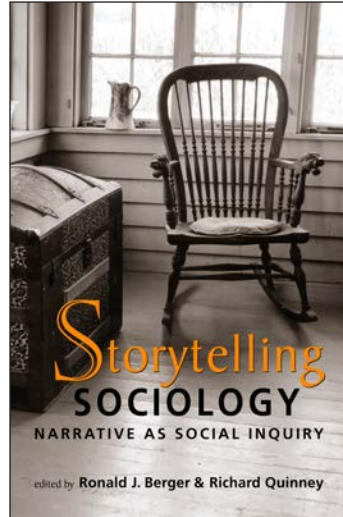


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Narrative as
Social Inquiry

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and Richard Quinney

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CHAPTER 1

The Narrative Turn in Social Inquiry

Ronald J. Berger and Richard Quinney

But in order to make you understand, to tell you my life, I must tell you a story.

—*Virginia Woolf*

The remembering makes it now. And sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That's what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story.

—*Tim O'Brien*

What remains of a story after it is finished?
Another story.

—*Elie Wiesel*

Once upon a time, sociology emerged as a field of scholarly inquiry out of a need to understand the social changes that accompanied the industrialization of society in the nineteenth century. It was born in an intellectual space between positivist science and literary representation, alternatively striving for analytical understanding and practical application, on the one hand, and the conveyance of meaning and empathy, on the other (Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Lepenies 1988; Richardson 1998).

Sociology and Its Critique

Positivist sociology advanced a view of the discipline as a value-free enterprise dedicated to the creation of objective, nonideological knowledge derived from scientific observation of empirical reality.¹ In the United

States (but not in Europe) this disciplinary quest led to the ascendancy of quantitative methods and the “mathematization” of sociology, to use Ben Agger’s (2000) term. Although some of the early classics of American sociology included works in interpretive biography and ethnography,² and qualitative studies found a secure foothold in the field, quantitative sociology achieved hegemonic status. Rigor of method demarcated the boundary between “real” sociology and impostors. Economics, not the humanities, became the allied field most admired by professional sociologists as they sought to advance their academic careers and persuade university administrators and grant agencies to fund faculty positions and research projects for sociologists. To some extent, even qualitative methods became subject to such constraints, as witnessed in the development of systematic techniques for the coding and transformation of qualitative data into numerical variables that could be analyzed by means of the latest computer software (Neuman 2003).

In the postmodern era of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, however, a growing number of sociologists have become disenchanted with the project of positivist sociology. Critics within the discipline have observed that sociology has become so dependent on quantitative instrumentation removed from lived experience that its claim of being an empirical science capable of ascertaining social reality seems rather dubious. The apparent objectivity of quantitative data is belied by the fact that the numbers do not speak for themselves. The meaning of these data is in large part a rhetorical accomplishment, as researchers assert relationships among variables with descriptive terms such as “significant,” “robust,” “stable,” and “predictive” (Agger 2000; Maines 1993).

Especially noteworthy for his role in advancing this critique was C. Wright Mills, who observed that sociologists’ preoccupation with method, what he called “abstracted empiricism,” endangered the disappearance of sociology’s subject matter. In *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills (1959) called for a sociology that grappled with the intersection of biography and history in society and the ways in which personal troubles are related to public issues. This famous dictum, as we shall see, underpins the perspective of this book.

Mills was, of course, a man of the political left, and his penetrating analyses of class and power paved the way for an intense engagement with Marxism and socialist ideas among New Left activists and academics in the 1960s. This movement, along with the civil rights, women’s, sexual liberation, and anticolonial movements of that period, pushed the critique of positivist sociology further. New voices were heard as members of previously marginalized groups began speaking their own “truths” about their lives and the world as they saw it. Sociologists were challenged to abandon their faith in value neutrality and seek alliance with these advocates of change.

Feminism in particular played a key role in debunking sociology's privileged knowledge claims. Feminist scholars argued that "truth" is contested and polyvocal and that women's social position in society gives them distinctive insights, indeed a different epistemological standpoint, from men's. They advocated a research methodology that would eschew personal detachment and encourage collaboration and empathic connection with research subjects, cross-fertilization among academic disciplines, and involvement in action-oriented research that would facilitate personal and social transformation (Harding 1991; Jaggar 1983; Laslett and Thorne 1997; Reinharz 1992).

In the years that followed, intellectual movements variously called poststructuralist, deconstructionist, and most commonly *postmodernist* launched a provocative philosophical critique of scientific practice as an exercise of power. According to Michel Foucault, a chief figure in this movement, dominant regimes of "truth" construct restrictive criteria for the generation of knowledge and empower institutionalized "experts" with authority to administer knowledge and police heretical practices. In doing so, these regimes also produce a set of inferiorized knowledges, or disciplinary "others," which though subordinated and marginalized remain historically viable and continuously in revolt (Barrett 1991; Lemert 1997; Seidman 1996).

The counterreaction to these critiques and the defense of the status quo have been fierce in some quarters (Huber 1995; see Pierce 2003; Richardson 1996; Sparks 2002). Some consider postmodernism a fad that will eventually pass and are asserting institutionalized authority within doctoral programs, faculty recruitment and retention decisions, and professional publication outlets to police ideas they believe are undermining the legitimacy of sociology. But whatever postmodernism is, and according to Charles Lemert (1997), it may not be what you think, it will not go away. If postmodernism is about anything, it is about the fact that the world has changed in some unmistakable yet ill-defined and unfolding way, and that our conventional ways of thinking about social life may no longer suffice (Denzin 1997).

The Narrative Turn

Amidst all this commotion and strife, one began to hear a cacophony of voices throughout the social sciences and the humanities about *narrative*, *narrative analysis*, *stories*, and *storytelling*. This movement is constituted by diverse "analytic languages and growing representational heritages" that often talk around and past each other and do not fully engage (Gubrium and Holstein 1999:564). There is at this moment no central core or standardized

set of procedures that can be said to have achieved dominance. The less contentious and more cordial practitioners are content with allowing various avenues of inquiry to grow and are reluctant to enforce a regime of truth that will undermine creative developments.

In general, narrative is about stories and story structure. It is about imbuing “life events with a temporal and logical order,” about establishing continuity between the past, present, and as yet unrealized future, about transforming human experience into meaning (Ochs and Capps 2001:2). Narrative turns mere chronology—one thing after another—into “the purposeful action of plot” (Taylor 2001:2). A coherent plot is one that has a beginning, middle, and end. It grows plausibly out of what has come before and points the way to what might reasonably come next. Hayden White calls this *emplotment*, the way in which “a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind” (1973:7).

Narratives, however, are not always orderly accounts and do not invariably have happy endings. In *Lost in the Funhouse*, John Barth self-consciously comments on the failure of his story to cohere: “the plot doesn’t rise by meaningful steps but winds upon itself, digresses, retreats, hesitates, sighs, collapses, expires” (1968:96). Such stories are harder to hear, harder to make sense of, because they are stories about disconnectedness, about absurdity and uncertainty. In their telling, however, the sense of chaos may actually be eased, a “healthy disorder” may be unleashed (Mitchell 1981:ix). Even an effectively narrated tragedy will allow us to “take comfort that even the worst life has to offer can be given a shape, can be expressed—enacted—and therefore contemplated and reconciled” (Taylor 2001:75). But while some narratives are about healing, others are about wounds and pain that cannot be cured but only endured (Frank 1995; Zeitlan 1997).

Some analysts make a distinction between *narrative* and *story*. For example, D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly (1998) characterize narrative as a *method* of inquiry and story as the *phenomenon* of that inquiry. They write that people “lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives,” while “narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience” (p. 155). David Maines (1999) conceptualizes narrative as the cultural “master frame” or structure that prefigures stories and makes storytelling possible. Stories rely on and invoke collective myths, archetypes, symbols, linguistic forms, and vocabularies of motive, without which their meaning “would remain unintelligible and uninterpretable” (Ewick and Silbey 1995:211–212). Arthur Frank, on the other hand, notes that “since narratives only exist in particular stories, and all stories are narratives, the distinction is hard to sustain” (1995:188).

Narrative scholars of various stripes seem to concur with the proposition that lived experience can be understood through the stories people tell about it. Stories are ways not merely of telling others about ourselves but of constructing our identities, of finding purpose and meaning in our lives. Frank observes that “stories of people trying to sort out who they are figure prominently on the landscape of postmodern times” (Frank 1995:xiii). In the telling we remember, we rework and reimagine the past, reflect back upon ourselves, and entertain what we have and could become. What is included or omitted from our stories makes plausible our anticipated futures. Because stories unfold over time, they are provisional and open-ended and contain the possibility for change. At the same time, storytelling does not occur in a social vacuum. It requires listeners who may validate or reject our stories or require us to accommodate our stories to theirs (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992; Taylor 2001).

Some analysts are concerned that by acknowledging that everyone has *their own* story, narrative inquiry runs the risks of dissolving into solipsism or the local circumstances of each particular telling and of assuming that people’s commonsense accounts are suitable substitutes for sociological analysis. According to this view, people tell stories and use narrative in everyday life, but it generally takes a trained observer to make sociological sense out of all that is told. Thus Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein argue that researchers should allow “indigenous voices [to] have their own say” without abandoning their *authorial* obligation to “complement and contextualize the explication of informants’ accounts, or nonaccounts as the case might be” (Gubrium and Holstein 1999:569–570; Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992).

The narrative literature is replete with myriad authorial strategies for narrating people’s stories. Gubrium and Holstein are noteworthy for their ethnomethodologically informed inquiries into the *how* questions of “narrative practice,” that is, the everyday activities through which “stories about experience are presented, structured, and made to cohere” and thus constitute and sustain the meaningful realities of social life (1997:147). They view stories as incomplete “prior to their telling” and are interested in how people assemble their accounts “to meet situated interpretive demands” and in the process transform “experiential ‘chaos’ into coherent and decipherable forms” and social identities of the self (1998:166). To this end, they employ a variety of abstract, generalized narrative concepts (e.g., narrative linkage, slippage, editing, options, control, collaboration, coherence) to illuminate “how the meaning of experience is both artfully constructed and circumstantially conditioned” (1998:177; Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

Gubrium and Holstein offer readers a healthy sampling of conversational exchanges derived from a rich source of ethnographic data. Other

narrative researchers employ more narrowly construed conversational analyses, examining the microstructural features or rules of conversation that enable people to speak to “one another in an orderly, recognizable fashion” (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:55). These texts may use formal notation devices that take on the appearance of quasi-mathematical verbal formulas. Then there are those who utilize content analysis assisted by the latest computer software or apply semiotic or other linguistic methods to analyze the microstructural properties of symbolic texts. These narrative strategies privilege analyst and method over storyteller and story and distance us from the world of lived experience.³

Microlevel narratives also lack a Millsian sensitivity to the interconnection between biography and history in society. In contrast, other narrative analysts examine personal stories as embedded in a field of power and inequality that extends beyond the realm of “pure narrativity” itself (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992:7). Here the analyst is concerned that storytellers are unable or unwilling to articulate the structures of domination that colonize consciousness and reiterate and elaborate hegemonic frameworks that reinforce the status quo. Personal experience can be too narrow, too idiosyncratic, to shed light on important social debates. Often the most compelling insights come from examining the multiple experiences of others. Thus the imposition of critical social analyses may be necessary for the telling of subversive stories that facilitate personal, spiritual, and political emancipation. According to Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey, “Subversive stories are narratives that employ the connection between the particular and the general by locating the individual within social organization” (1995:220). The personal is political. Personal troubles are public issues.

A problem with such critical narratives, however, is that they, too, often privilege the analyst over the storyteller. If the past has taught us anything, it is that members of marginalized groups should be afforded the opportunity to speak their own truths. Changing social conditions create cultural openings for the telling of alternative tales, which in turn pave the way for new modes of engagement with the world. Historical reality is a contested terrain. People previously silenced are now giving voice to their stories and imagining better endings for themselves and the communities in which they are enmeshed.

Qualitative Methods and Self-Reflexive Social Inquiry

The critique of positivist sociology discussed earlier in this introduction gave birth to a “crisis of representation.” In the postmodern period, who can lay claims to speak the truth? Nowhere has this crisis been more visi-

ble than in the field of qualitative methods (Denzin 1997; Denzin and Lincoln 2003).

Qualitative inquiry, an interdisciplinary endeavor, owes a particular debt to the early anthropologists and Chicago school sociologists who laid the groundwork for the ethnographic fieldwork method in the early twentieth century. In those early years and for several decades thereafter, researchers were assumed capable of authoring objective, truthful accounts of “other” cultures and societies (Adler and Adler 1987; Denzin and Lincoln 2003).

In the 1980s anthropology was at the forefront of a methodological self-reflection that challenged the assumptive separation of the observer from the observed. Qualitative data were now understood as a product of the interpretive work that constructs social reality, that “writes culture” (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Denzin 1997; Frank 2000; Geertz 1988). To some extent, it is noncontroversial that ethnographic research is more dependent than quantitative analysis on the researcher’s use of self, for in fieldwork the researcher is the primary instrument for documenting and interpreting the data. Conventionally, however, this truism is viewed as a potential liability. While a range of membership roles is tolerated (e.g., observer-as-participant, participant-as-observer, and complete participant), ethnographers are encouraged to maintain analytic detachment, to cultivate an “attitude of strangeness,” and especially to avoid “going native” (Adler and Adler 1987; Neuman 2003:375).

The postmodern challenge, on the other hand, actively eschews the ideal of the trained “social science voyeur” who stands apart from the experience being observed, remembered, or recorded (Denzin 1998:411; Richardson 1998, 2002). There is no separation of the observer and the observed. The writer’s voice is always present. The author is part of the story. In this view, researchers no longer have the option of avoiding self-reflection. As Michelle Fine and Lois Weis observe, “It is now acknowledged that we, as critical ethnographers, have a responsibility to talk about our own identities, why we interrogate as we do, what we choose not to report, on whom we train our scholarly gaze, who is protected and *not* protected as we do our work” (2002:284).

In the midst of this epistemological reappraisal, *autoethnography* emerged as an identifiable research strategy. As far as we can tell, the term is attributable to David Hayano (1979), who defined it as the cultural study of one’s own people. Under the creative influence of Carolyn Ellis, however, autoethnography came to be understood as a method by which the ethnographer turns her or his gaze inward, while also maintaining the observer’s gaze outward and examining the larger social context in which experiences of the self occur (Bochner and Ellis 2002; Ellis 1995, 2004; Ellis and Bochner 1996).

While many of the articles in this book could be described as autoethnographic, the term is too narrow for our purposes. We are interested in both the autobiographical and the biographical, and we understand these two genres as intertwined. One cannot write autobiography without interfacing that story with the stories of others. Neither, as we have seen, can one write biography without recognizing the authorial voice that produces the biographical presence. Thus we seek a narrative sociology that embraces both of these forms, as well as the ethnographic and other qualitative genres (e.g., life history, oral history, life story, case studies) whose boundaries blur in rebellion against the instinct to classify (see Denzin 1989:47–48).

A self-reflexive sociology anticipates the charge of solipsism and self-indulgence that is often brought against it. The rebuttal to this charge lies, in part, in the Millsian recognition of the relationship between the individual and society. Society runs through our blood. We are not separate from it. As Jean-Paul Sartre would have it: “I am the universal singular, universalizing in my singularity the crisis and experiences of my historical epoch” (paraphrased by Denzin 1999:511). Or, in Kathryn Church’s words: “My subjectivity is filled with the voices of other[s]. . . . Writing about myself is a way of writing about these others and about the worlds which we create [and] inhabit” (1995:5). At the same time, and this is perhaps the paradox, the writer must have the humility to acknowledge that “I give you the world as experienced by a single individual. And even when I am moved to generalize beyond my own experience, be cautioned that this is just one observer writing to make sense of his own life” (Quinney 1998:xi–xii). There is never a single story that can be told.

Toward a Storytelling Sociology

Storytelling is as ancient as the language it uses. It emerged out of the need to speak and to understand the world. Storytelling secures and increases our consciousness and extends the reality of our experiences. But since the last quarter of the twentieth century, we seem to have undergone a storytelling revival. The writing and reading of autobiography and biography are more popular than ever. Everyone wants to write his or her memoir. Professional storytellers have become more visible. People are researching their family’s genealogy and relatives’ histories, preserving these stories for future generations. Storytelling is invoked in the art of healing, as a way of defining one’s journey through and beyond suffering. Sociologists have become storytellers.⁴

Perhaps this revival reflects a culture that is ill at ease, that lacks compelling myths to bind us all together. Perhaps it has something to do with

our sense of rootlessness, of separation from extended family. Perhaps it's the secularization of the world or the vacuousness of television. Perhaps it's a form of nostalgia, a way to resurrect something we never really had. Perhaps it's the condition of postmodernity.

In this book of narrative sociology, we follow Robert Coles's lead. In *The Call of Stories*, Coles (1989) tells of the advice given to him by one of his supervisors, Dr. Ludwig, during his residency in a psychiatric ward. Ludwig urged Coles to dispense with the theoretical abstractions of his profession in order to let patients tell him their story. "What ought to be interesting, Dr. Ludwig kept insisting, is the unfolding of a lived life rather than the confirmation such a chronicle provides for some theory. . . . Let the story itself be our discovery" (p. 22).

Norman K. Denzin (1997, 1999) distinguishes two general orientations toward narrative inquiry: the *analytic* and *storied* approaches. The analytic, as we have seen, is more positivist in orientation, maintaining the analyst's neutral stance, silencing the writer's voice, and employing abstract interpretive schemes derived from preexisting theory or deduced from the data itself. The storied approach, on the other hand, is theoretically minimalist, seeking meaning in the stories themselves and encouraging the listener/reader's active engagement with the material (Jackson 1998; Polkinghorne 1995). This is why, in the forthcoming introductions to the four sections of this book—Family and Place, The Body, Education and Work, and The Passing of Time—we avoid overtheorizing the essays. Following Thomas Barone (1995), we understand the artfully persuasive storyteller as one who is willing to relinquish control over the story's meaning and to trust readers to bring their own interpretive and emotional sensibilities to bear on the tale being told.

In this project, which we call *storytelling sociology*, the measure of the "truth" is judged not by conventional scientific standards of validity and reliability but by the power of stories to evoke the vividness of lived experience (Denzin 1997). The aim is verisimilitude, or what Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis call "authenticity," the degree to which the narrative captures "the essence and resonance of the actors' experience and perspective through details of action and thought revealed in context" (1997:12). Stories transfuse "the pale abstractions of disembodied reason with the blood and bone of the senses and presents them for inspection" (Taylor 2001:30). They tell a truth that "no amount of theorizing or recitation of statistics" could reveal, a truth that generates empathy, makes it more difficult to marginalize others, helps build social bonds (Duncan 1998:107). Stories help us consider "the conditions under which the moral terms of the self are constituted" (Denzin 1999:513). They make us more "forgiving of moral failure at the same time that they convince us"

of the necessity of moral choices and of the need to engage the world in the struggle for peace and justice (Taylor 2001:55).

A compelling story is not simple entertainment, although it can be entertaining. A compelling story “isn’t a flight from reality but a vehicle that carries us on our search for reality, [a] best effort to make sense out of the anarchy of existence” (McKee 1997:12). Characters in stories—when they are interesting characters—make choices, exercise agency in the face of structural constraints, attempt “to take control over their lives and the stories about them” (Denzin 1999:512). They are both chosen by and choose their stories. A compelling story connects personal experience to public narratives, allowing society to “speak itself” through each individual.

In storytelling sociology, the writing is recognized as part of the research process. It is not merely a “report” of one’s observations, but an integral part of the process of creating meaning. As Laurel Richardson observes, “I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I didn’t know before I wrote it” (1998:347). It is through the writing that we discover our “voice,” as we emerge from silence, in our search to discover or rediscover our selves (Lincoln 2002; Lincoln and Denzin 2003; Lincoln and Guba 2003; Richardson 2002).

Storytelling sociology encourages writing that experiments with different forms of representation and that seeks engagement with the world beyond academe. Much sociological writing is, quite frankly, dull and turgid. Students, if they can manage to muddle through it, find it boring and “are disappointed that sociology is not more interesting” (Richardson 1998:346). We need to cultivate a writing that reaches a broader audience, not just a writing that impresses our colleagues with our ability to master theoretical abstraction or mathematical technique. We need a writing that avoids esoteric language, that informs and enlightens without being pedantic, that appeals to both the intellect and emotions, seeking to inform and inspire and joining “the endeavors of documentation, interpretation, and intervention” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997:xvi).

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, among others, seek an interdisciplinary approach to narrative inquiry that operates at the border of the social sciences and the humanities, that blurs the boundaries of empiricism and aesthetics. This approach is permissive of experimental forms of writing that abandon conventional scientific formats. In the process new narrative genres are being created. We are now hearing more about “sociopoetics” and “performance” texts that span the range of communicative expression with photography, drama, music, and dance (Bochner and Ellis 2002; Ellis and Bochner 1996; Gergen and Gergen 2003; Richardson 1998, 2002).

Relative to these experimental forms, the readings in this book are in many ways more conventional. Our own affinity is for a narrative style that most closely resembles the personal essay. As Phillip Lopate (1995) notes

in his wonderful anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay*, this a genre that spans a history of over 400 years. According to Lopate, the “hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy” (p. xxiii). It is a writing that reveals the process by which the writer has arrived at her thoughts, lets readers in on his doubts, makes the writer vulnerable in the text, reflects on roads taken and not taken. This does not mean that the writer bares all. It is not kiss and tell. The writer is entitled to some privacy.

The writing style of the personal essay is friendly, even conversational, but also literary. The reader should enjoy the “pleasure of knowing that we are in cultivated hands, attending to a well-stocked liberally educated mind” (p. xli). Importantly, according to Lopate, the “personal essayist must above all be a reliable narrator; we must trust his or her core of sincerity. We must . . . feel secure that the [writer] has done a fair amount of introspective homework . . . and is trying to give us the maximum understanding and intelligence of which he or she is capable” (p. xxvi).

This criterion raises the question of narrative truth. We agree with the proposition that there is no such thing as unmediated reality. At the same time, the contributors to this book have made a conscientious effort to describe the world as they see it (or perhaps, we should say, as they *tell* it). They do not deliberately deceive or “make things up” to provoke the reader’s attention. We are content to live in the borderland between reality and our perceptions of it, as we marvel at the breadth and depth of the human experience. Let the stories begin!

Notes

1. Critiques of positivist sociology can be found in Denzin (1997), Lemert (1997), Maines (1993), Richardson (1996), and Seidman (1996).

2. Some good examples are Anderson (1923), Shaw (1930), Thomas and Zaniecki (1918–1920), Thrasher (1927), and Whyte (1943).

3. Further comments on such strategies can be found in Denzin (1997), Frey et al. (1992), Manning and Cullum-Swan (1998), Ochs and Capps (2001), Pathas (1995), and Silverman (1991).

4. Storytelling in sociology and in the larger society is celebrated in Denzin (1997, 1999), Frank (1995), Hovey (2003), Quinney (2000), Sobol (1999), Stich (2002), Taylor (2001), and Zinsser (1998).