of an autobiographical storyteller, which leads to a relative decrease in stress when talking about these (potentially slowly emerging) memories.³⁷ Naturally, this does not mean that the

individual experiences a general decrease in cortisol when reflecting on the past. Rather, it means that typical PTSD reactions, such as anxiety and panic attacks, may be overcome when potentially traumatising events are remembered, as they become less extreme. This way, narrators learn not just how to communicate their highly subjective memories (in those cases where the memory exists), but the narrated events are also perceived as less threatening and uncontrollable. The experience recruits a set of memory traces against which the initial experience is compared³⁸. As a result, the individual trauma is eventually perceived as less central to the self³⁹.

When thinking about *Autobiography* and *Memory*, one may automatically attribute that a spark of creativity will be part of the narrative process. Trauma, however, is not something usually associated with creativity, as it is an ultimately negative experience. The moment of traumatising and human creativity share unexpected similar mental processes: regression and dissociation, both altered states of consciousness, support individuals during traumatic events to ‘involuntary states of cognitive and affective alterations of consciousness’ and can thus be ‘enlisted in the service of the creative process’⁴⁰. Basically, on a neurological level, though with a different psychological trigger and emotional impact, inspirational moments and the fragmentation of the self during trauma happen through the same dissociative processes. Through temporary deactivation of the pre-frontal area of the brain and temporary hold on the workings of the frontal lobes, the individual thinking becomes more winding, less directed and thus allows the human being a higher ability for creative connections⁴¹. This state is equivalent to the moment of traumatising as well as to the moment of the creative spark. This neurological process is followed by an elaboration phase during which ‘the frontal lobes take over in order to evaluate previously generated ideas’⁴². Though memory gaps are relatively frequent after traumatic experiences, one can see that this does not mean that the human brain completely shuts off during the experience of trauma. Rather, the above-described processes create a connection between creativity and survival. Though naturally, traumatised individuals do not become more creative due to trauma, out of the box thinking may often be the reason why people are able to survive seemingly unsurvivable situations.

Post-Trauma Narratives and the Human psyche

When dealing with post-trauma narratives, it is important to mention that this paper focuses solely on the impact of personal traumatic or possibly traumatizing experiences. Collective dimensions of trauma and the transmission of trauma across generations through epigenetic mechanisms⁴³ are not in the focus of this paper, although they offer promising insights for further research.

This paper discusses the impact of autobiographical narration on the one who narrates, the trauma survivor who takes over the authorship of their life. However, one should not underestimate the impact of reading about other people's traumatic experiences and their techniques of dealing with past events. The case study in this paper also highlights the beneficial aspects of knowing that one's own story might help others suffering from similar issues. Specifically in times where trauma survivors still find it hard to speak about or write about their own trauma, it can be helpful to listen to another narrator's voice and to reflect on their path of healing. This way, trauma survivors may find common ground between the development another individual is sharing through autobiographical (published or privately narrated) storytelling and their own mental health goal. Studies in the field of Health Psychology show the positive impact of not just dialogical approaches towards trauma narration, but also the impact of peer relationships among combat veterans experiencing post-traumatic stress⁴⁴. The concept of narrative empathy, defined as 'the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition'⁴⁵ also discusses how reading enables identification with narrators and protagonists. Thus, we may conclude that the reception of trauma survivor autobiographies may also have a helpful impact on trauma survivors, specifically those who might struggle to verbalize their experiences and thus may find it impossible to incorporate their experiences into their autobiography.

The reason why this paper refers to 'possibly traumatising events' and 'post-conflict narratives' instead of applying the term *trauma* is that not all cultures have a concept of trauma. Additionally, not all individuals who experience trauma or possibly traumatising events develop psychopathological conditions. Whether someone refers to themselves as suffering from traumatic memories highly depends on their personal and cultural conceptualisation of trauma⁴⁶. Once the individual decides to narrate their experiences, events are newly evoked, re-evaluated emotionally and may be re-encoded in a new context, attaching specific meaning to the trauma and making it part of a narrative⁴⁷.

Trauma survivors are often caught in the dichotomy between the urge to protect themselves, which includes keeping silent about their experiences, and the urge to receive recognition for surviving often seemingly unsurvivable settings⁴⁸. Autobiographical writing can provide individuals with a compromise between the need to be known and the need to hide. Art generally, but specifically writing is regarded as one of the most powerful tools for self-help, as it supports narrators to distance themselves from feelings of terror and actively decreases cortisol-levels on a long-term basis⁴⁹. Often, culturally predetermined genres may accompany these narrative processes and help the narrator establish their identity as a storyteller. Through narration, we interpret and reconstruct events through narrative conventions and genres⁵⁰. Potentially fluctuating events can suddenly not just be used to create a fluent and coherent storyline, but eventually even to find closure. As mentioned before, creativity may be used here to weave hypothetical narratives into 'past, present and future'⁵¹ identities, thus not just filling the objective gaps between memory but furthermore justifying subjective actions and reactions.

Bridging the Gap: Completing Autobiographical Memory through Storytelling

Every individual life story is a 'selective reconstruction of the autobiographical past and a narrative anticipation of the imagined future that serves to explain, for the self and others, how the person came to be and where his or her life may be going'⁵². Autobiographical writing as a subsection of Life Writing can have an enormous impact on trauma survivors. Through narratives and stories, we construct ourselves and our lives. Hallet emphasises the connection between life story and literary studies by stating that life stories have a 'single, underlying plot'⁵³ and that 'the coherence of the narrative and the referential identity of the narrator's 'I' characterize the social environments, changing personalities and diachronic-linear stages which normally characterize life'.⁵⁴ In Polkinghorne's theory of identity, people make their existence 'into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story', including 'a single, though constantly revised plot and historical unity'⁵⁵. The concept of narrative identity thus relies on the presumption that the manifold experiences of life and the self may be represented in a story⁵⁶. This means that the things which we believe to be constituting of our identities, our experience, knowledge, memories, character traits, etc. are not just given. Instead, to become meaningful, they must be articulated and interpreted narratively.

By actively deciding to incorporate the highly emotional experiences of trauma into one's life narrative, individuals may reach a point where their story continues onto a new path. Thus, storytelling becomes an 'instrumental explanation of a person's most important commitments in the realms of work and love, and a moral justification of who a person was, is and will be'⁵⁷. Specifically, the idea that morality plays an important part for the construction of the self and its identities is important when analysing post-conflict narratives of soldiers and veterans, as will be seen in the case study of this paper. Post-conflict narratives may be changed and adapted at different stages in life to match the changing goals of the individual at different points in time. As identity changes and develops, so does the perspective of one's memories change and adapt. Thus, life writing is never fixed, as the stories of our lives continually develop. As storytellers of our own lives, we are the ones constructing a beginning, a middle, and an end to our life writing. Only through hindsight can we claim that hopes were fulfilled, and decisions turned out to be right or wrong. The stories one writes (and tells) are always provisional and revisable. In connection to this, Mark Freeman mentions the hindsight bias which is the human tendency to believe (falsely) that one would have predicted the outcome of an event in hindsight⁵⁸. Cognitively and causally, the reason for inner change is found after the change has already happened. Through hindsight, human beings may even create self-protecting illusions which help to accept who we are and what we may have experienced⁵⁹.

It is important to bear in mind that narrative shapes not just the accounts of past events in our autobiographical memory. Through the process of forming plans and projects, narrators may use narrative concepts and schemata to define goals and to give shape to the future by forming expectations about future events⁶⁰. This is particularly important to bear in mind when analysing the role of narrative after trauma: the symptoms of PTSD may decrease heavily when individuals articulate and historicise not just their own (past) life story, but also especially when they are given the chance to verbalise futurity and experience social engagement⁶¹.

The biggest threat to this process, particularly when working with post-conflict narratives, is depression, which is often triggered through PTSD, and which may hinder narrators from being able to imagine a future for themselves. Specifically suicidal narrators may struggle to give narrative shape to a possible future, which Freeman defines as 'narrative foreclosure'⁶². Narrators may be supported by raising awareness for cultural scripts and storylines which are already internalized, as they may help to demystify the past. This way, individuals suffering from depression may regain the possibility to creatively imagine a future for themselves.

Case Study: John-Paul Jordan: Joys of War - From the Foreign Legion, the SAS and into Hell with PTSD

United Kingdom-veteran John-Paul Jordan's autobiography, published in 2018, is a representative example for the role of autobiographical storytelling after combat experience. It was written and published by the author as a reaction towards the dialogical need to actively communicate his experiences and publicly incorporate them into his identity while battling PTSD. Furthermore, despite focusing every now and again on non-military aspects of his life such as his childhood, early adolescence, and so forth, the focus of the autobiographical story remains on his primary memories connected to the military, and their reprocessing as secondary memories. Thus, his memoir creates a life narrative that identifies and communicates a military narrative identity as he structures traumatising memories and his long-term reactions to these into a coherent storyline.

The narrative begins with a preface that directly addresses fellow veterans, emphasising the author's wish to help others suffering from PTSD to find 'peace of mind, peace of body, peace of soul, peace of life'⁶³ with his writing. The publication of his memoir is thus directly connected to a meaning-making process, where the narrative creates not just sense and coherence for the self, but also aims to support others going through a similar challenge. He states that soldiers frequently feel isolated from normality and civilian life after returning from combat, and directly addresses his reader with '[f]inally, there's somebody who also knows your story'⁶⁴. By emphasising the emotional similarities between veterans, the potential sense of isolation is lifted, as Jordan's autobiography presents itself not just as a communicational device of his own narrative identity, but as a narrative tool with the purpose to help and support others. 'For too long we've been prisoners of war in our mind'⁶⁵ gives the reader already a glimpse of the traumatic impact war must have had on the author, despite not actively using the term 'trauma' at this stage. By taking on the role of the active storyteller, John-Paul Jordan uses the tool of narrative to share his own stories of belated experience and to make meaning not just for himself, but also for a potential military audience.

The narrator remains relatively superficial during the beginning chapters of this narrative. The focus remains rather on thought-processes and general steps taken; instead of giving detailed accounts of singular experiences, he chooses a relatively quick pace of directing readers through his life-story, reflecting the velocity of experiences he feels during several moments in his lifetime. By the beginning of chapter four, the

reader has already been guided narratively through the author's childhood and teenage years as well as through his first military training experiences, deployments and SAS selection⁶⁶. Non-military anecdotes serve only a contextual purpose in his life-story, as they are not directly linked to the self-stabilizing properties of post-trauma narration.

Although the reader's perception of time in this narrative is manipulated through the pace in which the author chooses to present his life-story, there are moments of battle which very accurately display the disorienting properties of trauma the protagonist and his comrades experience.

When it all kicked off, our interpreter jumped to where I was standing and curled into the fetal position, with the empty red-hot cartridges of the .50cal which are 6in long and 0.75in thick. I didn't even notice him, that's how busy I was and how much adrenaline was flowing, never mind the rockets and bullet. I had three of those empty cartridges infused to my neck where they were seared between my body armour and skin, with the scars still there to this day⁶⁷.

The above quote renders an impression of combat in Afghanistan and of the long-lasting mental and physical effects which combat may have on military personnel. The mix between technical details about the amount and volume of the cartridges combined with the heat of the moment is a fitting representation of a traumatising moment, where the mind can focus on specific details and at the same time may lose its sense of orientation. Primary and secondary memory come together, restructuring a past event through technical facts and emotional responses. At other times, the narrator summarizes hours of combat with only a few sentences⁶⁸, a strategy which again triggers a sense of disorientation in time and leads to gaps in the story which resemble memory gaps. The destabilisation of the self through trauma is thus represented through the unstable perception of time and temporality.

Vocabulary like 'the enemy'⁶⁹, 'killing zone'⁷⁰, and 'bloodbath'⁷¹ emphasise the extremeness of combat and accompany the protagonist's decision to take several enemy lives. After returning from Afghanistan twice, the narrator both times makes a point of emphasising that, in contrast to his comrades, he does not get the rest he might require and continues to work⁷². Next to the foregone combat experiences, this offers an additional explanation for the narrator as to why he will eventually require psychological and psychiatric support. The build-up to Jordan's potential low-point is foreshadowed by statements such as '[e]motions were left at the front-door of the house in Hertfordshire'⁷³, which show the protagonist's emotional detachment from

his self in preparation for combat. Statements such as these serve not just an informing purpose for the reader but are also stages of self-reflection and self-understanding. Through the ability to understand past psychological mechanisms, the author enables himself to understand his present state of being in the time of writing. A social and cultural evaluation is additionally and indirectly introduced, as the narrator explains to himself and to his readership which inhumane physical and emotional (external and self-afflicted) conditions he endured before his diagnosis.

‘It’s only now I realize that my injuries were non-visible injuries’⁷⁴ gives the first direct account of the post-traumatic stress disorder which Jordan develops. By stating that he uses the term *injury* instead of *health*, the author stresses that ‘injury is temporary’⁷⁵, alluding directly to the beginning sentences of his autobiography in which he states his wish to help other veterans by sharing his story. His life story is given shape and form through the internal motivation of not just healing himself, but also to use the restorative properties of narrative to support other veterans.

Despite continuously suffering from mental stress and physical combat wounds, the author shares accounts of taking up private security work in Iraq and Egypt and continues depicting adventurous stories of a post-military life. Mixed with this sense of adventure comes a feeling of bitterness about the lack of medical support the protagonist receives from the British military, despite still suffering from physical, combat-related wounds. The narrator shares the emotional mayhem he goes through, as he states that he feels ‘touched and proud and very humble’⁷⁶ when, at the same time, he receives notice about being awarded for his actions. The focus of this narrative develops from primary and disoriented memories into a direction that emphasises emotions more; not just from a perspective of internal monologue, but also through describing external observations about himself through third parties such as ‘it was brought to my attention that I seemed distant to my family’⁷⁷. Statements such as ‘part of me thought that I’d be better off if I’d been more seriously injured’⁷⁸, and ‘[y]et what ate away at me was could I have done more to help those who didn’t make it or those who were more seriously injured than I was? I felt a sense of shame’⁷⁹ display a rapid decline in the protagonist’s mental health and display questions of morality and guilt. From here on, Jordan’s narrative continuously focuses more on the ‘seeds of destruction’⁸⁰, the harmful coping mechanisms he and many others from the (British) military choose, and the superficial medical aftercare given to British soldiers at that time. The narrative applies a new level of self-reflectiveness, sharing secondary memories and consciously evaluating past emotions and relationships in a narrative meaning-making process.

By throwing himself into more work in conflict zones, the protagonist paints over his emotional scars by seeking more adrenaline. The chapter titled 'Combat Stress'⁸¹ addresses the mentally most fragile representation of a chapter in his life. Here, his writing style becomes much more detailed, in-depths and the pace of the story more focused on single thoughts and events, which highlights that the effects of PTSD have been the driving forces to narrate his life story. Statements such as 'I felt so unattached to life'⁸² and 'the Afghan memories just played over and over'⁸³ give a sense of the 'speechless terror'⁸⁴ which trauma survivors typically refer to. Additionally, statements such as 'my sleep was erratic'⁸⁵ and 'I just isolated myself from everyone and everything'⁸⁶ together with repeated flashbacks from his time in Afghanistan show prototypical symptoms of PTSD, which materialize through his narrative. By stating that 'I just couldn't figure out how the hell I had ended up here'⁸⁷, the author initiates the turning point of his autobiography; the realization that with 'an empty house and a head full of memories'⁸⁸, he has ignored the symptoms of his illness and potential medical support for too long. He compares his life at that time to a car-crash⁸⁹, characterized by 'emptiness in the house and emptiness inside me'⁹⁰. Comparing life to an accident emphasizes the perceived loss of agency and control the author reflects upon, which escalates in a suicide attempt⁹¹. During unconsciousness, he describes how he sees an image of his children appear in his mind⁹². This experience awakens his will to live, and the author uses this memory to connect with his potential reader with a direct address:

If you're thinking of taking this route out, trust me, your head and the voice in your head will tell you anything to make it sound like the only solution. It's not a solution. It's the problem [...]. Because if you die, you kill your loved ones too. It's just that they die more slowly. No matter what happens, hold on, just bloody well hold on⁹³.

Jordan's narrative continues with a detailed description of drug- and alcohol abuse and of his struggles with depression and anxiety⁹⁴. The author's suicide attempt is only the first story of a series of additional chapters he uses to share his negative experiences with the British mental healthcare system. Although it can be assumed that these negative anecdotes will not necessarily motivate others suffering from PTSD to seek professional health support, the cruel honesty of presenting himself as paranoid⁹⁵, psychotic⁹⁶, and becoming a strongly medicated patient 'just sitting on the sofa staring into space dribbling'⁹⁷ might resonate in other veterans who have made similar negative experiences. The vulnerability of his accounts has a de-isolating effect on

those who read his memoir and who can identify with this narrator. They also emphasise the authenticity of his accounts, in which he euphemises nothing during the meaning-making process of structuring his life and its various chapters narratively.

By using the conceptual metaphor SICKNESS IS AN ENEMY, he states that 'I couldn't fight the two enemies at the same time'⁹⁸. His identity as a soldier is conceptualized in a new frame by the idea to battle drug-addiction and PTSD. The author states that 'I started writing this book when I was ninety days clean', adding that next to his treatment for non-visible injuries, he decides to 'add writing a memoir to it'⁹⁹. He self-consciously and self-reflectively describes the writing of his life story as a therapeutic approach with which he hopes to make a difference in the lives of others struggling to recover 'from non-visible injuries or whatever has caused you suffering in your life'¹⁰⁰. From this moment on, the author continues to directly address his readers with the wish to inspire them on their way to mental health. He encourages fellow soldiers and veterans to 'find other veterans or people with whom you can identify and with whom you have a common bond' to '[s]hare your story'¹⁰¹.

Just as the preface was directly addressed towards soldiers and veterans, the afterword is directly addressed to those self-medicating through drugs and alcohol abuse. The memoir is thus also stylistically framed by the aim to inspire other veterans and PTSD survivors on their way to mental health. John-Paul Jordan's memoir serves as a de-isolating, communicational device through which he 'feels blessed to have gone through all of that so I can help others with it'¹⁰². It is the manifestation of his identity as someone who has turned '[t]rauma into [t]riumph'¹⁰³, and positions his identity within his pre-, mid- and post-trauma life experiences. By crossing the boundaries of mental health stigmas and communicating his (past) emotions and struggles, he manifests himself as an adventurer who uses his primary and secondary memories to make meaning out of his own life and to better the lives of others.

Conclusion

Narrative Theory and (Cognitive) Narratology specifically highlight the narrative tools and techniques applied by autobiographical storytellers during their individual meaning-making processes. Hermeneutic approaches to autobiographical narratives give additional insight in the existence of story-scripts, culturally predetermined plotlines, and the subconsciously and unconsciously applied tools of storytelling which guide narrators in the creation of their own life-story.

This paper has discussed the role of autobiographical writing after potentially trau-

matizing experiences and specifically: how the narration of autobiographical memories may support narrators to come to find sense and meaning, and thus come to terms with their life story. Through structuring traumatising memories into a non-fictional, autobiographical story and by positioning one's pre-, mid-, and post-trauma memories, highly distressing events can be turned into meaningful experiences necessary for the healthy development of the individual. In the realm of post-conflict life-writing, autobiographical storytellers can use the fragmentation of the self to transform potentially traumatizing, highly distressing and potentially broken memories into a meaning-giving form. This way, causal explanation can be given for change, feelings of contingency can be lowered, PTSD symptoms reduced, and perceived sense of agency can increase. The case study of John-Paul Jordan's autobiography *Joys of War – From the Foreign Legion, the SAS and into hell with PTSD* has been discussed as an example of successfully finding and manifesting meaning through narrating one's life-story.

However, it is important to remember that narratives can reduce the feeling of helplessness, but never fully eliminate the experienced contingency of past events. Yet, autobiographical writing can be regarded as one of the most helpful tools for survivors of trauma by helping them become the authors of their own life story enabling a coherent, post-conflict identity.

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About the Author

Deborah de Muijnck is a research and teaching fellow at the Department of English Literature and at the Aachen Center for Cognitive and Empirical Literary Studies (ACCELS), RWTH Aachen, Germany. She holds a B.A. in Cultural Studies & Literature, Psychology, and Linguistics, and an M.A. in English Studies and Communication Studies. She is currently concluding her dissertation titled 'Cultural Models of Narrative Identity: The Case of Military Autobiographical Writing', in which she explores how soldiers and veterans reconstruct their narrative identity after war experience through non-fictional, autobiographical storytelling. She is the author of *When Breath Becomes Air: Constructing Stable Narrative Identity During Terminal Illness* (2019), and Co-Author of *Methods of Reception Theory and Cognitive Approaches - From Reception Aesthetics to Cognitive Poetics* (2021). In 2019, she presented her paper on *Mission Narratives* at the *Narratives of Displacement* Conference, St. Anne's College, Oxford University, and in 2020 her paper on *Autobiographical Storytelling during Terminal Illness* at the *Narrative2020* conference in New Orleans.

Notes

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