



Narrative Criminology as Critical Criminology

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Abstract

Narrative criminology is a theoretical paradigm rooted in a view of stories as influencing harmful actions and arrangements. Narrative criminologists explore the storied bases of a variety of harms and also consider the narratives with which actors resist patterns of harm. We submit that narrative criminology is an apt and powerful framework for research in critical criminology because narrative criminology is fundamentally concerned with harm or resistance to harm, underscores collective involvement in the genesis of harm, illuminates the dynamism of harm and therefore the possibilities of resistance, and compels a reflexive stance on one's research. Stories are recounted at multiple levels of social life. They are self-consciously *and* habitually generated, structured *and* creative, populated by things said *and* things not said. The complexities of stories are a good match for the complexities of crime, harm and justice in late modernity—core concerns of critical criminology.

Introduction

Narrative criminology is a theoretical paradigm centered on the view that stories influence human actions and arrangements, including those that harm. Narratives, used synonymously with stories in this article, are temporal accounts of events that give meaning to those events. We know ourselves and others in the world in large part through stories: they inform and animate us and thus guide our actions. Narrative criminologists study the types, textual composition and mechanics of stories that influence—either promote or curb—harm-doing. We submit that narrative criminology is an apt and powerful framework for research in critical criminology.

Critical criminology is a broad term for perspectives that question, among other things: statist codifications of crime; classist, racist and gender-oppressive policies; neglect of political economy (inequality) as a cause of crime; and criminological inquiry for its own

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sake rather than for the sake of furthering justice (see MacLean and Milovanovic 1997). Critical criminologists are deeply concerned with power relations. They observe that what is called crime and how the criminal justice system responds to those who commit it reflect and perpetuate social inequalities. They furthermore note that criminology is apt to legitimize inequalities if it does not adopt an activist position.

In this article, we sketch narrative criminology and the state of the field—that is, theory as well as research to date—in order to build the argument that narrative criminology has critical potential inasmuch as it (1) is foundationally concerned with harm and not just illegal action; (2) underscores collective involvement in patterns of harm; (3) illuminates the dynamism of harm and therefore the possibilities for resistance; and (4) compels researcher reflexivity. Critical criminologists need not attend to narratives, but narratives surely drive the phenomena they study.

Narrative Criminology: Theory and Research to Date

Presser coined the expression and outlined the field of narrative criminology in 2009. She noted that criminology had yet to take “the narrative turn” that related disciplines had—mainly cultural studies, history, psychology, and sociology (Presser 2009, 2016). Whereas criminological research owes a great deal to stories (see Bennett 1981), Presser noted that it had rarely been *about* stories. Rather, it had used stories in large part to explore other (e.g., criminogenic) factors. Until Presser, criminologists had only rarely approached narrative itself as factoring into action.

The view of narrative as spurring action is common in studies of mass harm from fields other than criminology, however. For example, Mason (2002: 191) (aligned with English, American Studies, and Gender Studies) identifies narratives that spur violent attacks on abortion clinics by representing “some particular people as pro-life warriors and others as conspiratorial enemies of life.” Kay (2005: 17), a philosopher, discerns the collective story that sustains the death penalty in the United States: “The story says it is morally permissible to harm criminals for a variety of reasons.” Smith (2005), a cultural sociologist, theorizes war in terms of the choice of narrative genre that nations make to describe geopolitical conflicts. Analyzing three international conflicts in post-World War II United States history, he found that use of the apocalyptic narrative genre was more likely to culminate in warfare than were other genres, such as tragedy. Sternberg (2003), a psychologist, and Vetlesen (2005), a philosopher, advance general theories of mass atrocities based on stories. In each of these cases, the author demonstrates that narratives shape harm perpetrated by aggregated elites.

Narrative criminology has theoretical forebears within criminology as well. Narratives are related to identities, neutralizations and situational interpretations (Athens 1997; Becker 1963; Sykes and Matza 1957; Lemert 1967; Messerschmidt 1997). Each of these constructs is something that actors borrow from their (sub)culture to construct themselves and the world around them, with the result being some sort of transgression. Narrative is a more holistic rendering of actors in the world, however (Maruna and Copes 2005; Presser 2009). Furthermore, it is discursive, or bound to language, whereas studies of identities, neutralizations and situational interpretations do not generally share that emphasis. Attuned to lives, the meaning of lives, and to language or meaning’s actual rendering, narrative criminology invites attention to more systemic and socially organized harm-doing. In many respects, then, Henry and Milovanovic’s (1996: 170) constitutive criminology,

which posits that crime is “not so much caused as discursively constructed,” anticipated narrative criminology. Narrative criminology concretizes the discursive focus of constitutive criminology, asking, among other things, which *particular* (narrative) discourses construct crime and how.

Some readers will connect narrative criminology with critical ethnographies by criminologists and sociologists—invaluable works that share stories told by subordinated persons (e.g., Baca 2001; Bourgois 2003; Duneier 1999; Shukla 2016). Narrative criminology is distinguishable from that tradition in three ways. First, whereas many of those ethnographies seek to point out the falsehood of dominant (and dominating) myths, narrative criminology scrutinizes the social production of *all* stories. In other words, it considers the concept of the people’s “own” stories as problematic. Narrative criminologists recognize that narrators draw on a culturally delimited set of options for telling stories, and that their stories are also always influenced by interlocutors, real and imagined. Second, narrative criminologists observe that stories act in the world with both good and bad consequences. Our stories, especially when shared with others, can help us escape hardship and oppression, but they can also hurt and constrain us: witness disadvantaged supporters of right-wing leaders coming together around a particular narrative of victimization. Third, and most importantly, narrative criminology takes stories to be social forces in their own right, rather than merely stores of information *about* social forces. The *story*, and not the *factual information it provides*, is the phenomenon of interest. Thus, narrative criminology differs from research that assembles storylines or trajectories of events in people’s lives (e.g., Agnew 2006). Because narrative criminology is attentive primarily to people’s stories and not the events purportedly behind stories, the accuracy of stories is not a main concern (Sandberg 2010). “True” or “untrue,” stories have consequences: they affect thought and action. Thus, unlike critical criminological approaches that tend to eschew positivism, narrative criminology sets the stage for the making of *causal* claims. Accordingly, narrative criminology invites both qualitative and quantitative inquiries.

Our edited volume, *Narrative Criminology: Understanding Stories of Crime* (Presser and Sandberg 2015), sets forth the narrative criminological approach theoretically and through application to specific empirical cases. In that volume, Keeton (2015) reveals the impact of religious narratives on Indian removal policies and related atrocities in nineteenth-century America. Sandberg and Tutenges (2015), comparing contemporary stories of addiction and bad trips with ancient folk-tales, argue that even tragic drug stories can motivate drug use. O’Connor (2015) clarifies through fine-grained analysis the discursive devices that drug users and maximum security prisoners use to change their storylines and their lives. Tognato (2015) describes shifting public stories of tax evasion in Italy. Other chapters, such as those by Ugelvik (2015), Fleetwood (2015), Miller and colleagues (2015), and Victor and Waldram (2015), deconstruct the stories with which ex-offenders reestablish dignity and agency as members of a vilified subpopulation. Aspden and Hayward (2015) describe points of connection and disagreement between cultural and narrative criminology. Aspden’s memoir centering on his youthful attempt at robbery helps flesh out synergies between the sensual and the narrative: “The story I told myself was that I had fallen to the bottom, that I was exiled from my community and peers” (2015: 250).

In a special 2016 issue on narrative criminology in *Crime Media Culture*, the editors, Sandberg and Ugelvik, and Presser, in a separate contribution, recount the history of the narrative criminological perspective. One of the key accomplishments of that special issue is the dialogue it convenes among cutting-edge criminologies that focus on culture. For example, Katz draws connections between his cultural criminological approach and narrative criminology in the context of the Rodney King riots. Katz

(2016: 233) writes: “Culture in crime refers to the understandings employed by people as they commit crimes. These include folk narratives of how crimes occur, which are used by offenders to organize the social interaction required to commit crimes.” Carabine (2016) and Copes and Ragland (2016) connect images to stories and thus visual criminology to narrative criminology.

Narrative criminology also occasions cross-disciplinary dialogue. A body of work by psychologists Youngs, Canter and their colleagues (see Youngs and Canter 2012; Ioannou et al. 2015, 2017) directs analytic attention to particular roles that a person assumes in committing a crime. Although based in psychology, this research follows narrative criminology’s fundamental decentering of criminal propensity, as narrative roles and not person-types align with offending. The psychological branch of the narrative criminology tree has implications for humane practice, such as in helping addicts achieve lasting recovery (Kougiali et al. 2017).

In very recent years, scholars undertaking work in narrative criminology have engaged with literary arts. Colvin (2015), a language and literary scholar, considers the productive use of literature in prisons (see also Wilson 2014). Brisman (2017) argues for scholarly attention to fiction given its consequences for real-world environmental harm. A deeply “storied” environmental harm is climate change, which, according to Craig (2016), will devastate us and the environment if we do not intercede in the main narrative “told” by modern American law and policy—that of “Humans as Controlling Engineers.” This narrative credits humans with “the considerable ability to control and modulate human impact on ecological systems” (Craig 2016: 363). Craig sees hope, however, for outliving climate change in the form of an alternative narrative—one of climate change as trickster. “Among other things, trickster tales teach humans to expect the unexpected and that change—good or bad—is just part of life” (Craig 2016: 384). Trickster stories are not generally seen or heard in mainstream Anglo American society, and Craig connects the elevation of Indigenous cultural forms with the promise of re-writing dominant environmental law, stories, and, indeed, our history.

Contemporary research in narrative criminology spans the globe and an array of storytellers and contexts. Barrera (2017) scrutinizes the drug war stories of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, while Gilmer (2017) probes piracy narratives in Somalia. Saarikkomäki (2016) examines youths’ stories about meetings with security guards and the police in Finland, and Dollinger (2018) investigates how young criminal defendants in Germany position themselves in relation to reigning public discourses about offenders. Boonzaier (forthcoming) hones an intersectional feminist approach in analyzing the narratives of violence shared by sex workers in South Africa.

Perhaps most importantly for our argument concerning narrative criminology’s critical potential is that recent studies in narrative criminology, including ones discussed previously, *study up*. Some explore the ways in which stories inform and sustain criminal justice, including policing, prosecution, imprisonment, and rehabilitation, as well as immigration control practices (e.g., Petintseva forthcoming; Törnqvist 2017; Ugelvik 2016; Wright 2016; Yardley et al. 2015). Kurtz and Upton (2017) demonstrate to us that police officer narratives, such as that of the occupying soldier, shape and are shaped by the racialized and masculinist institution of policing. Fiander and colleagues (2016) analyze the narratives of critical penal history museums in Canada and find potential for humanizing prisoners and problematizing their confinement. Some studies, such as those that discern stories of ordinary Muslims opposing Islamist terrorism (Joosse et al. 2015; Sandberg et al. 2018; Sandberg and Anderson forthcoming), take an implicit stance against violence, including state violence. This body of work has

critical potential in that narrative resistance challenges the physically and discursively violent attacks, on cells and individuals associated with terrorism, narrowly referred to as “counterterrorism.”

A hallmark of studies in narrative criminology is their emphasis on the complexities of stories and storytelling. Fleetwood (2014) stresses the importance of examining how narratives are embedded within socioeconomic and gender structures. Presser (2012) and Sandberg (2013), in analyses of the narratives of domestic terrorists in the United States and Norway, respectively, highlight the incoherence, including contradictions, with which narrators make meaning. They also showcase the narratives’ rootedness in larger and wide-ranging discourses. Sandberg and colleagues (2015) take note of the plurivocality of stories of violence. In a recent piece, Sandberg and Tutenges (2018) argue that narrative play is evident in humorous stories. As suggested above—and notwithstanding its topical and analytic openness—we believe that narrative criminology summons critical thinking in four related ways.

Narrative Criminology’s Critical Potential

Narrative criminologists hold the view that the world is fashioned out of stories. Human beings know themselves and “others” as characters of stories. They understand temporal and specifically causal relationships as developments in plots. And those of us who study social phenomena inevitably are “characterized”: we matter to those plots. Narrative criminologists, trained in the storied nature of existence, are well positioned to recognize criminology—which is to say, ourselves—as telling stories. We also view oppression and other harm as based on stories, though not only on stories. These are the conceptual bases of narrative criminology’s critical and transformative potential.

Focus on Harm Over Law-Breaking

Critical criminologists question mainstream criminology’s focus on law-breaking, viewing government-defined “crime” as an ideologically wrought designation that does not necessarily capture activities that cause harm and occludes attention to ones that do (Kramer 1985; Michalowski 1985; Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1970). Corporate and state actions and arrangements, which can degrade and destroy ecological, human and nonhuman health and well-being, are beyond the reach of state designations and regulations. The criminal justice system itself causes tremendous suffering that is legal, or if illegal then largely permitted, and bolsters extant injustices through selective criminalization and enforcement.

Foundational writings in narrative criminology identify harm as *the* object of concern. Presser and Sandberg (2015: 1), for instance, define the field: “Narrative criminology is any inquiry based on the view of stories as instigating, sustaining, or effecting desistance from, harmful action.” Why this focus on harm? First, narrative criminologists were, from the start, influenced by analyses of not-necessarily-criminal mass harm (Presser 2009, 2013). Second, and to this day, narrative criminologists are confronted frequently with the evidence that criminalization, criminal justice and punishment is itself storied—that is, constituted by stories (see, e.g., Ugelvik 2016; Kurtz and Upton 2017).

Powerful, socially integrated individuals and institutions tell stories—and have superior capacities and opportunities to disseminate these stories. Thus, powerful and

aggregate offenders are no problem for the narrative criminological perspective, unlike other theories of offending centered on disorganized communities, economic deprivation, impaired biological or psychological make-up, or weak social bonds. As seen above, exemplars of narrative criminology include research on the actions of governments and other elites.

In addition, narrative criminology is highly compatible with a view of harm as patterned and rooted in *institutions*, rather than as so many isolated incidents, which is a distorting tendency of mainstream criminology. Stories become hardened; they form narrative habitus or internalized “dispositions towards particular discourses and narrative forms,” which inform particular “interpretations and representations” (Fleetwood 2016: 182; see also Sandberg and Fleetwood 2017). “People’s habitus of expected plot completions is nothing less than their sense of life’s possibilities” (Frank 2010: 54). Institutions circulate stories to account for their practices and thereby play a key role in constructing the narrative habitus of individual actors within their purview.

Collective Participation in Patterns of Harm

Mainstream criminology concerns itself primarily with interpersonal injury, channeling “the underpinning logic of capitalist societies (which) serves to prioritise interpersonal harms over organizational and structural harms” (S. Pemberton 2016: 8). Critical criminologists challenge that tendency. They urge attention to the organizational and the structural.

Narrative criminology counters the individualism of the dominant approaches to the etiology of criminal behavior. Undoubtedly, narrative criminology can and does explain individual behavior—and our studies may yield very personal and idiosyncratic story features—but those operating within its frame know that narrative is always sourced collectively in that stories are patterned after collective forms, with standard plotlines and stock characters. Consider the tragedy and the romance, the heroic underdog and the devious foe. Stories contain and make reference to other, collective stories, and import understandings of them into the present rendering. They are interdiscursive (Fairclough 2013).

Collective myths ground harmful patterns. Hochschild (2016) describes the “deep story” of American conservatism, according to which the American Dream story is false for whites: they cannot really get ahead because of the privileges bestowed upon others, namely racial minorities and immigrants. Like Hogan (2006), narrative criminologists study the stories that harm’s passive bystanders tell. Even narrative criminologists who study individual life stories take stock of broad forms of which the life stories are derivative. Maruna (2001) notes the inspirations for desisters’ redemption narratives in 12-step programs. Presser (2013) finds collective stories that both license harm-doing and avow powerlessness in the face of harmful projects one engages in or supports. She observes that institutions, including industry and law, are sources for those stories.

Vetlesen (2005) suggests that narratives are uniquely relevant to organized harm-doing. In contrast to “individual evil,” to which he attributes to individual reasons, Vetlesen (2005: 172) explains that “[t]he collective action at work in collective evil typically identifies the victims by ideological (symbolic, narrative) means, concentrating on what *they* have done or are about to do against *us*” (emphasis in original). Individual action likewise rests on narratives. “Individuals become the autobiographical narratives

by which they tell about their lives” (Riessman 1993: 2), and those autobiographical narratives are no less ideologically structured than are collective narratives.

Showcasing Dynamic Oppression and Possibilities of Resistance

Oppression operates through ideology. “[T]he way in which...subaltern classes live their world will be typically shaped and influence by the dominant ideologies” (Eagleton 1991: 101). Stories are one highly impactful form for ideological communication (Presser 2018). Some stories are proscribed; others are simply marginalized, ignored by dint of dominant ideologies. Prohibitions concerning whose story can be heard are means of control (Butler 2004; Colvin 2017; Sharpe 2016). Struggle necessarily involves countering dominant stories. To that end, narrative criminologists have studied resistance to harm, including resistance to stigma (Ugelvik 2015; Stone 2016; Sandberg 2009) and resistance to carceral knowledge (Berger 2015). A rich vocabulary exists for narratives that seek authority *and* narratives that resist—including narratives versus counternarratives (Joosse et al. 2015; Maan 2015), hegemonic narratives versus subversive narratives (Ewick and Silbey 1995), and cultural narratives versus collective narratives (Richardson 1990). We expect the recent development of *narrative victimology* to generate new concepts and insights (Pemberton et al. 2018a, b; Walklate et al. 2018).

Narrative researchers have exposed the structures that govern storytelling and support existing social hierarchies. Molotch and Boden (1985: 285), for example, observe: “Demands for ‘just the facts’, the simple answers, the forced-choice response, preclude the ‘whole story’ that contains another’s truth” (see also Ewick and Silbey 1995). Polletta (2006: 187) explains:

Certain discursive forms seem less credible or authoritative when used by certain groups. Certain discursive forms are open to all groups but are restricted to particular settings and occasions. The boundaries that institutions enforce between one discursive form and another may operate to legitimate the institution—and to insulate it from attack. In these and other ways, the conventions of culture’s practical use may operate to reproduce the current state of things. By the same token, however, challenging those conventions may have transformative political effect.

Polletta’s research has lessons for how subordinated groups can tell stories in such a way as to promote their cause. For instance: “Where legal theorists have emphasized stories’ capacity to elicit an easy identification with the story’s narrator/protagonist, I argued that effective narratives may juxtapose discordant ideas and emotions in a way that initially prevents an easy identification, forcing the reader instead to discover the sense of an unfamiliar connection” (2006: 112).

If critical criminology is to help summon better worlds, it must envision structures that are at least somewhat mutable. A narrative framework offers radical potential—and hope—for as Gubrium and Holstein (2000: 503) put it: “If we make visible the constructive fluidity and malleability of social forms, we also reveal a potential for change.” This eye towards how the world is socially constructed through stories, and therefore can be changed by stories, is narrative criminology’s most important critical potential. It is also closely connected to researcher’s reflexivity, another important feature of narrative criminology.

Compelling Reflexivity

Dispelling the notion of interpretive neutrality is a signal coup of critical scholarship. Narrative criminology centers a critique of neutrality, for there can be no question that stories are always collectively created and, as such, that stories are products of specific social contexts and interests. Reflexivity is required. Narrative criminology compels researchers to locate themselves in the story and to clarify their role within it.

The narrative criminologist gathering stories from interviews confronts her influence quite readily. If she is attentive and honest, she will notice that the supposed reasons for storytelling and the actual or intended or imagined audience—including her position—shape the telling. Stories are *told for*—or *tailored to*—particular audiences, with the interviewer being one such audience (Fleetwood and Sandberg forthcoming; Presser 2006; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). The interview is “another context that we must take into consideration in trying to answer the question of what the story is about” (Mishler 1986: 247). But even those stories obtained from archival or media sources presuppose choices about what “the story” is and where “the story” begins and ends. Across data sources, but perhaps especially through ethnography, scholars aggregate reported stories to arrive at a single story. In each of these cases, the analyst has created “the story” as much as the original communicators have.

In short, analysts do not occupy a space outside of the realm of meaning-making: they can make no claim to detachment. Auto-ethnographic narrative criminological research, where the researcher is herself/himself a storyteller, takes the reflexive charge to its logical conclusion (e.g., Aspden and Hayward 2015; Presser and Taylor 2011). Other studies pursue participants’ stories but make clear the researcher’s role in it (see Petintseva forthcoming; Presser 2004). The reflexive stance in regard to narrative work can be depressing, as when Presser and Taylor (2011) saw themselves channeling big, pervasive stories that support harm to nonhuman animals. It can unsettle our academic socialization: it did for Sandberg (2010), who found himself redirecting an interviewee’s story about good reasons for murder. If narrative criminologists believe that stories influence action, and that interviews are a site for the co-production of narratives, it is necessary to reflect on the kinds of stories we participate in constructing, willingly or unwillingly.

Fortunately, the reflexive stance can also prefigure a method for achieving social change, as when Petintseva (forthcoming) deploys a data collection method she calls “light Socratic dialogue” to unsettle stories, told in interviews, that enable official mistreatment of migrant youth. Following critical criminology, many narrative criminologists have also taken their studies outside the “academic box,” with the aim of effecting societal reflexivity and positive social change. One example is a new project sponsored by the University of Oslo, “MuslimVoices.” In short video clips accessible on several social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube), young Muslims challenge public stereotypes, presenting an effective counter-narrative to widespread negative stories of Islam and Muslims.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Narrative criminology follows other disciplines in its understanding of narrative as penetrating social life. Its key premise is that narratives impact human action. Narrative criminologists explore the storied bases of a variety of harms and consider the narratives with which actors resist patterns of harm. Accordingly, we have argued that narrative

criminology can be a useful framework for critical criminology. Critical criminologists have paid invaluable attention to the depth and breadth of harm-doing—historical roots in intersectional inequalities, global expanse in world systems, grounding in state-corporate collaborations, and so forth. Narrative criminologists ask how these and other phenomena are rendered as meaningful events unfolding over time, and register the impact of those (storied) meanings.

Contemporary harms are complex, involving multiple, often geographically dispersed parties who may or may not collaborate mindfully and/or as coalitions. They may nevertheless share a story or operate on compatible stories, thereby lending significance to the present-day project of narrative criminology. First, the populism that has taken hold around the world may be seen as the product of a basic narrative—on which a congeries of national and regional stories converge—of being historically put-upon and cheated by immigrants of color, Jews, Muslims, progressives, sitting governments, and so on. Politicians, online propagandists, and angry young men are among the agents whose complementary narratives produce the ills of this phenomenon. Second, narrative criminologists are writing from and about Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as Europe and North America. We need still more narrative criminology from outside the Western context, and more from refugee camps, sacrifice zones, and war zones; the paradigm of narrative criminology is ripe for inquiries in those spaces, by analysts who can enlighten us to canonical forms and (narrative) forms of resistance.

We would note here some challenges. Narrative is a wily construct and an ambitious one for analysts—more so than is widely recognized. For example, the story that influences actors is almost certainly not the one that observers are in a position to “collect.” Stories do not stay the same from the time of action to the time of post-action reflection. Narrative criminology insists that stories somehow *precede* actions, even though stories are told *following* action. Narrative criminologists must lay bare this sort of intellectual leap. In fact, though, where patterned, persistent harms are concerned—the kind to which critical criminologists are most attentive—the enabling stories *keep* getting told. The challenge of capturing the story at time zero is therefore attenuated. Other challenges, such as determining what “the” story is, are addressed through reflexivity and candor.

Important future directions for a critical narrative criminology include how narratives are conveyed visually, how narratives arouse us emotionally, and how narratives are cultivated, disseminated and sometimes achieve dominance. A critical narrative criminological perspective would emphasize these hegemonic narratives. In these times of rising xenophobia, issues of dominating constructions of race and religion come to mind. Arguably, narrative studies have some limits when it comes to studying ideological hegemony. The most important narratives are often taken for granted (Sandberg 2016). Some stories are recounted self-consciously and creatively, while others are channeled with little or no awareness. Stories themselves contain absences. As such, narrative criminology cannot limit itself to the text of narratives, but must also develop ways to understand what is “not said” in narratives (Presser forthcoming). Narrative criminologists should not only analyze stories, but also try to reconstruct them critically—in a way that resists domination and promotes social justice.

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