

Interest can be expressed in a variety of ways, but one way is to focus on the things you were looking for, ignoring the things you were not prepared to deal with. Another way to look at this is to take the view that, since we can only understand things that relate to our own experiences, it is actually very difficult to hear things that people say to us that are not interpretable through those experiences. In other words, we hear what we are capable of hearing. When what we hear relates to what we know, what we care about, or what we were prepared to hear, we can understand quite easily what someone is saying to us. If we have heard the same story or a similar story before we can also understand more easily what we are being told.

Understanding, for a listener, means mapping the speaker's stories onto the listener's stories. One of the most interesting aspects of the way stories are used in memory is the effect they have on understanding. Different people understand the same story differently precisely because the stories they already know are different. Understanders attempt to construe new stories that they hear as old stories they have heard before. It follows then that one of the major problems in understanding is identifying which of all the stories you already know is being told to you yet again.

In the shallowest form of understanding, a hearer has only one story that he wants to tell. No matter what you say to him, he tells you his story. He understands what you say as something that reminds him of the story that he wanted to tell in the first place. Thus, his understanding algorithm needn't have more in it than a detector for when you have stopped talking, and perhaps he doesn't even need that. One typical case of this kind of understanding involves people who we might label as crazy, people who just rattle on without regard to the world around them.

In the world of computers, we have an analog in machines that do their thing irrespective of the wishes of the user because the user either doesn't know how to communicate instructions to the machine or else doesn't know how to stop the machine once it has begun to do its thing. The crazy person or the user-hostile computer has a story to tell, and it may not really care about whether you want to hear that story. For them, understanding means no more than unrestrained storytelling.

A less shallow form of understanding takes place when listeners with many stories to tell pay enough attention to what you have said in order to relate the story in their repertoire that is most closely connected to what they have heard. But, in a sense, this still seemingly shallow understanding may be all we can really expect most of the time. Now, this view may seem rather radical. After all, we do see and hear new things every day. To say that we never have to understand any story that is brand-new may be overstating the case. And, of course, we do get presented with new stories. My point is that we don't really understand them.

Well, more accurately, we don't understand them as new stories. They may be new enough, but we nevertheless persist in seeing them as old stories. To understand what I mean here, consider the possibility of this hypothesis in

Let me tell a story: I went to visit a cousin of mine who is curious about why family members turned out the way they did. She asked me whether I knew anything of interest about our mutual grandfather. I told her my father always says his father (our grandfather) never really talked to or had much time for him. My father explains this reticence in a variety of ways having to do with how much work my grandfather had to do. Recently, however, I heard that whenever he didn't have much work, my grandfather would go to the movies by himself. My cousin was very excited by this information and ran to tell her grown-up daughter. It seems that both my cousin and her daughter have the habit of going to the movies alone and thought that they were quite odd to do this. They found something fascinating about the fact that their ancestor did the same thing. I found it all quite confusing myself. My cousin and her daughter are very gregarious people. My grandfather never spoke to anybody. My point was that growing up with this man as a father was probably difficult. My cousin's point was something else entirely. When I noted the differences in our perspective, she was too excited about discovering our grandfather's predisposition for going to the movies alone to consider another point of view.

People are only able to hear part of what is being said to them. Some of the reasons for this are obvious. Most of what we hear is complex and has so many possible avenues of interpretation and provides so many possible inference paths that people must make their choices as they listen. We cannot think about all the possible ramifications of something we are being told. So we pay attention to what interests us.

Understanding Other People's Stories
Roger C. Schank

its strongest form. Let us assume an understander who knows three stories. No matter what story you tell him, he will tell one of his three stories back. If understanding means matching the story we are hearing to the stories we have already heard, the strong form of my hypothesis states that an understander must decide which of the three stories he knows is most applicable. When he has found some way to relate the new story to an old one that he knows, we can claim that he has understood the new story as well as could be hoped for.

Looked at this way, the strong hypothesis appears somewhat silly. Why should we label as "understanding" a process that merely differentiates among three stories? In some sense, we shouldn't. But let's consider the same situation where the understander knows ten thousand stories. When he selects one to tell as a response to the new one that he has heard, he will most likely seem more profound than the understander who has only three stories. If he has used sound principles for selecting a story to tell from his data base of ten thousand, we are unlikely to dispute his having understood the original story. But naturally the process of understanding in both cases is identical; only our subjective judgment allows us to decide that one understander seems to have "really" understood. We cannot look inside people's heads to see what the difference in their understanding of a new story is; therefore, from an objective evaluation of the output alone, we still can measure understanding only by how effectively and reasonably we think the responsive story relates to the input story.

Now, my argument here is that all that people are doing when they understand is figuring out what story to tell. . . . In some sense, then, no two people can really understand a story in the same way. You can't understand a story that you haven't previously understood because understanding means finding (and telling) a story that you have previously understood. Finding some familiar element causes us to activate the story that is labeled by that familiar element, and we understand the new story as if it were an exemplar of that old element. In this way, we find things to say to those who talk to us. These things differ considerably from person to person, thus accounting for the very different ways in which two people can understand the same story. . . .

Indexing Stories

If our knowledge is really a collection of hundreds of thousands of stories, then finding the one we need leaves us with a massive indexing problem. Of course, finding stories is a problem that people seem to manage with some ease, if not with perfection. So we probably have some method that works. To see what I mean here, let's consider an actual situation of story understanding.

A group of people heard two monologues from the movies *Diner* and *The Breakfast Club*. In each monologue, the speaker tells some listeners about a problem of his. The subjects in this informal experiment were asked to imagine that they were the friend whose advice was being solicited or to expect that, as conversational partners, they would have to say something back. The

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subjects were asked, therefore, to tell a story or to give some advice or to comment in any way that came to mind. . . .

Here is the first story, from *Diner*, exactly as it was read to the students, from *The Actor's Book of Movie Monologues* (Marisa Smith and Amy Schewel, eds.; New York: Penguin, 1986).

TIME: 1959

PLACE: Baltimore, Maryland

A group of six high-school friends get together around the Christmas-New Year holidays. Most of them have stayed in town after graduation. Shrevie, the first of the group to get married, works in an appliance store and nurtures his obsession for his record collection. He can tell you what's on the flip side of practically every record he owns. His collection is kept in frighteningly fastidious condition—with a detailed system of categories that would put the Library of Congress to shame.

Eddie, his pal, a ferociously loyal Baltimore Colts fan, is planning on marrying Elise on New Year's Eve on the condition that she pass an outrageously difficult football quiz he has prepared for her. One night, in front of the local diner where the guys hang out, two days before the test, three days before the wedding, Eddie asks Shrevie if he's happy with his marriage to his wife, Beth. Shrevie answers.

SHREVIE: You know the big part of the problem? When we were dating we spent most of our time talking about sex. *Why* couldn't I do it? *Where* could we do it? Were her parents going to be out *so* we could do it. Talking about being alone for a weekend. A whole night. You know. Everything was talking about gettin' sex or planning our wedding. Then when you're married. . . . It's crazy. You can have it whenever you want. You wake up. She's there. You come home from work. She's there. So all the sex-planning talk is over. And the wedding-planning talk. We can sit up here and bullshit the night away, but I can't have a five-minute conversation with Beth. But I'm not putting the blame on her. We've just got nothing to talk about.

The first subject chose to tell a story about a friend of his:

SUBJECT 1: In high school, I had a friend named Larry who was a couple of years older than me. We were the two computer jocks in school. His dad had died, and his mother was sort of on hard times. But Larry was doing OK, and we used to go to the beach together. We had this great arrangement with the computer teacher. The teacher would teach one day, and we would teach one day. This was summer school. The day that we taught the teacher would take off, and the day the teacher taught, we

would take off and go to the beach. It was a great way to get summer school credit. I think about where I am now, and where Larry is. Larry didn't go to college. He didn't really take his hacking talents anywhere. He got married as soon as he got out of high school. He was a manager of a Shakey's in Hollywood. Now he's a group manager at Shakey's in Mar Vista, and he's married to this stupid woman. It's really a sad story. The guy just exploded—and he had all that potential. He just didn't know what to do once he got out of high school. He didn't know what to do with himself, so he got married and got a job like he was supposed to.

One thing that we do when we understand a story is to relate that story to something in our own lives. But to what? One thing seems clear. Potentially, we can see Shrevie's story in many ways. Subject 1 understood Shrevie's story by relating it to one about a friend of his whose life never amounted to much. In other words, according to his value system, he saw Shrevie's statement as a story about how one can get trapped into a dull life by marrying right out of high school. To put this another way, Subject 1 seems to believe that marrying too young leads to a dull and pointless life. Subject 1 also probably believed this prior to hearing Shrevie's story. Thus, we know two things. First, Subject 1 drew a conclusion from Shrevie's story that confirmed a view he already had about the perils of marrying too early. Second, he already had labeled a story in his own memory with such an index.

So the first index we shall identify is:

INDEX 1: Marrying too early can lead to a dull and pointless life.

Actually, we cannot say for sure that this is the index that Subject 1 used. What other matches are there between Subject 1's story and Shrevie's story? Both stories are also about the following:

INDEX 2: Blindly following scripts that are chosen for you in life can cause you to raise questions when it is too late.

This index, also, might not be the one that Subject 1 actually used, although clearly Subject 1 believes this generally and believes this about Shrevie specifically. However, and here is the important point, the story that Subject 1 heard, namely a story about the futility of early marriage, was not the same story that the other subjects heard at all.

Now let's consider how Subject 2's understanding of Shrevie's story differed from Subject 1's understanding:

SUBJECT 2: I had the same experience. Basically you desire things that you can't have, and often once you can have them, you don't desire them as much. I remember that with a woman I was always interested in sexually over the course of many years. Either she had boyfriends or I had girl-

friends, and we never consummated our relationship. For four or five years, I always kept in contact with her, wrote letters, and so forth, but independently of anything else, I considered her a friend. A year or two ago, we did end up having sex. What's interesting to me is that, afterwards, I wasn't all that interested in her friendship. Now we sort of occasionally make efforts to see each other, but I find that I don't have much motivation. It's very disillusioning. I realize that most of my interest in her must have been sexual, particularly in trying to get something I couldn't have, and not in her, herself. That reminds me of this situation. You seem to be saying a similar thing which is that you thought you really loved your wife when she was your fiancée, but now that you have her, you realize that what you really wanted was the conquest. Part of it is political. I guess the opposite story that I could tell is about a woman I knew a year ago. I saw her for about two months, very heavily, but it was a platonic relationship pretty much because she had a boyfriend, and we were still trying to decide what would happen if we didn't want to meet behind his back. In the end, she decided to stay with him. She has remained in my mind very, very strongly. I think the reason for this is that I didn't succeed in the conquest. So she occupies my imagination disproportionately. Well, is there any solution to this? One relationship that I had was very successful for three years. Why did it survive once we had sex very regularly? I think the answer is that there has to be a lot of intrinsic interest in the person outside of sex and the relationship. So if it is just the conquest, then you lose interest. It's not that having sex makes it less interesting—it's more that what really is often at issue is the power relationship. If that's all there is to the relationship, making the conquest, then it won't last.

Subject 2 sees Shrevie's story as a story about sex, not early marriage. He understands Shrevie to be saying that he got married as a way of getting sex on a regular basis. Here are some of the indices that Subject 2 explicitly mentions:

INDEX 3: You desire things you can't have, and then when you can have them you don't desire them so much.

INDEX 4: Desiring sex clouds your judgment about whether you really like and want to spend time with the person you desire.

INDEX 5: Good relationships depend upon intrinsic interest in a person, not sex.

INDEX 6: The exercise of power in the form of sexual conquests can be a strong motivating force.

Notice that while this interpretation is a perfectly reasonable way to understand Shrevie's story, it simply isn't the way Subject 1 understood it. Subject 1 sees the story as one about the promise of life unfulfilled. Subject 2 sees

this story as one about the hazards of thinking with your sex organ. Clearly, this story is about both of these things. Surely Subjects 1 and 2 would agree that the other's interpretation is valid, but what each learned from the story is different.

One question to ask here is what kind of animals these indices are. They look a great deal like beliefs. In a sense, I am arguing that each subject learned very little precisely because they both saw the stories as simply verifying already-held beliefs. The four indices above are certainly things that Subject 2 believes, but they are also labels that the mind uses to find what it knows. It almost couldn't be any other way.

Consider for a moment what it might mean to believe something and not be able to justify why one believes what one believes. Certainly inarticulate people have difficulty with that sort of thing. And, in fact, we do use that ability, namely the ability to justify one's beliefs with evidence, as a measure of intelligence and reasonableness. In other words, we expect intelligent people to have a story to tell that explains why they believe what they believe. But how can they do this? The mental mechanisms that are available must be ones that connect beliefs to stories. The fact that we can do this is obvious. It follows, therefore, that beliefs are one possible index in memory. Construct a belief and you should be able to find a story that exemplifies that belief.

Thus, for Subject 2 at least, beliefs and indices are one and the same. Understanding, then, in this model depends upon being able to see one's own beliefs in whatever one is trying to understand. Understanding Shrevie's story for Subject 2 meant identifying what he believed about what was happening to Shrevie, but the beliefs expressed in the story that Shrevie told are Shrevie's beliefs. So what we are seeing in the understanding process is the attempt to understand the beliefs of another in terms of one's own beliefs.

An index is a juxtaposition of another person's beliefs, made evident by statements or actions, with one's own beliefs. Indices are not beliefs, but are actually beliefs about beliefs. In other words, our reactions to the implicit beliefs of others cause us to consider what we believe about the same subject. We can either directly access what we believe by finding our own belief and telling a story that exemplifies it, or we can use the belief expressed in the story as if it were one of our own and see what story we might have stored away in memory under that label. Alternatively, we can create a new belief that is a juxtaposition of what we heard and what we might think about what we heard. This new belief might already exist and thus we would find another story to tell, but possibly the new belief will be entirely new. If this is the case, we need to create a story that exemplifies the belief or it will be lost.

Indices are phenomenally complicated and phenomenally important. We find what we want to say effortlessly and unconsciously. But to do so, we must construct complex labels of events that describe their content, their import, their relation to what we know and what we believe, and much more. It is effective indexing that allows us to have stories to tell and enables us to learn from the juxtaposition of others' stories and the stories that we are reminded of.

Let's now consider another subject:

SUBJECT 3: There seems to be a real pattern of joking between guys that are married and guys that are not married or are about to be married. I've been having some conversations like this because I'm getting married in the fall. I think there is a standard pattern that's involved in these stories. Unmarried guys and married guys joke to each other a lot about sex. I remember hearing the comment, jokingly said because I am getting married soon, "Oh, you'll be married, and you'll understand it someday, my boy." It seems to be a comment that sometimes is said seriously, but a whole bunch of jokes are based around it.

Subject '3 is a very clear example of an idiosyncratic understander. Obviously, he had been talking with many people about getting married and had been subjected to various jokes about sex and marriage. He sees Shrevie's story as yet another person bothering him with worries about why one should not get married. Obviously, that was not the intent of Shrevie's story. Shrevie did not say what he did with Subject 3 in mind. Equally obviously, Subject 3 knew this. Nevertheless, Subject 3 took Shrevie's story personally as yet another married person trying to scare him about getting married. He, too, had heard this story before, but the story he had heard was about why marriage will make you unhappy. Note that neither of the previous two subjects sees the story in this way.

With that in mind, let's look at another response. Subject 4 understood Shrevie's story in terms of the belief that Shrevie had expressed:

SUBJECT 4: Something like that happened to me with my girlfriend. It must have been right after things had gotten past the initial stage, that we really knew we were together, and we started sleeping together. I remember I was sitting on the floor one morning, and she was doing something in the kitchen. So I said to her, "What do lovers do when they're not eating or screwing?" She threw a spoon at me. She didn't think much of the question. But I think it was a question that bothered me for a long time. We had to kind of learn what to do and what we were going to talk about and what we were going to do when we weren't eating and screwing and doing the things that we knew we had to do anyway.

Subject 4 understood this story exactly as it appeared on the surface. While the other subjects tried to relate the story to some deeper theme about marriage or life or sex, Subject 4 asked himself the question: *Well, what else is there to do with a mate other than screw and eat?* This question strikes at the heart of Shrevie's story in some sense. Rather than read a deeper meaning into the story, why did Subject 4 only see the superficial question? Because he had already asked himself that question. In other words, Subject 4 had seen this story before in his own life exactly as Shrevie presented it. The index here is:

INDEX 7: What do lovers do when they are not screwing or eating?

While indices clearly can be beliefs, indices can obviously be questions also. This assertion is obvious because people can answer questions. In order to answer them, they must be able to use something in them to find a story in memory. But what?

People can ask and answer their own question rather easily. They can query themselves about real world facts (What was the name of George Washington's wife?), about internal facts (What is my favorite flavor of ice cream?), about recent history (Where was I when I heard about the crash of the space shuttle?), and about beliefs (Should a man open the door for a woman?). People do not know how they find the answers to such questions, but they know that they can find them if they only ask.

Perhaps equally important is the fact that people know, again implicitly, what questions not to bother asking themselves because they know they can't easily find the answer. These include questions about forgotten past history that has never come up again (What was the name of the little girl who sat next to me in the second grade?), things that no one remembers if they are asked in the wrong way (What picture was on page forty-two of your science text in high school?), and things that we know were never stored away in the first place (Tell me five word analogies that were on the SAT test that you took to get into college).

Why are some questions answerable and others not? The answer is indices. Certain concepts, and the words that name those concepts, are indices in memory and others are not. George Washington is an index. So is ice cream, the space shuttle, and etiquette. But book is not an index, at least not by itself. Page numbers are almost never indices, and SAT may be an index, but curiously not to the SAT itself. In any case, while it is clear that most beliefs are indices, not all concepts are.

Even a superficial reading that results in the recognition of a story as one of your own stories can differ from person to person. Consider the next subject:

SUBJECT 5: You're right. You got married very young. When you're young like that you are very preoccupied with sex. I remember the time before I got married, going over to a friend's apartment in order to have a liaison with my wife-to-be because we couldn't at the home of my parents. That wasn't accepted.

Here, Subject 5 recognizes a story from his own life, not about what else you do besides sex, but about the complexity of getting sex.

INDEX 8: Young people must go to extremes to find places to have sex.

Subject 5 did get divorced from the wife he refers to, so perhaps he is also making a prediction about what will happen to Shrevie. Perhaps he is saying

that interest in making arrangements for sex can provide the interest in a relationship. Yet, even here, Subject 5's view is that young people find things to do and talk about that do not relate to what marriage will be like. Subject 5 saw Shrevie's story as a story about himself. Here too, understanding means finding a story you already know and saying, "Oh, yeah, that one."

The last subject did not see this story as being about sex or marriage. For him the index was quite different than it was for the others:

SUBJECT 6: Well, that reminds me of the qualifying exam in Artificial Intelligence actually. It reminds me of the phenomenon where you're spending time thinking about one particular thing going on in your life, and then when that thing is over you are supposed to be happy because you have passed through this barrier. Before you get married, your main goals are having a place to have sex and having sex, and then when you're married, that's taken care of, and then, all of a sudden, all sorts of other problems start to creep in. That reminds me of the qual. You're focused on how your whole life is going to be okay if you just pass the qual; but when you pass the qual, then other aspects of graduate school start sweeping back in. All of a sudden, you're upset that your room is a mess, and your social life starts to seep back in, and you have to find a way to do research.

Subject 6 is referring to the qualifying examination in Artificial Intelligence that graduate students spend months preparing for in their second year at Yale. If they fail, they are asked to leave graduate school. This particular subject had passed his exam three years earlier, but his office mate had taken the exam a month before this story was read to him. For Subject 6, certain ordeals in life cause one to lose the forest for the trees. He sees that the trials involved in sex and marriage can prevent one from seeing that life goes on. He believes that focusing on immediate problems causes one to lose sight of the larger issues.

INDEX 9: Putting aside all your goals in order to achieve one major goal only works for a short time. Eventually real life reappears.

And, of course, here again, Subject 6 already believed this, prior to hearing Shrevie's story.

An important question, therefore, is, How did each of these subjects manage to find his own story in Shrevie's story when each story is so different? How does this kind of very subjective understanding actually work? The key point is that there is no one way to understand this story. When someone hears a story, he looks for beliefs that are being commented upon. Shrevie's story has many possible beliefs inherent in it. But how does someone listening to Shrevie's story find those beliefs? He finds them by looking through the beliefs that he already has. He is not as concerned with what he is hearing as he is with finding what he already knows that is relevant.

Picture it this way. An understander has a list of beliefs, indexed by subject area. When a new story appears, he attempts to find a belief of his that relates to it. When he does, he finds a story attached to that belief and compares the story in memory with the one he is processing. His understanding of the new story becomes, at that point, a function of the old story. The key point here is that once we find a belief and connected story, no further processing, that is, no search for other beliefs need be done. We rarely look to understand a story in more than one way. This process explains why each person understood Shreve's story quite differently. The mind cannot easily pursue multiple paths.

Let's pursue this way of looking at story understanding while considering a number of responses to a story taken from *The Breakfast Club*:

TIME: 1985

PLACE: Shermer High School, Shermer, Illinois

Five high school students, Brian, Andy, Alison, Clair, and John, must spend Saturday in detention at the school library. Their assignment is to write a thousand-word essay describing who they are. They all come from different cliques in their school and are described by one of the group as being "a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess, and a criminal." Although they don't know each other as they start the detention, by the end of the day each has revealed something about himself, and all five become friends. Andy, "the athlete," explains why he got detention.

ANDY:

Do you guys know what I did to get in here? I taped Larry Lester's buns together. Yeah, you know him? Well then, you know how hairy he is, right? Well, when they pulled the tape off, most of his hair came off and some skin too. And the bizarre thing is, is that I did it for my old man. I tortured this poor kid because I wanted him to think I was cool. He's always going off about, you know, when he was in school all the wild things he used to do, and I got the feeling that he was disappointed that I never cut loose on anyone, right? So, I'm sitting in the locker room and I'm taping up my knee, and Larry's undressing a couple lockers down from me, and he's kinda, kinda skinny, weak, and I started thinking about my father and his attitude about weakness, and the next thing I knew I, I jumped on top of him and started walling on him. Then my friends, they just laughed and cheered me on. And afterwards, when I was sittin' in Vernon's office, all I could think about was Larry's father and Larry having to go home and explain what happened to him. And the humiliation, the fucking humiliation he must have felt. It must have been unreal. I mean, how do you apologize for something like that? There's no way. It's all because of me and my old man. God, I fucking hate him. He's

like, he's like this mindless machine I can't even relate to any more. "Andrew, you've got to be number one. I won't tolerate any losers in this family. Your intensity is for shit." You son of a bitch. You know, sometimes I wish my knee would give in, and I wouldn't be able to wrestle anymore. He could forget all about me.

Subject 1 makes a comment and not a story.

SUBJECT 1: I always wondered what the assholes who beat up on me in junior high school were thinking. It's sort of nice to think that they were actually humans and that they did it for some reason.

There must be a story, however, behind the comment. Subject 1 got beaten up in school and never understood why. The particular stories are probably not interesting stories or else Subject 1 didn't feel like telling them. Nevertheless, he was reminded of them. How?

One possibility is that *bullies who beat up smaller kids in high school* is an index which Subject 1 has used to label one or more stories in his memory. He first had to construct that index from the story he heard. Next, he had to find the stories in memory labeled by that index. Then, on listening further to the new story, he had to recognize that his story in memory had no reason listed for why someone was beating him up. As he hears a reason in the new story, he finds that he has no old story to match it against. Thus, he can, if he wants to, learn something from this story. Namely, he can add a possible reason derived from Andy's story to explain the actions of the actors in his own story. Therefore, understanding a story in order to learn from it means finding an old story in memory that matches the new story but then enhancing the old story with details from the new.

Now let's look at the next subject:

SUBJECT 2: You have to be your own person. You can't keep trying to please someone else. You should develop to the best you can be, and your father will have to learn to like it.

Here we have another comment that seems to reflect an untold story. Somewhere in memory, Subject 2 probably has an opinion about this story that he is not revealing. Notice that the index is something like *When deciding what kind of person to be, trying to please someone else never works (Index 11)*. Again, the two subjects have heard very different stories.

In Subject 3's story, we have another case where the subject has understood Andy's story by reliving his own version:

SUBJECT 3: Part of the problem is that you are trying to prove yourself by doing things you don't want to so that you can appear cool. When I was

in eighth grade, I went to visit friends of the family in the countryside, and they had a boy about my age. He had a shooting rifle. So we went hunting, and he made a big point of having this special privilege of the gun. He wouldn't let me use it, and I was basically acting like a scout. But I really wanted to fire his gun. He said that if he killed one of the chipmunks which we were hunting then I would get the gun. Eventually, up comes the chipmunk. I pointed it out to him, and he shot and killed it. We walked over to the chipmunk—it looked so pathetic. It was still sort of twitching. It was such a pointless killing. I felt really bad because I felt responsible. I tried to be cool. You do something for no reason, no reason at all. You don't even stop to think about it. You just act, and, then afterwards, you feel terrible.

After telling his story, he then uses it to have better insight into Andy's story. The process seems to be like this. First, Subject 3 found an index from Andy's story which he states in the beginning as *Trying to prove yourself may cause you to do things you don't want to so you can appear cool* (Index 12). But as he tells his story, he begins to think about his own story rather than Andy's and realizes that his own story is labeled in an additional way by something like *Guilt follows the rush of the moment when you do something against your own value system* (Index 13). He then realizes that this is a better analysis of Andy's story. Still, in the end, what he has understood is really his own story although remembering it this additional time may have allowed him greater insight into it. We dwell on our own stories, not those of others.

Subject 4 is almost a classic case of not paying attention to someone else's story any more than is necessary for being able to retrieve your own:

SUBJECT 4: When I was in the seventh grade, I was in the locker room, and one of the guys who was a lot bigger than me, for no apparent reason, started jabbing and popping me. Everyone was standing around in a circle watching, as people tend to do. Then finally, even though he was so big, finally, I stood up and started wailing on him. Immediately everyone jumped on my side, and he was chased out of the place. So that was sort of a victory for me even though we didn't get into a bloody knockdown fight. All I had to do was stand up for myself and wail on him to get everyone else on my side.

The index getting *beaten up in school* caused Subject 4 to recall his own experience, and he found nothing else to think about. Certainly understanding in this case may seem to be something quite different from what constitutes understanding in the other examples, but the difference here is really a question of degree and not of kind. Understanding means searching memory. Sometimes we have less memory to search, and sometimes we have fewer indices available with which to search. An understander is, in some sense, in control of both of these variables. He decides how much attention to pay to

the world around him and how much to remember about what he has previously processed. Attention and memory are strongly related.

Subject 5 has resonated to an index that he found in Andy's story about how the efforts to please an unsuccessful and demanding father can lead to bad decisions in life (Index 14).

SUBJECT 5: A friend of mine had an older brother who ended up on drugs. Looking at his family situation was always weird to me. His father was an alcoholic sportswriter who seemed to have big expectations for both of his sons. The older son had been a stellar athlete and a great student in high school. In college, he just came apart and ended up a drug addict and wasted his mind one way or another. At one point, he was in a mental institution, I think. I was friends with the younger son, and I always wondered if the same thing would happen to him because he seemed to be very successful and very oriented towards doing well somehow or other where his brother had fucked up—but it seemed like he was on the same road his brother was on. So I don't know, I can sympathize with this guy.

The recalling of his story from memory caused Subject 5 to recognize Andy's story as one he had seen before, and no more really came to mind.

Subject 6 saw Andy's story as showing that *sometimes you act irrationally in a group when you wouldn't if you were alone* (Index 15).

SUBJECT 6: Yeah, I don't know. Everyone does all sorts of shit because of who they think they're supposed to be and because their parents told them who they thought they were supposed to be. Actually, it happens just as much from who your friends think you should be. I'm reminded of my undergraduate days, being in the band, an incredibly obnoxious and rude bunch of people. And in that gang, you felt safe doing things that you wouldn't do otherwise. You'd get up in the middle of a football game and do a series of Humpty Dumpty cheers: "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall, all the king's horses and all the king's men raped the queen." It's like you scream it at the top of your lungs in the middle of a football game. It's still an open question for me to what extent you sort of surrender yourself to something which seems like a bad thing to do. Or to what extent is it reasonable to let yourself try out things you wouldn't do otherwise? Basically, you can rationalize what you do in a lot of different ways. The question is to what extent are you rationalizing? When have you really done something that shouldn't have been done?

As in the case of Subject 3, Subject 6 evaluated his own story again, and this time constructed an index from a different point of view: *Trying new (bad) things with the encouragement of a group is probably the only way one can safely try them* (Index 16). Subject 6 is not sure of his beliefs and thus might see Andy's

story as more evidence to be considered. When our own beliefs about a situation are in a state of flux, however, we can learn from paying attention to other people's stories.

This aspect of story understanding is, in some sense, what we really mean by understanding although, as we have seen, it is not really the most common form of story understanding. We would like to imagine that we learn from the stories of others, but we really only do so when the stories we hear relate to beliefs that we feel rather unsure of, ones that we are flirting with at the moment, so to speak. When we are wondering, consciously or unconsciously, about the truth, about how to act or how to understand some aspect of the world, then the evidence provided by others can be of some use. We can extract evidence from a story, supporting or refuting a given belief that we are considering. This extraction process is an important form of understanding which serves as input to various thinking processes.

Subject 7 has seen Andy's story as a story about change. He has constructed an index such as *Part of growing up is selecting the groups that you want to belong to and trying their value system for a while* (Index 17).

SUBJECT 7: I am reminded of two people I knew in high school. One guy I had known since kindergarten. He was a jock, and he was a very popular guy. He hung out with everyone, and the girls all liked him. Toward the end of high school, he became more and more sensitive and less and less of a jock. He was a very smart guy. And I remember toward the end of high school, somebody told some crude joke, and Terry objected to the language. I thought this was strange coming from a jock, but he'd really turned around. And then I had another friend who I had also gone to school with since kindergarten. He was an artist, and his father was an artist as well. This guy was very talented and sensitive. The opposite thing happened to him. Toward the end of high school, he kind of stopped being smart and decided he wouldn't study much anymore. He started hanging out with all the jocks. That was much more fun, and he decided that he just wanted to become a regular guy. So I think of these two people's paths crossing. They both wanted acceptance by some group that hadn't accepted them before.

Subject 7 had seen the movie and probably remembered that Andy was making an uncharacteristic admission to a group of kids that were not at all macho. So for Subject 7, the index was quite different from those constructed by the other subjects. His index was constructed from more information than was provided by Andy's story. He was also recalling the story of the movie itself from his memory and "reading" that story as well. He was like the others, however, in that he was simply reminded of an old story and then let the old story take over the comprehension of the new story. . . .

There is a funny side effect to all this. We really cannot learn from other people's stories. In getting reminded of our own stories, ones which of course have more poignancy and more rich detail than the ones we are hearing, we

tend to get distracted into thinking more about what happened to us. The incoming story can get recalled in terms of the story of which we were reminded, but in the end, we rarely recall the stories of others easily. More often than not, other people's stories don't have the richness of detail and emotional impact that allows them to be stored in multiple ways in our memories. They do, on the other hand, provide enough details and emotions to allow them to be more easily stored than if the tellers had simply told us their beliefs.

So we are left with an odd picture of understanding. Real communication is rather difficult to achieve. We do not easily remember what other people have said if they do not tell it in the form of a story. We can learn from the stories of others, but only if what we hear relates strongly to something we already knew. We can learn from these stories to the extent that they have caused us to rethink our own stories. But mostly we learn from a re-examination of our own stories. We hear, in the stories of others, what we personally can relate to by virtue of having in some way heard or experienced that story before. Understanding is an idiosyncratic affair. Our idiosyncrasies come from our stories.

EXPLORING THE TEXT

1. What role, according to Schank, do expectation and memory play in our ability to understand the stories other people tell? How do we show others that we do, in fact, understand their stories? What makes some responses more "intelligent" than others, in Schank's view? Generally, when you share a personal story with a friend, what kind of response do you expect?
2. What does the technical term "index" mean to Schank in his analysis of the role of memory in understanding? What do indices do? What difference, if any, can you set between Schank's concept of an index and the more common notions of a theme or main idea?
3. How does Schank evaluate the individual responses of his students to the stories told in the movies *Diner* and *The Breakfast Club*? Which of these responses strike you as the most interesting or effective? Which strike you as the weakest? Why? In general, what seems to characterize responses that show "deep" or full understanding?
4. How does Schank describe the process of learning? Why is it so hard to learn anything new from the stories we hear, in Schank's view? Do you agree that in general "we dwell on our own stories, not those of others"?
5. Why does Schank believe that "no two people can really understand a story the same way"? What factors affect the way that two people interpret and respond to the same story? To what extent do you agree with Schank's conclusion that "real communication is rather difficult to achieve?"

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

1. Drawing on Schank's theory of story-based understanding, how might you explain the difficulty that Baldwin's narrator has in comprehending the dreams and desires of his brother in "Sonny's Blues" (p. 390)? How do the narrator's beliefs —