Theoretical Criminology

Vol. 13(2): 177–200; 1362–4806
DOI: 10.1177/1362480609102878

The narratives of offenders

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Abstract

Although criminologists have long used the offender's own story to shed light on crime and its possible causes, they have not plumbed its potential as an explanatory variable. This article considers the way narrative has been conceptualized in criminology and the way that it might be *re*-conceptualized, following scholarship in other social sciences and in humanities, as a key instigator of action. The concept of narrative is useful for the projects of contemporary criminology because it: (1) applies to both individuals and aggregates; (2) applies to both direct perpetrators and bystanders; (3) anchors the notion of (sub)culture; (4) circumvents the realism to which other theories of criminal behavior are bound; and (5) can be readily collected by researchers, though not without confronting the problematic that is the socially situated production of discourse.

Key Words

criminology • narratives • positivism • qualitative methods • theory

Introduction

Narratives are the mainstay of disciplines that produce thick descriptions of human societies, especially history, literature and anthropology. It is, in fact, difficult to imagine a serious contemporary study of people and culture that does not entertain at some point the role of stories in producing or dismantling people's troubles, actions and artifacts. As historian Hayden White (1980: 5) explains, 'To raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and, possibly, even on the nature of humanity itself.' In recent years narratives have gained ascendance in psychology and sociology as well, such that they now occupy a vital role in theories of social

life. Their significance for these disciplines derives from the same bold idea that inspires the rest of the academy: we know the world through and pattern our lives after stories and via storytelling conventions are culturally circumscribed. Although use of offenders' 'own' stories has a venerable tradition in criminology (see Bennett, 1981), criminologists have not exploited the potential of stories to theorize the etiology of crime.

This article considers the ways in which narrative is conceptualized in criminology and the ways in which it might be *re*-conceptualized. I build a case for a *narrative criminology* that situates stories as antecedents to crime. Criminologists generally define crime as behavior *or* as that which gets criminalized—that is, identified and treated as crime. Accordingly, narrative criminology is poised to clarify the nature of both criminal behavior and criminalization—including court decisions, media accounts of crime and scholarly analyses of crime. In this article I mainly focus on criminal behavior, bracketing its necessary relation to processes of criminalization, because I wish to say something about the payoff of narrative for realist criminology. Also, I view inquiry into those meta-narratives that affect what and who gets criminalized as considerably more developed than inquiry into how offenders' stories might direct 'real' behavior and specifically behavior that harms.

Narrative is a temporally ordered statement concerning events experienced by and/or actions of one or more protagonists (Labov and Waletzky, 1967). It is primarily a written or oral text, although some say it may also be constructed visually, such as through gestures (Barthes, 1977; Onega and Landa, 1996). The emplotment of experiences and actions—what they mean as a whole—is central to narrative. Criminologists are concerned with that sequence of events culminating in crime, which suggests a main point of this article. Criminologists tend to think of and to utilize narratives as stores of data on criminal behavior and its causes. Not incidentally, this exclusively representational conceptualization of narrative informs the notion that offenders' narratives are inauthentic because offenders are motivated to distort what happened. An often implicit understanding of narrative as a device intended to affect others, in turn, prevents criminologists from viewing narrative as something that affects the actor as well and thus might explain criminal behavior.

What I term narrative criminology positions the narrative itself, as opposed simply to the events reported in the narrative, as a factor in the motivation for and accomplishment of crime and criminalization. Narrative criminology is an emergent paradigm with forerunners in theories of neutralization and drift, cognitive error, identity and situational interpretation—theories that focus on acculturated cognition. None of these theories occupies a starring role in criminology, although they have a place in the discipline's leading paradigms.

The acculturated cognition theories seem only to function at the individual level. Their key causal factors largely reside within people's minds, however social the origins of these factors (e.g. neutralizations). Criminality in these, as in most individual-level theories, is embodied. In contrast, narrative criminology attends to discourse, not minds. Aggregates as well as individuals tell, and act on the basis of, stories. Moreover, stories thematize the points of connection

between personal and collective experience, desire and effort. The point at which individual agency is reconfigured, phenomenologically, as group will, and vice-versa, is limned in stories.

The criminogenic influence of ideology upon individual intent is facilitated by a story that, as a moralizing tale packaged in an aesthetically compelling way, arouses emotion. Conventional perspectives in criminology have too rarely, or too abstractly, grappled with emotion. But emotion is just one aspect of narrative that is a source of neglect (or trouble) for criminology. As Katz (1988) observes, criminological theory mostly ignores the here-and-now of crime, including dynamic factors at the point of behavior (see also Garot, 2007). Narrative references the past but is always tailored to the present, and specifically to the moment of narration. It would seem that both emotional state and story change too quickly to be captured and measured by the researcher, and yet prediction demands just such measurement. These considerations highlight the fact that the offender's life story, including its affective dimensions, has no fixed or necessary essence. Clearly, to contemplate a narrative criminology forces us to engage with myriad epistemological, sociological and methodological issues, and to exchange ideas with academics in other fields—processes that can appreciably further the discipline.

Offenders' stories and the 'problem' of authenticity

A narrative (or self-narrative) is sometimes referred to as a life story or life history. But a narrative is not a report on one's entire life so far. Rather, a narrative always draws selectively upon lived experience. Witness the fact that groups such as nation-states and youth gangs tell stories of who the group is, judiciously presenting some life-world that group members share in common. Nor could individuals possibly include every life event for the sake of telling their story. It must start and end somewhere; it must emphasize some event(s) and not others to make its point. For, whereas narrative 'pays special attention' to a (recollected) sequence of events, it is fundamentally oriented toward a plot (Polkinghorne, 1988: 36). Narrative 'ceaselessly substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of the events recounted' (Barthes, 1977: 119). There lies a key difference between a narrative and a report or a chronicle. In a report or chronicle, the author recounts events and allows the recipient to determine which are most important and what they indicate about the world being told, whereas the storyteller maintains more control than that (White, 1980).

Stories help us make meaning because the plot of a story explains why. Literary theorist Albert Stone (1982: 10) calls autobiography 'the activity of explaining oneself by telling one's story'. Hence the special utility of self-narrative for the offender: the evolution of misconduct from identifiable and culturally intelligible causes positions him/her as less bad or wrong than ascribed labels suggest (e.g., 'offender'). The 'whole story' complicates and historicizes who he/she really is.

Through narrative we forge a sense of coherence that experience lacks. White (1980: 24) states that in the narrated world 'reality wears the mask of a meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience'. Whereas coherence is central to narrative, narratologists recognize coherence as a fabrication.

What, ultimately, does narrative render coherent? For historians, political scientists and cultural anthropologists, narrative creates a sense of nationhood or other group identity (Bell, 2003). For psychologists, narrative cultivates personal identity, or the sense of being one person over time and across circumstances (McAdams, 1999). From a linguistic perspective, structural characteristics of narrative aid in establishing and maintaining a unified sense of self (Linde, 1993). The narrator can discuss different parts of a single self, including phased out, disowned or hypothetical parts, and can stand at a distance from all these parts.

Thus, consider again the particular value of narrative for the transgressor. Most fundamentally, the potential for narrative to attenuate one's supposed deviance lies in the fact that a person's narrative presupposes a moral self in the narrating present. Linde (1993: 123) explains that 'the reflexivity created by the act of narration means that the speaker is always moral, even if the protagonist of the narrative is not'. Simply by narrating, the moral deviant separates himself/herself from past wrongdoing. In this way, narrators 'come off best' whether the protagonist is vilified or praised (Bruner, 1990: 96). The self-narrative communicates a complex character that has unfolded over time and thus has the potential for further change.

Whereas an offender's narrative—and indeed the mere act of narrating—promises to influence others' appraisals of the self, it is a social construct in a far more profound way. Like all narratives, it is tailored to social conventions and general normative standards (Mills, 1940). We offer reasons for our actions that make sense to our real, imagined and potential interlocutors, including ourselves. Recall the necessity of selecting among one's life experiences to tell one's story. The fact of selectivity is pragmatic—logistically we cannot recapitulate all that has happened to us, and even if we could, the narrative point would suffer. It is also cultural, as socially situated notions of what is (literally) noteworthy about one's life constrain what we even think to make of it. Mary Gergen (1992: 128) explains:

> Our cultures provide models not only for the contents of what we say but also for the forms. We use these forms unwittingly; they create the means by which we interpret our lives. We know ourselves via the mediating forms of our cultures, through telling, and through listening.

Social expectations shape both how we present ourselves and how we know ourselves (Mead, 1934). Partiality—including but hardly limited to fakery—is an intrinsic feature of any story.

Nonetheless, offenders in particular are called upon to explain themselves and thereby to reconcile multiple selves—usually, the bad person they were with the good and responsible agent they must now be (McKendy, 2006;

Presser, 2008; cf. Abbott, 1981). The fact that offenders face tangible incentives, such as release on parole, for portraying themselves in a particular way (say, as innocent or remorseful) reinforces the view that their stories mainly serve a remedial function (Goffman, 1971). Popular cultural forms (e.g. television shows about criminal investigation) routinely depict criminal suspects telling false stories to avoid sanctions.

To sum up, the suspicion that offenders' stories are strategically pitched and thus potentially inauthentic belies a view of stories as social artifacts for some, when they are social artifacts for all. Moreover, the concern with stories as inauthentic reflects a conception of narrative as data on human experience—as valid or invalid only insofar as the stories equate to what *really* happened. It is only one of the ways that narrative may be conceived. We might instead focus on narrative as a guide to behavior. I turn to the matter of conceptualizing narratives in the next section.

At this point I would simply observe that criminology is ever challenged by the question of the validity of its data on crime and criminals. Criminologists obtain such data from the State (e.g. the Uniform Crime Reports), victims, offenders, citizens and through their own observations. Each data source presents problems of veracity, interest and perspective. The launch of any analysis of crime and criminals is thus quite often either an insistence that the data can be trusted *or* an insistence (for example, from critical criminologists) that the data cannot be trusted.

Therefore, skepticism about offenders' narratives must be understood within the context of criminological concern about the truth of all crime data and perhaps especially the data provided by offenders, who are often presumed to be manipulative by nature. Alternatively, that skepticism may reflect a distrust of all narratives (Polletta, 2006) or sociologists' concern to divest their projects of the fictional by positioning the subject as the sole author of fiction about social life (Maines, 1993; Gordon, 1997). Nonetheless, whatever else is going on, lurking behind the skepticism is a view of narratives as primarily recalling experience.

How do criminologists conceptualize narrative?

Ricoeur (1984) discerned three basic conceptualizations of the relationship between narrative and experience, which Polkinghorne (1988: 67–8) paraphrases:

> The relationship can be defined in any of three ways. The first two ways assume that life, as lived, is independent of narrative description. If this separation is accepted, then one can hold either that narrative gives an accurate description of the way the world really is or that it is descriptively discontinuous with the real world it depicts. The third position, advocated here, is that aspects of experience itself are presented originally as they appear in the narration and that narrative form is not simply imposed on preexistent real experiences but helps to give them form.

Criminologists conceptualize narratives in the same three ways.

First, we treat narratives as indicators of criminal behavior and related (say, contributing) experiences. I call this view *narrative as record*. Narratives document what actually happened or is happening in someone's social world. For example, in the early decades of the 20th century, the Chicago School researchers embraced the value of life histories for revealing, among other things, behavioral influences. Foremost among them was Clifford Shaw, who saw the stories of delinquents as illuminating 'the process of transmission of delinquent practices from one person or group to another and the gradual evolution of those practices through further participation in delinquent groups' (Bennett, 1981: 189). This is also the view that many contemporary criminologists take. For example, Robert Sampson and John Laub (1992: 80) observe: 'Qualitative data derived from systematic open-ended questions or narrative life histories can help uncover underlying social processes of stability and change. They can also help to confirm the results derived from quantitative analyses.' Similarly, Robert Agnew (2006: 122) calls the 'storylines' generated by offenders an overlooked source of data for understanding crime; storylines describe 'those particular combinations of events and conditions that are especially likely to result in a crime or series of related crimes'.

A preoccupation with the authenticity of offenders' narratives follows directly from the representational view that criminologists, scholars in general and the public have tended to take of narrative—as simply a record of what happened. In his 1992 article laying out general strain theory, Agnew affirms that the subjective experience of strain is key. However, Agnew (2006) looks to stories for information on real experiences that increase the likelihood of offending. He explicitly distinguishes storylines, identified by the analyst, from accounts and neutralizations, which 'present a selective and often distorted portrayal of the events and conditions leading up to a crime' (Agnew, 2006: 122).

Second, and in roughly equal measure, criminologists use narratives to illuminate how people see (or saw) their world. The narrative is a certain *rendering* of what is happening or has happened, including a rendering of one's own actions. I call this view *narrative as interpretation*. Ethnographic works on crime and criminals abound, based on narrative (as well as observational) data collected for the express purpose of understanding people's criminogenic interpretations of their world. Interpretations are significant to social scientists because people act based on their perception of things that concern them (Thomas and Thomas, 1928). Hence, of the life history of young Stanley, analyzed by Shaw (1930) in *The Jack-Roller*, Burgess (1966: 189) maintained that 'in human affairs it is not the absolute truth about an event that concerns us but the way in which persons react to that event'. Burgess' observation follows from Shaw's explicit statement of what the life story provides—a window into events, circumstances as well as the delinquent's perspective (Shaw, 1930).

A key difference between the two formulations of narrative just described—as record versus interpretation—is the latter's emphasis on subjectivity, both in the sense that the statements are biased and in the sense that they are self-referential. For the sake of studying crime, this difference is

largely considered unproblematic. Accounts of the past are usually recognized as subjective to varying degrees. The subjective aspect is something that can be managed methodologically if one's theoretical perspective has no need of it. For instance, those interested in historical events *qua* events conduct checks on validity by amassing and comparing multiple narratives as well as so-called hard data (e.g. officially counted crime events) or documentary proof—such as physical evidence of atrocities. They then present common themes. The narratives are individual versions of actual circumstances.

Most criminologists acknowledge that it is interpreted circumstances rather than 'real' circumstances that are consequential. Ethnographic studies of offenders clarify how offenders view themselves, their actions and their communities. They reveal humans making choices from partial vantage points on complex and dynamic social forces. They also showcase intersections of personal and historical circumstance. For instance, Mitchell Duneier's (1999) rich ethnography of used book vendors on the streets of New York City sheds light on a multitude of factors shaping the men's participation in the informal economy. The men's stories give voice to these factors; the stories themselves are not among such factors. Consider this comparison of two men's stories:

> If we take Ron's life story as representative, we may gain the impression that people who use crack end up in the informal economy because the effects of the drug make it impossible for them to keep a job in the formal economy. If we take Marvin's story as representative, we may infer that many drug users on the street move into the informal economy because of a lack of opportunity, rather than because of drug or alcohol use.
>
> (Duneier, 1999: 51)

On reviewing evidence that drug users can maintain a legal job, but that the relationship between drugs and legal work is mediated by such things as frustration and incarceration, Duneier concluded that Ron is overly fatalistic. Whereas Duneier's study deals with fatalistic stories such as Ron's sympathetically, the stories themselves are not objects of analysis per se.

Philippe Bourgois' *In Search of Respect*, based on five years of participant observation with Puerto Rican crack dealers in East Harlem, is also exemplary. Bourgois' main informant was a dealer named Primo. Of Primo's mother, Bourgois (2003: 176) writes:

> Her functional illiteracy and her inability to communicate with the educational bureaucracy condemned Primo to appear uncooperative and slow-witted to his teachers … Despite his anxious mother's admonishments that he respect his teacher and do well in school, success in the classroom would have betrayed his love for her.

Interpretations are important to the analysis and mediate the effects of structure: school officials interpret the woman's illiteracy and Primo interprets success at school. However, Bourgois devotes far less attention to informants' stories of reality than to reality itself. His theory of social marginalization is ultimately built on the 'complex interfaces among family, school, and peer group' (Bourgois, 2003: 174).

Scholars who offer general theories of offending are typically more tentative than are ethnographers in embracing the role of offender interpretation—not surprisingly since the latter is not easily accessed for the sake of the statistical assessments required of theory-testing. For example, Charles Tittle (1995: 205), who proposes that an imbalance between controlling and being controlled is the key cause of deviance, states: 'In view of (the) human tendency to perceive reality incorrectly, an individual's actual control ratio may sometimes be far less relevant than the control ratio he or she thinks is operating.' Social learning theorist Albert Bandura (1973: 50; emphases added) points out: 'The notion that behavior is controlled by its immediate consequences holds up better under close scrutiny for *anticipated* consequences than for those that *actually* impinge upon the organism.' In presenting reintegrative shaming theory, John Braithwaite (1989) suggests that the gossip one imagines oneself being subject to for transgressing behavior is more effective in preventing that behavior than is face-to-face censure. And so on. These and other scholars accept as unavoidable the slippage between data and the phenomena the data presumably measure—here, perceptions of things—for the sake of assessing the theories.

In short, in the aforementioned conceptualizations, narrative is a signpost of what occurred. Both conceptualizations—narrative as record and narrative as interpretation—may be called representational, with the gap between the representation and the event(s) estimated somewhat differently.

Third, and least commonly, criminologists adopt a post-positivist conceptualization of narrative, one that effectively blurs the distinction between narrative and experience by suggesting that experience is always known and acted upon as it has been interpreted symbolically. I call this a *constitutive view of narrative*. Thus, literary theorist Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1981: 179) questions 'the notion of a set and sequence of events altogether prior to and independent of the discourse through which they are narrated', even where so-called non-fictional stories are concerned.

From this perspective, one makes choices on the basis of a self that is conjured as the protagonist of an evolving story. Somers (1994: 613–14, emphases in original) observes that 'social life is itself *storied* and … narrative is an *ontological condition of social life*'. Similarly, Gergen and Gergen (1988: 18) point out that 'we live by stories—both in the telling and the doing of self'. For these scholars, who are not criminologists, narrative influences lines of action however much it 'distorts' 'what happened'. The perspective focuses attention on how narrative constitutes reality.

The claim that narrative constitutes reality should sound familiar to readers of postmodern theory. Postmodernists clearly assume the constitutive conceptualization of narrative. Criminologists influenced by postmodernism have generated insights about the logics reproduced by scholars and other control agents (and law violators to a lesser extent) that freeze and reify who actors are vis-a-vis others (e.g. Henry and Milovanovic, 1996; Woolford, 2006). These logics might be viewed in terms of narrative. In general, however, postmodernist thinkers challenge the project of explaining behavior. They are more likely to describe, and their preferred topic is constructions of behavior,

not behavior itself. Schwartz and Friedrichs (1994: 225) observe: 'The purpose of the postmodernist endeavor is to explore how images and meanings pertaining to (the rhetoric of) violence are constituted.' Postmodernists hold as suspect codifications of crime—even non-statist ones—and inquiry into causes of crime—even constructivist ones. Hence I see a problematic but enticing connection between postmodern and narrative criminologies.

The question arises: How does this constitutive view of narrative differ from the interpretative one, where narrative describes the world as it seems to the narrator? It differs in at least three related ways. First, it privileges language. It is concerned, for example, with linguistic devices for minimizing agency or for fusing the fate of the individual with the fate of the group. Whereas Bourgois (2003) in his ethnography gleaned key insights from the stories of crack dealers, he did not analyze any one story as discourse. For instance, he did not thematize plot and plot turn. Second, the constitutive view emphasizes one's use of language for self-awareness, which harks back to early writings in symbolic interactionism, particularly those of Mead (1934). On this view, through linguistic expression we make ourselves known, to others and to ourselves. In contrast, the more representational conceptualizations engender a cynicism about what people say. Statements are designed to manipulate outcomes. Lastly, whereas narrative as interpretation stresses perspectives and interpretations of social facts, the constitutive view stresses perspectives and interpretations about the self, but only those selves the social order and culture make available.

This is not the appreciative stance toward narrative taken by many critical criminologists, which casts the narrative of the marginalized subject as true, or at least truer than the culturally dominant stories.[1] This is not the postmodernists' fracturing of meta-narratives, which eschews cause and effect possibilities. Only a few criminologists have used the notion of narrative in ways consistent with the constitutive view.

For example, Hans Toch (1993) states that violence is an enactment of certain stories. Toch (1993: 202) observes: 'War stories can function as morality plays … Morality plays buttress the belief in a just world and make violence the means for achieving this world.' War stories rest on a definition of certain violence as good. Though violence is storied in Toch's work, he refers to psychological phenomena—a disposition to aggression, 'a personal violence problem' (1993: 194)—as the ultimate source of the story.

Jack Katz (1988: 302) suggests that the offender, like everyone else, acts in ways that are mindful of 'the narrative possibilities' of the action. In acting, one is playing out a moral tale of some sort, one that posits its protagonist as a particular sort of person. For 'the badass'—one of the archetypical criminals Katz names—the 'logic of domination is to mean nothing more or less than meanness' (1988: 100). Katz (1988: 321) explains that aggressors 'are engaged in a transcendent project to exploit the ultimate symbolic value of force to show that one "means it"'. The crime helps one to realize a particular self-story.[2]

Shadd Maruna (2001) broke ground with rigorous empirical examination of narrative effects on repeat crime. Qualitative interviews with matched samples of desisting and persisting property offenders allowed him to hold

circumstances and traits relatively constant, while investigating narratives. He discovered common plot devices in the narratives of the desisters, namely that they 'portray themselves very much in control of their current and future life direction. This change in personal agency is frequently attributed to empowerment from some outside source' (Maruna, 2001: 13). Persisters described a different narrative arc, one where a passive protagonist was, time and again, at the mercy of oppressive circumstances. Thus, whereas Katz begins the narrative (quite intentionally) at the crime scene, the narratives of Maruna's informants concern whole lives.[3]

Sizeable samples of persons who have been sanctioned are more readily available to criminologists, by virtue of their surveillance by the State, than are sizeable samples of persons for whom a first offense awaits. For this reason, narrative effects on desistance or any other shift in the criminal career (Ulmer and Spencer, 1999) are easier to access than are narrative effects on initial offending behavior. The recent work on narrative and conventional crime, like the early labeling approach that it echoes, does not attempt to explain initial offending. There lies mostly uncharted territory.

Even as an explanation of repeat offending, Maruna's (2001) findings await replication. Whereas Maruna controlled for psychological and structural variables, other studies may suggest that the narrative–offending relationship is spurious. From Gadd's (2003: 319) perspective, the motivation to stop offending preexists the desistance narrative, hence we must explore the psychological 'the inner, psychological realities offenders inhabit'. Whereas a radical postmodernist position questions the existence of such realities, such a strong position is not necessary for the constitutive view of narrative, and hence for a narrative criminology. A narrative criminology need only bracket non-communicated realities, perhaps positing them as stimulating or conditioning the effects of narrative on human action.

Already, scholars bracket individuals' inner realities when they theorize collective behavior. Scholars outside of the discipline of criminology have gone far in explaining collective violence in terms of the narrative constructions of would-be offenders and victims (e.g. Huggins et al., 2002; Mason, 2002; Sternberg, 2003; Vetlesen, 2005). And the issue of the authenticity of offenders' narrated identities is not so troublesome when we contemplate group identities and group offending. Numerous case studies demonstrate that stories matter a great deal for mobilization of terrorism and war, development of nuclear weaponry, participation in corporate pollution and the like, as well as smaller scale group actions like gang rape and drive-by shootings by warring drug dealers. The weightiness of what people say is only more evident, but not more salient, where group action is concerned.

Related concepts in criminology

Within the discipline, important groundwork for a narrative criminology may be found in concepts including neutralization, cognitive error, identity

(criminal and gender), and situational interpretations, and in their associated theories. Each of these concepts is concerned with how offenders construct the world and/or themselves, with the effect being transgression.

Neutralizations and cognitive errors

Inspired by symbolic interactionism, some of the most influential mid-century sociologists of deviance stressed the effects of signification. Mills (1940: 907) proposed that 'the vocalized expectation of an act, its "reason", is not only a mediating condition of the act but it is a proximate and controlling condition for which the term "cause" is not inappropriate'. Cressey (1953: 151) likewise pointed to the fact that embezzlers 'must first rationalize' embezzlement:

> In the cases of trust violation … rationalizations were always present *before* the criminal act took place, or at least at the time it took place, and, in fact, after the act had taken place the rationalization often was abandoned.
>
> (Cressey, 1953: 94, emphasis in original)

Sykes and Matza (1957) provided criminology with what remains the best-known statement of discursive effects on offending. Whereas their predecessors had already argued that learning and especially use of neutralizations enables deviant action, Sykes and Matza provided a handy list of discrete neutralization techniques consisting of denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemned and appeal to higher loyalties.

In Sykes and Matza's famous 1957 article and in subsequent applications of their scheme (e.g. Levi, 1981; Benson, 1985), neutralizations attend only to the offense, not to a lifetime of criminal and non-criminal actions. Their construction of the past, centered on the illegitimate act, gives little indication of who the subject will, reportedly, be in future. Maruna and Copes (2005: 284) maintain that 'the individual use of specific neutralizations should be understood within the wider context of sense making that is the self-narrative process', with neutralizations aiding the construction of narrative coherence (2005: 255). Matza's (1964) book *Delinquency and Drift* is a fuller development of how the individual youth conceives of him- or herself—as 'drifting' into delinquency under the spell of a 'mood of fatalism'. But Matza's book never got the attention of the 1957 article, whose list of neutralization techniques lent itself to assimilation into numerous theories. Sykes and Matza's techniques are important as kinds of 'irrational beliefs' (Ellis, 1973) or 'thinking errors' (Yochelson and Samenow, 1976) in a dominant model of correctional rehabilitation. It is especially ironic that neutralizations are deviant in this model, since Matza (1964: 61) insisted on their embeddedness within mainstream, legal culture (see also Matza and Sykes, 1961).

Thinking errors, such as a flawed notion of how long it takes to succeed in life (van Voorhis et al., 2000: 174), are like narratives in that they feature protagonists engaging with the world. They are unlike narratives insofar as rehabilitation scholars view thinking errors as: (1) discrete cognitions unrelated to a fuller sense of self in the world through time, and (2) internal,

psychic phenomena, not necessarily having been articulated. Only in the treatment setting (e.g. group work) must the erroneous thoughts purportedly get expressed or narrated for the sake of effective intervention. There, staff actively banish notions of self that the model says have little to do with one's offending (Waldram, 2007).

Identity

A venerable tradition centered in the labeling perspective considers the impact of identity on criminalization as well as criminal behavior. As a notion that the individual constructs him- or herself *about* him- or herself by making meaning of available resources (i.e. social roles and personal attributes) (Stryker and Craft, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Burke, 1991), identity shares common conceptual ground with self-narrative. Identities as traditionally conceived are not narratives, however.

In the labeling literature, the deviant identity is represented as a mark or stigmata (Goffman, 1963; Lemert, 1967; Schur, 1971). A label, not a story, is imposed, and the consequences of that label form the basis for one's identity. Indeed, part of the actor's problem with labeling is that others deny him/her his/her stories altogether, constructing him/her instead as unidimensional—as only the label (Garfinkel, 1956).

However much the labeling perspective brackets the authenticity of who people are and what crime is, the fact of labeling is taken as real. One has *really* been labeled, such as through a criminal conviction. A story—even a perception—of having been labeled is not stressed in this literature.

Situational interpretations

A number of criminological theories treat as important (if not primary) the would-be offender's interpretation of (1) situations leading up to the crime and (2) the situation for crime. As suggested earlier, positivistic criminology accepts subjectivity as inevitable. So strain theories look to how actors interpret their life circumstances—as, say, thwarting goals or not (Agnew, 1992, 2006). Learning theories look to how actors interpret the consequences of their conduct—as favorable (and thus reinforcing) or unfavorable (and thus punishing) (Akers, 1998). Rational choice theories concern themselves with the actor's perception of the benefits versus the costs of the criminal act (see Paternoster, 1987). Interpretations differ from narratives in several ways.

First, interpretations are fundamentally concerned with an event or situation; narratives are more comprehensive. Accordingly, interpretations are component parts of narrative. Strauss (1997: 147) explains: 'The sense that you make of your own life rests upon what concepts, what interpretations, you bring to bear upon the multitudinous and disorderly crowd of past acts.'

Second, situational interpretations may avoid referencing the self, whereas narratives are fundamentally concerned with the self. An exception is found in Lonnie Athens' (1997) theory of violence, where a self is evoked *in* making an interpretation. Athens (1997: 98–9, emphases in original) writes that:

> the type of self-image that people hold is intimately connected to both the *range* and *character* of the situations that they will interpret as calling for violent action, underscoring that their self-images are congruent rather than incongruent with their interpretations.

One may surmise that identities constrain what one sees in the situation, among myriad possibilities.

Finally, interpretations need not be communicated to have the criminogenic effect, whereas narratives are essentially verbalizations. Agnew (2006) identifies the criminogenic storyline as comprising both actual circumstances and perceived circumstances—for instance, a real event prompting the perception of financial need. Neither the event nor the perception requires verbal articulation save for the purpose of providing the researcher with data; indeed, Agnew (2006: 122) observes that neutralizations provide an 'often distorted portrayal of the events and conditions that contribute to (one's) crime'. In contrast, Cressey (1953) assigns a causal role to verbalization in the offending trajectory, and furthermore blurs the distinction between what persons have experienced and what they report having experienced.[4]

The potential contribution of narrative to criminology

In short, narrative criminology locates stories of who one/one's group is along pathways to offending. Stories shape self-awareness and chart action. Narrative is valuable as an organizing concept for criminological theory for at least five reasons.

First, narrative applies to both individuals and aggregates and can thus explain both individual and group crime. Maines (1993: 32) writes: 'narratives are intrinsically collective acts and exist at any level of scale'. A narrative-based theory thus counters the individualism of the dominant approaches to the etiology of criminal behavior—based on strain, control and learning processes. Building a bridge between individual and group behavior is an important task for criminology, especially as we nominally take on terrorism and genocide as crimes to be explained. The task will not be accomplished by aggregating individual perceptions and capacities so that these sum to group perceptions and capacities. The complexities of group decision-making processes make clear the need for extra-individual variables (see, for example, Matthews and Kauzlarich, 2000; Hagan et al., 2005), including both organizational 'facts' and cultural factors. Scholars in sociology and criminology commonly ignore the latter in favor of 'magic structuralistic formulas about "the needs of capital" or the "need for social control"' (Melossi, 1985: 205).[5] Psychologists specialize in distinguishing persons (and, less frequently, groups) most likely to be aggressive, but they tend to overstress individual dysfunction or alienation, neglecting questions of process like '*Why this action here and now?*' Research on stories and storytelling can help with these (see Azzi, 1998; Polletta, 2006).

Second, narrative applies to both perpetrators and bystanders; it can explain passive tolerance of harmful action. The neglect of bystander behavior

in criminology is the product of a western notion of responsibility as belonging to individuals (Braithwaite and Roche, 2001; Kay, 2005). A great many analyses of harm on a large scale, including studies of genocide and police brutality, bear out the absolute necessity of tolerant bystanders (see Cohen, 2001). The dominant criminological paradigms (including but not limited to pathologizing explanations) do not readily apply to bystander behavior. Bystanders tell stories about who they are relative to the perpetrators and victims of harm, and these self-stories permit their indifference.

The perpetrator's narrative conduces to his/her/its harmful action only insofar as this (or another) narrative somehow, perhaps in addition to mobilizing harm, also averts preventative measures by third parties. Here is another way in which bystanders are central to a narrative criminology. The questions 'Why did they do it?' and 'How did they get away with it?'—the factors motivation and opportunity—conceptually overlap in this approach, which will strike some as advantageous and others as the opposite.

Third, narrative can anchor the notion of cultures of violence. Subcultures of crime and violence are typically said to consist in values and codes of conduct (Miller, 1958; Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1967; Nisbett and Cohen, 1996; Anderson, 1999). But such values and codes might more usefully be conceived as embedded in and thus transmitted via narratives shared by some collective, though possibly resisted (Anderson, 1999) and often misconstrued (Matza, 1964) by individuals. Matza's (1964) argument that no subculture exists but perceiving that one exists conduces to delinquency suggests the importance of subjectivity, which is largely missing from cultural theories. The individual making the culture his/her own is nowhere to be found. As a result, we know little of the discursive practices grounding culture (see Swidler, 1986).

The narrative of the collective provides the resources with which one crafts individual stories (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). Richardson (1995) distinguishes between 'cultural stories' that help to maintain the status quo and 'collective stories' that might stimulate social change (see also Delgado, 1989; Ewick and Silbey, 1995). In assessing individuals' creative use of any shared narrative and its elements, one begins to illuminate the agentive practices whereby culture shapes individual action.

Fourth, narrative circumvents realism. That is, a theory based on narrative sidesteps the question of whether would-be offenders truly believe their stories or only tell them (to self or others) to enable harmful conduct. This is a methodological boon. Unlike other explanatory variables in criminology, we need not treat the stories that promote offending behavior as real or true in order to recognize their role.

Case studies help us appreciate the impact of narrative (as opposed to actual attitude or perception) on behavior. Hitler may or may not have believed his own story. Neither inference changes the proposition that his storied construction of self (namely, as a victim) vis-a-vis others promoted harm. Addressing the falsehood of the story may be crucial for intervention and healing. It can foster a critical consciousness about the storied construction of reality. However, for

predicting harm I submit that their truth—their factual basis—is rather beside the point. I know that there is potential trouble in designating an important basis of crime and injustice as socially constructed, while treating these phenomena as realities. However, I am happy to be candid about the contradiction.

Fifth and finally, a theory based on narrative is methodologically viable. Verbalizations can be collected. Polletta (2006: 7) observes that narrative is particularly accessible among discursive forms (e.g. ideologies): 'it is fairly easy to identify a narrative in a chunk of discourse'. And narrators themselves convey consciousness of their narration: they mark off some speech or writing as a narrative. In contrast, analysts are the ones who construct micro-level variables such as cognitions and psychological states, and macro-level variables such as collective efficacy, social disorganization and power, from what informants or social artifacts tell them. For studying harmful action by individuals, it makes no difference whether the researcher maintains the notion of an 'internal self-story' that is fairly well represented by the expressed narrative (e.g. Morrissey, 2003; Maruna and Copes, 2005: 254) or insists that narrative is always that which is expressed in social settings (Smith, 1981; Polanyi, 1985; Chanfrault-Duchet, 2000). For studying group action, the researcher need not conjure an internal self-story at all. The story that the group and, often especially, its leaders tell is consequential. The emphasis on interiority itself distracts from the harmfulness of group action (Box, 1983).

Conclusion

Narratives have long been important to criminology. First, practically: we have learned much about the etiology of criminal conduct from in-depth stories, containing as they do data on such conduct and antecedent factors. Also, the use of narrative data reminds us of the bearing subjective and complex experience has on offending. Many critical criminologists rely on the stories offenders tell about their offenses and about resistance to victimization and social control. For example, feminist criminologists urge us to view offenders as 'people with life histories' in order to better appreciate their trajectories from victimization to offending (Chesney-Lind and Pasko, 2004: 5; cf. Kruttschnitt and Carbone-Lopez, 2006). This suggestion reflects a representational view of life history, where history primarily tells us what happened or seems to have happened, though paradoxically with a central awareness of the impacts of ideology.

The representational perspective, like all perspectives, has us seeing some things while missing others. I have argued that it has largely, although not entirely, kept criminologists from appreciating narrative as affecting the actor. Narrative is a vehicle for self-understanding and as such an instigator to action. This view of narrative now enlivens studies in history, literature, and culture and history. However, it has hardly caught on among criminologists.

White (1980: 24) asks: 'Has any historical narrative ever been written that was not informed not only by moral awareness but specifically by the

moral authority of the narrator?' Perhaps we criminologists have shied away from the view of narrative as constitutive of action due to a reluctance to grant the offender-narrator his/her moral authority—the capacity to weigh in on the logic of their lives in a way that we cannot.

Assigning a central role to the offender's narrative does not imply that that logic preempts all other dynamics that may be operating. That is, assigning a central role to narrative in theories of crime does not imply that other factors are unimportant. Rosenwald (1992: 279) reminds us: 'Material conditions place a low ceiling on the development of living action, and this must inevitably curtail the revelatory experiences the members of these groups can find to process in their narratives.' As such, a crucial area of future research is to determine which social arrangements and events conduce to criminogenic narratives. Ishmael Beah's (2007) memoir centering on his years as a child soldier in war-torn Sierra Leone suggests the cultivation of a heroic, violent self-story out of a collective victim narrative mandating violence for the sake of safety and vengeance, as well as ignorance, macho role models and regular doses of narcotics. After these last two factors are wrenched away in a rehabilitation program, Beah comes to hear the dominant stories (now from a different leader in a different coup) as both false and ludicrous. As a soldier, Beah (2007: 126) recalls: 'My squad was my family, my fun was my provider and protector, and my rule was to kill or be killed.' Post-rehabilitation, he is a critic of the dominant rhetoric, calling the new leader's English 'as bad as the reason he gave for the coup' (2007: 203). Narrative was not a sufficient motivator of the killings; somehow it operated in conjunction with other variables. Case studies can help us to understand the interaction of narrative and material factors.

Another task for future research is to clarify the mechanisms by which narrative affects action. Stories may guide action quite literally, as Sternberg (2003: 314) writes: 'People often create self-fulfilling prophecies as they try to make their stories come true.' Or, the story may imply a self that must be *negated*. Say, when one holds oneself to be the subject of external forces—a partner's infidelity or an enemy's taunt—crime is 'dramatic reassurance that (one) can still make things happen' (Matza, 1964: 189). At the group level, certain highly criminogenic narratives, like those of Slobodan Milosevic and other political leaders, render paramount a common group struggle. These group narratives cause the individual to abandon agency to a collective mandate, a mandate that thereby gets constituted. To parapharase Vetlesen (2005: 147): 'collective identity-cum destiny counts for everything, and collective evil is made out to be imperative and necessary, not optional and avoidable'.

With more research we might find, as with neutralizations, that certain narratives are associated with certain crimes. The youth who 'cannot help herself' from snatching drugstore cosmetics might tell a different story of compulsion than the corporate executive who 'must do what he has to do to remain competitive'. Despite the common theme of necessity, the two narratives draw on different popular idioms and notions of self-in-society.

But first, numerous challenges face research in narrative criminology. For instance, stories are tailored to the circumstances of telling (Mishler, 1986;

Bavelas et al., 2000; Presser, 2004), and indeed are regulated within particular settings (e.g. Cook and Powell, 2006). To put the matter in positivistic terms, stories are unreliable across settings and listeners. Can today's narrative be considered a reliable proxy for the one that was articulated prior to offending? Without resolving the problem, I would merely point out that it plagues all qualitative data (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Nor is survey research immune to the influence of the research setting, as Pool (1957: 192) notes: 'the social milieu in which communication takes place modifies not only what a person dares to say but even what he thinks he chooses to say'.

A related question is: who ultimately authors the narrative obtained in research, since the researcher inevitably affects what is told and typically gives an order and meaning to the narrative different from those the narrator gave it (Denzin, 1999)? Can a narrative still be said to belong to or come from the narrator? Clearly, a mature narrative criminology will be as much concerned with research as it is with theory. If crime is seen as discursively grounded, then all discursive sites, including research sites, are fair game for investigation. As such, a narrative criminology forces the discipline to be more reflexive than it has been.

Narrative pathways to offending suggest narrative interventions. Twelve-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and restorative justice programs such as victim–offender mediation emphasize the telling and revising of stories. In these settings the addict or offender is both supported and held to account as he/she reconstructs a past that coheres with a desired future (Crites, 1986). Local expectations of true and coherent stories are in fact potential sources of trouble for both narrators' and programs' reform claims/stories (e.g. Fox, 1999; Irvine, 1999; Waldram, 2007). With evaluation of these sorts of programs, research in narrative criminology—particularly, de/criminalization through story telling—is already underway. Whereas I have mainly avoided discussion of narrative as instrumental to the activities of criminologists and criminal justice agents, and particularly activities that disempower and harm, narrative criminology promises to explain such activities *and* 'crime' using the very same theoretical lens—and so even in the same research project.

I look forward to the critical, interdisciplinary vantage on crime as harmful action that a narrative criminology—based on the constitutive conceptualization of narrative—can provide. There is nothing magical about the possibilities. Narrative is simply a concept whose study to date has assimilated a rich array of insights into human existence and human enterprise from across the academy. Furthermore, our understanding of narratives and their effects is ripe for refinement. Through research, we might discover with some precision the ways in which the effects of stories on behavior are limited. In that case, I would revise this story of limitless intellectual rewards just over the horizon.

Notes

1. Nor does it necessarily take issue with the milder version of that stance, so long as we recognize that the subaltern narrative is not, to quote Spivak (1988: 297), 'ideology-transcendent'.

2. Tittle (1995) observes that Katz's theory is really a version of strain theory, albeit one that is especially sensitive to the subjectivity of crime and of the world that makes crime attractive. Tittle (1995: 70) writes: 'Much of Katz's work merely appears to be new because he labels in unusual ways the limitations giving rise to deviant solutions.' This critique is informed by the view of narrative as interpretation—narratives are subjective versions of real circumstances (here 'limitations') that actually cause behavior. For Tittle as for most social scientists, including critical ones, real circumstances are ontologically preeminent (Melossi, 1985).
3. Giordano et al. (2002) also studied the narratives of desisters and persisters. They concluded that 'cognitive blueprints'—which are both attitudinal and linguistic in nature—are important for promoting new patterns of behavior, in part by forging new views of self. Giordano et al. (2002) stop short of asserting that the discursive aspect of the blueprint is itself consequential to behavior. They state, for example, that whereas

> actors' accounts within a narrative or life history will not access the full array of influences that literally produced successful changes … (l)inguistic and cognitive hooks are important to consider, for … together they can serve as an organizing process that actually helps to push along the changes. (Giordano et al., 2002: 1000).

4. Cressey (1953: 78) writes that 'knowing' and 'rationalizing' are 'interrelated intellectual processes' which he distinguishes 'for purposes of analysis only'.
5. Cultural criminology counters the discipline's emphasis on structures and background factors generally (Ferrell, 1999). Whereas cultural criminologists are most attentive to what crime signifies and how crime feels—over and above and in reaction to a pervasive emphasis on 'the mind, discursive practices and rationality' (Lyng, 2004: 360; see also Hamm, 2004), narrative criminology is most attentive to how crime is emplotted and spoken about. The transcendence of crime (and especially the thrilling, stylized practices known as edgework) in the cultural criminological view is discursively presaged in narrative criminology.

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