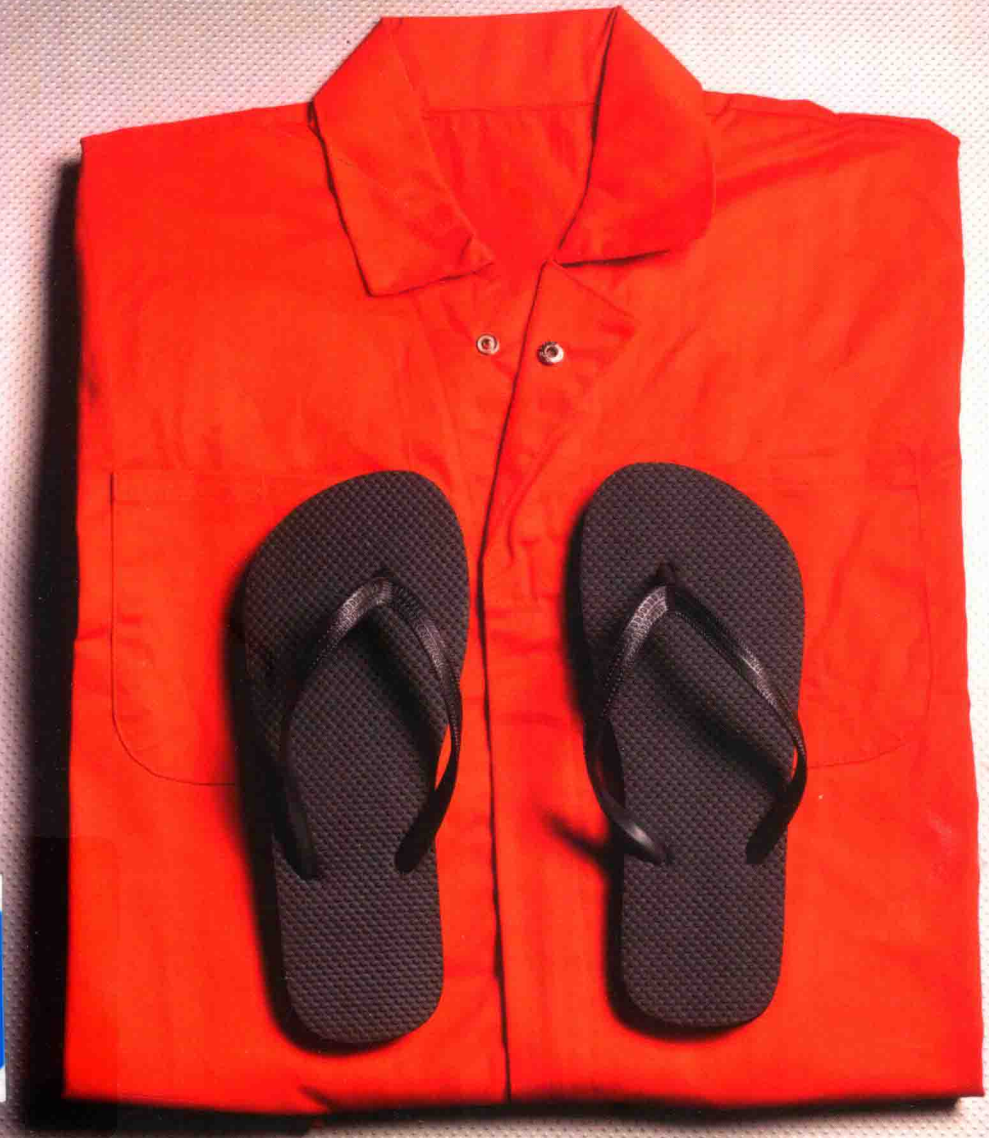
NARRATIVE CRIMINOLOGY

UNDERSTANDING STORIES OF CRIME



EDITED BY **Lois Presser** AND **Sveinung Sandberg**

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FOREWORD: NARRATIVE CRIMINOLOGY AS THE NEW MAINSTREAM

SHADD MARUNA

The movement toward narrative criminology is radical in its insights and implications. As a genuine departure from and viable alternative to mainstream criminology, the work showcased in this remarkable collection is likely to create serious waves in criminology that will be unruly and difficult to contain.

The irony, of course, is that there is nothing radical about narrative criminology at all. Throughout this book, the authors draw on a sophisticated array of leading thought in psychology, philosophy, cultural studies, and elsewhere. The so-called narrative turn in the social sciences (Brown et al. 1994) has characterized these other fields of enquiry for decades with its understanding, adopted from Sartre, that the human being is fundamentally a storytelling creature—or "homo narrativus" (Ferrand and Weil, 2001). Using the male-centered language of his time, Sartre ([1938] 1965, 61) wrote: "A man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it."

Over the last two decades, this notion that identity is an internal narrative has achieved a privileged place in the social sciences and humanities, with adherents like Paul Ricoeur, Dan McAdams, and Charles Taylor. The distinguished Harvard psychologist Jerome Bruner (1987, 15) argues: "Eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organise memory, to segment and purpose-build the very 'events' of a life. In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives."

The equally distinguished London School of Economics sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991, 54) agrees, arguing that in modernity, "a person's identity is not to be found in behavior, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going." Theodore Sarbin (1986, vii) even suggests that the narrative should be seen as the "root metaphor" for the entire field of psychology. As crime is simply a form of human behavior, it makes sense that criminological knowledge and understanding would follow closely (if perhaps lagging slightly) behind developments in these wider fields of understanding human relationships and cultures.

Far more radical, then, is the much wider field of nonnarrative criminology. How is such a thing even possible? As Scott and Lyman (1968, 62) have argued: "Since it is with respect to deviant behavior that we call for accounts, the study of deviance and the study of accounts are intrinsically related, and a clarification of accounts will constitute a clarification of deviant phenomena—to the extent that deviance is considered in an interactional framework."

Our criminal courts are full of stories; police work largely involves the collection of stories. The same is true of offender rehabilitation. Religions—the traditional realm of sin and punishment (and redemption)—explicitly explain right and wrong through parables and other stories. Indeed, all cultures appear to rely on mythologies and legends to teach morality. There may be no other way to teach it. Good and bad, crime and justice, deviance and punishment: These are not concepts that belong naturally to the realms of science, quantification, calculus, or accounting. They are, at heart, narrative concepts, belonging only and always to the field of stories and storytelling; they can appear ridiculous and hollow outside of this light.

The late Jock Young, a trained mathematician and one of criminology's looming geniuses, makes this case in his characteristically fearless and often hilarious magnum opus *The Criminological Imagination* (2011). Young's argument is not that crimes are not measurable or contain no empirical reality. Rape, murder, robbery, and assault may all be social and linguistic constructs, but this is cold comfort for the victims of such acts whose physical experiences of crime are most certainly real. Counting, measuring, and utilizing statistical probability models for predicting such acts were among the most radical and important of enlightenment inventions.

Yet, it has to be remembered that this sort of approach to understanding the social psychology of crime is just as counterintuitive today as it was in the nineteenth century. When human beings, in every culture, seek to understand "why did she do it?" the answer is not a mathematical formula but a story: "First, this happened, then that happened, and then she decided to do X." Moreover, despite two hundred years of nonnarrative criminology, human beings around the world continue to tell such stories for why they did what they did or do what they do.

These stories are not the literal or complete truth (if such a thing exists), nor are they in and of themselves the sole explanation for criminal behaviors, but they are an unmistakable source of evidence, the elephant in the room. Indeed, the most radical aspect of nonnarrative criminology is not the elevation of quantification which amuses Young so much, but rather the remarkable dismissal of these narrative data that are everywhere around us in the buildup to and aftermath of crimes. Leaving aside the ethics of this, what could be the scientific rationale of ignoring the stories of those human beings we have assigned to the construct of victim, offender, or family member in our analyses? If quarks and waves could talk, you can bet that physicists would be doing qualitative research as well.

The contributions to this crucial new volume demonstrate the value of doing so, both by force of the rich qualitative material itself (although this is hardly new) and through the engagement with psychosocial theories that can point to new strategies for interpreting these data. In doing so, the chapters also expose the considerable difficulty in analyzing self-narratives in criminology. We find that our versions of quarks and waves are not reliable recorders of some objective truth. Their narratives are biased (albeit often in ways that expose useful patterns of thought), they are influenced by the circumstances and audience of the telling, and they are, above all, complicated, nonlinear, and unique (if familiar through cultural conventions of storytelling).

One does not finish this book and conclude "we are almost there" in the quest to understand crime and punishment; far from it. Such false hopes for certainty may plague nonnarrative criminology with its goals of uncovering what works in controlling crime (at long last). Yet, narrative criminology aims at understanding and confronting rather than prediction and control. The conclusion from the essays in this book, or

this author's conclusion at least, is not that we have almost cracked the mysteries of crime and justice, but that at least we are now asking the right questions.

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CONTENTS

Introduction

What Is the Story?

LOIS PRESSER AND SVEINUNG SANDBERG

Narratives are central to human existence. By constructing our lives as stories, we forge connections among experiences, actions, and aspirations. We know ourselves as *one* over time—one consistent moral actor or one unified group of moral actors—however numerous or varied the cultural story elements that we access and integrate into our self-stories. Our self-stories condition what we will do tomorrow because whatever tomorrow brings, our responses must somehow cohere with the storied identity generated thus far. Criminologists have made ample use of offenders' narratives, mainly, albeit not exclusively, as vehicles for data on the factors that promote criminal behavior. The idea that narratives or stories themselves shape future action has not been exploited for the sake of understanding criminal behavior. Enter our approach, narrative criminology (Presser 2009; see also Presser 2012; Sandberg 2010, 2013).[1] Narrative criminology is any inquiry based on the view of stories as instigating, sustaining, or effecting desistance from harmful action. We study how narratives inspire and motivate harmful action, and how they are used to make sense of harm. In granting primacy to narrative in human action, narrative criminology follows a well-trodden path in psychology, sociology, history, literature, and cultural studies. Narrative criminology also hews to a critical perspective on power and agency as constituted discursively.

Narrative criminologists view narrative texts as foundational objects of inquiry and the study of those texts as "a useful corrective to the reductive tendencies that other analyses, rooted in individual disciplines, can manifest" (Andrews et al. 2004). The approach is a constructionist one. We do not view offenders' narratives as accurately—or

inaccurately—describing events. We do not consider narratives as vehicles for thoughts or as suppressed voices. What, then, is narrative? Where does narrative criminology come from theoretically and what does it look like methodologically? What can narrative criminology help us to achieve?

The Nature of Narrative

Narrative is just one discursive form. Other forms include reports, chronicles, expositions, metaphors, dialogues, and arguments. Generally speaking, a narrative is a type of discourse that follows events or experiences over time and makes some point. William Labov and Joshua Waletzky (1967, 20–21) famously set out the first characteristic of narrative, temporal sequencing, as central: "The basic narrative units that we wish to isolate are defined by the fact that they recapitulate experience in the same order as the original events." Labov and Waletzky assigned a somewhat less vital role to the evaluation of a narrative, which "establishes the importance or point" (32), although by now scholars generally agree that narratives, however subtly, always make a morally transcendent point (Bruner 1990; Mishler 1986; Polkinghorne 1988; Polletta et al. 2011). When the protagonist of the narrative is oneself or one's group, the point typically concerns who the self or the group is in the world. Hence the fairly recent view of identity or self as something constructed via storytelling (see Bruner 1990; Chanfrault-Duchet 2000; Kerby 1991; Linde 1993; Somers 1994).

Labov (1972, 363) is also responsible for a classic model of the well-formed narrative, which includes six essential elements: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result or resolution, and coda. An abstract says something about the theme, the orientation introduces the context, the complicating narrative action introduces an event, and an evaluation makes the point clear. The result tells audiences what ultimately happened, while the coda signals that the story has come to an end. In recent decades narratologists have questioned the faithfulness of stories to the classic model. For example, whereas narrative is said to include an evaluation, evaluative ambiguity is a resource some narrators use to influence others (see Polletta et al. 2011). Similarly, Sandberg (2009) has noted multiple, even contradictory, evaluations in a single

narrative. A storyteller may not even signal an end to the story; instead she or he may allow or invite interlocutors to continue it—sometimes from rather sparse beginnings (Fairclough 1992). Nonetheless, however much a particular story diverges from conventionality, audiences seem to recognize it as a story when they hear or read it.

Narratives themselves take many forms. Literary scholars distinguish between comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony (McAdams 1993). Hankiss (1981) claims that most life stories are dynastic (a good past gives birth to a good present), antithetical (a bad past gives birth to a good present), compensatory (a good past gives birth to a bad present), or self-absolutory (a bad past gives birth to a bad present). The narrative literature is replete with similar typologies.

Michel Foucault's (1972) discourse is a collection of many genres including narratives.[2] Discourses are ways of structuring areas of knowledge and social practice that systematically form the objects of which they speak. Discourses are embedded in, emerge from, and uphold social institutions. A discourse can achieve hegemony in particular historical times, where certain *épistèmes* and narrative structures dominate (Foucault 1970); there may even be several competing discourses, each with its own set of narratives (Foucault 1978). Viewing narratives as embedded within larger discourses highlights their power and the power relations in which they are implicated. It also highlights and contextualizes the limits of the individual narrator's agency.

Narrative and Experience

Narrative is closely related to experience, yet the relationship is highly problematic. First, experience is constantly changing, thus narrative must change as well. We have no once-and-for-all life story. Nor does the story of an event remain exactly the same with the passage of time: the evaluation or plot, if not the events themselves, is subject to change. Second, narratives vary with the circumstances of their telling. They are tailored to interlocutors—Michael Polanyi (1985, 33) neatly states that "the teller must 'recipient design' his story"—and shaped by interlocutors: narratives may be collective productions, as suggested above. They are also tailored to the purposes of storytelling, a fact that engenders suspicion about the truthfulness of people's stories.

The question of the truthfulness of stories comes to the fore where the stories of offenders are concerned. The public commonly presumes that offenders lie—either by nature or to avoid or mitigate formal and informal sanctions. Criminologists often share the view of offenders' narratives as suspect, belied by their methodological concern with whether storytellers are "telling the truth" (Sandberg 2010). Yet, many critical scholars espouse an apparently opposite view of the stories marginalized offenders (and victims) tell. They take these to reflect heretofore silenced truths about oppression and subaltern existence. Hence, some ethnographers say they are allowing those informants to speak their own truths through narrative excerpts. Whether offenders' stories are seen as potentially fictional or as offering a unique vantage point on truth, the implication is the same: narrative is epistemologically subordinate to experience. For philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1984) that is but one of the ways that the relationship between narrative and experience may be conceptualized.

Ricoeur describes three basic views of that relationship. First, narrative may be seen as an objective representation of experience—a historical record of what happened. Second, narrative may be seen as a subjective interpretation of experience. As in the first conceptualization, narrative as interpretive statement reveals what happened but through a subjective lens. Third, narrative may be seen as shaping experience. In this conceptualization, experience is always understood and acted upon as it has been storied.[3] Narrative criminology adopts this third view, which may be called constitutive.

We venture that the constitutive view—the view that narratives produce experience even as experience produces narratives—is foreign to most criminologists, a fact that owes a good deal to the discipline's individualism, its connection to the criminal justice system, and its limited forays into social theory. Criminologists study individual action far more than they do mass harms. Whole categories of mass harm, causing untold casualties, have been virtually ignored, including genocide and institutionalized animal abuse (see Beirne 2009; Day and Vandiver 2000; Hagan and Rymond-Richmond 2009). Yet, outside of criminology, scholars routinely bracket individuals' inner realities in order to theorize collective behavior. Such scholars have gone far in explaining collective violence in terms of the narrative constructions of would-be offenders and victims (see Cohn 1987; Huggins, Haritos-Fatouros, and

Zimbardo 2002; Mason 2002; Smith 2005; Sternberg 2003; Vetlesen 2005). Case studies demonstrate that stories matter a great deal for the 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. Few would think to assert that the inauthenticity of those collective stories undermines their mobilizing effects.

The weightiness of what people say is only more evident—not more salient—where group action is concerned. Consider that the human capacity to interpret experience depends upon language. People's verbalizations thus affect their behavior by affecting what they are able to think. Of the discursive—indeed, narrative—nature of thought David Polonoff (1987, 47) states: "Even the private consultation with recollection issues in a kind of narration in which temporal gaps are elided and the continuous succession of experiences is organized as movement to and from significant episodes or markers." What we take to be reality necessarily takes narrative form.

Some, in fact, view events themselves as narrative in form. Donald Polkinghorne (1988, 68) relates that aspects of experience 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." This radical position is consistent with postmodern thought. However, narrative criminology need not go to that extreme. We need only bracket so-called actual conditions in the world to focus on the role of narrative constructions in influencing behavior. In adopting the constitutive view, in any of its forms, the researcher theoretically and methodologically focuses on storied experience, not experience per se.

Related Concepts from Criminology

Narratives bear a likeness to established criminological concepts, namely, neutralizations, thinking errors, identities, and situational interpretations. Each of these constructs is something actors are said to borrow, more or less, from their culture to construct the world and themselves, with the result being misconduct. The gap between these criminological concepts and narrative colors our vision of narrative criminology, as we will show.

Gresham Sykes and David Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralizations—denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemned, and appeal to higher loyalties—are the best known of these concepts. Neutralizations are verbalizations actors use to tell themselves that their actions are not in violation of the norms they are otherwise committed to. The parsimony of Sykes and Matza's typology has fostered a tendency toward excessive reduction in research on what offenders say (see Maruna and Copes 2005), just as it assured the prominence of neutralizations over similar though more theoretically intricate earlier work by C. Wright Mills (1940) on vocabularies of motive and Donald Cressey (1953) on the justifications of embezzlers. Nor has Matza's 1964 book *Delinquency and Drift*—which offers a more complex theory of how the individual youth conceives of her- or himself as drifting into delinquency under the spell of a "mood of fatalism" (88)—received nearly as much attention as the 1957 article.

Unlike narratives, neutralizations attend only to the offense, not to a lifetime of criminal and noncriminal actions. The neutralizing actor focuses on the illegitimate act alone, giving little indication—as narrative does—of who she or he, allegedly, will be in the future. Such indication informs the narrator's criminal project. Narrative criminology advocates a more constitutive and all-encompassing understanding of language than the concepts of neutralization, justification, and excuses allow for.

More reductive still are thinking errors, which are the focal points of a hegemonic program of offender rehabilitation in the West (Ellis 1973; Yochelson and Samenow 1976). Thinking errors, such as attribution of intent to harm to one whose action was accidental, are similar to narratives in that they feature protagonists engaging with the world. They differ from narratives in that 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, with no requirement of verbalization. Only in the treatment setting must the erroneous thoughts purportedly be expressed or narrated for purposes of effective intervention. In addition, from the perspective of narrative criminology narratives are never erroneous. Finally, narrative criminology attends to individual and collective narratives and action, whereas thinking errors are individual phenomena used to explain individual offending only.