

Narrative

In the 1930s and 1940s social scientists abandoned narrative for being an ambiguous, particularistic, idiosyncratic and imprecise way of representing the world. During the 1980s and 1990s narrative was resurrected as a means of challenging positivistic, reductionist, logico-deductive modes of knowing, gaining lively support as a form of representation in legal scholarship.

Epistemological arguments claim that narratives have the capacity to reveal truths about the social world, truths that are flattened or silenced by more traditional methods of social science or legal scholarship. According to this view, social identity and social action - indeed all aspects of the social world - are storied. Consequently, narrative is not just a form that is imposed on social life; rather it is constitutive of that which it represents. Scholars argue that to attempt to examine lives, experiences, consciousness, or actions outside the narratives that constitute them is to distort through abstraction and decontextualization, depriving events and persons of meaning. Although some scholars claimed that by representing social processes through narratives and story-telling scholars give voice to populations silenced by efforts to discover general, objective truths, narratives have no necessary nor inherent political valence.

Although the concept can be confusing since it was borrowed from literary studies and is more often used as a common sense term, *narrative* took on specific meaning when applied to social scientific studies, including studies of law and legal processes. As Jerome Bruner explained, narratives are not logico scientific or paradigmatic forms of deductive argument supported by empirical evidence, typical of physical sciences or philosophical argumentation. Instead, narratives offer the truth of lifelikeness or verisimilitude. Ewick and Silbey (1995) described *narrative* as a particular communication that relies on representation and temporal ordering of a selection of past events and characters, presenting these as having a beginning, middle and end. The events and characters most often relate to one another and to some collating structure through opposition and struggle. The resolution of the struggle and the temporal closure constitutes a form of narrative causality, a statement of how and why events occurred as they did.

Scholars adopt *narrative* as the object of inquiry when they explore how stories are produced through social action, mediating action and constituting identities. They use narrative as a method of inquiry when scholars collect narratives to illuminate some other aspect of social life, whether that aspect is experience of law, economy, family, or something other. Finally, rather than analyze or use them as data, scholars produce their own narratives when they represent pieces or processes in the social world, functioning themselves as storytellers producing accounts of social life.

As socially produced accounts, narratives perform multiple functions, neither entirely challenging nor entirely supporting existing social structures and power. Ewick and Silbey claim that narratives can be hegemonic when they bury the organization of relations that sustain action and meaning with what appear to be individual, unique, discrete personal stories. Because hegemony describes and reproduces commonplace, taken-for-granted understandings that constitute everyday life, narratives can support hegemony by offering what appears to be diverse, polyvocal accounts that nonetheless inoculate and protect from critique a subtextual master narrative. Conversely, narratives

can be subversive, producing new, liberatory consciousness when the story exposes and articulates the structure of social relations that is more often unrecognized, and most often unspoken.

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FURTHER READINGS

Jerome Bruner, 1986, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey, 1995. "Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales: Toward a Sociology of Narrative," *Law & Society Review*, Volume 29, Number 2, 197-226.