
3-1-2011

The Experiment-based Knew-it-all-along Effect in the Qualitative Light of Narrativity

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Recommended APA Citation

Palasinski, M. (2011). The Experiment-based Knew-it-all-along Effect in the Qualitative Light of Narrativity. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(2), 441-463. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2011.1064>

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Abstract

In contrast to the extant quantitative studies on the hindsight effect, the present narrative analysis looks at it from a rare angle of talk-in-interaction. Fifty one-to-one interviews were done with five student groups, each of which was presented with a scenario ending with one factual outcome and three alternative outcomes that actually did not happen. Confirming the already proven role of the provided event outcome in overestimating the probability of its occurrence, this study expands the current understanding of the processes neglected by the research on the hindsight effect. It does so by highlighting the strategic use of vagueness, self-empowerment and selective perspective-taking that question the assessment of the past for its own sake and emphasize the importance of self-presentation.

Keywords

Decision Making, Hindsight Effect, and Qualitative Research

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Acknowledgements

I would like to warmly thank Professors Baruch Fischhoff, Howie Giles, Jonathan Baron, Ian Parker, Robin Cooper, Ron Chenail, as well as the reviewers for their useful comments on the earlier versions of this paper.

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In contrast to the extant quantitative studies on the hindsight effect, the present narrative analysis looks at it from a rare angle of talk-in-interaction. Fifty one-to-one interviews were done with five student groups, each of which was presented with a scenario ending with one factual outcome and three alternative outcomes that actually did not happen. Confirming the already proven role of the provided event outcome in overestimating the probability of its occurrence, this study expands the current understanding of the processes neglected by the research on the hindsight effect. It does so by highlighting the strategic use of vagueness, self-empowerment and selective perspective-taking that question the assessment of the past for its own sake and emphasize the importance of self-presentation. Key Words: Decision Making, Hindsight Effect, and Qualitative Research

The phenomenon whereby one overestimates the probability of a particular event after one has learnt about it has been explored quantitatively for over three decades since Baruch Fischhoff (1975) started looking into it. Known as the hindsight bias or knew-it-all-along effect, it was found in miscellaneous settings, including political, business, military and health-care spheres (Christensen-Szalanski & Willham, 1991). It appears that even deliberate attempts to suppress it could ironically magnify its occurrence (Sanna, Schwarz, & Stocker, 2002) and that the difference between the hindsight effect in specialists and laymen is rather small (Guilbault, Bryant, Brockway, & Posavac, 2004).

The current understanding of this effect assumes that consecutive events are linked up causally via processes of cognitive reconstruction. According to this approach, the information subjectively validating a particular ending is given prominence and the data inconsistent with it is marginalized (Harley, Carlsen, & Loftus, 2004; Hawkins & Hastie, 1990). This creates an illusion known as creeping determinism whereby a particular course of the past seems to have been inexorable, leading one to overestimate the likelihood of its occurrence (Hawkins & Hastie; Wasserman, Lempert, & Hestie, 1991). It also appears that the processes underlying creeping determinism are effortful and that causal reasoning plays a big part in the perception of past events (Nestler, Blank, & von Collani, 2008). Recently, it was even proposed that the hindsight effect is not a unitary phenomenon and comprises three partially independent components: memory distortions, impressions of foreseeability and impressions of necessity (Blank, Nestler, von Collani, & Fischer, 2008).

The overwhelming majority of research on the hindsight effect, using cognitive and motivational models (Blank, Musch, & Pohl, 2007)¹, has been done by exploring probability assessment as a practice of writing down particular percentage figures on paper questionnaires without allowing participants to speak freely and ignoring their verbal accounts. It was already found, however, that remembering and reasoning do not have to be based on any alleged factuality and may serve a number of different functions, like appealing to one's personal interests or undermining other people's competing accounts (Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 1992b). Thus, although people's descriptions of their hindsight judgments, their meanings and inferences might be determined indexically, they have not been explored linguistically in any detail.

Given the "war of the worlds" between quantitative and qualitative methodologies and the fundamentally different theoretical orientations they entail, it might be fair to ask which side I stand on. Finding merit in both of them, I strive to adopt various methods to different research problems. When investigating how historians and non-historians are susceptible to the hindsight effect (no major differences were found), me and my colleagues employed a quantitative method as it appeared to be most adequate to our objective (Dymkowski, Domin, Marszalek, & Palasinski, 2007). Having been originally trained mainly in quantitative methods and only later immersing myself in qualitative methods, I was keen to see if and how the hindsight bias might happen in talk, thus addressing at least a little bit of the striking absence of narrative research on this effect and setting my work apart from the "mainstream" studies. Running this project alongside my ongoing mixed methods PhD thesis on out-group helping, it was enlightening to come back to the subject of my quantitative master thesis, the hindsight effect, and analyze it from a qualitative angle.

I anticipated that exploring the hindsight effect by adopting a narrative approach might shed new light on at least some of the traditional research on it and put it in a somewhat different perspective without necessarily marginalizing its value. To put it more precisely, as the hindsight effect is subject to variations, depending on the used materials, types of feedback and methods of assessment (Rudiger, 2007), there are grounds to suspect that spoken language might affect it in a way that is unfairly ignored. One should bear in mind, though, that people's cognitive processes may not be in direct correspondence with what they say (Ericsson & Simon, 1984). Thus, the preference for overestimating the probability of a specific outcome after it has happened might prompt individuals to engage in activities that are not aimed at the assessment of the past for its own sake. Rather than viewing cognitive distortions only as something that people have, they can be also understood as purposeful narrative organizations that serve specific functions in a social context, like mitigating sex offenders' responsibility for their abuse (Auburn & Lea, 2003). However, the question of whether such functionality would still be evident in a less mundane context, which somewhat resembles the classical quantitative research on the hindsight effect and thus stays in dialogue with that research, was open.

Although people tend to make assessments using descriptive categories (e.g., very unlikely) rather than numerical terms (Chard, 1991), a narrative account of past

¹ Given the spatial limits of this paper, the more inquisitive reader is referred to the Special Issue on the Hindsight Bias (2007) in *Social Cognition*, 25(1).

evaluation from this angle has been ignored. Such ignoring appears to be unjustified as qualitative methods hold the potential of providing extra insight that otherwise might be out of reach (Seale, Gobo, Gubrium, & Silverman, 2004), like shedding light on distinct discursive characteristics. As quantitative studies of the hindsight effect suggest that the influence of motivational and emotional factors is generally marginal (Guilbaut et al., 2004; Winman, 1999), such marginality has not been explored from a narrative angle and this requires clarification. The problem with quantitative research is that in order to create a world of variables that can be manipulated, concepts have to be fixed. Hence quantitative methods are not the best at looking at the flexibility and context of categorization. In contrast, narrative research has shown how categories can be used in different ways at different times (Meinhof & Galasinski, 2005). This is particularly the case in domains that can be said to be dilemmatic or involve uncertainty (Condor & Gibson, 2007).

The recognition of such possible benefit, like a chance for examining the formation of judgments, was made recently in a quantitative exploration of the hindsight effect (Villejoubert, O’Keeffe, Alison, & Cole, 2006). As O’Doherty (2006) notes, a qualitative approach to likelihood assessment has the potential to reveal linguistic functions of probability estimates, giving insight into task construal processes in real time decision making (Fischhoff, Welch, & Frederick, 1999). Since interviews can be occasions for self-presentation to be managed discursively (Lee & Roth, 2004), adopting a narrative approach might also help develop a model of motivated sense-making (Pezzo & Pezzo, 2007). This model suggests that in hindsight people put a premium on managing their image, not on looking for the most reasonable event causes, unless the internal causes seem irrefutable. The clarification of how such management can be achieved is another objective of this research that was designed to map out emergent hindsight themes and their functionality in a context that was used in the early research on this effect – a historical scenario.

Method

Materials

Drawing back on a classical theme of history used in the original study by Fischhoff (1975), I used a factual story of the Great Northern War, presenting it in a way that would make the victory on either side look equally plausible, so that the scales of balance would not tip in any favor². Although choosing a theme pertaining to people’s ordinary concerns would be more relevant to normal and usual situations, it might also create a greater risk of appealing directly to various personal experiences, potentially influencing the preference for one ending. At the same time, I accept that the use of that particular story does not eliminate that risk entirely and acknowledge that in this way the insight into the contents of how people may talk about probability in their everyday lives may be somewhat limited. The research on spoken language (McCarthy, 1998; Harnqvist,

² The analysis of the narratives produced by the interviewees in the 0 Group confirms that this condition was met.

Christianson, Ridings, & Tingsell, 2003; Huang, Acero, & Hon, 2001), however, suggests that the forms of their narratives would not have to be very different.

To minimize the possibility that my interviewees would favour one particular outcome of the presented scenario over others, I strove to make it look little relevant to their British national identity. Since Britishness has been found to be little connected to Europeaness (Abell, Condor, & Stevenson, 2006; Fox, 2005), this lends support for using a scenario set in mainland Europe. I anticipated that it would be unlikely if 50 female British University non-psychology and non-history students were familiar with the Northern War that was waged in the early 18th century. Just in case, however, I asked them all if they knew anything about it and none of them even admitted to hearing about it.

Interviewees

Recognizing that psychology is sometimes criticized for using psychology students as participants, I focus on non-psychology interviewees. The inclusion of women is justified by the fact that most research on the hindsight effect is largely based on responses given by young females (Christensen-Szalanski & Willham, 1991; Shwarz & Stahlberg, 2003). Confined by the limits of this paper, I did not want to run the risk of compromising the analysis of any possible gender differences. I acknowledge, though, that such potential differences might be important and may deserve separate and more exclusive exploration elsewhere.

Data Collection Procedure

In a process approved by the Lancaster University Institutional Review Board, I informally approached individual students on a university campus, introduced myself as doing research on how people assess the past and asked them if they could take part in a 10-minute task of historical evaluation. Upon consent, I asked the students to read the presented scenario (Appendix A) and asked for permission to have their answers voice-recorded. I also advised them to take their time and mention anything that might come to their minds only when they were ready to speak. I emphasized the entirely voluntary and anonymous character of the study and advised them that if they felt uncomfortable at any point, they could terminate it.

Similarly to the original 1975 questionnaire study by Fischhoff, in this research there were five nominal groups, whose individual members were presented with different story endings. Apart from the 0 Group, which was provided with no specific ending, all the other groups were advised that the given historical scenario ended with respectively: Swedish victory, military stalemate and military stalemate without any peace agreement. Only one of the five ten-people groups was provided with the real ending of the conflict – Russian victory.

After reading the historical scenario, they could familiarize themselves with the following projective questions that were meant to minimize potential impression management processes:

1. Which of the four endings would most students judge as the most likely and why? What would they take into account?
2. Which of the four endings would most students judge as the least likely and why? What would they take into account?

All the six to ten minute interviews were conducted one to one with the given groups intact. Each person in each nominal group was interviewed separately from the other group members, so that, like in most research on the hindsight effect, they could not communicate with one another. I did not interrupt my interviewees, did not make any comments and did not engage in any discussion during the voice-recorded interaction. Being an active listener, my role was limited to repeating any of the above questions that they did not answer and to encouraging them to justify their responses, unless such justification was spontaneous. I then thanked, debriefed and informed interviewees of the real historical ending.

Data Analysis

To start with, it seemed worthwhile examining the spoken responses in terms of how frequently particular endings were selected. It is indispensable, however, to mention that what was counted as answers in my study, were only the first responses that interviewees gave. Thus, any later changes in their answers were not taken into account here as questionnaires used in the research on the hindsight effect do not allow participants to modify their first answers. This imposes rigid theoretical constraints and limits the possibility of self-expression, which might be minimized if a narrative approach is adopted.

Given that in the hindsight research tradition the focus has been mainly on how participants respond to the given questionnaire, I took into consideration a narrative approach where my role would also be rather passive. Aiming to focus primarily on the verbalized responses to a questionnaire-resembling prompt, rather than on the interaction with me or on the conversational flow, I chose the method of textual thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It must be mentioned that unlike discourse analysis, for instance, this method can be more prone to less accurate functional linguistic interpretation of talk. This, in turn, poses a risk of overlooking contextual consistencies and informative paradoxes across independent accounts (Seale et al., 2004). However, as discourse analysis also deals with the conversational interaction between people, it could be seen as less relevant to this research, where I did not get involved in discussing the research material. Considering the possibility of subjecting the individual narrative responses to consistent intra and intergroup comparisons, the thematic analysis is good at mapping out homogeneous and contrasting strands across the whole data set. Its flexibility also offers a whole spectrum of analytic pathways to choose from (Braun & Clarke).

The transcription of the produced narratives was based on the standards suggested by Jefferson (1987)³. Relying on quoting no more than one chosen account by individual

³ (.) denotes a pause < one second; (2) denotes a timed pause in seconds; italicised text represents emphasis; “hhh” represents an audible intake of breath; equals sign between turns “=” represent no discernible gap

interviewees, only those excerpts were selected that reflect the main strands of the whole without going over the same elements or editing them. By the same token, the structure of this paper was meant to be kept both dynamic and bereft of repetitious fragments. Such selection, however, was not arbitrary as it was based on the requirement that any germane narrative properties would be represented consistently in similar cases. This was confirmed by two independent raters, 3rd year undergraduate psychology students, who also helped to calculate the frequency of each theme by scanning the whole transcript for coherent clusters of individual references making up the discerned themes. The clusters were subsequently cross-compared, so that their sizes could be juxtaposed against one another and their combined whole.

Prior to examining the interviews from the angle of textual thematic analysis, I had to break up each entire transcript into coherent numbered units that were defined by change of subject. I then inspected them for consistent informational threads that could be woven together into themes, whose identification might help to capture some of the essential processes involved in “doing” hindsight. The number of such discerned themes was then brought down to fewer and progressively more succinct themes that were systematically checked back with the transcript and cross-examined between and within the interviews. To identify their reliability levels, the two raters were given access to the themes to numerically code 90 items chosen from the interviews and comprising 30% of all units (N=300). It is important to clarify the term *agreement* defined by allocating one item to the same thematic category. Such agreement was found in coding on 89.8% of the items between the researcher and Rater 1, on 92.3% of the items between the researcher and Rater 2, and on 82.2% of the items between Rater 1 and Rater 2.

I did not want my exploration, however, to be limited just to theme identification. I was also interested in the thematic contents and in how both direct and indirect references comprising the discerned themes might create new possible meanings and what functional implications for impression management might stem from them. Therefore, during the theme identification, I made efforts to analyze their strategic functions, (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000), so that the hindsight effect might be examined from the angle of what people do rather than what happens to them (Antaki, 2006; Auburn & Lea, 2003).

The calls for mixed research methods (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007; Symon, Cassell, & Dickson, 2001) lend further support for the employed methodology, although I acknowledge that using it might contrast some epistemological positions that may not necessarily appear to be in perfect tune with one another. However, “squabbles on the margins” (Levinson, 2006, p.85) might be less important here in light of the evidence that diverse approaches can be more illuminating than the more monolithic ones, especially as they can reveal the contradictory and intertwined subtleties of life experiences (Brannen, 2008; Jackson, 2005; Mertens, 2004). Adopting one single theory of language might indeed appear to be more methodically consistent, but doing so may potentially limit the breadth of the overall analysis without necessarily increasing its depth. Blank et al. (2007) caution that no single theory can explain the hindsight effect as most likely multiple processes are involved. While appreciating the value of elegantly packaged theoretical accounts, Mason (2006) also argues that multi-dimensional research can help us “think outside the box”, revealing

more intersecting dimensions of social experience and enhancing the logic of qualitative explanations.

Data Interpretation

The produced narrative responses show the clear presence of the hindsight effect in three out of four groups (Appendix B), which is overall consistent with the existing and growing literature on this effect (Fischhoff, 1975; Hawkins & Hastie, 1990; Wasserman et al., 1991). They also suggest that the effect does not only show up in traditional “pen and paper” research, but can be also evident in talk. The likely reason for such results could be the presentation of the historical story in a way that would not strongly suggest any of the provided endings.

The plausibility of this explanation is increased if one considers the most diverse narrative responses made by the 0 Group interviewees during the assessment of the most likely ending. Here four people chose *Swedish victory*, three people selected *Russian victory*, two people went for *military stalemate*, and one person chose *military stalemate without any peace agreement*.

This confirms that in general the presented scenario does not swing the odds in favor of one particular ending. This is also illustrated by the following narratives⁴:

- 1.1.Sweden became the largest military power (2) but they lost the food supplies (2)
- 1.2.But then the Russian hhh on the other hand (.) they came sort of good as well (.)
- 1.3.*So it's like spread even.*
- 2.1 But there is *nothing that swings in favor* (2) that either won
- 3.1.Because it seems to give quite an even account of both sides (2) people would
- 3.2.Think they were *quite evenly matched*.

It must be mentioned, though, that when the ending categories are collapsed into “victory (7 people)” and “stalemate (3 people)”, it becomes clear that even in the 0 Group there was a strong selection preference. It is suspected that the stalemate was probably interpreted here as a less complete ending, hence becoming a seemingly less definite conclusion than either’s side triumph. Although most interviewees chose other endings than *military stalemate* or *military stalemate without any peace agreement*, their narratives still give away their inclination to describe the situation as more well-balanced rather than one-sided. This is evident in their use of disclaimer “but” (1.2, 2.1) that might also serve as a strategic rhetorical device. Despite this telltale “but”, which may well reflect their hesitation or caution, as opposed to all the other four groups, the 0 Group interviewees were not changing their answers much. A possible reason for that could be the paucity of any definite ending that the other groups were provided with. In other words, once the 0 Group interviewees made up their minds and selected particular

⁴ The first digit symbolizes consecutive interviewees; the second represents their individual accounts.

endings as the most plausible, they did not have to deal with any additional interfering factors, like the concluding passage.

Emerging Narrative Themes

Theme 1: The construed agentic role of the provided ending. Selective focusing on the units of information corroborating the particular given ending was not uncommon in any of the four groups (1.1.1, 1.2.3, 1.3.1)⁵, tying in with the foreseeability impression component of the 3 subphenomenon hindsight effect model (Blank et al., 2008). Neither was ignoring other information that could suggest a different outcome from the one that was provided. As meaning-creating selectivity allows for the self-flattering belief in control and prediction, it is noteworthy that although the final provided ending was often described as counterintuitive (1.2.1, 1.3.1), its role was still presented as profound anyway (1.2.3). Using that provided ending might give away informational conformity (the need to be right) or little engagement in the analysis of the story. Its prominence and availability could also have made choosing an alternative ending a socially risky and potentially embarrassing act despite the interviews being anonymous:

- 1.1.1. Because that's already in the passage (2) *it seems to flow*
- 1.2.1. I feel *it was quite persuasive* though in almost making me choose Swedish
- 1.2.2. victory (.) so (2) just because of all that saying about Sweden and its leader (2)
- 1.2.3. but just *the final bit* about the Russians made me change my mind
- 1.3.1. I don't particularly agree with it (sigh) *but it feels* like a natural ending

Unlike the responses obtained in the mainstream cannon of research on the hindsight effect, the narrative accounts seem to pertain to emotion rather than to cognition. In contrast to questionnaire studies, they allow for greater insight into how people can construe such a cognitive-emotional dilemma, sometimes verbally contrasting their feelings with what they might actually think otherwise (1.3.1). Although the reliance on the provided ending might be also interpreted as a form of availability heuristic⁶, whose importance in the hindsight effect has already been recognized quantitatively (Fischhoff, 1977; Fischhoff et al., 1999), how it can be expressed in hindsight talk to what end (1.1.1, 1.2.1) seems to be neglected in the research on this effect.

Disclaimers like, "I don't particularly agree with it" (1.3.1) present the interviewee as an independent thinker and might serve the role of face-saving, should her answer be incorrect, whereas the audible sigh gives away the problematic nature of the pending decision. In other words, the potential inference that she is not able to draw any

⁵ The first digit refers to the given theme, the second symbolizes consecutive interviewees within one theme, and the third represents their individual accounts.

⁶ A mental shortcut whereby people use a value as a reference point and then adjust insufficiently from this anchor.

conclusion herself is undermined or counteracted. Rather than simply confirming the provided ending as being the most likely, interviewees set up the conditions for plausible deniability. In other words, they indirectly deny the potentially attributable motive of taking the easiest way and cutting corners to confirm the seemingly obvious provided ending. They achieve this by using emotionally-charged categories “I feel” (1.2.1) or “It feels” (1.3.1), which can get them somewhat exempted from the responsibility for their judgments, constructing the actual final wording of the story as almost making those judgments for them. Edwards (1997) proposes that when exploring how different versions of events and their functionality are constructed, one should consider a whole range of employed linguistic and rhetorical devices, including how people adopt their positions to what is said.

This implies that the emotional categories might be considered here as argumentative resources that can safely reposition interviewees as only semi-active in their decision making, which appears to be heavily affected by the constructed agentic role of the provided ending. The construction of that role, however, is very subtle. Although its importance is stated unequivocally, it is always framed in a way that creates the impression of tying in with the whole of the story. It also provides a defensible inference allowing the interviewee to claim that choosing the provided ending is not coincidental, but appears to be a logical and natural conclusion. Reliability raters 1 and 2 were in 86% and 90% agreement with the researcher on this theme; the references comprising this theme represent 38% of all the four identified thematic references in the whole transcript.

Theme 2: The creation of vague and changeable answers in hindsight. As participants in the research on the hindsight effect are usually given no option of amending their answers, unless they cross them out and write down new figures, their opportunities for self-expression are clearly limited. In light of the below narratives, such practice turns out to ignore the verbal fuzziness of active probability assessment making. Far from appearing homogenous and firm, as quantitative literature on the hindsight effect suggests, the narrative post factum past evaluation appears to be diverse and not infrequently hesitant, which somewhat corresponds to the memory distortion component of the 3 subphenomenon model (Blank et al., 2008).

It is also noteworthy that in contrast to the 0 Group, interviewees provided with a specific ending of the given scenario were using more vague discourse, which questions the assumption that having access to the event outcome must lead to rather confident and definite judgments as it is suggested by the mainstream research on this effect (Blank et al., 2007). It seems that enacting the hindsight effect entails the use of language that appears to be more equivocal. One of the main challenges here was to capture, describe, and thus to better comprehend such hindsight fuzziness:

- 2.1.1. Actually I might be wrong now (.) the Swedes had bad food supplies (.) I might
- 2.1.2. change my answer to the first question actually (.) cos the Russians seemed
- 2.1.3. like they had a better (2) maybe the Swedish won the first couple of (.) *I dunno*

- 2.2.1. *I don't know* (sigh) because the Russians (.) it says they were highly motivated
- 2.2.2. so it could possibly be a military stalemate as well

These above narratives illustrate how complex on-the-spot probability assessment making can be and how the chosen individual pieces of information are strung together into various meaning-making patterns. Such undecidability also represents a flow of active real-time engagement and shows an array of potentially face-saving hedging devices, like “I might be wrong now” (2.1.1), “maybe” (2.1.3) or “I don't know” (2.2.1). These devices can license a potential inaccuracy and help maintain control over the interaction by changing the focus of the asked question. In other words, the open admission of possibly making a mistake, being ignorant or simply guessing serves the role of a safety net. It offers some level of protection against running both informational and social risk of being wrong, appearing incompetent or even foolish. Perhaps more importantly, the emerging responses are almost always justified and the chosen arguments might also act as inoculation against impugning them.

Such “I dunno” (2.1.3, 2.2.1) formulations do not have to be treated as simple markers of uncertainty or limited knowledge as they might be treated as argumentative resources performing work in talk-in-interaction. Thus, they might give away lack of interest in the given scenario or even imply that its details do not deserve paying attention to. It is worth considering such formulations as ways of distancing speakers from having to make sensitive decisions that might potentially lead to pejorative judgments about them (Edwards, 1995; Wooffitt, 2005). Such processes have not been explored in-depth in the questionnaire research on the hindsight effect. When looked into as a whole, the individual accounts might even seem contradictory, yet their logical continuity is clearly held up and puts interviewees in a position enabling them to safely adopt various consecutive and sometimes mutually-exclusive views:

- 2.3.1. It easily could've been stalemate (2) or stalemate without peace agreement (2)
- 2.3.2. *they're quite likely* hhh but obviously it could've been Swedish (.) but it says in
- 2.3.3. bold at the end it's Russian

The quoted example illustrates that the unfixed and indefinite responses obtained in a hindsight effect task (2.3.1, 2.3.2) can represent a very dynamic practice in talk that might help to clarify more fully what it is people do when they are engaged in probability assessment. The possible reasons for such elusiveness and changeability of the produced judgments could pertain to impression management processes as under uncertainty it much safer to give ambiguous answers (Galasinski, 2003; Shuy, 1998). This explanation would appear plausible all the more as one could get away with such equivocation and yet still provide an explanation that cannot be logically incorrect (2.3.1). It is noteworthy that the produced response (2.3.1) only appears to answer the original question about the most likely ending, but it actually does not and instead it relies on “covert evasion” (Galasinski, p.60). In other words, the character of that response being weak in commitment and lacking informativeness indirectly distances its author from her non-

specific answer that might be created so as to persuade the interviewer to accept it as specific enough. Reliability raters 1 and 2 were in 80% and 82% agreement with the researcher on this theme; the references comprising this theme represent 21% of all the identified thematic references in the whole transcript.

Theme 3: The focus on hindsight self-empowerment. The presentation of oneself as an independent thinker was consistent in all the groups, albeit to a lesser degree in the 0 Group. Thus, in the four groups the produced narratives contain safe, yet non-specific answers, many of which highlight the very interactive nature of the task. This indicates that people can play an active and strategic role in endowing the given task with a new interpretation, which apparently cannot be entirely isolated from its social context. The explicit mention that the researcher had some expectations (3.1.1) appears to be in tune with the necessity impression component of the 3 subphenomenon model (Blank et al., 2008). Here it underscores that the probability assessor does not have to be a passive respondent confined strictly by the assigned particular task, suggesting that the interactive contact with the researcher should not be underestimated in hindsight research:

3.1.1. *I don't really know (sigh) what I am meant to say*

One possible explanation of this “hedge-your-bets” strategy might be self-presentational avoidance of committing oneself to one specific and potentially risky answer. Another explanation could also pertain to the depth of one’s individual analysis, depending on the spent time and paid attention, which is illustrated by the following quotes:

3.2.1. But if I were to go through it again (.) *maybe* (2) and pick up various areas of strength for each country

3.3.1. And they've got more (2) more forces (.) oh no! *Russians got more forces* (.)

3.3.2. I don't know (2) but I suppose it's difficult to really distinguish

3.4.1. Well (2) I'd take my knowledge into account (2) *I don't really have any* (laugh)

These narratives show that people can present themselves as being well aware of the influence time and attention can have on their own likelihood evaluation judgments (3.2.1, 3.3.1). It is also apparent that they do not have to present themselves as shy about their ignorance or coy about struggling to reach some conclusion (3.3.2, 3.4.1). On the contrary, they can effectively ward off such potential criticism by redefining the social context in terms of an entertaining game rather than some serious likelihood assessment task. The produced exclamation (3.3.1) and laugh (3.4.1), for instance, minimize such seriousness, giving it a character of fun that hence might be trivialized and challenging the experimental assumption that participants usually approach the given hindsight task as seriously as the researcher would like them to.

Effort to present oneself as reasonable was manifest as well, turning the rhetorical tables on the researcher by letting him know that the four provided endings to choose from are not good enough to allow for self-expression:

3.5.1. What would *make a logical sense* (2) I think would be the answer

The active verb “think” emphasizes the interviewee’s independent role, thus indirectly questioning the constructed restrictive character of the prompt. Apparently, people can actively protest against being given just a limited number of available options without any room for flexibility and subtlety:

3.6.1. And I don’t know (2) *you can’t necessarily categorize* whether or not they had

3.6.2. peace agreement (2) *cos hhh it is just too complex to say yes or no*

This again turns the rhetorical tables on the researcher and actually questions his practice, subtly transforming the interactional landscape. The pronoun “you” (3.6.1) reduces the social distance between him and the interviewee, redefining him like an equal, not any authority figure to be simply listened to or obeyed. It adds facticity to the generalizable nature of the produced account, empowering the interviewee with a sense of agency and control over the given hindsight task. The unambiguous evaluation of the available ending options as being too crude and rigid (3.6.2) puts them under a question mark, almost implying that the researcher should actually learn how to do research from the interviewee, thus changing the balance of power and competence. Reliability raters 1 and 2 were in 75% and 84% agreement with the researcher on this theme; the references comprising this theme represent 29% of all the identified thematic references in the whole transcript.

Theme 4: The engagement in selective perspective-taking in hindsight. As opposed to traditional research on the hindsight effect, the narrative approach also seems to allow for greater understanding of how the probability assessor can tendentiously adopt the position of others. It turns out that the given task could be approached as a full interactive role-play that did not have to be simply limited to the provided information. Apparently, interviewees could go beyond its confines and spontaneously engage in meaningful inferences about the presented characters’ motives. Applying ad hoc, ready-made theories of the human mind to explain the provided scenario ending was clear too (4.1.1):

4.1.1. So stalemate *wouldn’t really be an issue* for those fighting for something

4.1.2. (2) for something they consider their motherland

A form of the narrative organization “I was just doing X...when Y”, which was already identified in an analysis of paranormal experiences (Wooffitt, 2005), can be discerned in lines 4.1.1 and 4.1.2. Here, however, it takes shape of “No Y...when they are just doing X”. Wooffitt argues that this kind of organization constructs a specific

version of reality, entailing a set of implications about the speaker's stake by increasing the credibility of the described events. Here the used script formulation about the fight for the motherland performs functions that are not just relevant to the speaker. Whereas Auburn and Lea (2003) show how this narrative device assigns motive and responsibility to other individuals, in my study it is apparent that a similar process can apply to group-level characters that do not even have to exist or be familiar.

In contrast, the narratives in the 0 Group do not indicate that interviewees got engaged in that kind of sophistication to justify their answers. This implies that having access to the event outcome and assessing its likelihood of occurrence might facilitate the tendentious adoption of others' perspectives as long as they tie in with the given event outcome. Although this process dovetails with the hindsight literature on sense-making (Pezzo & Pezzo, 2007), causal attribution (Ash, 2009; Wasserman et al., 1991) and the memory distortion component of the 3 subphenomenon model (Blank et al., 2008), the classical hindsight effect questionnaire does not capture the dynamics of such perspective adoption. Its verbalization might be considered as an argumentative resource, making the produced response seem to be more justified and persuasive. A script formulation of other people making a similar probability evaluation was mentioned as well, so that the selection of a less complicated outcome was justified by the assumed human intolerance of uncertainty:

- 4.2.1. Because people quite *like to have a conclusion* (.) with something
(2) if they're
- 4.2.2. trying to find an answer to that hhh they would be disinclined to go
with D

Revealingly, the generalizability of the reached inferences transcended the characters featuring in the presented scenario. All this belies the image of respondents as passive participants who would be unlikely to engage in the role of an amateur psychologist. Although most quantitative studies on the hindsight effect recognize the representativeness heuristic⁷ (Winman, 1999), they do not show how it can be actively used by respondents evaluating past events. The present study demonstrates that it could be the popular non-historical image that is used to evaluate the past and justify the given answers. The fact that such image could have been different at the time of the described situation was ignored. Instead, availability and vividness of events or states, like the Soviet Victory over the Nazis, were employed as good enough reference points to bolster the argument for choosing the given ending that happened over three hundred years ago (4.3.1, 4.3.2):

- 4.3.1. They keep on going until they get what they want (2) it's that
Russians don't
- 4.3.2. (2) that *Russians don't back down easily*

⁷ A mental shortcut whereby people classify things and people according to how similar they are to a typical case.

If history was referred to, it was always European history. This could be the result of both anchoring the presented story in the Old World and the most accessible historical knowledge, highlighting the importance of familiarity with the cultural themes, which is predominantly ignored by the mainstream experimental work on the hindsight effect. This implies that probably different kinds of representations would be used if the scenario setting was more exotic, thus leading to different discourse. As opposed to the questionnaire methods used in the research on the hindsight effect, the adopted mixed methods approach allows for some insight into the influence of peripheral associations, like those engendered by the media (4.4.1), on the evaluation of the past:

- 4.4.1. You know (2) cos sometimes (.) you know that film 300 that came out (2) it's
- 4.4.2. *quite similar to that* (.) it's like a small army against a larger army

It is worth bearing in mind that the interviews were done in April 2007 - before the mediatised Russian resumption of the Soviet-era long-distance flights of strategic bombers in August 2007, and well before the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008. One can suspect that if similar interviews using the same scenario were done later, these highly publicized events would be likely to lead to more voices favoring the Russian victory. This ties in with the existing literature suggesting that the media can bear heavily on discourse (Fitzgerald, 1991; Garrett & Bell, 1998), behavior and judgments (Giles, 2003), which might affect the perception of others' position. On the one hand, the present example might again be seen by cognitivists as a form of availability heuristic whose role in the process creeping determinism has already been recognized. On the other hand, however, in contrast to classical questionnaire approaches, the contribution it brings implies that such informational availability does not have to be embedded in the presented text of the given hindsight task.

It seems that its influence is much more extensive and can involve mere subjective associations with the presented scenario, which might somewhat question the concept of experimental objectivity that is strived for in the laboratory. Rather than looking at the recall of the ancient battle (4.4.1) in cognitive terms, one should consider its interactional role (Edwards, 1997) in justifying the produced answer and increasing its credibility. What deserves attention here is the rhetorical way the American movie blockbuster about the ancient Greek battle was used to favor the odds of smaller military forces. Inoculating expressions of time, like "sometimes" or "quite similar" (4.4.1, 4.4.2), might serve the purpose of making it more difficult to cast doubt over the sensibility of the given judgment (Galasinski, 2003). This again hints at the importance of impression management and highlights the role of the often-ignored social context in probability assessment tasks. Reliability raters 1 and 2 were in 78% and 83% agreement with the researcher on this theme; the references comprising this theme represent 12% of all the identified thematic references in the whole transcript.

Conclusions

The objective of this research was to explore how the experience of hindsight past evaluation can be expressed in talk without the usual experimental “pen and paper” constraints. The explanations produced by interviewees give away their active engagement in the search for meaning and order, the needs that have also been identified as fundamental to making sense of existence (Baumeister, 1992). It is also probable that such narrative strategies help keep their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) in predicting events high, bolstering their illusory control over chance-determined events (Crocker, 1982). They support the existing literature that judgments are much influenced by initial expectations and self-serving interpretations (Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Tversky & Kahneman, 2002). Most of them also back up the creeping determinism hypothesis (Hawkins & Hastie, 1990; Wasserman et al., 1991).

As Wooffitt (2005) argues that identity ascriptions are fluid, variable and occasioned, my contribution demonstrates that the produced verbal assessments of the past in hindsight are of a similar character, which is in contrast with questionnaire studies suggesting that the availability of the given outcome leads to a rather definite and confident judgement. My paper also shows that in evaluating the past people can get engaged in activities that have little to do with any accurate analysis of what happened. It adds to the growing literature on fact construction and memory (Edwards & Potter, 1992a; Lynch, 2006; Middleton & Edwards, 1990), pointing out that such construction can be a functional tool to get across personal meanings that seem to be more relevant to their creators than to more impartial analysts of history.

Auburn and Lea (2003) show how speakers use strategic narrative organizations to assign motive, responsibility and morality to individual characters. My analysis brings to light how plastic and dynamic such assignment can be with regards to groups, which also depends on the given context (scenario ending). Whereas Auburn and Lea illustrate how created descriptions in doing cognitive distortions are oriented to counteracting or pre-empting alternative version of events, my research finds that speakers can easily engage in doing the reverse. “Hedging one’s bets” by voicing such alternative versions can be clearly in their interest, for instance, to appear thoughtful or to safely ward off the potential criticism that one definite answer might provoke. This ties in with the so called creation of chronology in reverse (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 170):

Looking back from the conclusion to the episodes leading up to it, we have to be able to say that this ending required these sorts of events and this chain of actions.

Although interviewees presented with the specific endings tended to focus on the tendentious causal linking of particular events, their narratives also clearly point out the importance of other processes. They include the production of equivocal answers, self-empowerment and selective perspective-taking, all of which were shown to serve multiple purposes in the immediate social context at hand. Such staying on the “safe side” by giving non-committal answers minimizes the risk of making an error and pre-empts the potential embarrassment it might cause. McLure (2003, p. 171) aptly notes that:

...subjects sometimes act up, make self-conscious jokes, contradict themselves, adopt different masks (without necessarily knowing that they are masks; or that there are only masks), forge their own signatures, and deflect researchers' agendas. And that this is an entirely unexceptional (but not at all uninteresting) part of any person's repertoire of interactional strategies and, indeed, ways of "Being".

It seems that active elaboration of the produced narratives, their recasting or cautionary modification should not be ignored. Such potentially embarrassment-reducing use of equivocation (Bello & Edwards, 2005) in post factum probability assessment appears to be far from negligible. It shows that depending on the empirical method, the given responses in hindsight can be dynamic and sometimes even vague rather than definite and static, like questionnaires find them, lending further support to the value of mixed methods research.

Redefining the whole research situation by putting emphasis on one's active role shows that people can skilfully reposition themselves as meaning-creating beings that are not willing to be held back by the confines of the given hindsight task and its implicitly imposed rules, which is in contrast to questionnaire-based answers. This lends support to the hypothesis that impression management may indeed underlie avoiding personal responsibility in hindsight, extending the model of motivated sense-making (Pezzo & Pezzo, 2007). It seems that impression management in hindsight does not have to pertain to appearing knowledgeable or competent. The presentation of one's ignorance or disinterest (*dunnos*) can be equally important, just like the strategy of equivocation, wit or turning the rhetorical tables on the researcher through self-empowerment and reformulation of the given situation.

It appears that the likelihood assessor can be far from a passive subject who cannot go beyond the space-time imposed by the researcher. It appears that the assessor can spontaneously become an active reality co-creator, giving a completely new meaning to the probability evaluation task, even if the research setting is not entirely natural. Therefore, it is arguable that all this should be kept in mind when interpreting the classical questionnaire-based research on the hindsight effect, which apparently should not be treated as done with neutral tools in a vacuum of social context.

It also turns out that at least in the probability assessment of a historical scenario, people may well be able to defy its featuring time scale. Not only can they consider later events, but they can also move back and consider much earlier happenings or even try to generate laws of history. It looks that the narrative fallacy (Taleb, 2007), the tendency to create stories around selected available facts, can play a notable role in doing the hindsight effect. Such sense of self-empowerment is also evident in the selective verbalization of others' perspectives, which emphasizes again the creative role that people can spontaneously adopt in making meanings and transcending the conceptual limits of the given hindsight task.

Highlighting the findings that would otherwise have not come out if the classical approach to the hindsight bias had been adopted alone and analysing them in dialogue with the data obtained in traditional ways has clear implications for promoting mixed methods research in general. It might potentially inspire new directions in combining

methods (Morgan, 2007) or perhaps influence some single methods practitioners to grow more open-minded to such practice or at least become less hostile to it as it is still all too often met with barriers of disapproval and prejudice (Bryman, 2007). Alas, such barriers still hold out, slowing down and sometimes holding up research progress, which is evident for example in the spectacular and unfair absence of mixed methods research on the hindsight effect, although it has already been explored for over three decades.

A few words of caution about the limitations of my study are due too. The particular nature of the interaction, together with the place and specificity of the given task should caution against automatic generalizability of the drawn conclusions to non-historical, geographically closer and more personally relevant probability assessment situations. As with most research, so should the potential bias stemming from my own preconceptions and the used prompt. Thus, the present study does not represent a comprehensive list of all emergent themes and self-presentational strategies that can come up in doing hindsight. Neither do I argue that similar themes and contents would not be necessarily found in other thinking-requiring tasks. Avoiding staking claims to any grand narratives and universal truths about evaluating the past in hindsight, all my contribution offers is a context-dependent polyphony of voices, which according to Lincoln and Guba (2000) is all we can really aim at.

I would also like to mention that the qualitative-quantitative divide may not always be clear and that rather than joining different data and methods it might be better to think in terms of meshing or linking them in a mutually illuminating way (Mason, 2006), which is more likely to be productive (Bazeley, 2009). Future challenges might further address this issue by focusing on the “knew-it-all-along” effect in other types of scenarios and contexts, for instance in tasks closer to people’s interests or expertise. Comparative gender analyses would not be just a cliché as little is known how women’s talk in hindsight would differ from men’s in vagueness, functionality or form of employed explanatory strategies.

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Appendix A

The Great Northern War was fought between Sweden and other northern European powers. At stake was control of the Baltic Sea and the lands around it. In 1700, Sweden was attacked by Denmark, Saxony, Poland and Russia. Sweden's Charles XII was only 18 and his enemies hoped to take advantage of his inexperience. But Charles proved to be a skillful leader. He won the battle at Narva in Estonia, which enabled Sweden to force Saxony, Poland and Denmark out of the war and put a new king on the Polish throne. Sweden became the largest military power in Northern Europe and eight years later Charles invaded Ukraine. The bitter winter of 1708-09 was crippling the Swedish food supplies and highly motivated Russians adopted the technique of scorched earth. The final outcome of the war was decided by the battle of Poltava where more experienced Swedish military fought a more numerous Russian forces protecting their motherland (0 Group - uninformed of the conclusion), which ended with

Swedish victory (1st Group)

Russian victory (2nd Group)

Military stalemate (3rd Group)

Military stalemate without any peace agreement (4th Group)

A) Swedish victory
B) Russian victory
C) Military stalemate
D) Military stalemate without peace agreement

Appendix B*Table 1.* Frequency Figures for the Most Likely Endings

	First Group	Second Group	Third Group	Fourth Group
Swedish Victory	7	3	2	4
Russian Victory	3	6	2	2
Military Stalemate	0	1	6	1
Military Stalemate without Peace Agreement	0	0	0	3

Table 2. Frequency Figures for the Least Likely Endings

	First Group	Second Group	Third Group	Fourth Group
Swedish Victory	1	1	3	4
Russian Victory	2	1	2	2
Military Stalemate	4	6	2	2
Military Stalemate without Peace Agreement	3	2	3	2

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I would like to warmly thank Professors Baruch Fischhoff, Howie Giles, Jonathan Baron, Ian Parker, Robin Cooper, Ron Chenail, as well as the reviewers for their useful comments on the earlier versions of this paper.

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Article Citation

Palasinski, M. (2011). The experiment-based knew-it-all-along effect in the qualitative light of narrativity. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(2), 441-463. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR16-2/palasinski.pdf>
