The Sociology of Storytelling

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Abstract

In contrast to the antistructuralist and antipositivist agenda that has
animated the "narrative turn" in the social sciences since the 1980s, a
more uniquely sociological approach has studied stories in the inter-
actional, institutional, and political contexts of their telling. Scholars
working in this vein have seen narrative as powerful, but as variably so,
and they have focused on the ways in which narrative competence is so-
cially organized and unevenly distributed. We show how this approach,
or cluster of approaches, rooted variously in conversational analysis,
symbolic interactionism, network analysis, and structuralist cultural so-
ciologies, has both responded to problems associated with the narrative
turn and shed light on enduring sociological questions such as the bases
of institutional authority, how inequalities are maintained and repro-
duced, why political challengers are sometimes able to win support, and
the cultural foundations of self-interest and instrumental rationality.

INTRODUCTION

Talk about stories is everywhere. Between 1970 and 1990, 587 articles on narrative or storytelling were published in the journals indexed by *Sociological Abstracts*. In the next 20 years, 10 times that many were published. Interest in narrative has swept fields as diverse as law, urban planning, cognitive science, anthropology, and organizational behavior. Interest in narrative has burgeoned outside academia, too. Reporters have rallied around a movement for narrative journalism, and psychologists around one for narrative therapy. There are degree-granting programs in narrative mediation for lawyers and in narrative medicine for physicians. Political consultants promise to create election-winning narratives for their candidates, and business consultants promote storytelling as a management strategy.

What accounts for the contemporary fascination with stories? In the social sciences, Bamberg (2007) pins it to a desire to capture the local and textured character of experience against the simplifying abstractions of behaviorist theorizing. More broadly, Illouz (2008) sees the rise of personal storytelling as coterminous with the union of Freudian self psychology and self-help in an enterprise that made performances of the self the route to happiness and success. Some postmodernist scholars have argued instead that when the old master narratives of progress, faith, and rationality became suspect, stories—particular, local discursive forms that claimed only verisimilitude and never absolute truth—became all that people could trust (Lyotard 1984). Add to that popular anxiety about the manipulative character of contemporary political discussion, and stories, especially personal ones, may seem appealingly authentic. Symbolically aligned with common sense rather than science, stories seem engaging and concrete rather than abstract. They seem democratic ("everyone has a story," we often say) rather than monopolized by elites (Polletta 2006, Higgins & Brush 2006).

This is not to say that popular opinions about narrative are only positive. To the contrary, people often worry that stories are deceptive and that their authenticity is a creative ploy. People call something "just a story" to refer to its weak claim to credibility, and "just her story" to refer to its one-sided and subjective character (Stokoe & Edwards 2007). People trust stories as normatively powerful and dismiss them as politically trivial, as entertaining but unserious (Cazden & Hymes 1978, Polletta 2006).

Popular beliefs about storytelling—about how stories work, what they are good for, and whether they should be trusted—should be central to a sociological approach to storytelling. Yet they have received relatively little study. Sociologists have concentrated more on the norms governing narrative's content than the norms governing either its use or its evaluation relative to other discursive forms. In other words, they have treated stories more as texts to be analyzed for the meanings they express than as social performances that are interactively constructed, institutionally regulated, and assessed by their audiences in relation to hierarchies of discursive credibility. The imbalance in how narrative has been studied is understandable. The wave of theorizing about narrative that swept the social sciences in the 1980s was inspired by the belief that, because people lived their lives in tune with the stories they told, analyzing those stories would provide a better explanation for their behavior than reigning structuralist explanations. Interview-based studies of the narrative construction of the self proliferated, as did methodological discussions of narrative as an alternative to positivist research. For sociologists, as for many other scholars, narrative was seen as capable of subverting the conventions of social structure and normal science.

The work on narrative that we highlight is different. Rather than probing the meanings evident in interview-elicited narratives, scholars in this vein have drawn on diverse methods—conversation analysis, ethnography, comparative historical research, and discourse analysis—to study stories in the contexts of their telling. Where they have studied narrative texts, they have focused on the institutional and

political conditions of texts' production, circulation, and reception. Where they have studied narrative practices—storytelling rather than stories—they have focused on the institutional norms governing those practices. Skeptical of the liberatory claims made for any discursive form, they have emphasized that stories' power is socially organized and unevenly distributed.

Narrative scholars working in this vein have not always been in direct dialogue with each other, nor are they all in sociology. Treated as a distinct perspective on narrative, they have not received as much attention as has work on narrative's relation to the self or narrative as a mode of analysis (for reviews, see Orbuch 1997, Franzosi 1998, Abell 2004, Riessman 2007; but see Ewick & Silbey 1995 and Loseke 2007 for perspectives related to the one we develop here). We hope to show, however, that this body of work has provided analytic purchase on enduring sociological questions about authority, inequality, conflict, and change. It has done so in part by responding to several problems that accompanied early versions of the narrative turn. Accordingly, after defining narrative and outlining early sociological work on the topic, we turn to the themes that animated the interdisciplinary wave of theorizing about narrative in the 1980s. We draw attention to several gaps in those theories and then focus on two strands of sociological work that have effectively contributed to filling them: one on narrative in institutions and one on narrative in politics. We conclude by linking some of the findings from this research to more general insights about how culture works and suggest further lines of investigation.

WHAT IS A STORY?

We use the terms narrative and story interchangeably. Many scholars have distinguished between the two, but they have done so in so many ways (compare, for example, Polkinghorne 1988, Mahoney 1999, Maines 2001) that we have opted instead to use more specific terms such as background narrative where appropriate. Sociolinguist William

Labov's definition of narrative has the virtue of simplicity: A narrative is an account of a sequence of events in the order in which they occurred to make a point (Labov & Waletsky 1967). Beyond that minimal definition, most scholars see narratives as having characters (who are human or human-like in their characteristics or perceptions). Audiences usually feel a sense of empathy with at least one character (on character, see Chatman 1978, Jacobs 2002; on story's eliciting of emotions, see Sarbin 1995). Only relevant events are included in the story, and later events are assumed to explain earlier ones. The causal links between events, however, are based not on formal logic or probability but on plot. Plot is the structure of the story. It is the means by which what would otherwise be mere occurrences are made into moments in the unfolding of the story. Plots are familiar to audiences from stories they have heard before, although the relations between the underlying plot structure and a particular story are complex (for a sense of competing approaches to the morphology of plot, including that of Propp, Barthes, Ricoeur, and Frye, see Brooks 1984; for social scientific approaches to plot, see Polkinghorne 1988, Somers 1994, Jacobs 2002, Ochs & Capps 2001, Polletta 2006). Finally, events in a story project a desirable or undesirable future. They make a normative point. Storytellers rarely say explicitly to their audiences, "and the moral of the story is . . . ." Rather, the story's larger meaning seems to be given by the events themselves (White 1980), while requiring interpretation on the audience's part (Iser 1972, Polletta 2006). Insofar as stories draw on a cultural stock of plots, they communicate the normative values that are associated with those plots (MacIntyre 1981, Ochs & Capps 2001).

Unlike an explanation, then, a narrative represents cause and effect relations through its sequencing of events rather than by appeal to standards of logic and proof (Polkinghorne 1988). Reports also explain through their representation of events, but they do not organize events as carefully and, in particular, do not rely on suspense to make a normative

point (Robinson 1981, Polanyi 1985, Trinch & Berk-Seligson 2002). An argument makes a normative point, but the point is not integrated into the account of events and revealed by the account's end (Polkinghorne 1988). More than arguments, analyses, reports, or descriptions, audiences expect stories to be open to multiple interpretations; audiences are less likely to hear ambiguity in stories as imprecision or error (Polletta 2006). Myths are stories that have a sacred character and that explain how the world or a people came to be (Dundes 1976). Narratives are forms of discourse, vehicles of ideology, and elements of collective action frames, but unlike all three, they can be identified in a chunk of text or speech by their formal features (Polletta 2006). People may cognitively process stories differently than they do non-narrative messages, suspending their natural proclivity to counterargue when they are absorbed or transported by a story (Green & Brock 2000, Slater & Rouner 2002). Narrative also may be a distinctive mode of cognition (Bruner 1986, Schank & Abelson 1995).

Literary stylists, of course, often break with narrative conventions. They may recount events out of order or present only unsympathetic characters. More interestingly, however, people telling stories in everyday conversations also depart from the formal conventions. They routinely recount events out of order (Ochs & Capps 2001, Trinch & Berk-Seligson 2002). They tell stories without a clear point, waiting for their interlocutors to help them decide what the point is (Robinson 1981, Polanyi 1985) or allowing their interlocutor to tell another story that only then makes a point for both of them (Arminem 2004). Or they tell stories that are almost all point—with a small number of events subjected to detailed evaluation (Bamberg 2004, Kalcik 1975). In other words, storytelling in conversation looks quite different from many theoretical accounts. Conversational storytelling also varies across cultures (Ochs & Capps 2001, Miller et al. 2005), class (Heath 1983), ethnicity (Heath 1983, Riessman 1988), and gender (Johnstone 1990, Ochs & Taylor 1995).

To complicate matters further, ordinary people's ideas about what a story should look like share some features with narrative theorists' depiction and some with that of conversation analysts. People do expect events in the story to follow a causal sequence (Stein & Policastro 1984) and they expect stories to have a natural beginning and middle (Stokoe & Edwards 2007), but they do not expect stories to have a clear ending (Stein & Policastro 1984). They are also capable of recognizing story-like discourse, where a story is simply alluded to (Kalcik 1975). Rather than trying to adjudicate among these definitions to specify what narrative fundamentally is, we argue that all three—how prototypical narratives work, how people typically tell stories, and what they think proper stories should look like—provide insight into narrative's role in social life.

SOCIOLOGY BEFORE AND AFTER THE NARRATIVE TURN

Sociological work on narrative before the 1980s was largely divided into symbolic interactionist studies of how people gave accounts to avert threats to their self-image and status (Scott & Lyman 1968, see work reviewed in Orbuch 1997) and ethnomethodological studies of how people used stories in conversation to maintain interactional order (see work reviewed in Goodwin & Heritage 1990).

The concerns animating the wave of theorizing about narrative that emerged in the 1980s were different. Led by philosophers and, especially, psychologists critical of reigning behaviorist frameworks, scholars emphasized the centrality of narrative to cognition (Bruner 1986, Polkinghorne 1988), self (MacIntyre 1981, McAdams 1993), and community (MacIntyre 1981, Carr 1986). Stories were not just things people told, they were things that people lived (Ricoeur 1984, Polkinghorne 1988, McAdams 1993). The stories that people told offered insight into the ways they fashioned identities from available cultural materials. The same was true of collective identities. The stories told by groups, communities,

and nations created bonds of belonging and identity (MacIntyre 1981, Carr 1986). Groups without coherent stories were vulnerable to fragmentation; those with them were capable of acting collectively (Carr 1986).

A second theme animating the new scholarship on narrative also asserted the sense-making role of stories, but in expert knowledge rather than everyday life. Scholars showed that what passed as universal categories, neutral standards, scientific facts, and objective progress were actually stories: moralizing accounts whose claim to truth rested on their verisimilitude rather than their veracity (in history, White 1980; in science, Latour & Woolgar 1986, Gusfield 1976; in law, Bell 1987, Williams 1987, Delgado 1989). To determinedly tell those suppressed stories, for its part, would expose the unstated reference points of ostensible universals. It would make clear the particularity of the experiences that were masked by the authorial voice. Storytelling here was conceived as an explicitly normative project, a way of subverting the discursive bulwarks of disciplinary authority (Ewick & Silbey 1995).

All three themes—stories as central to self and collectivity, stories as the basis for disciplinary authority, and stories as a critical and even liberatory discursive form—were prominent in the sociological work on narrative that began to appear in the late 1980s. In one stream of work, sociologists analyzed people's stories to shed light on motivations for their actions that might not be apparent even to the people themselves. For example, the stories that interviewees told about their partner's infidelity revealed more about their emotional response to divorce than the objective fact of having experienced infidelity (Riessman 1990). Women who recounted their domestic abuse as a "dark romance" in which violence was the price one paid for love were likely to tolerate that abuse (Wood 2001). Men who recounted the violent crimes they had committed as a minor part of a heroic struggle in which they took their mistreatment by the system "like a man" were probably more likely to commit

crimes again (Presser 2008; see also Ewick & Silbey 1998 on the meanings people made of law, Morrill et al. 2000 on conflict in high school, Hollander 2002 on experiences of sexual assault, and Frank 1995 on illness). Sociologists of class and ethnic identity formation argued that resonant stories created collective interests and actions that one simply could not predict from people's structural location (Steinmetz 1992, Somers 1994, Cornell 2000).

In a more methodological vein, sociologists exposed the narrative tropes on which sociological empiricism depended (Richardson 1990, Maines 1993, Somers 1994, Brown 1998). The solution was not to try to excise such tropes from sociological inquiry. Most narrative sociologists rejected the idea of an objective reality that could be tapped by non-narrative methods [some historical sociologists, by contrast, argued that objective reality—and in particular, the contingent and multicausal character of historical developments—could be captured by narrative methods (see Abell 2004 for a review)]. Rather, the task was to tell stories that were self-conscious about their partiality and recognized the researcher's own role in the interactions she was studying [and to recognize, too, that the author could never fully know her own role (cf. Clough 1992)]. Narrative sociological approaches overlapped with autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis 1992) and modes of qualitative inquiry that privileged empathy, authenticity, and an openness of meaning as alternatives to positivist truth (Denzin 1997).

These streams of theory and research generated sociological work that was novel and compelling. However, scholars' view of narrative primarily as a tool for individual meaning-making, along with their reliance on interview material, necessarily put to the side sociological questions about power, solidarity, inequality, and social change. For example, the centrality of story to identity and action was more asserted than demonstrated. Certainly sociologists were more attuned than scholars in other fields to the idea that narratives were constraining as well as enabling (Riessman 1990, Wood 2001,

Presser 2008). But they were not able to say much about the sources of narrative constraints, other than to attribute them to culture broadly understood. Nor did they say how those constraints operated and whether they were always accepted by cultural subjects or were sometimes negotiated or contested.

A second problem associated with the narrative turn was a tendency to assume that narrative played the same role in group life as in individual life. At the very least, the notion of a sense-making collectivity should have been problematic. But it underpinned claims that groups required shared stories, that incoherent stories weakened solidarity, and that communities with strong collective narratives were better able to withstand setbacks than those without such narratives. Again, sociologists who treated class and ethnic identities as narratively fashioned recognized constraint as well as agency (Somers 1994, Kane 2000), drawing attention, for example, to the fact that ethnic stories were often imposed rather than collectively self-fashioned (Cornell 2000, Cornell & Hartmann 2007). But they failed to broach a very different set of possibilities: that stronger narratives might be those that were less coherent rather than more coherent, or that groups might be better off with multiple, even inconsistent, narratives that somehow seemed to hang together, or that the possession of a fortifying group narrative might be a consequence of a group's strength rather than the cause of it.

Similarly, claims for the liberatory capacity of storytelling were plausible but incomplete. If disadvantaged groups' stories were marginalized in mainstream discourse, the argument ran, then to tell those stories necessarily challenged the norms of disciplinary authority. Moreover, stories' capacity to elicit empathy across chasms of difference might gain a hearing for claims that would be otherwise ignored. But this perspective assumed that all people's stories were heard the same way. An alternative possibility was that storytelling, like other discursive forms, was embedded in hierarchies of cultural authority that shaped the credibility of particular stories. Furthermore, these

hierarchies might well intersect with other hierarchies, based on race, class, gender, and so on. Completely aside from their content, then, stories might be persuasive when told by some groups and seen as unconvincing when told by others. They might ratify preexisting inequalities even as they sought to challenge them.

In the rest of this essay, we want to highlight work that has effectively responded to these gaps. One stream has explored narrative's role in institutional settings such as courts, businesses, doctors' offices, and self-help groups. It has shed light on the institutional conventions that shape people's accounts of self and on the ways in which people resist those conventions. It has also investigated the specifically institutional work done by storytelling and, just as important, by the lines that are drawn between occasions where narrative is appropriate and where it is not. A second line of work has explored narrative's role in contentious political processes. It has depicted the steep hurdles facing groups that have used stories to try to advance their political interests, and the ways in which they have sometimes overcome those hurdles. Both lines of work have a complicated relationship to the narrative turn. On one hand, they have drawn inspiration and, often, conceptual tools from the emerging interdisciplinary dialogue. On the other hand, they have relied on theoretical traditions such as ethnomethodological conversation analysis, symbolic interactionism, and Levi-Straussian structural linguistics that were not prominent in that turn.

STORYTELLING IN INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS

Conversation analysts studied storytelling in institutional contexts, but until the late 1970s, they emphasized the conversational requirements of storytelling over the institutional ones (Heritage 2005). As one stream of conversational analysis began to examine the institutional shaping of stories, however, it converged with work on storytelling in institutions by scholars of law and language (Atkinson & Drew 1979, Bennett & Feldman 1981, Wodak 1985,

Conley & O'Barr 1990, Manzo 1993), organizations (Martin et al. 1983, Boje 1991), science (Gusfield 1976, Latour & Woolgar 1986) and by symbolic interactionists (Denzin 1987, Holstein 1988, Loseke 1989, Plummer 1995, Maines 2001). Methodologically, conversation analysis was joined with discourse analysis, ethnography, archival research, and interviews. Scholars studying storytelling in institutions have rarely generalized across settings, let alone institutions, but their work has been similarly inspired by the recognition that (*a*) stories often unfold over repeated interactions rather than being told in an uninterrupted fashion, (*b*) the meaning of the story is often negotiated by teller and audience, and (*c*) power inheres in storytelling rights that are unevenly distributed.

One line of scholarship has shown that organizations do what they do in part through the stories they tell and elicit. Workers such as copier repairmen (Orr 1996), insurance agents (Linde 2009), anesthesiologists (Iedema et al. 2009), and staff at a battered women's clinic (Loseke 1989) train each other in occupational skills and responsibilities by telling each other stories. Such stories—about puzzling problems, shrewd diagnoses, and recalcitrant people or machines—communicate normative obligations but also technical know-how (Orr 1996). For the defense and district attorneys that Maynard (1988) studied and the juvenile probation officers that Jacobs (1990) did, telling and evaluating stories was the bulk of their work.

Stories may also be a way in which people communicate organizational schemas: recipes or logics of action and interaction (Czarniawska 1997, Gerteis 2002, Polletta 2006). Schemas are also enacted in rules and routines, but stories may be effective in conveying schemas' normative component insofar as they integrate universal lessons into accounts of the particular. The story of this firm, or a particular repair job, or friends' failed marriage also says something more general about how firms, or jobs, or marriages should work (Polletta 2006). It is not surprising that people use stories about an organization's past to claim authority (Linde 2009). But research suggests that power

comes less from knowing the right stories than from knowing how and when to tell them: what to leave out, what to fill in, when to revise and when to challenge, and whom to tell or not tell (Boje 1991, Feldman & Skoldberg 2002, Linde 2009). Contrary to the advice often given to managers, concreteness in stories may not make them more effective; ambiguity may (Boje 1991, Sims et al. 2009).

A second line of inquiry has centered on the first-person stories that people in institutions—plaintiffs, petitioners, suspects, employees, students, members of therapeutic groups—are asked or required to tell [on what Zussman (2006) calls "autobiographical occasions"]. The reasons for requiring stories are not self-evident. After all, 911 emergency operators discourage callers from recounting how they came to be in the emergency they are in (Whalen 1995). It is hard to imagine the Internal Revenue Service asking taxpayers to tell the story of their financial transactions over the previous year. In these instances, and probably in others, personal storytelling is inefficient as a means of conveying information. Why then ever seek to elicit it? Personal stories can alert diagnosticians to information they might otherwise miss (Clark & Mishler 1992). Clients often want to tell their stories (Conley & O'Barr 1990). But storytelling is probably also encouraged or required when institutional personnel must evaluate the worthiness of a client's claim, and, implicitly, the worthiness of the client: his or her honesty, degree of need, innocence, or competence (Holstein 1988, Blommaert 2001).

This, however, makes for an awkward situation. Institutional personnel need a certain kind of story but need it to be the client's story. The story must be at once conventional and authentic. For that reason, institutional personnel often coach clients on how to tell their stories properly. Trinch & Berk-Seligson (2002) showed that when victims of domestic abuse sought an order of protection, paralegals reshaped their initial accounts, which unfolded over several conversational turns and focused on patterns of behavior rather than specific events. Paralegals made them into quite

different but legally compelling narratives. Those who testified about their experiences of brutal state repression in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings were supplied a 20-page protocol that, among other things, discouraged them from talking about the larger context of their experiences (Andrews 2007). In a support group for battered women, facilitators redirected speakers from recounting their partner's infidelity to recounting his abuse (Loseke 2001). In a group therapy session for heroin addicts, a member was chastised and eventually ejected for insisting on a narrative in which recovery just happened, rather than embracing the accepted narrative of orderly, willful work bringing about recovery (Fasulo 2007; see also Denzin 1987, Jacobs 1990, Plummer 1995, Holstein & Gubrium 2000, Loseke 2001, Gubrium & Holstein 2009).

Even with coaching, however, and despite people's capacity to creatively rather than mechanically conform [for example, in Alcoholics Anonymous, "hitting bottom" was a key element of participants' narratives but was used to mean a variety of things (Denzin 1987; see also Holstein & Gubrium 2000)], people often resist telling the stories that are expected of them. Sometimes, the expected narrative conflicts with their view of who they are. It makes them seem passive or incompetent or too much like everyone else or as if they are exaggerating the severity of their experience (Bumiller 1988, Heimer 2001, Loseke 2001). In other instances, however, people refuse the institutionally expected narrative because it conflicts with their ideas not about who they are but about what a good story is. In Conley & O'Barr's (1990) study of interactions in small claims court, litigants who told the kinds of stories that were familiar in everyday conversations, in which an event was made sense of in terms of the social relationship of which it was in breach, often lost. Their stories were simply too unlike the rule-oriented accounts that judges were used to hearing in higher courts, in which agency and responsibility were represented in straightforward chains of causality. Participants in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings wanted their stories to be heard as if in a court of law and to secure them justice for the brutalities they had experienced. But the commission's organizers had in mind a more psychotherapeutic setting in which storytelling would have healing benefit on its own (Andrews 2007). Participants in an online forum were encouraged by organizers to tell personal stories during their discussions of economic development and transportation policy, but they refused to do so because they saw storytelling as subjective, biased, and inappropriate for discussing policy (Polletta & Lee 2006).

People usually end up conforming to the stories that are expected of them (Holstein & Gubrium 2000, Loseke 2001, Trinch & Berk-Seligson 2002, Lofstrand 2009). Sometimes, however, people do not have the resources to conform. In political asylum cases, applicants were asked briefly to tell a complex story about political developments in a foreign country, and then the story was translated, reproduced, and evaluated in numerous materials. Yet the applicant was held responsible for any inconsistencies or ambiguities in the story anywhere along the line (Blommaert 2001, Baillot et al. 2009). Juvenile delinquents who failed to conform to probation case workers' narratives of crime and expiation were treated more severely than their legal offenses warranted (Jacobs 1990). Conley & O'Barr (1990) found that women tended to tell the relationally oriented stories that were less credible to judges. But Wodak (1985) observed that the judge in a vehicular manslaughter case helped the middle-class male defendant to tell an appropriate story. A working-class woman in a similar case was both less prepared to tell the right story and treated dismissively by the judge, who then levied a steeper penalty on her than the male defendant had received. In other words, institutional personnel play an active role in producing the stratification of narrative competence (see also Briggs 1992).

To be sure, sometimes institutions are forced to accommodate popular ideas about stories rather than imposing their own. Attorneys, for example, have generally sought to work with

rather than challenge jurors' beliefs that true stories are coherent, unambiguous, temporally and logically organized, identical in their retelling, and more likely to be told by older people than younger ones (Bennett & Feldman 1981, Pennington & Hastie 1991, Scheppele 1992, Allison et al. 2006). In many settings, norms of narration and narrative evaluation are more flexible and less enforced than the ones we have been describing. Even there, however, socially acceptable selves are created via conventions of storytelling. When elderly women described their photo albums to Zussman (2006), they recognized the idealized character of the family relationships depicted in their photos and at the same time denied the agency that went into styling those standard depictions. In the family dinnertime stories that Ochs & Taylor (1995) observed, mothers began stories or prodded children to tell them and fathers responded, often critically, thereby setting up a "father knows best" dynamic (see also Bamberg 2004 on how young men create masculinity through the collective stories they tell, and Bjorklund 1998 on conventions of literary autobiography). Like the lived-stories perspective we outlined above, these studies treat storytelling as constituting selves. But they emphasize the eminently conventional ways in which it does so.

Yet another way in which storytelling does the work of institutions is via its demarcation from discursive forms that are not narrative. The line between narrative and non-narrative discourse is more symbolic than real. Much of the ostensibly non-narrative discourse that experts use is in fact narrative (in science, see Harré 1990 and Brown 1994; in legal practice, see Scheppele 1989; in academia, see Cazden & Hymes 1978; in public administration, see Czarniawska 1997). But the line accomplishes institutional work. When scientific journals insist that research be reported in the three-part form of hypothesis, results, and inductive support of the results, they legitimize science as a form of knowledge that is removed from everyday modes of cognition and representation (Gusfield 1976, Bazerman

1988, Harre 1990, Myers 1990, Brown 1994, Battalio 1998). When jurists counterpoise law and story, even though much of what happens in court is storytelling, they demarcate law's realm from that of extralegal systems of moral sanction (Scheppele 1989, Manzo 1993). When journalists insist on multiple sources, they distinguish the stories they tell from hearsay and gossip (Fishman 1980). In each case, the line that is drawn between appropriate and inappropriate occasions for telling stories warrants the institution's claims to expertise.

Finally, the stories that are institutionally required or encouraged change over time. For example, psychiatric professionals before the 1970s told stories of child sexual abuse in which harm was variable and rarely long-lasting, and the victim was often collusive in tolerating her own abuse. Professionals encouraged victims to recount their experiences along those lines. By the 1980s, victims were encouraged to tell a new story, in which victimization was clear-cut and harm was profound and long-lasting (Davis 2005). What accounts for changes like these? Professional groups have promoted new stories about social problems that advanced their autonomy and scope (Fraser & Gordon 1994, Nolan 2002, Davis 2005). Social movements have won the institutionalization of new story lines and new storytelling practices (Epstein 1996, Best 1999, Loseke 2001, Davis 2005, Stark 2007). International nonprofit organizations have diffused a "myth of Western rationality" that has led to remarkable isomorphism in institutions around the world (Meyer et al. 1997).

Sociologists have only begun to account for what appears to be the spread of specifically personal storytelling across a range of institutions. Illouz (2008) and Nolan (1998, 2002) cite in this regard the rise of a therapeutic ethos, which, Nolan argues, entered state bureaucracies to fill the void of meaning left by a rationalizing state. Modernizing institutions earlier had banned personal storytelling in favor of the techno-scientific discourse of expertise [see, for example, Mooney's (2009) account of how nineteenth-century medical

diagnostic techniques discredited patient narratives as the source of information, and see Benjamin's (1968 [1955]) famous account of the decline of the storyteller in modernity]. Later, personal storytelling was brought back to provide human connection and meaning in a rationalized world. Radway (1997) traces the rise of a personalistic way of reading stories in the mid-twentieth century to a middle-class desire for cultural mastery and expertise without sacrificing an emotional investment in the human and particular (see also Long 2003 and Griswold 1993 on practices of reading). Plummer (1995) cites the women's and gay and lesbian movements, which turned the personal recounting of private troubles into a political act, and the growth of confessional television (talk shows such as *Donahue*, *Oprah*, and *Sally Jesse Raphael*), which solicited stories of personal shame, hurt, and recovery. Polletta (2006) argues, however, that there may be a contemporary backlash against personal storytelling, which is increasingly seen as narcissistic and self-pitying—in part, perhaps, because of its association with a psychotherapeutic ethos.

Together, these studies of storytelling in institutions counter the notion that people are free to construct their own stories of the self. Narratives and selves are brought into being, whether in the formal setting of the court, the semiformal setting of the self-help group, or the informal setting of family dinnertime conversation. People can and do contest narrative conventions, based on conventions they have learned in other settings. But the contest is uneven: Those advantaged outside the institutional setting tend to be advantaged within it, whether because they have a better grasp of storytelling norms or because they are heard as having (and helped to have) a grasp of such norms. These studies also make clear that institutions depend on storytelling. What matters, however, is not only that people tell the right stories (the norms of narrative's content) but also that people tell stories at the right time and place and interpret them in the right way (the norms of narrative's use) and that they subscribe to the right beliefs about what

stories are good for (the norms of narrative's evaluation).

STORYTELLING IN POLICY, POLITICS, AND PROTEST

Sociological approaches to storytelling in politics have challenged the primacy of interests in motivating political action and the primacy of material resources in making political gains. With respect to the first, sociologists have identified interactional and institutional dynamics in the construction of mobilizing collective identities. These include the "narrative competition" that preceded the establishment of an Irish national identity (Kane 2000); the mutual constitution of an audience for new stories and the new stories themselves that fostered a homosexual identity but not one around the enjoyment of pornography (Plummer 1995); the importance of not one but multiple stories that, in the case of American class identity as it emerged in the nineteenth-century Knights of Labor, defined working white Americans both against and in solidarity with racial others (Gerteis 2002); and the interpretive openness of key moments at the boundary of we/they ethnic identity stories, which allowed Italian and Croatian Istrian immigrants in New York, formerly enemies, to forge a newly unified Istrian identity (Smith 2007; see also Bearman & Stovel 2000 on network approaches to narrative identity, Tilly 2002 on "boundary stories," and Polletta & Lee 2006 on how people have exploited stories' ambiguity to forge agreement across difference).

Scholars have also investigated the use of storytelling by already constituted political actors such as officials, agencies, states, and movements. Here, they have shown people using stories to make up for a lack of material and political resources. For example, social movement groups have used stories to mobilize participants (Nepstad 2001, Jacobs 2002), build solidarity and keep adherents in line (Benford 2002, Owens 2009), secure public support (Haltom & McCann 2004, Loseke 2007, Stark 2007), justify violence (Fine 1999),

and discredit countermovements (Crowley 2009). Professional groups have used stories to win support for new policies (Nolan 2002). States have used stories to educate the public (Slater & Rouner 2002, Hinyard & Kreuter 2007), retain legitimacy (Olick 2003, Polletta 2006), and define and decide among policy options (Stone 2002, Smith 2006; we do not review here the literature on narrative as a tool for policy analysis—see Hampton 2009 for a review).

Unfortunately, few of these studies have compared stories with other discursive forms in assessing their effects, making claims for narrative's unique capacities in this regard speculative. [For exceptions, see Polletta & Lee (2006) and, in experimental research, Green & Brock (2000), Slater & Rouner (2002). In addition, research on entertainment-education initiatives to promote positive health behaviors has shown that people exposed to narrative materials were more likely to change their behavior than a control group (Hinyard & Kreuter 2007).] We clearly need studies of whether and when stories are more persuasive than other discursive forms in explicitly political contexts. However, researchers have valuably identified some of the constraints on political actors' ability to win support for the stories they want. Unsurprisingly, political entrepreneurs with deep financial resources and wide political connections are better able to secure a favorable hearing for their particular story (Fine 1996, Irvine 2002, Meyer 2006, Esacove 2010). But scholars have also drawn attention to less obvious constraints on actors' capacity to tell politically effective stories, constraints whose force is by no means lessened by the fact that they are cultural rather than material.

One set of constraints has been explored by scholars of collective memory. Against a notion of the past as malleable, utilized instrumentally, and even created by whomever has the power to do so (e.g., Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983), scholars in recent years have emphasized the durability of the past. This is not necessarily because of what really happened in some pristine sense. Rather, it is because of several

things: The commemorative infrastructure that is already in place (official holidays, teaching conventions, historiographical traditions) (Schudson 1994, Jansen 2007), the peculiar alliances that stand behind different stories of the past (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz 1991), popular cultural beliefs about the past (Schwartz & Schuman 2005), historical protagonists' fit with narrative conventions of heroic character (Fine 1999), the cultural taboos and proscriptions established at one point in time that set the mnemonic rules of the game thereafter (Olick & Levy 1997), and historical narratives' openness to being claimed both by critics and supporters of the current regime (Spillman 2003).

Accounts of the nation's past may figure as one kind of background story against which political actors' stories, but also their arguments, explanations, and evidence, are heard. Many scholars have drawn attention to a dynamic whereby a particular narrative comes to dominate political discourse and then rules out policy options that are inconsistent with its narrow representation of reality (Fraser & Gordon 1994, Haltom & McCann 2004, Fields 2005, Somers & Block 2005, Esacove 2010). Key here is narrative's integration of description, explanation, and evaluation. The dominant narrative seems simply to recount a set of events; the events themselves seem to tender a moral conclusion. For example, the familiar story of greedy Americans bringing frivolous lawsuits and pushing up insurance costs made tort reform widely popular, in spite of evidence that litigation was not actually increasing (Haltom & McCann 2004).

But why does one narrative rather than another come to dominate discourse? And why are groups unable to discredit that narrative if it is untrue? A plausible answer is that the dominant story meshes with deeply held ideological values. Tort reformers' story of litigation-happy Americans, however much it conflicted with the empirical evidence, tapped a deep-rooted American belief in individual responsibility along with a nostalgic longing for a bygone era of self-restraint (Haltom & McCann 2004). But in contrast with that scenario, welfare

reformers who sought to drastically cut welfare benefits in the 1990s were able to capitalize on what seemed to be new beliefs. Reformers argued that people's dependency on welfare could, like a dependency on drugs or dysfunctional relationships, inhibit their ability to become autonomous people. The idea that economic dependency was a psychological problem rather than a structural relation was promoted against the backdrop of new stories that were circulating about (chiefly women's) dependency on drugs, alcohol, and destructive relationships (Fraser & Gordon 1994; see also Irvine 2002 on how campaigns against sex education gained ground against the backdrop of new stories about child-victims and the abusive power of words). Perhaps stories about women's dependency seemed to mesh so well with the welfare reform story because they gave novel and, in particular, scientific warrant to a long-standing belief about the undeservingness of the poor. On yet another reading, however, welfare reformers' power lay in their ability to tell a conversion story in which right-thinking people would wake up to the stunning perversity of the government fostering people's weakness— a realization that required nothing in the way of scientific evidence (Somers & Block 2005).

A different answer to the question of how a story comes to dominate policymaking is that one story does not dominate policymaking. Rather, power lies in particular kinds of stories. Smith (2006), for example, argues that genres of public narratives compel political action in line with them. As long as public political discourse about a foreign power is in a low-mimetic mode, characterized by a view of protagonists as humanly flawed and of political action as oriented to solving problems prudently and efficiently, then war with a hostile foreign power can be avoided in favor of pragmatic bargaining, compromise, and diplomacy. Once the stories that are told shift into an apocalyptic mode in which the contest is between good and radical evil, with antagonists made unredeemable, war is all but unavoidable. Also using the concept of genre, Jacobs (2000) argues that media coverage of racial unrest in

Los Angeles after the 1992 Rodney King beating adopted a tragic form. Unlike the romantic genre that had characterized reporting of the 1965 Watts riots, the tragic genre promoted a stance of resignation in the face of racial conflict. Alexander (2003) argues that for the Holocaust to come to symbolize the necessity of intervention against evil, it first had to be detached from an earlier progressive narrative in which campaigns against anti-Semitism would erase the stain of Nazism and then be retold as a tragic narrative of universal human trauma.

For Polletta (2006), as for Smith, Jacobs, and Alexander (see also Alexander & Smith 1993, all following Levi-Strauss 1963), popular narratives reproduce familiar symbolic oppositions. But Polletta emphasizes the diversity of such stories. What political challengers are up against is not a single, canonical story, or even a genre of stories, but rather many stories that similarly navigate the poles of familiar oppositions. The diversity and complexity of such stories give them the feel of the real. For example, employers who were defendants in sex discrimination suits argued that most women did not want higher-paying jobs that were stressful, heavy, dirty, and took time away from their families. The argument was convincing against the backdrop of the countless stories we have all heard of girls being different from boys, girls liking clean things, women sacrificing for their families, and families being a haven in a heartless world. Against those stories, plaintiffs' stories flew in the face of common sense, as more than one judge put it (Schultz 1990).

We noted earlier that activists have sometimes succeeded in gaining the institutionalization of their preferred story line. But there are downsides to that achievement. Advocates for battered women were able to create a legal and social infrastructure of support for the victims of domestic abuse by telling a horrifying story of extreme violence. The sameness of the story across its diverse tellers along with the graphic violence it described was crucial to its power (Loseke 2001, 2007). But activists have since struggled with the possibility not only that the story may not fit *all* battered women's

experiences, but that it may not fit *most* battered women's experiences (Stark 2007). Violence in many abusive relationships is minor and cumulative, and it is just one element of the pervasive control that abused women experience. But the standard story has been institutionalized in an injury-based legal conception of battering, which effectively normalizes violence by treating each incident as below the threshold of criminal assault (Stark 2007).

Whether they focus on the power of one story or a genre of stories in shaping an ideological common sense, most scholars emphasize that powerful stories are reproduced through institutional routines. A third set of constraints, then, comes from the institutional norms governing how and when stories should be told. For example, feminists' efforts to prove gender discrimination in employment were undermined by judges' insistence that they supply women who could testify to their experience of discrimination, even when their claims rested on patterns of disparate treatment (Schultz 1990). Advocates for adult survivors of child abuse counseled those who went to court seeking monetary damages that they would have to emphasize the debilitating consequences of their past abuse, not present themselves as survivors who were in control of their lives (Whittier 2009). Reporters' practice of telling stories about people and events rather than about contexts and longer-term processes has made it difficult for activists to communicate the structural causes of the injustices they have fought (Iyengar 1991, Bennett 1996, Smith et al. 2001). Reporters' practice of presenting two sides of the story, intended to ensure impartiality, has had the effect of making it impossible to present a third view on the issue or a critical interpretation of one of the opposing views (Chancer 2005).

A fourth set of constraints comes less from the formal conventions of storytelling or even the institutional ones than from popular expectations about how stories work and what they are good for. As Scheppele (1992) observes, the expectation that stories stay the same in their telling has disadvantaged those whose stories must change. Women have normalized their experience of sexual harassment when it was happening—defined it as horseplay or harmless—so that they could endure it. The fact that their stories only later became about harassment was a sign neither of dishonesty nor mental instability, but rather of the coping skills that they had relied on to survive. Polletta (2006) argues that people are ambivalent about storytelling: They see it as simultaneously authentic and easily manipulated, universal and dangerously subjective, normatively powerful and politically unserious, valuably therapeutic and unhelpfully self-indulgent. But they rarely hold positive and negative views of storytelling at the same time. Rather, concerns about stories' deceptiveness or generalizability are more likely to be triggered by lower-status speakers than higher-status ones. For example, animal rights activists discouraged women from serving in leadership positions because they believed that women were seen by the public as prone to the kind of emotional storytelling that would cost the movement credibility (Groves 2001). However, activists spent little time debating whether women were in fact prone to emotionalism or whether emotional stories rather than rational arguments were bad for the movement. Concerns about stories' worth are also likely to be triggered on occasions that are seen as technical, procedural, or expert (Polletta 2006). Because activists are often in a position of having to call attention to the political dimensions of ostensibly neutral categories and criteria, they may be tempted to tell stories to do so on such occasions—and may be disserved in the process.

Of course, activists have challenged storytelling norms, as well as maneuvered with and around them. They have taken advantage of personal stories' perceived authenticity to make the bureaucratic and legal structures they are up against seem inhuman and uncaring (Frank 2000, Nolan 2002) and have capitalized on stories' capacity to stir powerful emotions to enlist support (Irvine 2002, Loseke 2007). If media reporting tends to downplay the structural causes of injustices in favor of a

focus on individual people, activists have been able to capitalize on that focus by supplying the authentic-seeming person on the street who can articulate the movement's perspective (Gamson 2001, Polletta 2006).

Challengers have overcome the constraints of narrative genre by combining genres and, especially, by using irony's creation of distance to draw attention to official hypocrisy (Jacobs 2002, Polletta 2009). Activists have exploited stories' ambiguity to tell old stories in new ways (Bakhtin 1986, Steinberg 1999, Spillman 2003). Even before movements have formed, ordinary people have told, retold, and collaboratively interpreted subversive stories in a way that has begun to build up a rich, variegated narrative common sense that is capable of competing with the hegemonic one (Ewick & Silbey 2003). Finally, activists have made institutional norms of storytelling the target of explicit challenge. For example, in the 1980s, AIDS activists gained recognition for AIDS patients' personal accounts of their illnesses as authoritative knowledge in drug research (Epstein 1996). The 1980s movement against child abuse successfully reformed laws around the admissibility of children's stories of abuse (McGough 1994). Activists have had an impact in these cases by gaining institutional purchase for new distributions of storytelling authority.

Together, these studies suggest that the ability to tell a politically effective story maps partly, but only partly, onto preexisting structures of wealth and power. Money and power have not been enough to determine whose stories win for at least three reasons. One is that states, like individuals, have relied on narrative's sense-making functions. Available stories have guided policy choices as well as legitimated them. Second, elites, too, have struggled with and against the constraints of memory, genre, and institutional routines of narration. Third, elites have faced off against activists who, sometimes but not always, have been able to exploit popular associations of narrative with people over power and moral urgency over technical rationality.

CONCLUSION

Several themes come across in these topically, theoretically, and methodologically diverse studies. One is that ambiguity in stories may be a powerful resource. Scholars have argued that ambiguity in communication more generally can serve valuable organizational and social functions such as maintaining solidarity and deflecting opposition (Eisenberg 1984). But storytelling may be an especially effective way to communicate ambiguous meanings, for at least two reasons. People expect stories to be allusive. They expect to have to work to grasp the story's meaning, and they often accept the fact that their initial interpretation may be incorrect or partial. The other reason is that stories call for more stories. People often respond to a story by telling one of their own, which may make an entirely different, even a contrasting, point without drawing attention to the contrast. Researchers have shown people using stories' ambiguity variously to maintain power within an organization (Boje 1991), mobilize state-sponsored remembrances against the state (Spillman 2003), forge agreement and identity across political differences (Polletta & Lee 2006, Smith 2007), and win support for policy changes that are at odds with the prevailing common sense (Polletta 2009).

To be sure, research on juries has suggested that ambiguous stories are less credible (Bennett & Feldman 1981). And one can imagine that ambiguity in some tellers' stories would be seen as a sign of incompetence or confusion. But the finding that ambiguity can be a resource casts doubt on common claims that powerful stories are simple ones, that stories' persuasive capacity lies in their concreteness, that narrative coherence is necessary to self- and collective identity. None of those may be the case. Instead, stories may be powerful insofar as they seem to hang together while pointing in quite different normative directions. They cover the bases, as it were. The question, then, is whether this is true only of stories or also of other discursive forms. In other words, have scholars overrated the importance of clarity in persuasive messages?

More generally, we need to know much more about what makes stories politically persuasive. Plot, for example, is thought to be crucial to narrative's effects, but few studies have investigated whether plot actually works to structure narrative interpretation in the way it is thought to (for an exception, see Polletta et al. 2010). Do people tend to understand and evaluate recounted events along only a limited number of plotlines? What happens when they hear stories that depart from familiar plotlines? Character, too, remains understudied, despite the fact that character may be more important than plot to readers (Long 2003) and that characters more than events seem important in policy debates [i.e., the "welfare queen" or the "innocent child" (cf. Loseke 2007)]. More challenging methodologically is the possibility that the most effective stories are those that are not told explicitly but instead are simply alluded to, with the speaker treating the story as already known by the audience. The challenge is to get at those stories empirically.

Finally, to what extent does a story's plausibility depend on its empirical accuracy? Framing theorists, for example, argue that frames must be both empirically credible and faithful to dominant cultural narratives to be effective (Benford & Snow 2000). But stories' empirical credibility may be a product of their narrative fidelity (White 1980). That is, they seem true because they accord with familiar stories. Alternatively, stories may not be expected to be as accurate as non-narrative statements. Legends and rumors, for example, are not expected to be true. Instead, audiences ask, "Are these claims that could be reasonably thought likely to happen within the world as we know it?" (Fine & Khawaja 2005, p. 190). Expectations about the truth value of stories probably vary across story genres as well as settings (and speakers). It is worth studying the circumstances in which narrative is pitted against other modes of representing reality.

A second prominent theme in the research we have described is stories' negotiated meaning. From conversational analysts' demonstration that audiences routinely participate in eliciting, telling, and interpreting stories; to legal researchers' recognition that plaintiffs resist telling the stories they are expected to tell; to collective memory researchers' demonstration of the frequently contested character of the past, scholars have shown that storytelling is an interactive process. Yet the contest is uneven. Disadvantaged people are often less well trained in the requirements of telling an institutionally appropriate story, they are less likely to be seen as narratively competent, and their very experiences make them less able to tell the kind of story that is required. The stories of movement groups, for their part, are more easily dismissed as unintelligible (because they cannot be told in terms of familiar plotlines), inappropriate (because they are told on the wrong occasion), or untrustworthy (because the fact that they are told by activists triggers concerns about stories' manipulability). In this sense, culture may curb effective challenges less by limiting the stories that can be imagined than by limiting the stories that can be authoritatively told.

We need now to know more about the sources of the norms for telling and evaluating stories within institutions as well as the spread of those norms across institutions. We should also study what happens when institutional norms come into conflict with popular norms and beliefs about narrative. Institutions have defined their expertise against everyday modes of telling stories, but sometimes they have been forced to accommodate everyday beliefs about what makes a persuasive story. When are they likely to do which? New digital media are creating new narrative norms, for example, of interactive authorship in news reporting (Robinson 2009) and emphasizing the recency of narrated events rather than their coherence on social networking sites (Page 2010). These, in turn, may drive changes in popular understandings of what a story is.

Finally, in addition to the norms governing narrative's form and its use, the rules governing narrative's evaluation relative to other discursive forms are critical to understanding the social and political work that narrative does.

If we are right that modern Americans are ambivalent about stories, and especially first-person stories, is that ambivalence recent? What has been the truth value of story-telling in other times? How have narrative epistemologies—beliefs about how stories work and what they are good for—varied across settings, speakers, cultures, and eras, and with what effects?

These questions point to a broader line of inquiry and to a cultural sociology that focuses less on meaning than on the social organization of the capacity to mean effectively. Just as there is a prevailing common sense about what narrative is good for, when it is appropriate, and what relation it has to truth, so there is a common sense about other discursive forms. Speeches, confessions, interviews, and statistics are the subjects of popular beliefs about their epistemological status and proper use. A sociology of any of these discursive forms would look to see how beliefs about them have evolved over time, how they vary across institutions, what stands behind them, and how they shape selves and social interactions. It would also investigate the possibility that such beliefs vary depending on the context and the speaker and would try to determine whether that variability works to reproduce existing inequalities.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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