Review Article

Ego Involvement and the Law of Exercise: Memorization as a Function of Ego Involvement in Folklore Scholarship and Anthropology

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Abstract

The article is a component in my "Folkloric Behavior", a total innovation within my "Folkloric Behavior" (1967), which introduced a theoretical system for analyzing a folkloric phenomenon in a cognitive verifiable context. The universal psychosocial principles constituting the system were applied to a real (live) community: the ethnic Arabs living in Brooklyn, N.Y., USA, with particular emphasis on the Egyptian component. This approach stood in sharp contrast to the dominant Freudian psychoanalytic and Jungian analytical psychology theories that dominate this field.

Terms, concepts, and processes offered in this innovative work are currently being used—often in isolation of their academic home and systemic links-- in various folklore fields. Examples of current usage are: "ego-involvement", "learning process", "extinction", "motivation", "intervening stimuli/cues [(re-presented as) "negotiations", etc.). Ironically, my founding work on "Folkloric Behavior" is hardly ever evaluated or even mentioned.

It would be useful to afford students of folk traditions and other readers the benefits of research objectivity of tracking the temporal sequence in which these key issues appeared in folklore scholarship. This step would be required for also establishing the history of ideas in a discipline.

Introduction

Dissertation abstract

"Folklore" can be defined as a class/[category] of learned, traditional responses forming a distinct type of behavior. The individual must undergo the psychological process of learning in order to acquire the responses of folkloric behavior, and this learning process occurs under conditions determined by social and cultural factors. The fundamental factors involved in learning are: *drive, cue, response*, and *reward*. Secondary factors such as repetition, regency, and ego-involvement can contribute, but their presence is not required in the process of learning.

Folkloric behavior is distinguishable from non-traditional, non-folkloric behavior, and consequently, folkloric responses are distinguishable from other classes of responses, such as those characteristics of modern science and technology. Thus, folklorists should initially concern themselves with *folkloric responses* (*narrating, believing, singing, applying* a proverb, or *dancing*) and relevant social and cultural factors before proceeding to the study of the folklore items themselves (narratives, beliefs, songs, proverbs, or dances).

Through the application of psychological theories of individual and social learning to folkloric phenomena, we can gain an understanding of the forces affecting the perpetuation or extinction of folklore and thus can explain the function of a particular folkloric response in a particular community.

Concept system

In principles of psychology, William James wrote:

Most men have a good memory for facts connected with

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their own pursuits. The college athlete who remains a dunce at his books will astonish you by his knowledge of men's 'records' in various feats and games and will be a walking dictionary of sporting statistics. The reason is that he is constantly going over these things in his mind and comparing and making a series of them. They form for him not so many odd facts, but a concept-system - so they stick …

In a system, every fact is connected with every other by some thought-relation. The consequence is that every fact is retained by the combined suggestive power of all the other facts in the system and forgetfulness is well-nigh impossible [1].

Hunter substantiated James' account of the "concept-system," adding that in the concept-system, "When the new fact fits into a system of interrelated facts, this facilitates its being memorized in the first place … Again, there is reference to the role of repetition in preventing subsequent forgetting of memorized fact [2]". This, in learning familiar material, such as well-known themes or motifs appearing in an unfamiliar folktale or legend, the familiar elements aid in the retention of the entire item because the material is rendered meaningful, while learning this material in the new context is an exercise (repetition and recency) for the familiar material. Because of familiarity, repetition, and recency, the amount of retention is higher than would be the case with totally unfamiliar material. The "concept-system" introduced by James and developed by Hunter appears in the experimental psychology literature as the concept of "ego-involvement."

Ego-involvement

According to Cofer and Appley, "the term ego-involvement is used to refer to circumstances in which attitudes relative to the person himself and his possessions, the people, groups, values, and institutions with which he is involved are engaged [3]". Paul T. Young states ego-involvement begins in early childhood when the individual [child] ceases to refer to himself in the third person and learns the concept of "I." Subsequently, "In the normal adult, ego-involvement has developed very far," and is important in that it "… gives interest and zest to pieces of property, systems of belief, plans for action, or whatever it may be that the individual accepts as beholding to himself [4]".

As in James' "concept-system," ego-involvement directly influences learning and retention. In 1948, Thelma G. Alper found that ego-involvement was related to memory gains over retention intervals, for memory gains were absent in situations when the subjects were merely task-oriented [5]. Cofer and Appley summarized experiments on ego-involvement as a factor contributing to faster learning and better retention over long periods of time: "A number of experiments have found that recall is superior for material that agreed with a subject's attitudes, values, or beliefs, for material favorable to his sex or color, for material produced by the subject such as associations, and for story titles labeled normal rather than abnormal, etc."

These experimental findings and James-Hunter's explanations of this phenomenon as mental repetition by "constantly going over these things in … [one's] mind" [6] complement one another and support evidence for the Law of Exercise. Ego-involvement provides a type of reward which, according to Rotter's "Behavior potential," David Berlo's "Fraction of Decision" equation, and the general principle of reward, provides a strong drive for behavior. Ego-involvement also provides the conditions necessary for the exercise of learned material, thus producing greater retention: ego-involving folklore material can be recalled longer and remembered easier than material that is not ego-involving.

The concept of ego-involvement in folklore scholarship

Malinowski noted that among the Trobriand Islanders, "Every story is 'owned' by a member of the community. A story, though known by many, may be recited only by the 'owner;' he may, however, present it to someone else by teaching that person and authorizing him to retell it [7]". Since Malinowski, folklorists have learned that narrators can experience ego-involvement with certain *Märchen* and other folklore material which they regard as their personal property. Dégh points out the same phenomenon "among European peoples [8];" also Grudde [9], Brinkmann [10], Uffer [11], Delargy [12], and many others have reported instances of ego-involvement experienced by informants. As a psychological factor, ego-involvement is most dramatically evident in rivalries between narrators. Stith Thompson discussed "The sense of rivalry" among the Shanachies of Western Ireland and concluded, "The best way to get one of them started with telling a particular tale is to remark that a certain rival has told it well. He will then insist that you have never heard the story really told as it should be, and he then proceeds to demonstrate [13]". In this case of imitation ("vicarious instigation," if the narrator responds emotionally to his rival) the narrator's imitative behavior is produced by empathy, with ego-involvement playing a crucial role.

Ego-involvement as a function of folklore genres

Certain folkloric items, then, can be ego-involving for particular individuals who regard these items as their own property. By the same token, certain subclasses of folkloric responses (i.e., folklore genres) could be ego-involving in the same manner and with the same learning results. Just as a narrator or singer can be ego-involved with a particular *Märchen* or song that he considers his own, so social, religious, vocational, and ethnic groups, and even entire communities and nations, can be ego-involved with a particular folk item which they consider characteristic of their own identity. The genres (subclasses of responses) which may be subject to communal ego-involvement are: beliefs, myths [14], legends, memorates [15], and proverbs.

Ancient national mythology (Egyptian, Greek, etc.) or the current "myths" of a folk community are similar in that both belong to a class of folkloric responses that have historically been ego-involving for members of their respective cultures. Those folkloric responses that are ego-involving for a group will not be questioned by the adherents. For the outsider, however, the very same narratives would have no meaning or

identification, and he might reject them as erroneous, obsolete "myths" or superstitions.

William Hugh Jansen refers to the relative value of folk items as "... *the esoteric-exoteric factor in folklore.*" "The esoteric applies to what one group thinks of itself and what others think of it," while, "The exoteric is what one group thinks of another and what it thinks that other group thinks it thinks [16]". In other words, what could esoterically be a valid religious belief for one group could exoterically be superstitious nonsense for another.

Beliefs: As stated earlier, the concept of "belief" is, *per se*, ego-involving. Psychologically, a belief is "An attitude involving the recognition or acceptance of something as real [17]". "If people believe things to be true, then they are true for them and have social consequences [18]". Malinowski, Kimball Young, Robert MacIver, and Christiansen associated belief with myth as a development from the simple to the complex. For MacIver, myths are merely value-impregnated beliefs [19], and Malinowski described myth as "charts of belief," and adds: "The *myth* comes into play when rite, ceremony, or a social or moral rule demands justification, warrant of antiquity, reality and sanctity [20]". Christiansen divided mythology into "higher" and "lower" classes: "lower mythology" being "...'folk beliefs' or, to be more exact, 'ancient folk belief,'" and "higher mythology" referring to a "... rich and colorful store of tales, whether of the gods of the classics or of the sterner, less gracious deities of the Norse." "Lower mythology" functions as "... the background to all these elaborate tales about the doings of the gods, or the 'heroes'" [21] (i.e., to higher mythology).

Bidney described three categories of belief, based on the relative value of myth and belief in different cultures as follows:

First, there is scientific belief which may be verified. Secondly, there is a myth which refers relatively to any belief which we discredit, although acceptable to others in the past or present [superstition]. Thirdly, there is a sphere of belief which lies between science and myth. Religious beliefs, such as the belief in God, are neither scientific nor mythological [22].

The individual draws the differentiating lines between myth and superstition, on one hand, and belief and religion, on the other according to his own viewpoint. Thus, it is the principle of ego-involvement that sets myth and superstition apart from belief and religion. In William Jansen's terminology, it is the esoteric versus the exoteric in value judgment.

Myths: In spite of the disagreements among mythologists over such issues as the form, subject matter, and origin of myths, they do agree that a 'myth' must be believed if it is to exist. The definitions offered by [such scholars of diverse orientations as] Boas [23], Malinowski [24], MacIver [25], Kimball Young [26], Jung and Kerényi [27], Bidney [28], Thompson [29], and Christiansen [30], concur that myth is associated with belief. John Greenway summed up the present situation in myth scholarship: "... regardless of the disparity of their exegeses, all the writers on myth over the last 2500 years agreed that myth is a narrative associated with religion [31]", and religion, by definition, is ego-involving.

Legends: Similarly, the legend is believed by its adherents and is a part of their concept-system. Dorson defines legend as "... a true story in the minds of the folk who retain it in their memory and pass it along to the next generation ... the legend is further distinguished by describing an extraordinary event [32]". This learning aspect of oral tradition ("memory") is achieved "In closely knit communities ... through constant repetition [33]" and other factors of learning. In various forms (migratory legend, local legend, or saint's legend), this aspect of retention which Dorson calls "memory" remains. The transmission of legends amounts to the transmission of "historical facts" for the folk. The Brothers Grimm, over a century ago, noted that while "The *Märchen* is poetic," by contrast, "the legend is historical [34]." The combining of historical events from the past with memory (retention of the characteristics of these historically true events) indicates ego-involvement as a functional factor in the legendary tradition of a particular culture.

The importance of "memory" (oral tradition) as an aspect of ego-involvement is stressed by the fact that if the legend ceases to be ego-involving it disappears: Dorson observed, "If interest lags, the legend dies. What maintains interest is the intimate association with family or neighborhood history." In this sense, "Legends represent the folk's-eye view of history [35]"; that is, the folk's *own* interpretation of facts as they *believe* they happened.

The definitions of legend suggested by Stith Thompson [36], Heinrich Günter [37], Raymond Deloy Jameson and Alfred Metraux [38], and Kimball Young [39] all emphasize the necessity of belief or alleged historicity.

Memorates: "Memorate," as proposed by Von Sydow, denotes "the narratives by people about their very own personal experiences [40]". Both the legend and the memorate are sub-types/[(sub-genres)] of belief; they differ in that the memorate is a "personal experience" based on common belief, while the legend is a group, or communal, experience based on what is believed to be historically true. Honko, in "Memorates and the Study of Folk Beliefs," emphasized the presence of a communal belief and the individual's perception of this belief as basic to the formation of the memorate: "Memorates are a valuable source for the study of folk religion primarily because they reveal those situations in which supernatural tradition was actualized and began directly to influence behavior [41]". When a memorate acquires relevance, that is ego-involvement, for a social group, it develops into a legend. According to Honko, "When an existing description of a supernatural experience spreads from one district to another, it becomes schematic ... Then it can be called belief legend [42]".

A memorate, then, cannot exist in a community where it is not believed or ego-involving. This does not rule out the possible existence of legendary material in areas where it is not ego-involving, but it means that the material survives through factors other than ego-involvement. Honko argued that "Many legends are preserved by means of their drastic fantasy motifs and their narrative value (their humor, and their exciting nature) [43]". Undoubtedly, structural and aesthetic qualities are also influential.

Proverbs: Folklorists and psychologists alike have noted that proverbs function as action-producing agents in society. Archer Taylor, for instance, states that a proverb "... ordinarily suggests a course of action or passes a judgment on a situation [44]". On the other hand, Greenway would confine the proverb's function to a psychological process that follows behavior, rather than instigates it. For Greenway, "... the proverb is used by all the peoples of the world (except perhaps the American Indian) as a rationalization for all kinds of behavior [45]". Rationalization is "the process of justifying by reasoning after the event, as, for example, an act after it has been performed; often a defense mechanism against self-accusation, or feeling of guilt [46]". Whether or not we agree with Greenway's definition of the proverb as a rationalizer of action [47], both his position and Taylor's presuppose that the proverb is ego-involving. In his consideration of "Myth and Legends," in *Social Psychology*, Kimball Young also stressed the ego-involving nature of the proverb, thus he writes:

It is but a step from myth, legend, and superstition to much of that homely wisdom we call proverb and folk philosophy. The observations of men on their own and others' conduct have produced a vast body of everyday concept and judgment into which apparently sound sense and much stereotype and fantasy enter. Proverbs are but cultural precipitates of concrete experiences of men in society ... [proverbs] are not consistent and ordered body of knowledge but are common sense though often contradictory distillation of prior experience. Moreover, they are often the result, from a logical point of view, of what we call 'reasoning from one case' only [48].

Proverbs and syllogism: A proverb loses its social function if it ceases to be ego-involving. Bert R. Sappenfield points out that "Though rationalization involves conscious 'understanding' or conscious 'explanation,' it should not be understood to involve a conscious attempt to give misleading explanations. Conscious attempts to give *misleading* explanations should be termed lying or hypocrisy rather than rationalization [49]". Applying a proverb to a situation (or "reasoning from one case," in K. Young's words) is an instance of *syllogistic logic*; the *major premise* is given by the culture and enforced by social norms, and the *minor premise* is provided by the person applying the proverb (major premise) and thus implying the conclusion. Since the major premise is given by social norms, applying a proverb either to rationalize or entice behavior, requires ego-involvement. Unless the value of the proverb is perceived in the proper social and cultural "frame of reference" by both the applier and the recipient, it will fail to perform its function.

The following are examples of proverb-responses produced by members of the Egyptian community in Brooklyn (1965):

Example 1: I was speaking to Ali--(a northern-Egyptian Moslem)--about Hal.'s--(a southern-Egyptian Christian)--talent as a narrator of folktales. Ali was unimpressed and said, "I don't know him that well." When I questioned him about his antipathy he replied, "*talâta ma-ti'manlihumsh: masîhi si`îdi, we-muslim dumyâtî, we-yahûdi maghrabî*" (Three shouldn't be trusted: a southern-Egyptian Christian, a Damittan [from Damitta, Egypt] Moslem, and a Moroccan Jew). This proverb revealed an ego-involving social value of Ali's group. The example can be explained according to syllogistic logic:

Major premise: All southern-Egyptian Christians are not to be trusted.

Minor premise: Hal. is a southern-Egyptian Christian.

Inference: Hal. should not be trusted.

Example 2: As I was talking to Mr. Ata (now a restaurant owner), I mentioned a certain woman and her daughters. Ata stated that her daughters were "no good." When I asked why, he said, "She (the mother) is a belly-dancer." I then asked: "What has that got to do with her daughters?" and he replied, "'*ikfi el-garra `ala fommahâ, titla` el-bint l-ommahâ*, (Upset a jar on its mouth, a girl turns out like her mother," i.e., nothing comes out of the jar except what is in it; they are two of a kind). [See *post*, page 190].

Major premise: Every object produces only its like (its content).

Minor premise: A daughter is a product of the mother--(she is like the mother).

Inference: This daughter is like her mother.

A proverbial simile such as the Arabic "As a camel" (i.e., patient and strong, [see *post*, page 170, n. 6]), or the European "As white as snow," cannot be understood except within its [physical], social and cultural frame of reference; a person who had never seen a camel or snow, would not understand the phrase, especially if the modifiers "strong" and "white" were omitted. Moreover, every proverb expresses a social value just as the low status of a woman entertainer (`âlma) in Ata's community as voiced by his observation about the character of her daughters. The proverb is part of a concept-system that illustrates one's own ego-involving norms, values, and beliefs, functioning as a "frame of reference" for his behavior.

Conclusion

The factor unifying these subclasses (genres) of folkloric behavior (beliefs, superstitions, myths, legends, memorates, and proverbs) is their common ego-involving belief, conviction, or value system. As already noted, retention and remembering [recall] can be a function of ego-involvement.

It follows that all folkloric responses involving the ego are, other things being equal, better retained than responses that are not so. This fact will be demonstrated in the forthcoming analyses of [the proceedings of the] fieldwork among members of the Egyptian community in Brooklyn, New York.

Declaration

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