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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Narrative and Narrativization of A Journey: Differences between Personal and Fictional Narratives

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Abstract:

Background:

Scholars depict a deep connection between the way children remember their personal past and imagine the present and the future (Vygotskji, 2004; Brockmeier, 2015). Nevertheless, several studies indicate that children are prone to relate well-formed stories about past personal events but report difficulties in constructing narratives from fictional events.

Objective:

The present study aims to investigate the differences between school-aged children's personal and fictional narratives about a journey, considering different types of stories they structured.

Methods:

220. 8 to 10-year old children randomly divided into three groups, performed a narrative on a journey: 70 narrated a memory on a journey, 92 narrated an ideal trip and 58 narrated a fictional story from a given orientation. The presence and the type of complicating action were assessed to investigate children's ability to present well-structured narratives.

Results:

The results showed that children were more able to construct stories with complicating action when they narrated personal events and when they were scaffolded by an incipit. Furthermore, in fictional narratives with incipit, children narrated multiple Complicating action creating a continuous violation of canonicity.

Conclusions:

The authors discuss the results considering the difference between narrative and narrativization of personal and fictional events and the importance of scaffolding children's narrative skills.

Keywords: Personal narratives, Fictional narratives, Children, Autobiographical memory, Imagination, Complexity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The present work aims to investigate how children construct stories when they narrate autobiographical memories or fictional stories. The reason for interest in this area is derived from an apparent contradiction between different fields of developmental research on narratives.

The scholars highlight a deep connection between the way children remember their personal past and the way they imagine the present and the future. For instance, Vygotskij [1] depicted that imagination and creativity in childhood are mental acts that are strictly connected with memory: The human brain "combines and creatively reworks elements of past experience, and uses them to generate new propositions and new behaviour" (p.9). From his point of view, the act of recalling and sharing personal memories and the act of creating or imagining something new involve the same brain activities. This point seems clear when looking at the way children play, where imitation fulfils a crucial role. For instance, when a little girl plays with a doll and imagines being the doll's mother, she

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is both creating and recalling the scripts of her experience of the mother-child relationship. Similarly, children learn to narrate their memories and tell stories following a specific plot acquired through cooperative discussions with their significant other close elder relations throughout their development [2, 3].

Moreover, modern approaches to the study of cognitive psychology are focused on the assumption that memory is not a passive archive but a dynamic process [4]. In this sense, scholars tend to consider memory as something more than a storage of the past, where past life episodes or knowledge are encoded and retrieved. When recalling the past, people elaborate it and give it new meanings, also in reference to their expectations and values [5].

Recent neuroscientific studies confirm this assumption: from a neurocognitive and neurobiological point of view, there is no evident difference between brain processes that operate in remembering and in perceiving [4]. For instance, Addis and colleagues examined the neural regions involved in the construction and elaboration of past and future events. Through the analysis of fMRI, they discovered that recalling a past life event or imagining a future event involves the same neural substrates [6, 7]. In other words, there is a similarity between the cognitive processes of remembering the past, perceiving the present, and imagining the future.

This is exactly what happens when people narrate an autobiographical memory: narrative gives memory a temporal and causal structure, connecting what happened in the past with the present and the future [8].

Thus, narrating memory is a creative act and, at the same time, creating or imagining the present or the future is an action that is connected with memory.

Scientific literature, beginning with the work of Vygotskij [1], has depictedthat memory and creativity are two strictly related cognitive processes. The scholars have pointed out different narrative structures when children relate real personal events or fictional ones. This is the topic that will be explored in the following paragraphs.

1.1. The Roots of Personal and Fictional Narratives in Childhood: The Role of Parental Scaffolding

From an early age, individuals begin to tell their personal stories of human diversity and learn to conform to cultural standards through which these stories find meaning [9]. At the beginning of this process, the role of the caregiver is essential because the roots of narrative development are found in parent-child conversations and, specifically, in the scaffolding provided by parents [10 - 13].

Both personal and fictional narratives represent two narrative genres that develop with the parental scaffolding action. Parents usually provide most of the content and structure of the narrative, helping the child to construct a story [14 - 16]. When talking about personal experiences with caregivers, children may learn how to rehearse and what to rehearse. Therefore, they learn which aspects of experience are reportable and, consequently, worth remembering [12, 17]. Similarly, the opportunities to participate in fantasy-talk interactions, which represent a proper context for learning about plots, characters, and other narrative elements, supported by an adult, will lead to greater skills in the autonomous production of fantasy talk and fictional narratives [17].

Research has recognised some important aspects of parental scaffolding that support narrative development. For example, there are some strategies parents use to promote the construction of a proper narrative in their children, such as the length of the discussion, task orientation, questioning, correction of misunderstandings, and emotional support [14, 15, 18 - 20]. All of these strategies represent effective tools to improve children's narrative skills during conversations.

Because of parental scaffolding, children learn to narrate their personal world (thoughts, emotions, experiences, and desires), although sometimes their narratives do not assume the classical story format. As White stated [21], there is a significant difference between narration and narrativisation. The narration occurs when someone talks about facts without composing a story, merely listing the events that happened in chronological order. It is more like an accurate report of the facts. Conversely, narrativisation entails the transformation of an event into a story with a canonical structure, in which the events are connected around a high point, with the aim of providing a coherent and global picture of the facts. Thus, the consequent question is: How is a “good story” made? How do children learn to narrativise?

1.2. When a Narrative becomes a Narrativisation

Researchers in the narrative field have been interested in analysing stories with the aim of searching for underlying commonalities of structure [22]. Some researchers have focused their attention on the analysis of structure, specifically on the narrative propositions or clauses [23 - 27]. In particular, Labov and his colleagues [24 - 26] have investigated narratives structured around high points, defined as the point where the complication, that is the core of the narration, reaches its peak. According to these scholars, narratives have two functions: Reference and Evaluation. The referential information states the actions that occurred and describes objective details concerning conditions, people, or objects involved in the event. The evaluative information explains why the event was interesting, self-defining, and meaningful. In a few words, “evaluation assesses why the narrative was told” [22, p.29]. In a High-Point analysis [26], narratives are divided into various components: orientation, Complicating action, evaluation, result or resolution, and coda. Labov and Fanschel [28] later included an abstract component. The abstract provides the listener with a brief version of the story to set a framework, while the orientation provides the background information. Thus, abstract and orientation are two important devices occurring at the beginning of the narratives that help the listener’s understanding. As for codas, these occur at the end of the narratives and serve to indicate that the story is about to end. The use of abstract, orientation, and coda indicates that the speaker is aware of the listener's perspective and communication needs, and also contributes to creating more effective communication.

The most important part of the narrative can be found in the Complicating action - resolution sequence, in which the

Complication, that can also be seen as a violation of the canonicity [29], occurs, and is usually solved by some actions which are identified as the resolution. The evaluation includes all the statements that support the evaluation function of the narrative, *i.e.*, what to think about a place, person, thing, event, or the entire experience. Therefore, in this framework, a story is considered "well-formed" when it assumes such a pattern or, in other words, when personal events are narrativised. As Hudson and Shapiro stated [30, p. 98], "in studying the development of high point structure in children's personal narratives, we are studying the development of narrativisation, which goes beyond simply reporting 'what happened,' to developing a plot or 'story' about what happened through the use of formal structural elements". In a few words, the complicating action can be seen as the narrative device which permits the narrativisation of personal events [31].

It seems that this pattern is commonly used for narratives about personal events. In particular, the basic elements of narrative structure, namely abstract, orientation, and Complicating action, are independently applied by 3 and 4-year-olds. As they get older, specifically starting from 5 years of age, children's use of evaluative devices increases, as well as the presence of resolution. The use of a coda that connects the past to the present emerges at about 8 years of age [22, 30].

Regarding fictional narratives, researchers have shown that at the age of 4, children are still unable to use story schemas to produce stories. Their stories are closer to event descriptions or scripts [32 - 34]. By the age of 5, children include appropriate setting information [35], initiate actions and attempt to develop a plot [36]. However, the inclusion of internal goals, motivations, and reactions only emerges at around 8 years of age [27, 37 - 39].

1.3. Personal *versus* Fictional Narratives

In the study of children's narratives, few authors have investigated the difference between eliciting a personal narrative, considered as the recounting of a real past experience [40], or a fictional narrative. In actuality, scientific literature depicts that from the very first years of their lives, children tend to produce personal rather than fictional narratives when engaged in social conversation [40, 41]. This happens because parents and other close elder relations encourage conversation about real events over fictional ones [3]. In school contexts, however, fictional narratives are often used to improve the development of general language and literacy skills, as well as to promote the transmission of knowledge [42].

Since children are supported in producing personal narratives, scholars have found that they produce better-structured narratives when telling personal events in comparison to fictional stories [40].

In fact, scholars such as Hudson and Shapiro [30] argued that fictional and personal narratives place different cognitive demands on the narrator, since the latter may be more easily produced because of the narrator's familiarity with the events and characters in the story. Consequently, the two authors found in their study that personal narratives were richer in terms of setting and character information. Nevertheless, by performing a narrative intervention in preschool-aged children, Peterson and colleagues [43] found that mothers promote a better narrative structure when they converse with their children about actual stories. In their study, the authors depicted that parents who encourage narratives with context-related questions significantly improve their children's ability to tell stories, especially when they really took place. Similarly, a study involving children with language impairments [40] found that even if children are prone to produce longer tales when engaged in fictional discourses in comparison to personal ones, the former are not classified as narratives as often as the latter. In their results, fictional stories have few high points than personal ones and usually lack resolution.

In a study investigating children's ability to produce coherent and cohesive fictional narratives, Cain [44] found that fictional narratives lack temporal and causal connectives. Moreover, the author found improved narrative coherence when storytelling was elicited by giving information or fictional prompts as opposed to when researchers just provided a title to the children.

Ukrainetz and colleagues [42] investigated children's ability to produce fictional narratives as a measure of expressive elaboration. In their research, the authors depicted that producing narratives about made-up events deal with the need to tell charming or funny stories with a goal-oriented and problem-resolution structure. In a study involving children aged 5 to 12, the authors performed a high point and structural analysis of fictional narratives beginning with Labov's description of narrative structure [24]. The results showed that children's ability to construct fictional narratives gradually increases throughout their development. For instance, collected narratives were richer in terms of orientations (characters' names and contextual information) at the age of 10-12 when compared to 5 to 6-year-olds. Similarly, evaluations, defined as the ways a narrator imparts emphasis or meaning to a part of the story, were present in almost all the stories told by the children aged 10-12.

Correspondingly, Mill and colleagues [45] underlined that both fictional and personal narratives develop throughout primary school age, but the former are better organised in terms of macrostructure, while the latter are more cohesive and coherent.

Considering the content of fictional narratives, scholars have mostly investigated stories that children construct about fantasy characters involving imaginary settings. In actuality, fictional narratives can also be told to express children's desires and expectations. Indeed, children may invent stories to talk about their wishes and their plans for the future (*e.g.*, "What will I do when I grow up?"). In other words, fictional narratives comprise two aspects: on the one hand, they relate to plans, wishes, and expectations about the future, and are related to prospective memory [46]; on the other hand, they refer to the imagination, symbolic play, and creativity. Both of these aspects are critical for children's narrative development and should be investigated to shed light on the possible differences in how stories are constructed.

An interesting issue that can be addressed through narration is travel. In fact, travel could be considered a

significant topic for children, given its emotional and cognitive impact on their development [46 - 48]. Travel can be investigated through narration, because of the relationship that connects them. On the one hand, narration can be considered a journey: The narrative is considered as a physical process of movement, disruption, and return [49] due to its structure of development, growth, and change. On the other hand, travel can be considered as a narrative. In fact, as Mikkonen stated [50, p. 286], "The different stages of travel-departure, voyage, encounters on the road, and return-provide any story with a temporal structure that raises certain expectations of things to happen".

The topic of travel appears to be suited to investigating personal narratives, such as the memories of past journeys and fictional narratives, both in terms of ideal trips around places children wish to visit, and also in terms of invented trips based on imagination and fantasy. An interesting question relates to the possible relationship between fictional stories and personal narratives. Since these two genres share some aspects, for example, with the use of a canonical structure in a plot, it is important to investigate which processes are involved in the construction of these two narrative genres when children talk about their travel experiences. Furthermore, it is also interesting to investigate the possible differences between the two types of fictional narratives.

1.4. The Current Research

The present study aims to investigate the differences between school-aged children's personal and fictional narratives regarding travel, considering the different types of stories they structured. The previous paragraphs have shown that, throughout their development process, children are often engaged by adults in conversation about autobiographical memories and this activity promotes children's narrative skills and competence in producing a narrative. Conversely, several studies highlight that children report difficulties when constructing narratives based on fictional events. Based on these assumptions, the authors of this paper performed a study that aimed to deeply explore potential differences in the construction of personal and fictional narratives when children have the opportunity to narrate autobiographical *versus* imaginary journeys. Considering the importance of children's narrative skills in the developmental and educational contexts, the overall aim of the present study is to address knowledge gaps in the way children organise and construct narratives around imaginary worlds and the opportunity adults have to scaffold this pivotal process.

Moreover, the present study also aims to fill the gap in scientific literature concerning the continuity between remembering and imagination processes, as well as the described differences in narrating personal and fictional events. As illustrated in the first part of the present paper, since memory and imagination are two very connected processes, evidence on the difference between children's skills in narrating personal and fictional stories has not yet been explained.

Thus, researchers asked school-aged children to narrate, in detail, the most beautiful journey they had had (personal narrative) and the most beautiful journey they would like to have (ideal fictional narrative). Furthermore, the third group of children narrated a journey starting from a prompt given by the researchers in which they had the orientation of a story on a fictional journey to provide scaffolding for the narrative construction.

In line with the scientific literature described in previous paragraphs, the narrative device characterising a well-formed story was considered as the presence or absence of a complicating action [9, 24] in the three experimental conditions. It was assumed that the personal narratives would show a greater number of Complicating action than the fictional narratives which would be consistent with the previous studies [40]. However, supported by the evidence [17, 43], it was hypothesised that, by providing scaffolding, children would be able to narrate fictional stories around a complicating action.

The second aim was more explorative and dealt with investigating whether the three groups of children would report the different types of Complicating action in their narratives depending on the nature of the task. In this sense, the present study is an attempt to understand and deepen the nature of complex action in children's narratives. And the potentially different types of narrative devices [9, 31] children use to relate stories based on personal or fictional episodes.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Participants

220 children participated in the present study. They were all students attending two primary schools in the Region of Tuscany (central Italy). All of the children were 8 to 10 years old and were attending the third (58 children, 47.4% females), fourth (118 children, 56.6% females) and fifth (44 children, 50% females) grades in primary school. No students with Specific Learning Disorders or other types of cognitive disabilities took part in the study. All of the children's families were from Tuscany.

Children were randomly divided in three experimental groups: One group was asked to narrate a real trip experienced with their families or the school (Personal story Group PG, N= 70), one group narrated an ideal trip they would like to take (Fictional ideal story Group FG, N= 92), a third group narrated a story about a fictional trip commencing with a given orientation (Fictional Incipit story Group IG, N=58). The groups were similar for gender ($H = 1,307$, p = n.s.).

2.2. Procedures

Data was collected during school time and took two hours. A few days before data collection, the researchers informed the teachers and the Head of the school about the aim of the research. Once they had obtained permission, they requested the parents' informed consent and collected it before the narrative task. After the initial phase of familiarisation with the children and discussion about the topic of travel, researchers explained to the children that they were interested in understanding their memories/desires/fantasies about traveling. They introduced themselves, explained their jobs and answered

the children's questions. Then, they briefly explained the aims of the study and gave them a sheet to write down their narrative. The three groups of children performed a single narrative respectively on a personal journey, a fictional ideal journey or a fictional journey from an incipit. This was due to the researchers' need to avoid possible interferences among the three tasks.

The children in the Personal story Group were asked to think about a memory related to a trip they took with their families or the school and to narrate it in detail. The researchers proposed the task by using these specific words: "…So, children! Have you ever been on a trip with your class, your parents or friends? (…) Very good, so now we would like all of you to tell us in detail about the most enjoyable trip of your life".

Similarly, children in the Fictional ideal story group were asked to think about a great trip they could take. The researchers introduced the task using these words:

"… So, children! Now we would like all of you to tell us in detail about the most enjoyable trip that you could imagine, the trip of your dreams".

Finally, the third group (Fictional Incipit story Group) was asked to read together with the researchers the incipit of a story about a trip and to complete it by narrating the missing part of the story. The incipit was an orientation [24] and provided children with some information about the story to create:

"Once upon a time, there was a brave and curious child. He had always lived in the same city and really wanted to visit another city that he always heard people talking about. One day, he decided to leave and called his friend to go there together. After walking for days, they finally reached that city. They crossed through a big door and...".

As shown, the provided incipit had the typical structure of a folk tale consisting of "once upon a time" narrated in the third singular person. The researchers gave a neutral prompt ("a brave and curious child") and then proposed that the children give a name to the protagonist in order to help them familiarise them with the task. The protagonist of the proposed incipit was a young boy, but researchers gave children the freedom to change his gender and name as they preferred. No further intervention of researchers was actuated during data collection. Children related their narrative without any intervention of adults when they used the incipit.

No limit of time and space was given to the three groups of children to complete their narrative. Once each child finished narrating their story, they could silently conduct other activities while they waited for all the other participants to complete the task.

After data collection, the narratives were accurately transcribed into an electronic file and the high-point analysis [26] was conducted. After reading all the narratives; for each narrative, two researchers trained in narrative analysis independently identified the presence or the absence of the five elements of a story theorized by Labov which were previously described in the introduction section [24 - 26]. Every variable was coded with a 0-1 score (0 = absence; 1 = presence).

2.3. Measures

In line with the scientific literature debated in previous paragraphs, the structure of the children's stories was analysed. In particular, the presence/absence of Complicating action was considered [24]. Therefore, the narratives were analysed, considering the presence of an event violating expectations that were used by the narrator as a device to develop the story into a canonical plot.

Nevertheless, in the original theorization of Labov and colleagues, the Complicating action was a problem that had to be resolved and usually acquired a negative valence [24, 26]. In this sense, complications assumed the characteristics of an obstacle to disrupt the balance of the characters' lives, leading them to work to restore it.

To define the data coding procedures of the present study, researchers implemented a preliminary qualitative analysis on a sample of 30 narratives randomly selected among the three groups. From this pilot phase, the three categories of Complicating action have been described by researchers:

- Ordeal/test: the protagonist and the other characters go through an ordeal or face a test and fight/work to arrive at a resolution (*e.g. "when we came back, we realised that we had lost the key to our car […]"; "to release their friend, they had to find the magic stone, which had been buried by the monster").*
- Unusual/positive event: the protagonist meets an unusual situation or a strange character which violates expectations but does not constitute a negative event in the story (*e.g. "suddenly, they heard a beautiful melody and a violet horse appeared, flying in the sky […]"*; *"While we were visiting the museum, my uncle phoned us and told us he had won a car!")*
- Fireworks: the story is characterised by multiple unexpected events that characters face in a sequence during their journey, creating a continuous violation of canonicity (*e.g. "they found the trove but a policeman came and thought they were robbers trying to steal it and took them to prison […], when they finally tried to open it, they had to find the right code which was written in St. Paul church […]).*

The three categories that emerged from the preliminary analysis prove that, unlike in the Labovian definition of Complicating action, the narrative device of a story can have a different valence, and can be attributed to different types of events that violate the listener's/reader's expectation and provide a narrativisation of the story.

In summary, the main measures of the present study were: The presence/absence of Complicating action; the type of Complicating action: a) ordeal/test, b) unusual/positive event, c) fireworks.

Non-parametric tests like Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney were run to find significant differences among the types of Complicating action that emerged in the three experimental conditions.

The data had been analysed separately by two expert

researchers in the field of narrative psychology. To test the homogeneity of the data analysis , Cohen's kappa coefficient test was run and a high degree of agreement was found (K=.841).

3. RESULTS

3.1. A Comparison of the Three Groups

In line with the first goal of the present study, the presence or absence of a Complicating action was assessed utilizing the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test. The results highlighted a significant difference between the three groups (H=57.309; p=.000). Table **1** shows the descriptive statistics of Complicating action in the three types of narratives.

Children in the Fictional ideal story group created a story with a Complicating action in 9.8% of cases. In these few cases, children planned an imaginary trip that could be set in a fictional or real place, where something happened and it violated the canonicity of the events. For instance, a participant narrated her imaginary trip to London: *"The city of my dreams is London because it has always been a mysterious place to me and I would be a spy. One day […] I would like to take a walk and find a piece of paper with a secret written on it. I would like to analyse it and find a missing person […]"*. The rest of the narratives collected (90.2%) were lists in which participants reported what they wished to do and observe during an ideal visit to an unknown place. In certain cases, these were real places, especially foreign countries, located in Europe or other parts of the world, like the narrative of a girl who wrote: *"I would like to go to Spain with my friends and with other children who are not part of my class. I would visit Valencia on foot and take a tour of all the parks; then, I would like to ride a hot-air balloon to visit Valencia […]"*. In other cases, children talked about imaginary places, where daily rules were suspended (*e.g.*, places full of sweets). Children often talked about animals (pets or exotic animals), celebrities, and nature, and attributed these places with exotic and mysterious features, typical of make-believe worlds. For example, a girl wrote: *"Candy Land is a country that is totally made of sweets, everything can be eaten. The streets are made of dark chocolate, the cars are made of ice-cream, the houses are gingerbread; the shops are made of marshmallows, and the rivers and lakes are Nutella. Street signs are made of liquorice. The trees are made of chocolate sticks and the leaves are mint. The sky is water and the clouds are milk, the sun is a lemon, the grass is lettuce and the people are ice-cream"*

On the contrary, the Fictional Incipit group's stories were enriched with a Complicating action in 90.2% of cases. The majority of these narratives contained imaginary elements, structured like classical fairy-tales, like the following example: *"They crossed through a big door and saw a beautiful town named Imagiland. There was a castle, a king, a queen, many amazing flowers […]. The child said: "This city is so beautiful!", but a citizen answered: "don't be so happy…because sometimes tragedies happen". Suddenly, a monster called Dementor arrived […]"*. In this case, the presence of a monster represents the Complicating action around which the entire story was constructed. The majority of Complicating action reported in this type of fictional narratives were followed by a resolution, that usually consisted of defeating a monster or overcoming a trial.

Children in the Personal story group occupied a midpoint between the other two groups because, when narrating a personal memory on a journey, they constructed a story that was completed with a Complicating action in 52.9% of cases. An example of a story from the Personal story group is the following: *"One year ago, I went to Turin with my family to meet my dear friend Andrea […]. On the sixth day, we went to Aosta on a small trail covered with snow. We went on a sledge but…boom! We overturned! It was a great week and I had a lot of fun with my friend"*. In this narrative, the quiet trip to Aosta was violated by a funny and unexpected incident with the sledge which makes the story complicated. Both in fictional incipit narratives and personal narratives, Complicating action were solved by a resolution, but not always; sometimes, children broke the canonicity by reporting a relevant event that spoiled the trip.

3.2. Comparison between paired groups.

In order to assess potential differences between the Personal story group and the two Fictional groups, Mann-Whitney non-parametric test was run for two independent samples. The results showed a significant difference between the Personal story group and the Fictional ideal story group, as well as the Personal story group and the Fictional Incipit story group. Indeed, significant differences emerged in the number of Complicating action between the autobiographical stories and the ideal ones (U=2017.000; p<.001). Moreover, the results showed that participants narrating stories with an incipit reported more complicated actions than members of the Personal story group (U=1587.000; p<.01). Potential differences were also assessed in the presence of Complicating action between the two types of fictional stories, and a significant difference was found (U=1587.000; p<.01): participants in the Fictional Incipit group used more Complicating action than the Fictional ideal group to narrate their stories of a journey. From a descriptive point of view, these two kinds of fictional narratives shared some common elements, because the featured, real and make-believe elements mixed together, presented a good representation of children's imagination. However, although they belonged to the narrative genre of fictional narratives, they differed in the structure, because the Fictional Incipit narrative group featured more canonical stories than the Fictional ideal narrative group.

In summary, half of the children narrating a personal memory on a journey described their experience as a list of events that occurred without the structure of a narrative. Conversely, the majority of the children in the Fictional Incipit group provided their tale with a narrative plot. Finally, participants in the Fictional ideal groups reported their narratives on a made-up journey as a list of wishes without a Labovian Plot in 9% of cases.

3.3. Results of the content analysis of complex actions

In line with the second aim of the present study, the presence of different types of complicated actions has been investigated.

Table **2** shows descriptive statistics of the data collected.

Table 1. The descriptive statistics of the presence and absence of complex actions in narratives among the three groups.

	Complicating action Presence	
	F	**%***
Personal story Group	33	47.1
Fictional ideal story Group	9	9.8
Fictional Incipit story Group	40	69

*The percentage is calculated out of the total number of narratives collected in every single experimental condition

Table 2. Percentages of the three categories of complex actions among the three experimental groups.

	Personal story group (N of stories with complex action = 33)	**Fictional ideal story group (N of stories with complex action = 9)**	**Fictional Incipit story group (N of stories with complex action = 40)**
Complex Action	**%***	**%***	**%***
Ordeal/Test	31.4	8.7	32.8
Unusual Positive event	14.3	1.1	15.5
Fireworks	1.4	0	20.7

*The percentage is calculated out of the total number of narratives with complex actions collected in every single experimental condition

In the three groups, ordeal Complicating action were more frequent than the unusual positive ones and fireworks. Furthermore, fireworks were a specific characteristic of the Fictional incipit story group.

A Kruskal-Wallis test was run to assess the differences in the presence of the three categories of Complicating action defined in the pilot phase of the present study.

Considering the Ordeal/Test category, the results showed a significant difference among the three groups (H=62.098; p=.000): The participants in the Personal and Incipit groups reported more Ordeals as Complicating actions in their narratives than the children narrating fictional journeys. This difference is not significant when considering the comparison between Personal and Incipit narratives (U=2020.000; p=ns). The same trend has been observed for the presence of unusual positive events in narratives: significant differences are reported among the three groups (H=10.041, p<.05) but not between the narratives of the Personal and the Incipit groups (U=1991.000; p=ns).

Considering the Fireworks category, a significant difference was found among the three groups (H=37.147; p<.001). as well as in the comparison between the Personal and Incipit narratives (U=1569.000; p<.001). For this latter category, children who narrated a story about a journey from a given incipit provided their narratives with a series of complicating actions to create a complex and structured narrative.

An example of Ordeal/Test in a narrative can be found in this narrative by a participant in the Incipit group: *"They were in a big and beautiful city, full of ice-cream shops, funfairs and restaurants. They met an old friend and went to an amusement park, but then the mountain ogre arrived […]. A child had the insight to stop him with whipped cream. They sprayed whipped cream and the ogre fell down and died"*. Similarly, the following personal narrative describes an ordeal that the child endured on his trip to Venice: *"One day, I went with my family to Venice. We arrived and we started walking towards the water. There was a shop with necklaces, bracelets…but when I was there I felt scared because a woman hit her head on a glass shelf […]"*.

Overall, the stories classified as narratives with ordeals are canonical stories with unique Complicating actions, around which the entire plot is constructed. As noted, these ordeals often present a subsequent resolution, such as in the previous narrative example from the Fictional Incipit Group, where "the ogre fell down and died". Conversely, in some cases, there is no resolution, as in the previous example, where the child simply reported that the negative event happened (*a woman hit her head on a glass shelf*).

The following narrative excerpts show the presence of unusual positive events. A participant in the Personal story group included a positive surprise in her autobiographical story: *"On Sunday morning, I woke up and Daddy was preparing a snack to eat […] I went to check the calendar and I realised that it was my birthday! I asked my parents where we were planning to go and they answered: 'We are going to Gardaland!' (an Italian amusement park for children)."* In this case, the narrative of the canonical Sunday of a family was violated by the unexpected decision to take a trip to Gardaland to celebrate the child's birthday. Considering fictional narratives, unusual positive events seemed prevalently related to make-believe elements which provide imaginary worlds with unexpected features: *"They found a city full of candies tasting of peach, orange, cherry […]. Then, there was a Volcano throwing out chocolate instead of lava"*. In fictional stories, unusual positive events belonged to impossible worlds that children discover enriching canonical trips with incredible aspects.

Finally, the Fireworks category included stories completed by a continuous sequence of Complicating actions that can acquire both a positive and negative valence. The following story is an example from this category: *"They found a golden city and there was a treasure. The boy found a little cat but a car was crashing it. He ran to save it but he met a thief who stole the treasure and ran away. The police came and they put the thief in prison […]"*. As mentioned above, in the firework

stories, complex actions could also acquire a positive valence, describing impossible and unexpected features: *"They found big palaces, over 500 metres tall. The houses were also very tall - over 422 metres - and people were 50 metres tall […].*

Fireworks are different from stories with more than one complex action, because fireworks stories feature increasing emotional intensity given the sequence of events, continuously violating the reader's expectations.

complicating actions were analysed from a descriptive point of view, looking at their congruence with realistic and imaginary elements. As for the previous data analysis, two independent researchers provided a content analysis of omplicating actions in the collected narratives. The results showed a significant difference (H=36.367; p=.000) among the three groups in the presence of realistic *versus* imaginary complications in the narrated story. Indeed, Complicating actions in the Personal story group were related to realistic features in 96.9% of the cases, while 3.03% of stories involved unexpected events dealing with make-believe situations. Considering Fictional stories, no significant difference has been found between ideal and incipit narratives (U=2458.00; p=ns). The participants in the Fictional ideal story group provided their stories with imaginary features in 44.8% of cases, while stories with incipit contained make-believe complications in 36.9% of cases. As for the content analysis, examples of realistic Complicating actions described largely possible events: losing a wallet, ending up in jail, meeting a thief, having a surprise party, arguing with friends or parents. Even in the case of fictional narratives, unexpected events may consist of unusually positive or negative situations of everyday life. On the contrary, the content analysis showed that make-believe Complicating actions were strictly related to the canonical situations of folk tales: Fighting against monsters, finding treasure, and overcoming ordeals to obtain something.

4. DISCUSSION

The present paper began by reporting interesting evidence in literature underlying the strict similarity between remembering and imagination processes. As reported, several cognitive psychology and neuroscientific studies, commencing with the work of Vygotsky, argued that recalling and sharing personal memories and creating or imagining something new involves the same brain activities [1 - 5]. Alternatively, preschool and school-aged children, in particular, show different abilities in producing well-formed stories about personal and fictional narratives [40 - 50].

The findings of the current study are consistent with evidence about children's production of personal and fictional stories and point out interesting evidence concerning the relevance of scaffolding in the construction of fictional narratives and the need to revise the classical concept of the complex action.

According to the literature, despite the connection between the autobiographical memories and imagination, narrative skills seem to develop when recounting personal and fictional events following different paths: Children are better able to construct stories with Complicating action when they narrate personal events [12, 17, 30, 40]. Conversely, children do not practice the construction of fictional stories as much, especially in the family context, so they appear to be less able to narrate this kind of narrative [40, 41]. However, research has recognised the critical importance of adults' scaffolding in children's storytelling [10 - 13]. It can be provided, for example, through questioning and orientation to the task [14, 19, 20]. Based on this evidence, it was assumed that with scaffolding by means of the incipit of a story, children would be able to narrate good fictional stories around a Complicating action. Thus, the current work aimed to test the impact of a scaffolding strategy, which was an incipit of a story to be completed, on the construction of fictional narratives. Three types of narratives were compared that shared a common theme-travel. Children were asked to produce three different stories: Personal narratives about the most beautiful trip they had taken; fictional stories about the most beautiful trip they would like to take; fictional stories about a child who explores a new city. The initial questions at the base this work were: In what case do children construct a classical story with a Complicating action? And also, what kind of complex action do children provide?

It was found that children constructed stories both for personal and fictional narratives, but in the latter case, only when they were supported by an incipit.

Regarding personal narratives, when children were requested to recount a memory about their greatest trip, they told it in two different ways: about half of them narrated a classical story, usually with a unique Complicating action that was sometimes resolved.

The other half of them just provided an account of the events, completed with temporal and causal connections, but without a complex action; their stories assumed the format of chronicles [51]. These findings confirmed the literature's assessment about the ability of children at this age to create good stories about their personal memories [22, 30], but it also showed the distinction between narration and narrativisation described by White [21]. Narrativising personal events is not always simple and depends not only on the narrator's ability but also on the narrator's willingness to tell a story and on the object of the story. Some personal life events are effectively more difficult to be transformed into a story, and people usually choose their topic when they want to share an experience using a story format. In this work, the children chose their memory, but within a specific theme called "the greatest trip". Thus, some children voluntarily constructed a story completed with a problem or an unusual positive event, and that was possible because a Complicating action actually happened, and children included it to make their story more interesting. Conversely, some children reported just a mere account of events, probably because no trouble took place, and even the great aspects of the trip might not be unusual enough to break the canonicity.

Regarding fictional stories, two opposite scenarios were observed: on the one hand, children were requested to describe the greatest trip they could take, produce a list of desires and expectations, without a classical story format. Their narratives were closer to a wish list, such as a letter to Santa Claus. These narratives are almost totally lacking in temporal and causal

connections, and some attempts to create a plot can only be observed in rare cases. This happened especially when children introduced make-believe elements and created imaginary worlds, such as Candyland, in order to give a sense of coherence to these places. However, the overall narrative style of these stories is mostly descriptive, while the aim was to depict a world based on imagination, interests, and wishes.

On the other hand, when children were asked to talk about a child who explored a new city, by continuing the story from the provided incipit, most of them constructed a canonical story with a Complicating action. In this group, we also found some narratives based only on a detailed description of the new city without a narrative plot, but they represent a small percentage; the majority were traditional stories, full of adventures and troubles. By examining the content analysis of complex actions, it was observed that complications of both ideal and incipit stories were related to realistic and make-believe features. No significant difference emerged in the type of complex actions narrated. And this result suggests that the main difference between both the fictional narratives concerns the presence of an incipit that scaffolded children to narrate following the canonical plot typical of folk tales.

Furthermore, it seems that the presence of the incipit activated the narrative genre of the fairy tale in the children: the majority of these stories were especially imaginary stories, full of unreal elements: monsters to fight, enemies to defeat, and ordeals to deal with.

Sometimes, there was more than one Complicating action; we found several narratives with a lot of dramatic turns, like a series of crackling fireworks that follow one another, in a pressing rhythm that keeps the audience interested . This aspect is linked to one of the most interesting findings of the current work, which concerns the nature of the Complicating action action.

With regard to this issue, this study fills a gap in the scientific literature concerning the nature of what is a Complicating action within a story and its content. It was understood that, in this sample, there are more types of complex actions. Beyond the fireworks, ordeals and unusual positive events were recognized. In short, it was found that there are other possibilities to break the canonicity of the events, other possible violations [8]. The ordeals represent the traditional configuration of the Complicating action; unusual positive events represent elements of novelty, something of an extraordinary nature that positively changes the course of the events. A series of linear Complicating actions include fireworks which make the story adventurous and engaging. Although the majority of the participants reported more problems, both in personal narratives and stories with incipit, there was also a small percentage of unusual positive events. Fireworks, instead, were more frequent in stories with incipit rather than in real travel stories, probably because of their similarity to fairy tales. Thus, personal and fictional stories can be made interesting in different ways: by depicting a problem or an ordeal that requires the ability to solve problems, courage to beat enemies, and shrewdness to solve trials. It should accompany an unexpected event that appears completely new and extraordinary, making things fascinating ; through a series of sensational events, negative or positive, that make the story lively and emotionally intense.

From these findings, it can be stated that, overall, 10 year old children appear unable to transfer their skill to voluntarily construct stories from personal narratives to fictional narratives. However, when they are supported by a narrative structure that works as a scaffolding, they show great ability in telling fictional stories, even greater than the stories in personal narratives.

The results of the present study provided several suggestions on the need to empower fictional narratives in developmental and educational contexts. Since imagination and creativity are important processes involved in cognitive development [1], respective adults and teachers should provide support to children, helping them to narrate well-formed stories from their imagination that are enriched with a complex action. Narrative interventions and linguistic skills in schools should be organised through activities that consider the role of adults or expert peers to promote the ability in children to construct complex imaginary stories. with

Moreover, from a developmental and clinical point of view, this activity seems really important to help children become familiar with unexpected events that need to be faced and resolved. Since the result of the Complicating actions content analysis reveals different kinds of narrative devices children use to violate expectation, teachers and clinicians could develop narrative tools to help children, especially in the context of psychological suffering, to imagine and construct negative and positive unexpected events, as well as to provide a resolution.

CONCLUSION

In summary, these results demonstrated that children manage to construct stories about personal memories, and they usually do so by introducing one Complicating action around which the story revolves . They were asked to tell the story of a great trip, thus they were not forced to include a negative event in terms of a classic Complicating action. However, they also inserted it to show that their autobiographical memory deserved to be narrated because something unexpected of a negative or positive nature really happened.

Children seem less capable of giving a story format to fictional narratives, but only if they are not guided . With an incipit that activates and scaffolds their storytelling, children produce good stories, and also to a greater extent than in personal narratives; furthermore, they tend to construct their fictional narratives on several complex actions. It is clear how children attempted to capture the reader's attention through numerous narrative devices as if they would like to meet the request of adults, represented by the provided incipit. Conversely, in ideal fictional narratives, the focus seems mostly oriented to the final point, which is the object of children's desires and not on the journey towards achieving it.

Finally, Complicating actions can also assume a positive connotation: they can be seen not only as a problem but also as unusual circumstances that positively disrupt the course of events.

Based on these findings, the role of memory appears to be essential in explaining both personal and fictional narratives. As it was stated, memory and imagination are deeply connected [1] since memory has a double nature, which includes reminiscences of past experiences (retrospective memory) and expectations about the future (prospective memory) [46]. In this work, it can be seen how narration on the topic of travel corresponds to the three different aspects of memory: a) the autobiographical memory, from which children obtain information to narrate their greatest trip; b) the semantic memory, that provided material to talk about the expectations and wishes of an ideal trip; c) the semantic and procedural memory, that served to construct good stories about the exploration of a new city, inspired from the fairy tales listened in the past. Thus, memory represents a critical process that supports narration and contributes to the construction of different kinds of stories.

It is not easy for primary school children to construct a Complicating action that is a "possible" violation of the previous text of the story. In autobiographical narratives, they can be helped by memory but in fictional ones, they tend to invent completely extraordinary events that are not a "logical" violation with respect to what could be expected. For this reason, it seems important to that in the school, careful work is done on the problem of Complicating action in order to help children build stories where expectations are violated by a contextually inconsistent event. This work can lead children to perform, even when they have to examine reality, more accurate analyses of events, for example by distinguishing between the violations of the canonicity which are improbable but possible by completely impossible violations. A work of confrontation between fictional stories and autobiographical stories can, in this regard, constitute a good didactic strategy.

One limitation of this work can be related to the format of stories with incipit, that differed from the other two types of narratives. In fact, while personal travel stories and fictional travel stories were narrated in the first singular person, stories with incipit featured a character; the child who explored the new city, which led the children to construct the story in the third person. It might be that the incipit and the presence of this character activated the narrative genre of the fairy tale and encouraged the creation of classical stories in this group. In future, it would be interesting to test the role of the incipit in a story told in the first singular person, to reduce the gap among the three types of narratives.

Overall, this work contributes to the field of research regarding the comparison between personal and fictional narratives in childhood in two particular ways: a) it has depicted the role of scaffolding strategies to promote narrative competencies in fictional narratives; b) it has shown the importance of considering different types of Complicating actions in stories that children construct about their memories and their expectations.

ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

The study was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board.

HUMAN AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

No animals/humans were used for studies that are the basis of this research..

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

Informed consent was taken from all the participants when they were enrolled.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data supporting the findings of the article is available in the Unit of Narrative Studies, University of Florence. The corresponding author of the present work is avaialble for any information about data.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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