

Rumour, Legend, and the Transmission of “Serious” Knowledge

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This paper is concerned with rumour and legend, two aspects of communication that have been widely studied. In the past they have generally been considered in isolation from each other but recently it has become more common to treat them as related phenomena. This gives rise to the question of what features rumour and legend have in common and how they differ. We propose that in considering such questions it will be fruitful to look not only at examples of rumours and legends but also at other forms of communication where processes observed in the transmission of rumours and legends may also be observed. We illustrate this argument by referring to examples from academic discourse.

Defining Rumour and Legend

For much of the 20th century, folklorists studying legend and psychologists studying rumour did so largely in isolation from each other (Cornwell and Hobbs 1992). While the emergence of contemporary legend as a significant field of study has led to some breaking down of barriers (see for example, Fine, Campion-Vincent and Heath 2005), the relationship between contemporary legend and rumour continues to be unclear.

Originally ordinary language words, both “legend” and “rumour” have been adopted by scholars interested in the various ways information, gossip and other social reports tend to be transmitted. Unfortunately, to date there are no precise definitions of how these terms are to be employed in academic discourse. As is clear from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1933, and regularly updated online), they have had a variety of changing meanings. A starting point for

discussing scholarly usage may be, therefore, to consider *OED* definitions that appear to correspond most closely currently to their use in scholarly literature.

In the case of “legend”, the sixth meaning given by the *OED* seems closest: “An unauthentic or non-historical story especially one handed down from earlier times.” (Note that the final phrase does not exclude the possibility of a recent story.) In the case of “rumour,” the third meaning seems closest: “A statement or report circulating in a community of the truth of which there is no clear evidence.”

While the *OED* distinguishes “legend” and “rumour,” usage by some scholars suggests they are not only closely related but in some cases interchangeable. Brunvand, for example, states that sometimes “rumors have developed into full-scale legends” (2012:541). French writers (e.g. Campion-Vincent and Renard 2014) treat “rumeur” and “légende” as virtually interchangeable, whilst a recent work by Fine and Ellis (2011) explicitly does so, with an index entry which reads “Legend: see rumor.”

The emergence of “contemporary legend” as a distinct field of study makes rumor and legend appear particularly close to each other. Two early papers in the *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend* series (Boyes 1984 and Glazer 1987) employed the terms “rumour legend” and “rumor legend” respectively. In a footnote (76), Boyes notes the different adjectives applied to the legends she is discussing and suggests that “rumour” is better suited to them than “urban”, “modern” or “contemporary.” In contrast, Glazer does not offer a justification for the use of “rumor” legend, and employs “contemporary legend” in the text, without further comment.

We suggest that the conclusion to be drawn from these various examples is that rumours and legends are related phenomena, sharing some significant characteristics. However, this leaves open the question of how exactly they should be seen to be related. It is possible that “rumour” and “legend” are simply terms employed by different writers for essentially the same phenomena. To explore this possibility we shall now look at potential differences between legends and rumours.

Contrasting Rumour and Legend

If “legend” (including contemporary legend) and “rumour” are to be differentiated or contrasted, the *OED* definitions noted above suggest three areas of distinction: truth, story and time scale.

Truth: The *OED* definitions of rumour and legend put their truth-status in doubt. In the case of rumour, “there is no clear evidence” while a legend is defined as “unauthentic” or “non-historical.” Notably, in neither case is the description “false” *categorically* applied. Drake

(1989:275), discussing a "rumor panic" in Borneo which reappeared several times over many years, suggests it is "false literally" but "true figuratively, especially metaphorically." We are inclined to argue, however, that "metaphorical truth" is an unhelpful concept. Discussions of the role of metaphor in communication are hampered by lack of agreement as to how best to define "metaphor" (Cornwell and Hobbs 1984). Drake's meaning may be similar to what Hoffmann (1979:176) claimed when he said that metaphors have "social utility as the medium for expressing morals." Employing "true" in this context seems unhelpful.

Dealing with the characteristics of "urban legends," which they treat as synonymous with "contemporary legends,"¹ Bennett and Smith (2007:xvii) suggest that it is usually "impossible to tell" whether an urban legend is true or not. They also note, however, that urban legends exist in a "multiplicity of versions." If different versions of the same legend exist, this suggests that most versions must fall into the category of "not true."

Story: According to the *OED*, whilst a rumour is a "statement," a legend is a "story." In line with this distinction, Bennett and Smith (2007:xx) exclude from their collection of urban legends examples that are "not stories." Here is perhaps the clearest distinction between the *scholarly* and *popular* use of the term "legends." In their review of popular texts on urban legend, Hobbs and Anderson (2008) found that many included simple one-line statements such as "Clark Gable is Tom Selleck's father" or "Albert Einstein guest-starred on *Gunsmoke*" or "Charles Manson auditioned for the Monkees" (Craughwell 2005:244). Whereas the criterion for inclusion in such *non-scholarly* works appears to be simply that the statement is false, elements of a story or storytelling must be present for classification as a legend by legend scholars.

Time Scale: In the *OED*'s definition, "legend" differs from "rumour" in the sense that it refers especially to stories handed down from the past, whereas the definition of rumour makes no reference to time. Definitions offered by psychologists (e.g. Allport and Postman 1947) and by a sociologist (Kapferer 1990) include the view that rumour is "topical." Being topical does not exclude the possibility of being longstanding, of course: Drake (1989:271) described the "rumor panic" he studied in Borneo as a *diving rumor* on the grounds that it disappeared and returned from time to time.

It would appear from the issues reviewed above that the most acceptable ground for distinguishing rumour from legend would be that a legend is necessarily a story. This might imply a need to define a story, something that has not hitherto been of apparent concern to most rumour and legend scholars. One exception is the attempt by Main and

Hobbs (2007) to identify Substitute Personal Experience Narratives as a major form of legend.

Whether or not legend and rumour come to occupy the same or different definitions in scholarly accounts remains to be seen. Of interest here is the essential similarity between processes involved in rumour and legend transmission and other kinds of socially transmitted information: notably academic discourse or “serious” knowledge.

Rumour, Legend and “Serious” Knowledge

Academic discourse is popularly (and perhaps by legend and rumour scholars) thought to be governed by procedures that distinguish it from rumours and legends, with peer-reviewing being the most obvious and direct method of establishing the quality of what is published. However, there is substantial evidence that the quality aimed for in terms of accuracy or “truth” value is frequently not achieved. Berkowitz (1971), for example, has described secondary accounts of a well-known psychological study as displaying the same characteristics as Allport and Postman (1947) found in their experiments on rumour transmission. These were: *levelling*, where rumours become “shorter, more concise and more easily grasped and told” (75); *sharpening*, “Selective ... reporting of a limited number of details from a larger context” (86); and *assimilation*, modifications influenced by or conforming to an author’s prior experience, “the powerful attractive force exerted upon rumour by the intellectual and emotional context existing in the listener’s mind” (100). Without necessarily assuming these cover all possible relevant processes, we suggest that this is a useful argument for legend scholars to keep in mind.

In their paper “Analyzing rumors, gossip, and urban legends through their conversational properties,” Guerin and Miyazaki (2006) suggest that “serious” knowledge transmission may be open to the same categories of analysis as rumours, gossip and urban legends. Referring to “serious” knowledge as the transmission of facts or true knowledge (29), they propose twelve “conversational properties” (26) according to which rumours, urban legends, gossip and “serious” knowledge might be compared in terms of their effect on listeners—either to solicit attention or to promote social relationships. Although no evidence is provided for their list of properties, what is of significance to the present argument is that they find no clear distinction between “serious” knowledge and the phenomena considered in this paper. On their analysis, “serious” knowledge has seven conversational properties in common with rumours, five in common with urban legends and five in common with gossip,

suggesting that similarities between some "serious" knowledge on the one hand and rumour and legends on the other are worth exploring.

Academic publications are a possible place for such exploration. Although publications such as introductory textbooks are presumably usually regarded as "serious," the circumstances of their production and sale as commercial entities lead us to doubt whether they necessarily always reach appropriate standards. In a number of publications, Diane Paul (1985; 1987; 1988) has drawn attention to factors that may account for this. These include contributions to a book by people other than the named author, such as editorial staff of the publishing house and writers with no specialist knowledge preparing drafts according to guidelines composed by the publisher rather than by the book's named author.

Transmitting "Serious" Knowledge

We have previously published accounts of the rumour-like or legend-like processes in texts of psychology and related fields. These include quasi-historical narratives of a so-called Cognitive Revolution in psychology (Hobbs and Chiesa 2011), the varied and often contradictory meanings ascribed to the phrase Hawthorne Effect (Chiesa and Hobbs 2008) and legends attached to the eminent psychologist, B.F. Skinner (Hobbs 2005; Hobbs, Cornwell and Chiesa 2000).

Skinner has been the subject of a number of stories to which the terms "rumor," "legend" or "gossip" are applicable. An article in *New Society* (1970) repeats the story about students applying his method of operant conditioning to control his movements while lecturing until "he wound up in the corner of the classroom-teetering on the edge of the platform" (511). More sinister is the story that as a result of his innovative method of childcare, one of his daughters committed suicide as an adult (Skinner 1979:40).

Particularly relevant to the current argument are misrepresentations in academic texts. Analysis of introductory textbooks of psychology shows them frequently implying that Skinner was representative of a psychological approach which fell into disuse sometime between the 1940s and the 1960s, when in fact he began to get substantial support for his standpoint in psychology in the 1950s (Hobbs and Chiesa 2011). A number of texts state or imply that he subscribed to an extreme environmentalism such that, in principle, any creature could be conditioned to behave in any particular way. This despite the fact he had stated unequivocally that "no reputable student of animal behaviour has ever taken seriously the proposition that ... all responses are about equally conditionable to all stimuli" (1969:173). These and other

misrepresentations may arise in part from the processes of levelling, sharpening and assimilation already mentioned.

Second hand distortions of this sort are not uniquely associated with B.F. Skinner. In addition to the accounts noted above, Harris (1979) reports on multiple and widespread errors in transmissions of the Watson and Rayner (1920) "Little Albert" experiment, which he describes as "a well known piece of social science folklore" (151). As noted, Berkowitz (1971) refers to levelling, sharpening and assimilation in reports of Schachter's (1951) studies on deviation and rejection with similar mistakes frequently appearing in accounts of Asch's (1956) experiments on conformity and independence (see Friend, Rafferty and Bramel 1990). Treadway and McCloskey (1987) refer to distortions in reports of the original Allport and Postman (1947) rumour studies while Paul (1988), subsequent to the discovery that Cyril Burt's claims about the intelligence of identical and fraternal twins were based on fraudulent data, found the main effect of the scandal was its effect on reference sections of textbooks such that many text books "cited as references articles that characterised as worthless the data reported authoritatively in the discussion" (32).

To add to these examples, we now present a further case drawn from introductory textbooks for psychology students.² In 1943 the journal *Psychological Review* published an article by Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) titled "A theory of human motivation." Maslow subsequently published versions of this paper, with some minor revisions, as a chapter in his book *Motivation and Personality* (1st edition 1954, 2nd edition 1970).

Maslow proposed that human needs should be thought of as being in a hierarchy, where as a general rule lower needs have to be satisfied before those placed higher. He placed five needs in the hierarchy, calling them: Physiological, Safety, Love (later termed Belongingness and Love), Esteem and the highest, Self-Actualization. This last, he argued, is rarely achieved and he offered a listing of some individuals who seem to have achieved this level. Although he also proposed the existence of other needs, namely Desire to Know and to Understand, and Aesthetic need, Maslow did not situate them within the hierarchy.

We surveyed English-language introductory textbooks of psychology originating in the United States, dividing them into two samples: the first 1949-1980 (25 textbooks), and the second 1981-2008 (54 textbooks). Although the first sample shows a gradual increase in the frequency with which Maslow is mentioned, the proportion is low in comparison to the second sample (64% first sample, 100% second sample). Maslow's hierarchy of needs is mentioned in only 48% of the first sample, with an image of the hierarchy included in 20% and

individual self-actualizers named in 28%. In contrast, the later sample published between 1981 and 2008 (a) 100% mentioned Maslow, (b) 100% mentioned his Hierarchy, (c) 93% (50 out of 54) illustrated the Hierarchy with a figure and (d) 69% (37 out of 54) mentioned individuals who had achieved Self-Actualization.

Clearly Maslow and his theory feature quite prominently in these later textbooks. However, when one looks in detail at what is said about his theory it becomes clear that this growth in prominence is not due to the emergence of strong evidence in support of his claims. Indeed, contradictory evidence is sometimes cited. Furthermore, some of the textbook authors express doubts and criticisms concerning his theory. For example, Brown and Herrnstein (1975:161) stated that it "does not rest on rigorous evidence," while Lefton (1985:154) described it as "closely bound to middle class cultural experience" and Hothersall (1985:384) noted that "many psychologists consider it to be little more than sheer speculation."

What further interests us is the variation to be found in descriptions of the theory, as seen particularly in the illustrations. The most common visual illustration is a figure, typically in the shape of a pyramid or trapezium, with Physiological needs at the bottom and Self-Actualization at the top. The names attached to the needs are not always those employed by Maslow himself and the number of levels in these figures varies from 5 to 8. The publications in which Maslow proposed his hierarchy do not have illustrative figures, although it could be argued that a five level figure is a natural extrapolation from what he wrote. The additional levels have been quietly inserted by textbook authors.

References to individuals who achieved self-actualization include similar discrepancies. Only some of the people listed by Maslow are mentioned, but this cannot be accounted for simply by pressure of space, as some texts include individuals not mentioned by Maslow. Maslow distinguished between people he was "Fairly Sure" had achieved Self-Actualization, including Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson, and those for whom he thought it was "Highly Probable," including Albert Einstein and Eleanor Roosevelt. These four figures are all mentioned in *some* textbooks, but to varying extents, and those do not take account of the Fairly Sure/Highly Probable distinction. Specifically: Lincoln is mentioned in 29 textbooks, Jefferson in 14, Einstein in 28 and Eleanor Roosevelt in 34. Thus, just as contemporary legends take many variant forms, so too does Maslow's Hierarchy in introductory textbooks of psychology.

The failure to report Maslow's distinction between cases where he believed self-actualization was "Fairly Sure" rather than "Highly

Probable” may be regarded as an example of *levelling*. A detail of Maslow’s argument has been lost. The depiction of the hierarchy as having eight levels, rather than five, may be regarded as involving *sharpening*. Naming self-actualizing individuals not mentioned in Maslow’s works such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa and Mohandas Gandhi may have come about from authors *assimilating* Maslow’s analysis to their own life experiences. These figures will have been part of later authors’ cultural experience and regarded as having achieved remarkable goals.

The concepts levelling, sharpening and assimilation were employed by Allport and Postman (1947) to describe the results of experiments where the implicit assumption was that those participating were expected to accurately reproduce what they had read or seen. However, this is not a characteristic of most situations in ordinary life where someone’s actions (e.g. story-telling) are influenced by a past experience (e.g. hearing a story). What a narrator says, for example, may be influenced by other past experiences and by the reactions of an audience. A textbook author may draw on experience of student reactions in the classroom (e.g. “Do you think Mother Teresa achieved self-actualization, sir?”). We should also note that textbooks are actually communal products involving personnel in the publishing house as well as the nominal author, as noted by Paul (1987).

Conclusion: Communication Processes

Our main argument is this. Legends (including contemporary legends) when transmitted display the workings of many of the psychological processes to be observed when rumours are transmitted. However, those processes are not restricted to phenomena typically referred to as rumours or legends. Rather, they are characteristic of many situations where information is transmitted socially.

We began this paper by asking about the relationship between rumour and contemporary legend. To explore this question we have found it necessary to consider areas of activity not usually considered as “rumour” or “legend.” Our justification is that striking features of rumour and legend transmission are found in other areas of human activity. The examples we have employed lie in scholarly writings on psychology. These were chosen not because we believe that psychologists are particularly prone to “legend-like” writing, but simply because, as psychologists, the sources were particularly accessible to us. Other academic specialties may show the same characteristics we have observed in psychological writings. To illustrate this point we shall turn our attention away from the latter years of the 20th century and from psychology.

In 1938, Clifford Dobell published a paper in the medical journal *Parasitology* entitled "Dr O Uplavici." With such a title, it might be expected that the article would be an obituary or appreciation of a contributor to medical knowledge. In fact the paper demonstrated that no such person existed. "Dr O Uplavici" had been cited for several years in medical literature as the author of a work on dysentery. Dobell pointed out that "O Uplavici" is not a personal name but a Czech phrase that translates as "On dysentery." Early citations of this work had led non-Czech speakers to misinterpret the paper's title as the paper's author. Subsequent citations compounded the error by assuming that the author of such a work must be a physician and therefore be given the courtesy of the title "doctor."

Scholars of rumour and legend would do well to keep Dr Uplavici in mind when exploring their chosen fields of interest. He will serve as a reminder that many of the interesting psychological processes they come across are not confined to "rumour" or "legend" narrowly defined.

Notes

¹ Bennett and Smith were the organizers of the early international seminars, *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend*, editors of several books drawing on papers from these seminars, and founder members of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research. They consistently showed a preference for the term "contemporary legend," while the popular use of the phrase "urban legend" grew exponentially. Although in their later book they employ "urban legend" to describe their subject matter, they do not thereby endorse the popular use of the term.

² We have previously reported some of these findings to an audience of psychologists, in our paper "Maslow's Ubiquitous Hierarchy: An Exploration in the Lore of Psychology," Annual Conference of the British Psychological Society History and Philosophy of Psychology Section, April, 2009.

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