The truth of experience and its communication: Reflections on Mapuche epistemology

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Abstract

This paper explores certain ideas among rural Mapuche people in southern Chile regarding the epistemological status of experience. Drawing on a notion I call 'the singularity of personal experience', I explore why each experience, as something inherently personal, is understood as always necessarily true. I then move forward to look at how this diversity of experiential truths is manifest in social life, giving it a characteristic sense of uncertainty. Finally, I examine how rural Mapuche people believe it possible to overcome this singularity of experience, in order to create a sense of collectiveness, by establishing and nurturing social relationships.

In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault argues for the existence of a substratum of continuity and similarity that allows language to be a point of commonality between different human beings, stating: 'If everything were absolute diversity, thought would be doomed to singularity ... there would be no language. If language exists, it is because below the level of identities and differences there is the foundation provided by continuities, resemblances, repetitions, and natural criss-crossings' (2002: 132). In Foucault's view, if such a foundation did not exist, every encounter, understanding, communication and, on an even broader scale, 'society' would be impossible.

Foucault's observation makes explicit a key assumption that underlies not only the discipline of anthropology, but also Western thought in general. Recognizing

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this, I aim to explore through this paper how rural Mapuche philosophy calls into question just such an assumption. More specifically, I intend to show how and why rural Mapuche philosophy sees nothing absurd in maintaining, *pace* Foucault, that *since experience is indeed absolute diversity, thought is fundamentally doomed to singularity*. Let me start by recounting a story that I was told several times during my 15 months of fieldwork with rural Mapuche people in Elicura, a small valley in southern Chile:[1]

> Carolina left early in the morning, as usual. She took her car and headed towards Tirúa before dawn. The weather was awful, and the heavy rain made it almost impossible to see just a few metres out from the vehicle. Struggling in these conditions, Carolina drove a few kilometres until her car stopped suddenly. The engine was still working, but there was something blocking her way, something that 'pushed her back'. Intrigued, Carolina got out of her car to see what was in the way. Only then was she able to see it. Standing with its arms resting on the car's bonnet, a *witranalwe* seemed determined to prevent Carolina from proceeding. A chill immediately ran down her body, and she frantically returned to her car, turned it around, and, as fast as she could, drove back home.[2]

Carolina's story was just one of many similar narratives I heard while in Elicura. Indeed, in rural Mapuche life, events that may be deemed 'rationally unexplainable', such as the appearance of *witranalwe*, occur quite frequently. Furthermore, most accounts of these events are treated as unquestionable, regardless of where and when they occurred. This, however, was not the case with Carolina's story. Although some believed the story to be true, other people had their doubts. But these doubts, contrary to what one might expect, were often not directed at the experience itself: No one questioned the existence of *witranalwes* or the possibility of crossing paths with one. Rather, the scepticism centered on the person who claimed to have had the encounter. Put simply, what made the story questionable was that Carolina, the person who experienced it, was not Mapuche, but rather a *chiñurra* ('non-Mapuche woman').

In this paper, I attempt to follow recent arguments for the need to turn ethnography into an *ontographic* exercise (Holbraad, 2003, 2011). As I see it, this implies thinking of ethnography as an open-ended reconceptualization that aims not only to comprehend other people's worlds, but also to pay special attention to the particular underpinnings sustaining those worlds (cf. Toren, 2006). My goal, therefore, is to explain why some Mapuche people questioned Carolina's story, while others held it as indisputably true. In doing so, I intend to challenge the multiculturalist premises of Western thought, on the grounds that its presuppositions are 'incompatible' (Nadasdy, 2007) or 'incommensurable' (Povinelli, 2001) with those underpinning rural Mapuche epistemology.

Despite my best efforts, during my fieldwork I always struggled to believe in the fantastic beings and parallel realities often described by the inhabitants of Elicura. As time passed, I realized that this disbelief was not mine alone, but was also shared

by several others across the valley. As a friend once told me, when trying to provide a plausible explanation: 'The problem here is that people drink a lot [of alcohol]. That's why they imagine and say weird, funny things'. In those days, I thought that anyone who did not share my disbelief was simply not questioning the veracity of the stories. However, after a few months it became clear that my assumption was mistaken. Indeed, the fact that someone did not share my doubts did not imply that they did not doubt. My error was in supposing that the only way to doubt was by focusing on the possible reality of these kinds of phenomena. To the contrary, scepticism towards the contents of narratives was rather common among the Mapuche whom I lived with. Nonetheless, they did not situate their scepticism in an external reality, but instead doubted whether each person really had experienced what he or she claimed. In short, to paraphrase Wagner's (1981) famous depiction of his interaction with the Daribi, it was not that they did not doubt, but simply what was doubtful for them was not the same as what was doubtful for me.

In this article, I attempt to show that for many rural Mapuche people, the veracity of an experience does not depend upon how congruent and plausible it is with regards to a transcendent reality. Rather, it is something that lies in the very process of personal experience.[3] To comprehend this, it is crucial to understand that rural Mapuche people see experience as a strictly personal affair, one that is, by necessity, available only to the person who has lived it. At first glance, one would think that such a claim is nothing new, as it is widely accepted that experiences are self-referential and that 'we can only experience our own life' (Bruner, 1986: 5). Yet what I suggest here is that for rural Mapuche, there is nothing beyond the subjects themselves that influences personal experiences; that is to say, there is a lack of a supra-subjective continuity which would allow us to claim any a priori similitude between experiences lived by different persons. Although rural Mapuche people claim that experience is something personal, when they do so they are not assuming that this is because our individuality allows us a particular personal experience of one univocal reality (e.g. Keck, 1998). On the contrary, they are claiming that the very process of being-in-the-world, developed by each person, *forms* reality (Ingold, 2000: 99–100). This eventually implies a radically multivocal notion of reality, one that posits reality as something that is different for each specific person.

I will present my argument in three sections. Firstly, I will address why, from the standpoint of rural Mapuche philosophy, there is an inextricable link between personal experience and truth. Secondly, I will explore the social implications derived from this connection and how these are linked to a 'doctrine of the opacity of other minds' (Robbins, 2008; Robbins and Rumsey, 2008). Finally, I will discuss how rural Mapuche people think the truth of personal experiences can eventually be shared.

The truthfulness of personal experiences

As elsewhere in lowland South America (e.g. Gow, 1991), many rural Mapuche people are deeply concerned with determining a narrative's source before it is told

or listened to. Often, the narrator does this by directly stating whose experience the narrative depicts. If this is not possible, it is at least established who told the narrative to the current storyteller. This clarification, however, does not obviate the need for an 'original source', which is still referred back to, albeit sometimes only vaguely. Despite this, people generally confine themselves to narrating *their own* experiences.[4] The main concern behind knowing a narrative's source is to make crystal clear which person actually lived each story. It appears that every possible detail one can provide about a narrative's source is worth knowing. This is also true for accounts of experiences from the more distant, or even remote, past. In these cases, the empirical source identified is usually one of the storyteller's ancestors (e.g. 'My grandma said ...'). When referring to a more distant experience, such as from ancient times, the source named is vaguer: 'The ancient ones said ...' ('*Los antiguos decían ...*').

Even though I heard Carolina's story several times, I never had the chance to hear it from her own lips; it was always related to me by others, who carefully respected the ways in which Carolina had originally narrated the story. They were always emphatic in identifying Carolina as the person who had lived the experience that they were then recounting. They also maintained that a deep connection existed between the experience and the person who had lived it. Stories, apart from always being empirical descriptions, were inseparable from the persons who had lived them. This connection between narrative and experience was so deep that people frequently considered as worthless any narrative not rooted in an individual's experience.

The link between personal experience and narrative is fundamentally connected to how rural Mapuche philosophy conceives of experience, namely as a personal and autonomous act. Rural Mapuche articulate this concept in a rather simple maxim: *the only way to really know something is to experience that thing directly*.[5] I think this premise, which I call *the singularity of personal experience*, is key in any attempt to understand rural Mapuche lived worlds, because through it one may appreciate why personal experiences for rural Mapuche people are (almost) always inherently truthful.

There were many instances in which people openly asserted the importance of the singularity of personal experience. Here I will describe the two most frequent examples. The first is related to the way the people whom I engaged with during my fieldwork were generally reluctant to give advice (*ngülam*), something which appeared to hold true even when they were directly asked for it. The invariable answer I received, when asking most of my friends for guidance, was: 'I don't know, you're the only one who can know that' (cf. Course, 2011). In this sense, one might say that the general reluctance to give advice among rural Mapuche people occurs primarily beyond the boundaries of the consanguineal kin-group (fundamentally agnatic kin), a group of people who are said to be of 'common descent' or, as in Elicura, of 'the same blood' (González Gálvez, 2012).

The second example relates to the deep respect people hold towards what others think, a respect that manifests most clearly in their tendency to avoid

imposing on others opinions that they consider their own. This issue is related to the high value people place on personal autonomy (cf. Goulet, 1998; Stasch, 2009). This was most evident when I had a long conversation about 'Mapuche traditions' with Alberto, a respected elder renowned as one of the most knowledgeable residents of Elicura. In the midst of a long discussion, I asked him: 'What if I tell you that I'm Mapuche?' Alberto beamed at me and calmly said: 'That would be ok; then you're Mapuche'. At first, I thought he was joking, so I asked: 'How can that be? If I say I'm Mapuche, am I really?' Alberto answered: 'Of course, what you think is what you think, and nobody can mess with that. *Each person owns his thoughts*' ('*cada persona es dueña de su pensamiento*'). Then he took a deep breath, and very succinctly, as if to end our conversation, said: 'You may think whatever you want; it's your business…but what I think is a completely different thing'.

Before discussing Alberto's statement any further, I would like to clarify a few basic ideas about the concepts rural Mapuche use concerning experience and some related notions. It seems there is no equivalent term available in Chedungun ('language of the people') for 'experience', but people usually employed *mongen* ('life') when I asked for a translation of the Spanish word '*experiencia*'. Simply by living, by experiencing, Mapuche people acquire what they call *kimün* ('knowledge', 'wisdom'), which is something one accumulates personally. Eventually, this *kimün* informs and provides the raw material for each person's *rakiduam* ('thought'), which at the same time allows people to conduct themselves in their ways of living. There is thus a continuity from experience to thought, a relationship of mutual creation that ultimately allows each person to enjoy fully autonomous living, knowing and thinking.

Now, given this relationship of continuity between experience, knowledge and thought, in my view, when Alberto says '*each person owns his thoughts*', he is summarizing the radical singularity that characterizes rural Mapuche epistemology. At the same time, he is explaining why knowing who the person is that lived through an experience is as important as knowing the narrative itself. What each person experiences is unique, and no other person can replicate it. This is a key aspect of the rural Mapuche understanding of knowledge as something which emerges from a distinctly singular and personal phenomenology. This is why personal experiences are beyond the realm of contradiction. Their truth is found in people's singular experiences, not in the possibilities of a transcendent world where those experiences are embedded.[6]

Experiential truths and communicational doubts

So far, I have argued that for rural Mapuche, each personal experience should be considered a priori as true, in the sense that the veracity of experience is not measured against an external reality, but rather is dependent on each person's singular engagement with the environment. To fully substantiate such a claim, however, I first need to highlight a critical distinction made by rural Mapuche

people between, on the one hand, the truth of an experience and, on the other hand, the truth of communicating that experience to others.

Juana is a woman in her 70s who has lived all her life in Elicura. Like Alberto, she is renowned in the valley for what many people there assume is an exceptional knowledge of 'Mapuche traditions'. I frequently asked her about many aspects of Mapuche life that people associated with 'the old times'. During my fieldwork, I was for a time especially interested in the efficacy and values Mapuche people ascribe to language. One of my hopes was to identify the word for 'truth' in Chedungun. I asked everybody about this, and although I often received evasive answers, from time to time people said the approximate term in Chedungun was the prefix '*re*'. Yet this seemed only a partial answer, as scholars have proposed a considerable range of possible pragmatic translations of this prefix, ranging from 'sacred' to 'real' (Augusta, 2007; Erize, 1960).

And so eventually I put my question about 'truth' to Juana. After a few seconds of reflection, she answered: 'I don't remember, it seems that *se me achiñurró el lonko*' (roughly 'my head has become like a non-Mapuche woman's'). I then asked if the word she was looking for was '*re*'. She said, 'One might say *re* means truth, but there is another word that Mapuche people used to convey if what someone says is true or *koyla*' ('lie'). Our conversation continued, and the topic was forgotten. Hours passed and we all went to our bedrooms to sleep. Juana, however, kept thinking about this word that she could not remember. I know this because the next morning, when I went into the kitchen, Juana greeted me and then said, 'I remembered the word, it's *mupin*' ('to say the truth').

When distinguishing *re* from *mupin*, Juana was in fact highlighting the critical distinction between the truth of experience and the truth of communication to which I refer above. I think that while Chedungun has fallen into disuse in contemporary Elicura, this distinction remains extremely pertinent among Mapuche people there. It considers, on the one hand, that there are a few *essentially truthful* transcendental aspects of life. These aspects are what Juana considers as *re*, a term used to stress the way things are or should be. One of the truths associated with this status in rural Mapuche life is, as might be expected, that each person's experience is fundamentally truthful, and that each person's truths are the result of their personal phenomenology. Although there are other truths that might be understood as *re*, for the sake of my argument, I will restrict the term to this idea alone, which happens to be the most clearly cut foil for the term *mupin*.

On the other hand, and as Juana pointed out, there is another sense in which Mapuche people think about truth. This sense is related to an awareness of what takes place when personal truths (formed by personal experiences) are socially shared. Along these lines, truth (as *mupin*) is judged as dependent upon the relationship of congruence between an experience and the language used to refer to that experience.

As stated here, the distinction between *re* and *mupin* could be equated to the difference between, on the one hand, the premises by which particular personal engagements within several environments are understood and, on the other, the

problems regarding the nature of sociality. The first part of the distinction refers to *the singularity of personal experience*, the premise which we have indicated as central to rural Mapuche knowledge. The second is related to what happens when personal experiences are communicated among different people. In a nutshell, this *re*-truth is about how things are in a pre-social (or non-social) stage, while *mupin* signals a relationship of congruence between an experience and its linguistic elaboration – its 'expression' (Bruner, 1986) – and thus is an inherently social concept. For this, what is *re* is not opposed to *koyla* ('lie'), as pointed out by Juana. Every experience of something is necessarily *re*, truthful and real. Lying only appears when referring to the communication of an experience: it is scepticism over the ability of language to convey one experiential truth, and over the speaker's intent to express it truthfully.

So far, I have established that one of *re's* truths is that *truth itself is founded upon personal experience*. From this point, we can move towards a central premise: for rural Mapuche people, truth necessarily emerges from personal experience and does not exist beyond it. It is important to note that this does not imply the assumption of some sort of pragmatic approach to truth (see Blackburn and Simmons, 1999), reducing it to what is useful for the subjects. This case is not simply about the usefulness of personally upheld truths, but rather about truth's ontological foundations.

Rural Mapuche concerns about the sources of experience, the autonomy of thought, and personal experiences themselves are part of a particular ontology. According to this, the validity of what is experienced depends on the experiencer and on the way the phenomena are presented to him or her. It does not depend on the context of events. For this reason, experiences are intrinsically unquestionable by others. Every imaginable or recounted experience is possible. That is why, in contrast to what happened with me and the people who shared my scepticism,[7] others in Elicura usually did not doubt the plausibility of what was being narrated at any given time. Experiences, being personal, are necessarily limitless.

Therefore, truthfulness is not a property of utterances based on how congruent they are with an external environment. Rural Mapuche's emphasis on particular experiences makes truth instead a personal affair. What is truthful here is each person's capacity to know, engage, and develop his or her own views and thoughts. Truth is thus not something that transcends the person. Quite the opposite, it is more apt to say that truth is a property of a person's ongoing interaction with the environment.

At this point, I should clarify that I am not adopting a relativist position, attempting to deny external reality by simply arguing that reality's definitive features are always located in the person, in his tradition of thought, and so on. The rural Mapuche assumption of personal experience's truthfulness implies an ontological gap that cannot be explained *relativistically* (cf. Lima, 1999). As a concept, it is not a 'type' classifiable within a foreign ontology, but is rather a challenge to any kind of external ontology. It would perhaps suggest an invitation to reconceptualize other ideas by inhabiting the space between different ontologies and

noticing the gap previously hidden by ethnocentric misunderstandings (Viveiros de Castro, 2010). Related to this, it implies an awareness that what we recognize as 'culture' is not just a perspective placed over one objective reality, but rather something that interplays with, is generated by, and is also reproduced in relation to one specific ontology (cf. Clammer et al., 2004). Eventually, it is to be aware that epistemology depends on ontology and that the opposite is also simultaneously the case (cf. Bateson, 2000: 313–15).

On the ubiquity of uncertainty

This section deals with how the singularity of personal experience presented above becomes a problem when entering into social relations, and addresses the ways in which rural Mapuche people tackle this problem. I have established that, for rural Mapuche, the truthfulness of experience is not something found 'out there' as a shared dimension which everybody might have the same access to. Experiential truth is not necessarily something that is shared; we have not the same, but rather equivalent and differential access to it. When it comes to prioritizing the 'external environment' as the location of experiential truth, the Mapuche respond by personalizing the process. And thus, eventually, we realize that 'the truth of the matter is that the confusion is often ours: it is we who assume this image of a single, unified world, and not they' (Overing, 1990: 605).

With this in mind, we can comprehend the problem that rural Mapuche people see as intrinsic to sociality. To put it simply, because rural Mapuche emphasize *the singularity of personal experience*, sharing such experiences necessarily conveys an inherent sense of uncertainty. This is because there is a clear distinction between an experience and its 'expression' (*sensu* Bruner, 1986), which affirms the idea that one can be sure only about what one has experienced personally. When it comes to the Mapuche then, we may attest that, to a certain extent, language and communication present a problem of *authoritativeness* (Hill and Irvine, 1993). The fact that personal experiences are always truthful and respond to a personal phenomenology does not guarantee a person's ability to relate his or her experiences truthfully to others. Rural Mapuche people usually allude to this situation by questioning the real meaning of the messages that others deliver. By doing so, they articulate their ubiquitous two-forked scepticism. Firstly, how congruent is the relationship between a person's experience and the language he or she uses to describe it? (cf. Course, 2013). Secondly, how close is this person's experience to one's own experience? (A question that more directly addresses the task of assessing to what extent any narrated experience is valid to oneself).

The Mapuche and the doctrine of opacity of other minds

I have suggested that rural Mapuche social life might be depicted as having at its core a problem of *authoritativeness*, which results from the fact that people are fully aware that personal experiences are not necessarily shared. For many rural

Mapuche, this rests on two further premises: firstly, that such a notion of personal experience is strongly connected to the conception of people as unique entities (Course, 2011; González Gálvez, 2012); and secondly, that, as stated above, language does not have a fully congruent relationship with personal experience – or, alternatively, that this relationship exists solely on a personal level (which makes the experiences of different people mutually incommensurable).

For many rural Mapuche people, what a person experiences and knows is one thing. How a person socializes this (and what happens when he or she does so) is quite another. In this regard, one can never really know how congruent the relationship is between the *denotation* (language) and its *denotatum* (experience/thought). In practice, this implies that each time someone hears an utterance, he cannot get rid of one fundamental doubt: whether what he is hearing is *mupin* (something congruent with what the person experienced/thinks) or *koyla* (something which is not).

During my fieldwork, I was able to note this kind of doubt several times. Frequently, when asking someone what they thought about someone else's narrative, I received as an answer: 'I'm not sure what he was talking about'. People emphasized that doubt did not arise because a falsehood was necessarily located in the speakers' intentions, as if they wanted to lie to or deceive others. On the contrary, these statements inferred that the problem was located in language, as if it were an inefficient instrument for conveying thought.

The problem of *authoritativeness* among the Mapuche may echo what various ethnographers of Melanesia have referred to as the 'doctrine of the opacity of other minds' (Robbins, 2008; Robbins and Rumsey, 2008).[8] In simple terms, this doctrine indicates that one can never be sure what other people actually think. Speech is thus considered mere talk, because a direct link cannot be traced between it and what is really on the mind of the person who uses it.

Mapuche emphasis on the singularity of personal experience differs from this doctrine of opacity, as it is at times very extended and on other occasions much more limited. This is because what is *opaque* for rural Mapuche people is not just 'the mind', but also the body and the ways it experiences (González Gálvez, 2012). Opacity, then, can be extended to a problem of ontological difference and is not confined solely to the perceived limits of language. Despite these limitations, rural Mapuche still hold to the possibility of proper social relations. As I will address below, while rural Mapuche people consider persons to be unique, they also believe that by sharing certain substances or by managing relatedness, it is possible for people to become increasingly similar. Furthermore, through similarity, people may come to share perception and experience. And in this sense, it is thought that people may actually evaluate if what similar others say is *mupin* or *koyla* by contrasting it with what is *mupin* or *koyla* for themselves. Put simply, once people are increasingly similar, the foundations of their experiences will become more and more alike. I will focus on this statement further on. What is relevant for the time being is how uncertainty permeates communication, and how rural Mapuche people live in full awareness of this.

Dealing with uncertainty

The way rural Mapuche people confront many of the problems they see as inherent to communication is reflected in Alberto's statement that each person *owns* his thoughts. In order to know what is going on, people grant primacy to their own experiences, over and above those of others. Yet people's different truths do not contradict one another but are instead treated as parallel threads of experience. People usually have great respect for others' truths, even when these are different from their own.

Understanding how people use their personal experiential truths when coping with uncertainty is key, in my opinion, to appreciating that rural Mapuche truths do not compete for priority. Conversely, differing truths do not oppose one another, nor do they oppose an overarching concept of falsehood. This does not imply that these truths could not be denied. But denial should rest on each person's process of experience, and not on those of other people. To support my claim, I will now refer to one case from my ethnography.

My friend Hugo's cow was pregnant. He was extremely worried because her due date was fast approaching. When I asked him about the cause of his concern, he explained: '[This cow] is very lazy, so she always needs help to calve'. That kept him observing her behaviour, intent to help his cow as soon as she needed it.

At around the same time, I heard a statement whose salience I did not grasp until later. Chatting about cattle with one of Hugo's neighbours, I found that he was oddly insistent on the fact that cows have only one calf. As he put it, 'if they have two it's bad luck, and it means that somebody within their family is going to die soon'. One evening shortly after this conversation, Hugo's daughter shared with me her concerns about her father's preoccupation with the cow. He, as any old man, was not of the age to be so worried about a pregnant cow. However, she told me that she did understand him. She knew he cared about his cow, and she also understood that his concerns were related to the fact that this particular cow was *mellicera* ('frequently has twins') and thus particularly susceptible to difficult deliveries.

Sara, Hugo's daughter, knew quite well that some people said that twin calves were a sign of bad luck. But her personal view was that it was quite the opposite: a manifestation of good luck, simply 'because you have two calves instead of one'. In any case, other cows had had twin calves before, and nothing happened. 'People say those kinds of things because they're jealous', she concluded.

After a while, the cow finally gave birth to two calves. Hugo and his family were all exultant, and the others' claims about bad luck were not even mentioned. Several months later, when I left Elicura, Hugo and his relatives were all fine. Nothing bad, in their view, had happened to any of them. Many of their neighbours, nonetheless, kept the 'twin calves = bad luck' maxim as part of their repertoire. This despite the fact that I often pointed to Hugo's case as having proved the maxim wrong. They simply responded: 'That it hasn't happened in this case does not mean it's false'. The maxim, thus, could not be understood according to the logic I was employing.

One could say that the 'twin calves' maxim was not necessarily treated as wrong because it expressed a probability rather than a certainty. This explanation may well be right. However, there is a sense in which this kind of probability differs from one assumed from a non-Mapuche perspective. What is different is that, for rural Mapuche, these probabilities rest on personal engagements with the environment. They are not simply due to the transcendence of nature, nor to the possibilities of what is 'out there' beyond the agency of persons. Essentially, predictions are affirmations based upon past personal experiences. But subsequent contradictions of these affirmations deny neither that they were truly experienced nor that they were perceived truthfully. Hence, the predictions cannot be taken as false because they cannot be proven as wrong. When the prediction is uttered, it is obvious that alternative outcomes may occur. Anyway, its original truthfulness cannot be at stake socially.

Since rural Mapuche people conceive of experience as something personal, no experience can be negated *a priori*. No necessary given criteria of continuity or similarity is necessary, and no 'transcendental subject' allows a denial of personal experience based on a presumed objectivity.[9] This characteristic is crucial to how rural Mapuche people cope with the uncertainty of social life. Because they can never be sure about the congruence between a person's thoughts and speech, they find certainty, in their own experiential truths. This does not deny, the truthfulness of other people's experiences. All of these truths are possible. However, they are parallel lines that sometimes meet and at other times veer far away from one another, but never compete for primacy beyond the singularity of individual experience.

Rural Mapuche philosophy allows for yet another way to confront this ubiquitous uncertainty. We will now turn to how rural Mapuche put certain limitations to opacity claims, insofar as, for each person, only some minds are completely opaque, whereas others are in fact quite clear. The roots of this argument can be found in the way in which rural Mapuche people maintain that similarity is given and created. To explore this, I will return to the story I used to introduce this article.

Lying, truth, and distance evaluation

When introducing Carolina's story at the beginning of this essay, I pointed out the different kinds of doubts that it raised. I stressed the fact that I doubted something that was undeniable for many of my Mapuche friends. Whereas I was sceptical, my friends were acting on the awareness of something they knew simply because they engage in social life.

With this in mind, I now turn to address how rural Mapuche people, even when maintaining the singularity of personal experience, think personal truths can be effectively shared. To understand this, we should consider how, in rural Mapuche life, people conceive of similarity as being fundamentally subordinated to an open-ended creation, rather than something given, static and determined. In this sense, although some Mapuche recognize there are certain substances that allow

pre-social similarity between people – usually understood through the idea of sharing 'one same blood' – they simultaneously emphasize that these alone are not sufficient for achieving close similarity. Instead, close similarity can only be reached by cultivating social relations, sharing environments, and, in particular, developing intimate and close social bonds within one's home.[10] Close similarity is thus only recognized if created by carefully handling relatedness (González Gálvez, 2012).[11]

Here we may find the opacity doctrine's limits among rural Mapuche. It also explains why advice is usually proffered only among close kin. Close kin, besides sharing similar substances, often share many of the different spheres of life. As a result, their personhood is similar. There is an ancient Mapuche proverb recorded by Tomas Guevara: *Koila ngunen nieifui* ('Lying is astuteness'). In Guevara's words, this phrase was employed because 'according to Mapuche moral notions, lying is judged as a skill, as an art of deceiving the ones who are not relatives' (1911: 20). Contrary to what Guevara thought, I believe this art of lying was not restricted to non-relatives for moral reasons. More simply, it was because lying to close kin – to the people with whom one shares substances, intimacy, and therefore experience – would be almost impossible.

Bearing in mind this conception of similarity, I will now attempt to introduce what I call *the evaluation of the distances of experiential truth*. Simply put, this is a process by which singular persons measure how similar they are to other singular persons, in order to know how valid their personal truths are to each other. To explore this subject, I will now revisit Carolina's story.

When recounting Carolina's story, I had mentioned a fact differentiating this narrative from the many similar stories told on a daily basis in Elicura, a fact which allowed people to call into question the story's veracity. The problem was that Carolina, the story's central character, was not Mapuche, but rather a *chiñurra*. A German settler's descendant, Carolina moved to Elicura just a few years ago after developing a deep interest in what she thinks of as 'Mapuche culture'. Since then, for instance, she and her husband acquired some traditional Mapuche clothes and wear them on a daily basis, unlike most Mapuche people, who usually reserve such attire for special occasions. Her obsession has elicited various reactions from the residents of Elicura. Many found it suspicious because they did not understand why Carolina and her husband put so much effort into being Mapuche. 'They are always going to be *Winka* ('non-Mapuche'), no matter what they do', someone said. Others thought they were trying to obtain some of the benefits that the Chilean state grants to Mapuche people, intended as compensation for the historical bad treatment of indigenous peoples during their forced integration into the Chilean state (see Bengoa, 2004). There were others, nevertheless, who did not see anything strange in how the *Winka* couple acted, and they continued maintaining relationships with them.

Did this questioning of Carolina's story have anything to do with the diverse reactions she and her husband provoked in Elicura? Yes, but perhaps not in the way one would imagine. Setting aside those people who, like me, doubted the

existence of *witranalwes*, there were those who questioned the story because of the narrator's ontological status. To them, *witranalwe* encounters only happen to Mapuche people. Furthermore, many asserted, these spirits had abandoned Elicura Valley a long time ago, precisely due to *Winka* intrusion. Thus, if they did decide to reappear, it would obviously not be to a *chiñurra*, but to a Mapuche.

But one could also find people who neither questioned the experience nor the person it involved. My friend Juana put it in the following terms: 'People here in Elicura are quite *awinkada* ('*Winka*-like'). Maybe that's why they say it's a lie [Carolina's story]. But she seems to be much more Mapuche than many people who have Mapuche blood. Perhaps that's why she can see those spirits.'

These different reactions to Carolina's story show, firstly, that the possibilities of experience are directly linked to what one is. What one is, however, should not be understood as something already determined, but rather, as Juana points out, as something constantly created through conviviality (*sensu* Overing and Passes, 2000) and inhabiting the same environments with other people. Secondly, and related to this point, people value differently the relevance of substance in one's singularity. While for some it is a determining component, for others it can be moulded and overcome by people's social engagement. From there, thirdly, by sharing spheres of life, people may begin to create similitude, sharing in turn similar perspectives. It is from this premise that people can judge the distance between themselves and others. Indeed, by doing so, people can assess the distance between their own personhoods and those of others and, at the same time, assess how closely matched other people's truths are with their own. Juana, like many others, claimed that *Winka* people were not capable of experiencing *witranalwes*. Nevertheless, paradoxically, she also asserted that it was perfectly possible for Carolina to have had the experience as she claimed. What happens is that Juana's assessment of Carolina was not based on fixed substances but on the relationship she and Carolina maintained. It is this relationship that, according to Juana, had made Carolina, regardless of any substantial ontological barrier, become 'a Mapuche', a person similar to her.

Conclusion

'Sharing a world', wrote Pina-Cabral recently, 'is an essential condition, not only for thinking and speaking, but also for interpreting, and thus it is an unavoidable condition of the ethnographic exercise' (2011: 166). In line with the quotation from Foucault that I used to introduce this article, Pina-Cabral is supporting a principle of continuity that makes the anthropological enterprise possible. Without such continuity, there would be no way of approaching or understanding the other. In this paper, without denying the possibility of that continuity, I showed that for rural Mapuche people it should not be taken for granted, but rather thought of as being created through the establishment of social relations.[12] That is the only way rural Mapuche people think it possible to struggle against what they see as our fate of singularity.

When rural Mapuche people conceive of experience's truthfulness as something personal, truth is detached from any transcendent veil, and instead assumes a radical immanence. If, in Foucault, truth appears as something beyond persons and univocal, to which each person has the same access, for the rural Mapuche, who lack that principle, truth appears as something strictly personal, generally formed by multiple lines of ongoing personal experience. Importantly, these lines are not necessarily expected to converge. If that occurs, it would be due to an overlapping of experiences and/or persons (similitude of being), and not necessarily because there is something 'out there' allowing this to be the case.

To gain a deeper understanding of this premise, I drew on a Mapuche distinction between two senses of truth. On the one hand, we have a pre-social truth (*re*) that refers to how things 'really' are. On the other, we have a fully 'social truth' (*mupin*). This truth is the opposite of a lie (*koyla*), and is crucial to understanding why rural Mapuche social life is characterized by a ubiquitous uncertainty. In these terms, one pre-social truth would be, for instance, the premise of the singularity of personal experience. An example of a 'social truth' would be Carolina's story. 'Social truths' refer to how, most of the time, it is impossible to really know the congruence between what other people say and what they think.

Finally, this whole exploration has led me to believe that in order to understand rural Mapuche concerns, it is first necessary to question our own premises. This issue requires us to be aware that our own ontology is not universal, but simply one possibility among many. That is why it is essential to stress that, as Viveiros de Castro (1998) would say, anthropology should not merely concern itself with how we see the same world differently. The rural Mapuche epistemology I attempt to introduce here is different from others not because it is another solution to the same old problem, but rather because it addresses a different problem altogether. Personal experience for rural Mapuche people is a defining process, one that is far from subjectivism and objectivism. It is, simply, the outcome of a conception of life that, with its own foundations, is radically respectful of the singularity and autonomy of persons.

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Notes

1. The Mapuche are the largest indigenous group in Chile. Elicura is a rural valley located in the province of Arauco, in Chile's eighth region. It is inhabited by approximately 1500 people, half of whom self-identify as Mapuche (Lavanchy, 2007). I carried out fieldwork there from September 2009 to October 2010, as well as during several short-term visits since 2013.

2. Traditionally characterized as 'evil spirits' (Montecino, 2003), Mapuche people describe *witranalwe* in several different ways, ranging from powerful spirits with a human form to vanishing skeletons wearing a white or black suit. Such diversity is to be expected, given how Mapuche people conceive of personal experience, as we will see later.

3. A similar point has been underlined by Lima (1999) in her description of Juruna cosmology.

4. When people narrate the experiences of others, this difference is marked in the Mapuche language by introducing the evidential -*rke*/-*ürke* (Zuñiga, 2006: 155).

5. An ethnographical principle one can find in other Amerindian peoples (e.g. Goulet, 1998).

6. Closely in line with my argument, Bonelli (2012) has recently shown how 'spiritual' sicknesses among Mapuche-Pewenche people are explained as personal visions, which can only be seen by the person who experiences them (i.e. the person who is sick).

7. It is important to note here that, as will become clear later, social categories in Mapuche life are much more relational than essential. For example, when rural Mapuche talk about other Mapuche people who are non-Mapuche-like or who they claim to be Winka-like ('*awinkados*'), they are not necessarily asserting some kind of fixed state. Rather, they are more likely establishing a degree of distance or difference between people who may be called *awinkados* and themselves (usually defined as Mapuche, which in fact often serves as a pragmatic synonym for the 'self'; see González Gálvez, 2012: 116–20). Having said that, here and elsewhere in the text, when I seem to include in a fixed category the people who shared my way of doubting, I am doing so only to simplify my exposition. The only goal of this labelling is to highlight the fact that I and other sceptics like myself shared a belief in the existence of a transcendent reality.

8. Additionally, an insightful ethnographic account of what she labels 'the opacity of others' hearts' may be found in Rosaldo (1980).

9. Something essential for 'our episteme' (see Foucault, 2002: 264–70).

10. It has been widely argued that personal experiences may also be shared through ritual performances (e.g. Kapferer, 1986). However, this is not so clear among the Mapuche, who seem to stress personal understandings even of the most apparently collective experiential contexts (see Course, 2011: 138–59).

11. This is an aspect similarly emphasized elsewhere in lowland South America (e.g. Gow, 1991; Oakdale, 2008; Overing, 2003; Overing and Passess, 2000; Vilaça, 2002). Following this discussion, Course (2011) was the first to point out its relevance among the Mapuche. For a similar, more general approach, see Carsten (2004).

12. Something, by the way, ethnographers seem to unconsciously intuit, at least since Malinowski's development of 'participant observation'.

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